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Business

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## Is Your Business a Winner?

### How Industry Awards Can Help You Promote Your Business

*Have you ever picked up an industry magazine and read about someone – perhaps a competitor – who won a prestigious industry award? Did the thought “Hey, my business does that too!” run through your mind? Think about the exposure that company got through having their story published as a result of that award. Think about how much marketing leverage they could get by posting “Chamber of Commerce Company of the Year”, or “Voted Best Customer Service in XYZ Industry.” Now think about what that kind of exposure could do for your business and ask yourself why you’ve never pursued an award in your industry. One of the easiest and most inexpensive ways of getting great exposure for your business is to apply for industry or business awards. It takes time and effort both to seek out and apply for awards, but the potential value to your business is worth the effort. Most awards are judged by a group of independent judges, and their validation means you’ve been chosen as the best in your industry. This gives your business credibility you could never buy.*

This validation is important for the following reasons:

- Your customers like to be associated with a winning company
- People will try out your company because you’ve won an award
- The award lends prestige and credibility to your business
- It will instill pride and loyalty in your staff; they’ll feel great about working for a “winning” company
- Awards attract quality employees
- It increases the value of your business if you ever decide to sell it
- It sets you apart from and above your competition

## *Where to Look for Award Opportunities*

- Your Chamber of Commerce and Better Business Bureau will have annual business awards. So do many other local business organizations. Find out when they are, and get your customers, employees or friends to nominate you. The nominations are assessed by an independent panel, so don't worry if the nomination comes from someone you know, or from someone you've asked to submit it.
- Check your industry website or publications. Do they have annual or topical awards? Go ahead and apply! This is a time when it's OK to blow your own horn.
- If you belong to an association or umbrella organization, find out if they have awards of some kind.
- Pay attention when you're reading magazines or business newspapers to other companies that have won awards, and ask yourself whether your business might qualify for that award.

## *What to Do with Your Award*

- Display it prominently and with pride in your business. Your customers should be able to see it when they frequent your store or business.
- Use it frequently in your marketing materials. Use the words, "Award-Winning" to describe your business, or, quote the exact name of the award – "Voted Best Hot Tub Retailer in Canada!" Use these words in your brochures, on your website and on anything else that you print. In addition, if there is an award logo, add it to your marketing.
- Write a press release and let everyone in your town know you won the award. Then make sure you put out the word through social media channels, like Twitter & Facebook.
- Have a party. Invite your customers to help you celebrate the award. Have an informal open house, or host a special wine and cheese, or BBQ event.
- Find unique ways to publicize the information – a billboard, bus stop shelter, the side of a bus, in your yellow pages ad, or through an ad in your local newspaper.



Take advantage of the leverage an award can give your business. The recognition, prestige, credibility and increased traffic they will bring to your business far outweigh the amount of time and effort they may take to research and apply for.

# Top 10 Ways to Generate Brilliant Ideas (Part 1)

by Darren Roberts

*Great ideas. As entrepreneurs, we're always looking for the next one aren't we? In running our businesses we are always looking for ways to do things better, faster, more efficiently and with greater innovation. Indeed, in the new global marketplace, innovation is fast becoming the one thing businesses can't afford NOT to have. Innovation is what sets you apart. But where do these great ideas come from, and who has the time to sit around and come up with them? Idea generation should be part of your business strategy on a monthly, if not weekly basis. Not only does taking the time to divert your attention from the day-to-day give you the opportunity to tap into the creative part of your brain, it will actually make you more productive when you get back to the day-to-day. Darren Roberts, author and marketing consultant ([www.topliving.com](http://www.topliving.com)) suggests ten ways to generate brilliant ideas. Read the first five here, and look for the second half of the article in the May edition.*

## 1) Define the Problem

To generate ideas and to solve business problems we all need a starting point. You will not be able to fly from New York to Frankfurt, Germany until you first arrive at JFK. If you don't exactly know where you are you will need a map to pinpoint your current location and then gradually work your way to JFK airport. It is imperative that you establish where you are before looking to progress. In other words study the map that will take you to New York thoroughly.

## 2) Brainstorm

Get a group of people get together and simply write down as many ideas as you can in relation to the objectives outlined. Don't worry about strategic planning or anything like that. Concentrate solely on idea generation. Place a time limit on the group and choose the location and the time well so that they are conducive to performance. Make sure that everybody is at their peak and has been instructed to "Think Big". I have been able to move mountains after a very healthy brainstorming session.

### 3) Focus entirely on what you want

To give your ideas the best chance to sprout for your business solutions you are going to need to switch off to outside influences. Tolerate nothing! Eradicate the distractions, the daily frustrations and predictable dramas of your life once and for all! Don't just fix the problem; re-design your routine so the predictable irritations can't ever bother you again!

### 4) Have a genuine interest in what you are trying to solve

Do you remember your school days when you participated in sports (or particular class subjects) that you absolutely detested? Do you remember how good you were at these activities?

Probably not, as it doesn't present itself as a good memory. But it's probably safe to say that you didn't perform well. It's very difficult to perform magnificently at something you're not overly fond of. If you have a vested interest in what it is you're trying to do, the likelihood of success is multiplied substantially. If you are trying to solve something that bores you to tears, for heavens sake give it to someone who really likes it.



### 5) Look at parallel problems and solutions

Relate your current problem to one that you had in the past and check for parallels between the two. The way(s) earlier problems were solved can assist you greatly in generating ideas to solve subsequent situations that present themselves. Think laterally, think vertically, think logically. The best ideas will always come from groups working for the common goal. Give your group as much opportunity to be creative by listening twice as much as speaking. Do this as informally as possible and get past situations into the open. You can then draw on the past successes and take them a step further with the challenge you are facing today.

See whether you come up with brilliant ideas to grow your business. Watch for the last five “brilliant ideas” tips in next month’s newsletter.

## How Well Do You Unplug?

*OK, I have to admit it. I am addicted to my iPhone. I've always been a person who enjoys technology. I even love it at times. I've always enjoying learning new things about my computer, learning new software and discovering how to use technology to make things easier. I like work on my laptop when I travel, and enjoy being able to find wireless internet spots to work when I'm out and about. I've even considered myself technologically*

*savvy. But all that changed the day I got my iPhone. Nothing has compared to the connection I have to it, the panic I feel when I forget it at home or leave it at work. I look at it a hundred times a day. I text. I email. I listen to music, play games, read books, find recipes, check out wines, keep notes, read reviews, go online, catch up on my emails, do my banking, take pictures, play with pictures, and download app after app. It is the coolest thing I own, and my husband says it rules my life.*

Therapists are now dealing with a whole new genre of mental health issues around what is being coined as “technology stress”, which is a person’s inability to unplug from technology.

Blogger, Jason Teitelman says, “Having the ability to connect with friends and family, to access important information, and to enjoy our favourite music and media whenever we want to is an amazing thing. Yet, having this level of connectivity also means that it becomes increasingly more difficult to escape from the pressures of our everyday lives. Leisure time is interrupted by calls from work, emails about bills, and a host of other distractions that can inject a little bit of stress into our relaxation time. In a modern society that seems to be suffering more and more from stress-related maladies, the importance of unplugging and enjoying periods of quality relaxation is becoming increasingly apparent.”



If you’re like me, you may be hearing yourself counter, “Come on, no one ever died because they checked their email while they were on holidays, or because they did a little work on the weekend.” This is true, however, the inability to detach from technology is beginning to have an impact on our body’s ability to rest. According to the article *Understanding Stress* on [HelpGuide.org](http://HelpGuide.org), discounting the effects of even seemingly insignificant stresses may be a mistake. The article tells us that our bodies do not “distinguish between physical and psychological threats.” So even when we are confronted with what we may consider everyday stresses like traffic or a hectic work schedule, our bodies react just as strongly as if we were facing a life-or-death situation. The article says that the more our body’s stress system is activated, the easier it is to trip and the harder it is to shut off.

So, when I’m at home on the weekend and decide to take a call about a problem at work, it may not seem like a big deal, but my body may be reacting to that stress without my realizing it. I’m away on a romantic weekend with my husband and I hear the sound that alerts me to having received a text. Even though I promised him I wouldn’t look at my phone on the weekend, I think it won’t hurt to just have a peek – I’m expecting news from a friend anyway, except that it’s a notification from the phone company that I’m overdue on paying my bill. While it may seem like I disregard that text message and tell myself I’ll deal with it on Monday, the fact is that just getting that message has injected stress into my relaxation. Suddenly I’m taken out of the “bubble” of our weekend away and brought back into the stress of everyday demands. While

each of these incidents may not individually have a huge effect on our health, the stress accumulates and over time it becomes harder for us to deal with, especially if we are unable to set aside long periods of time where we are not “connected”.

The key to managing the type of stress brought on by our increasing level of connectedness, is simple, but not easy: unplug yourself. Turn off your Blackberry. Power down your laptop. Turn off the email and text sounds on your phone. Just spend some uninterrupted time doing something that you love to do and schedule some time each week for much-needed disconnection and relaxation. I have to admit that even as I write these words I can feel the sweat bead on my forehead at the thought of laying down my phone for an entire weekend, but that slight sense of panic only emphasizes how bad my technology addiction is, and how few moments in my life I am truly disconnected.

As a small business owner, there is always something calling you, demanding your time and attention, and technology makes it possible for you to be available to it, 24/7. If you let it, it can take over your entire life. Taking a little bit of time each day to unplug and unwind will give your body and your mind a break from the little stresses you face every day. That down time will also let you return to your everyday tasks with more focus and more energy. So when you do plug back in, you'll be cool, calm and ready to deal with whatever comes your way.

Can you do it? Maybe, like me, you'll need to start slow. I'll try to put my phone down for 2 hours the first day, and work my way up to an entire afternoon. Who knows, maybe this one small act will keep me out of the therapist's office, and with the money I save, I can check out some new apps!

## Successfully Managing Employee Performance

### Progressive Discipline Works

*Chances are, if you have employees you've had the challenge of managing performance issues. Most small business owners know how to run their business, but find it more challenging to manage people, and dealing with employees who are not performing well is difficult for even the most seasoned Human Resource professionals, never mind the business owner who's got enough on his or her plate just keeping the business going. Sometimes it's all about the tools. If you have the tools to do a job properly, it's always easier than if you're fumbling around without. Progressive discipline is one of those tools. When you understand it and tuck it away in your manager's toolbox, you'll, be able to handle even the most difficult employee challenges. First, let's define what progressive discipline is (and isn't) and how to approach the problems when they arise.*

## Defining progressive discipline

Progressive discipline is a process whereby an employer works with an employee on a specific performance issue, with the goal of improvement and continued employment. It is also a systematic method that is documented and progressive (as the title implies), so that in the event you must terminate an employee you have the evidence you need to avoid any action against your business. Progressive discipline is NOT a punitive measure of dealing with employees. It has the tone of coaching and a desire to help the employee move toward stronger performance, rather than the tone of punishment for bad behaviour.

## Elements of progressive discipline

***Documented*** – once you have identified an issue, you must document every discussion you have about it with your employee. Even if it's an informal discussion, jot it down somewhere what you discussed and/or agreed to. Only documented conversations count if you ever have to justify your decision to terminate an employee.

***Immediate*** – allowing bad performance to slide implies that you are condoning the actions of the employee. When a problem arises, it should be dealt with immediately.

***Predictable*** – employees should know clearly where you stand and what your expectations are, as well as the consequences of not meeting those standards, so that when they cross the line they are not surprised at the actions you take.

***Consistent and indiscriminate*** – no matter who they are, how long they've been with you, or what level they're at in your company, all employees should be treated with the same rules and standards. In addition, the way you handle performance issues should not depend on your mood or whether you're having a good or bad day. They are consistent and dependable.

## How to apply progressive discipline

When an employee breaks a rule or lags in some aspect of their performance, you must have a conversation with them right away about what your expectations are. The tone of this conversation should be firm, but compassionate. The employee should feel that you are on their side and that you want to help them improve, and should see clearly how you intend to do that. Expectations are laid out, and plans are made on how to address the issue. Does the employee need more training? Is there a personal issue they need to take time to deal with? Is there conflict that needs to be resolved? Does their workload need to be examined and re-evaluated? Once the plan has been laid out, a time should be set for evaluation. This conversation should be documented and placed in their personnel file. If the employee improves all the way to meeting your expectations, the problem is



solved and you have saved yourself the emotional and financial cost of firing, hiring, and training.

If the employee has improved some of the way but still has a ways to go, congratulate them on their progress and create a new plan and date for re-evaluation.

If the employee does not improve after expectations have been clearly expressed, you progress to the next stage, which is issuing a verbal reprimand. Restate your expectations, and advise the employee that the next step is a written warning. Decide on a date for evaluation. Document the meeting. If the employee makes no progress after your verbal warning, provide them with a written warning that again states your expectations, and advises them that the next step is dismissal. Put a copy of the letter in their file. If the employee continues in their bad behaviour, dismiss the employee. Document the meeting.

Most of the time, employees want to do better, and if they feel you are with them, and genuinely want them to succeed, they will work with you towards improvement. On the occasions where you have an employee that simply won't improve, if you have followed the steps of progressive discipline, you will have all the documentation to make the dismissal "stick", should the employee come back with legal action.

## The question of notice

Common HR practice is to provide 1 week's notice for employees who have worked for you less than 3 months, 2 weeks if they have been with you between 3 months and 3 years, and after 3 years, 3 weeks plus one week for every year of employment. These are generally accepted notices (you can give notice and have them work out their time, or you can give severance that equals the notice if you want the employee gone immediately). There may be special circumstances where longer notices are required (such as the employee's age and/or employability), but these are generally accepted practices.

Except in situations of grievous misconduct, it is almost always better and more cost-effective to coach an employee to improvement rather than firing, recruiting, hiring, and training a new employee. Progressive discipline provides you with a solid process to coach an employee toward improvement, and gives you the evidence you need should termination be necessary. Having these systems in place BEFORE you need them can provide peace of mind for you as a business owner, knowing you'll have the tools if they are required.

## Money Saving Tips for Small Business

*While we keep hearing that the Canadian economy is rebounding, and in many places we're seeing the signs of business growth and economic recovery, there's no doubt many businesses are still not quite back to where they were prior to the fall of 2007. Small businesses, which have fewer resources, have especially felt the burn. Many of you are probably still*

*pinching pennies and cutting back, and as a small business, chances are you don't have a lot of "fat" to trim. There are ways to be creative in streamlining your expenses so that you can save money and keep growing your business. Here are some tips to help you look at your operation with new lenses and see whether there are things you can do to cut down your costs.*

## TECHNOLOGY

- Go green! Energy-efficient technology will save you money. There are often tax benefits to green technology, too. Not to mention it'll help out the environment.
- Buy recycled printer cartridges. Printer ink is one of the most expensive liquids on the planet. Much of it is margin, so find low-cost sources.
- Eliminate unnecessary lighting. Install motion detectors to control lighting in frequently unoccupied areas, such as restrooms and copy rooms.
- Turn off equipment when it's not being used. This can reduce energy consumption by 25%; turning off the computers at the end of the day can save an additional 50%.
- If appropriate, use laptop computers. They consume 90% less energy than standard desktop computers.

## OFFICE ITEMS AND OFFICE SPACE

- Don't pay retail. Get purchase orders at trade shows, buy wholesale or even check out the local offerings on Craigslist to save big bucks on office essentials.
- Eliminate unnecessary paper waste. Implement paper-reducing strategies such as double-sided printing and reusing paper. You'll save some trees, too!
- Free form it. Don't waste time and resources finding writers to produce forms for your business. Search online for free forms you can download and print. [Entrepreneur.com](http://Entrepreneur.com) specifically has ones for small businesses.

## ADVERTISING

- Word-of-mouth marketing works. Use your associates to get referrals.
- Create an e-newsletter. It's much cheaper to market to previously acquired customers than creating new direct-marketing collateral.
- YouTube is a great free way for you to get the word out on your business.
- Start a blog. You can advertise, review your offerings and give free tips as often as you'd like without worrying about running up your budget.
- Talk to a social media guru and start twittering and facebooking. It's free marketing and you'd be amazed how many people are on social networks – your clients and customers are just waiting to hear from you!



- Get to know your neighbour businesses. They might be up for splitting local advertising and promotion costs, such as sidewalk sales and mailing lists.
- Get your clients to advertise for you. Ask them to write a testimonial on your website or tell their colleagues about your products or services.
- Piggyback your advertising. Include advertising material in mailings such as invoices and sneak announcements or coupons into newsletters and other promotional fliers.

## INSURANCE AND FINANCES

- Consider outsourcing your benefits and payroll to an external provider. Handing over administrative responsibilities to another company can save you time and money.
- Order your checks from a printing company. They often charge less than banks.
- Try to bargain. The professionals with whom you work regularly are often amenable to bargaining, thanks to the rapport you've developed with them.
- Seek at least three bids on everything. Even mundane purchases merit shopping around. If you quote a competitor's lower price, a supplier or vendor will often match that price to win your business.
- Form a buying alliance. Join with another business or a trade association for bulk purchasing discounts.
- Get the best business credit-card deal. Whether it's cash back or travel rewards, the right business credit card can yield big dividends.

## TRAVEL

- Shop for discounted fares online. Scour popular travel Internet sites for specials on major air carriers.
- Sharing is saving. Employees should share hotel rooms and rental cars as much as possible when traveling together.
- Don't eat where you sleep. Hotel restaurants are usually more expensive than other nearby options.

You may not be able to do them all, but use these ideas to start saving a little bit here and a little bit there, and you'll soon see a difference that puts more money into your pocket or your bank account at the end of the month.

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