

The Upside to Negativity: *No* Gets It Done

3 times when saying ‘no’ to others means saying ‘yes’ to your business

The modern business landscape is littered with mobile toting yes-men and -women who have been tricked into thinking they must say “yes” to every ridiculous request that is thrust upon them, or risk being mislabeled “negative” or “difficult to work with.” Or worse, they think saying anything but yes will mean they’re not keeping up on the road to achieving the life of their dreams.

Blame it on the *Army of One* mentality that spilled out of the U.S. Army’s hugely successful ad campaign revamp in 2001, replacing *Be All That You Can Be*. This mindset, which is both positive and powerful, may still work on the battlefield, but it doesn’t mesh with today’s always-on business culture, where Skype and FaceTime render after-hours conference calls routine, and texting and checking email have evolved into a global obsession.

The good news is you don’t have to be an army of one to build a sustainable business and enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. One thing you must do, however, is be mindful of certain hazards that are bound to impede your progress along the way, then say “No” with conviction — and never look back.

Here are three times when a negative response will benefit your business:

1. No to Mosquito People.

They come in all forms, as business partners, clients, suppliers, even friends and relatives. It may not be their intention, they may not even be aware they’re doing it, but whenever these people are around you, the swamp gas of negativity follows. They nitpick and criticize and pounce on your ideas, decisions and plans until you feel the life literally draining from your body...This feeling won’t get better with time. The only solution is to eradicate Mosquito People from your circle of influence.

Make a game of it. Start by listing all those who affect you with their negativity. Scan the list quickly and immediately cross off the ones who aren’t attached to you by blood or contract. These are the easy ones; scrape ‘em off. Don’t engage in conversations with them. Don’t take their calls. Don’t return their message or emails. Eventually, they’ll get the point and move on to juicier prey.

The tougher ones are those you need, or really want, to keep in your life. When you can’t eradicate Mosquito People, focus on compartmentalizing them to drastically reduce the number of times you’re bitten. If they’re attached to you by blood (relatives, longtime friends, etc.), commit to shifting the terms of your relationship so that it no longer includes elements of your business. You don’t need to discuss this decision with them, just commit and follow suit. For example, rather than entertaining questions about a course of action you plan to take, zero-in on *their* interests and keep them talking about themselves — or aspects of life that have nothing to do with your business ventures. Think of it as the verbal equivalent of running down the clock:

the more questions you ask about them, the less time and energy they'll have to besiege you with negativity.

If the Mosquito People in question are connected to you by contract (business partners, clients, vendors, etc.), plan ahead to replace them at the earliest opportunity. Make sure you're providing good value in exchange for their contributions, but recognize that life is too short, and your business too precious, to maintain relationships that detract from your health and happiness. Set a mental liberation date, then move on.

As always, be affable, caring and kind when engaging people, especially when parting company.

2. No to mismatched opportunities.

Sometimes, it's not other people we need to be saying "no" to, it's our own desire to be larger than life and open to anything. But this grand vision often backfires, leaving business owners feeling exhausted, distracted and not nearly as successful as if they had just stayed focused on the priority projects at hand.

Take it from Ina Garten, bestselling cookbook author and host of the Food Network's *Barefoot Contessa* program. In mid-June, Garten told attendees at the Forbes Women's Summit that when she was just starting out, she accepted pretty much any opportunity that presented itself because she was never sure which would take off. "At some point, you start making choices," she said. It's largely a matter of knowing yourself and your business. What's important is being selective about the opportunities you become involved with.

To avoid damaging relationships when declining speaking engagements and larger opportunities, start by clarifying your own vision, so you know right away if the opportunity at hand matches your objectives. Take the time to properly process the request, so you're remaining true to yourself while still valuing the other party's time. Respond promptly, of course, to avoid leaving anyone in a lurch, and make a point of explaining why you must decline, so they understand you're not simply dismissing the request.

3. No to multi-tasking.

Multi-tasking is what makes us human, according to UCLA anthropologist and author Monica L. Smith. Nevertheless, she believes we should appreciate our ability to sequence multiple activities, as well as our ability to return to tasks following interruptions. Others agree, not because multi-tasking itself is so bad, but because we're kidding ourselves if we think we can effectively perform two tasks at once. The human brain's ability to rapidly switch between tasks is impressive, but it comes at a price to focus, creativity and productivity. Don't go there. Stick with one task at a time for better outcomes.

By knowing when it's okay to say "no," you'll be saying "yes" to your business while steadily advancing toward your goals.