**The Business Plan Overview**

A business plan describes the future path of a business. There are many ways to write a business plan, however they all include some fundamental elements. **The key is to start.**

Don’t shoot for perfection: it doesn’t exist in the business world. Instead commit to completing each section by setting goals for yourself. A business plan is a work-in-progress that can, and should, be updated regularly. Insights learned in one section will shed further light on other sections. In fact, one of the most compelling reasons to write a business plan are the insights you uncover about your business idea which will help you avoid costly mistakes later on.

Business plans should be growth centric and strategic. It is a complete, concise document that will give the reader everything they need to know to understand and assess your company.

Consider the following elements when putting your plan together and building that sustainable growth strategy.

**1. Define Your Solution**

Every customer that approaches you is doing so because they have one or more problems. They’ll have questions that need answers in order to help them zero in on the main issue. Your customers are following a path that eventually leads to a solution.

Your plan should clearly lay out what the primary problem is for customers, and what solution you’re providing that will help them. Understanding the solution you provide (your products or services), and how your customers benefit, is a major component that will shape a majority of your marketing going forward.

**2. Pinpoint Your Market(s) and Customer(s)**

You need to establish that there is a market for your product and work out how you're going to access it. You need to be able to clearly define your ideal customer(s). Key demographics and behavior information should be noted

The most successful brands have been able to thrive and grow because of their ability to understand and define their customers.

Combine what you know along with assumptions about your audience, and support those assumptions with research

**3. Determine Your Value Proposition**

Your value proposition answers the question “Why would customers buy from us instead of our competitors?” Your value proposition is not your solution; instead, it’s a statement of differentiation that makes you unique from others in your market.

The value proposition is part operations, part marketing, and part strategy. Once you have it defined, it becomes the foundation of your competitive advantage because it’s something that your competitors cannot replicate.

In order to define this element, you’ll need to spend some time performing a competitive analysis of your market. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that your solution is so unique that you have no competition. Competitors aren’t just other brands offering the same product. Your competition includes substitute products and alternative options – which includes the customer performing the work on their own or creating their own solution(s).

**4. Establish Your Goals and Objectives**

Launching a business without goals and objectives is something that derails growth the most often. With no goals to focus on, it’s easy to get distracted.

Once you’ve established your primary goals, break those down into smaller and more achievable milestones. This process creates a roadmap you can follow to reach the end goal. When things inevitably change and you have to pivot, you can refer back to your milestones and roadmap to course-correct and get back on track.

**5. Map Your Operations**

You will need to plan your day-to-day operations. Consider what necessary tasks will be needed for your business to operate, why they need to be done, and who will be completing those tasks. Not all tasks are of equal value, have an order of importance in mind when coming up with an operations plan. Consider what you require to operate including licensing, permits, insurance, suppliers, certifications, health and safety, human resources, recordkeeping, etc.

**6. Create a Clear Marketing Strategy**

You can’t grow your business without a marketing strategy. The right strategy could create tremendous growth right out of the gate for your business. Ideally, you want to show why you feel your target audience will embrace you, and how you plan to get your brand in front of them. Your strategy will be driven by market analysis and other research you’ve done up to this point and will be one of the more detailed segments of your growth strategy.

**7. Outline Your Financials and Forecasting**

Financials and forecasting are important parts of both traditional and growth-centric business plans. You also want to set a financial goal so you have something to drive yourself towards.

Your financial projections are going to be the last inclusion in your business plan because they need to include data from a lot of the other components. Everything has a budget and expected cost that should be included.

This is not a section for accounting – accounting consists of records from today working backwards. This section should be for projections from today onward.

*\*\* Always start with Market Research. An idea is just an idea until you’ve researched the marketplace, talked to and even sold to customers.*

**The standard contents of a business plan include:**

* Executive Summary
* Business Profile (overview, history, management, structure, goals, mission/vision)
* Industry and Market (research information, competition)
* Your Strategy (competitive advantage, unique selling point, keys to success, strategic partnerships)
* Target Market
* Sales and Marketing (product/service, pricing, promotions)
* Management and Operations (location, legal, insurance, human resources, policies, processes, risk assessment/contingency plan)
* Financial plan (startup budget, sales forecasts, cash flow, income statement)
* Appendix

**Writing Tips:**

1. A business plan should be written in the third person; not using ‘I’, or ‘we’ but the name of the company and/or owner(s). For example, rather than ‘I will sell directly to …’ state ‘ABC Company will sell directly to …’.
2. Write your business plan in paragraph form, using bullet style lists and text boxes when you want to be more succinct. Use graphs, charts etc. to break up the text.
3. Include images of your product or services or images that would be applicable to tell your business story.
4. Keep the writing concise, to the point and avoid repetition, even if the point you are making fits under several categories in your business plan. Avoid jargon that the reader may not understand and if you use acronyms, always spell out the full terminology at first use.
5. Check for grammar and spelling errors.
6. Always read through once for structure and again for content. Have someone you can trust to review the plan for feedback.
7. Make sure your plan is consistent; financials projections and revenue streams should be consistent with information given in the body of the plan.

We believe that an effective business plan increases your chances for success. It adds greater confidence to your idea and provides workable strategies that you can implement.