

Think Customers' Needs When Finding Business Idea

You want to start a business but you just can't find that one great idea.

"This dilemma is often a major stumbling block for many aspiring small-business owners," says Glenn Muske, the North Dakota State University Extension Service's rural and agribusiness enterprise development specialist. "They just keep waiting for that one big idea that will guarantee a successful business."

The reality is that more often, a good idea, rather than a great idea, is what makes the business a success. A good idea that offers benefits to the customer, coupled with a solid marketing plan and great customer service, can turn into a winning business idea.

This is where local businesses have such an advantage. The owners can fully understand their target market and what those customers want. The owners also can build on established relationships to connect with and use in developing an outstanding customer support network.

"It is important that the business owner think of the idea in terms of the customer's needs and wants," says (Insert name and title) of (Insert county). "It is not the features that sells a product or service but the benefit to the customer."

Often the business owner thinks in terms of a specific list of details about his or her product. Think of a simple loaf of bread. The label discusses the calorie content, the amount of fat and how many grams of fiber the loaf contains. But what the customer wants is the taste. If customers grew up eating mom's homemade bread, they are looking for the taste they remember, and even a loaf that looks like what they once had.

So where do good ideas come from?

In reality, most businesses develop around an idea that is only a small jump, or even just a little step, forward from an existing idea, not the quantum leap we think we need to have. Look at how successful brands expand their product lines by just adding little changes to an existing product.

"The 'new' idea sometimes isn't even new," adds Muske. "I have worked with business owners who find their idea when visiting an area outside of their trade zone. When they find a place they like and the lines are coming out of the door, they take the idea home and consider how it might work in their area."

Such ideas may need to be tweaked or modified but it is a great place to start. As a note of caution, though, the owner also should consider intellectual property issues that may arise early in the business development process.

"The amazing thing is that some of the most unlikely business ideas have gone on to be successful businesses," says (Insert last name). "It goes back to the importance of marketing and customer service as key elements in business success."

For more information on starting a small business, contact your local Extension Service office at [insert phone number and email address]. Also visit NDSU's small-business support website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness and sign up for the monthly newsletter. Or check out Facebook at www.facebook.com/NDSUextsmallbiz or Twitter at @gmuske. Another online resource is www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship.

You also can get help from your local chamber of commerce, as well as the Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and SCORE.

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For more information, contact glenn.muske@ndsu.edu or call (701) 328-9718. You also can visit our website, www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness.