

5 Lessons from an Overnight Success

By Marla Tabaka
Inc.com

When Brittany Hodak and Kim Kaupe launched 'ZinePak, a New York-based entertainment company two-and-a-half years ago, they knew they had a lot to learn. Apparently, they're pretty fast learners because this year they were named to Advertising Age's 40 Under 40 list and 'ZinePak is currently vying for the title of the Wall Street Journal's Start-up of the Year in an online documentary series. But this is the shortlist. In addition to a multitude of honors and awards, these young entrepreneurs have already established partnerships with celebrities like Taylor Swift, KISS, Justin Bieber, and the Beach Boys to sell nearly two million 'ZinePaks, which are custom publications, in 18 countries.

One of the smartest things an entrepreneur can do is to learn from others who have an established record of success. So I asked Hodak about the most important lessons she and Kaupe have learned along their impressive journey. Here's what she had to say.

Lesson #1: Always stay two steps ahead.

Being a business owner means always embracing new challenges and looking for new opportunities, even when you're on a successful path already. Don't wait for failure or obstacles to arise to begin looking for alternate opportunities.

Example: Kim and I founded 'ZinePak in 2011 with a focus on enhancing the physical CD experience. We partnered with Walmart, believing that music fans would be drawn to owning more CDs if they were packaged in collectible fan magazines with exclusive merchandise, and we were right. Although we grew 350 percent in 2012 and are approaching \$15 million in consumer spending on 'ZinePaks, we know that fans also access their favorite tunes via streaming services. We have to stay ahead of the changing landscape in the marketplace.

Lesson #2: Never be the smartest person in the room.

Focus on being a great leader instead of a great doer. Surround yourself with the best experts and employees you can find so that you're never the most knowledgeable person about anything other than the future of your company.

Example: In the beginning I thought the key to success was knowing as much as possible about everything. I spent months trying to master details about print production, retail marketing, PR, sales, and about a dozen other disciplines. But this quickly led to burn out and poor productivity. Even if you're great at a lot of things, you should only focus on a few. A company can't grow if one person is doing the majority of the work. 'ZinePak's team now includes six fantastic employees all with their own specialties: an amazing accountant, a great attorney, dozens of incredible freelancers, and one of the best business coaches in the industry.

Lesson #3: It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.

Whether it's looking for a more creative solution to a problem or going outside of ordinary communication channels to make something happen, the cliché is true: It is easier to ask for forgiveness later than get permission upfront.

Example: Sometimes ordinary business channels just aren't conducive to getting things done. In the past year, Kim and I have employed the "get it done now, ask for permission later" strategy to help green-light projects, get meetings with high-level executives, and score publicity for 'ZinePak. Whether it's booking an interview without running it by our publicist or taking a guerrilla-style meeting with an artist backstage without having an official time slot on the tour manager's agenda, a whatever-it-takes attitude is important for growing a business.

Lesson #4: "No" doesn't always mean "no."

Don't take "no" to mean that you shouldn't continue to have a dialogue with someone you want to work with. Also, don't ever take "no" for an answer from someone without the authority to tell you "yes."

Example: Selling an idea to a junior person just means that he or she will have to spend time pitching your idea up the ladder until it gets to the ultimate decision maker. This isn't an effective use of time or resources. Go directly to the decision makers whenever possible, even if it's difficult to get time on their schedules. The extra effort will be worth the work. And if he/she doesn't say "yes" immediately, keep pursuing the relationship.

Lesson #5: Don't be afraid of the unknown.

Don't feel like you need to have all the answers or predict the future. Surround yourself with smart people and commit to making the best decisions you can with the information available to you at any given time.

Example: When Kim and I decided to quit our corporate jobs and start a company, we spent a lot of time talking about what we would do if the business failed. We never even considered what we would do if the business was successful. We certainly did not think that within two years we'd be leading a multi-million-dollar entertainment company with distribution across the globe! Every day, we are faced with new challenges and new decisions to make. We've learned that very few decisions are permanent, and even fewer are impossible to recover from. Lead your team from a place of confidence instead of fear to set the tone for success, even in the face of the unknown.

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