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## The 4 People Every Business Owner Needs

Starting a business is tough, so it pays to get a little help from your friends.

By Rich Mintzer | June 17, 2008

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Some 41 years after the Beatles introduced *With a Little Help From My Friends*, the concept still applies to new entrepreneurs, perhaps more now than ever. The increase in competition and the higher startup costs have made opening a business a worrisome task even for the most confident industrialist.

With so many facets to running a business--including sales, marketing, technology and protecting your physical and intellectual properties--having the right people in your corner can be a tremendous asset, providing both emotional support and business know-how. Unfortunately, many new entrepreneurs go it alone, without that emotional backing from friends or family.

"Getting this business off the ground was the most frustrating and lonely period of my life," says Paul McGrath, founder and owner of RideSpring, an online company providing carpool matching and scheduling, plus incentive programs for environmentally friendly commuting.

"I had great confidence in the concept and the market potential, but I was taken aback by the huge resistance to a new idea! I had no support from my friends, and in fact most of my old friendships fell apart," adds McGrath, who finally found some receptive drinking buddies plus a woman named Susie Leijten, a personal coach, whom he met at an improv class.

"She would help by role-playing various sales scenarios with me before my meetings with potential RideSpring clients. It was extremely helpful," McGrath says.

Those who are lucky enough to have an encouraging environment early on as they build and shape a business rarely realize their good fortune until much later. Typically, there are four common types of supporters who serve as emotional backers and/or advisors. If you are fortunate enough to find all four, you may have your own little village to help you raise a business.

### "The Cheerleader"

Athletes have them, so why shouldn't you? Cheerleaders are those individuals who rally behind your ideas and believe in you as an entrepreneur through the initial startup struggles.

"I began talking about starting my own company right after college. My friend Andrea was a trusted confidant who recognized my entrepreneurial spirit. She really believed in me before I even believed in myself," says eco-designer Kelly LaPlante of Kelly LaPlante Organic Designs, based in Venice Beach, California.

Andrea not only served as a cheerleader when LaPlante was starting the business, but also continued to provide support as the business grew. When LaPlante introduced one of her new collections at the Sundance Film Festival, Andrea took on the job of handling the press for LaPlante, who couldn't afford a PR representative. She even cooked dinner for LaPlante's staff when they were exhausted after the festival.

"Clearly you need to have positive-thinking people around you at all times," says New York City business coach Marian Banker, who works with small business owners through her company Prime Strategies. "Your cheerleaders give you encouragement. You'll notice the word courage is in there, which is also something very important that a cheerleader helps you develop."

### "The Role Model"

If he or she is actively teaching or training, then you might consider the role model to be a mentor. Often, however, someone is providing tremendous support through the simple concept of "do as I do." Lance Eng, a real estate broker from Los Angeles and author of *Company You*, a guide to managing your life by the guiding principles of successful businesses, learned what it takes to run a business from his own role models, his family.

"My family was very supportive because they provided me with business know-how and showed me how sheer determination could pay off," says Eng, whose parents moved to Minnesota from China and worked 12 to 14 hour days to run their own restaurant.

"They did it not to make a million dollars, but because they had four children to feed. Failure was not an option, so I learned from watching them, and helping them, how to build a business around a strong work ethic."

Eng believes it's very important for a business owner to build his or her own personal little board of directors, so to speak, to have key supporters around.

#### **"The Expert"**

There's a fine line between tapping into a friend's expertise and taking advantage. Yet some friends (or relatives) are more than willing to go the extra mile by providing their expertise in a specific area.

"We talked with friends who were realtors and attorneys because we wanted feedback on our business idea," says Lila Cummings, who, along with her friend Susan Church, co-founded Get a Move On Inc., a New York tri-state area moving business designed specifically to walk seniors through the process of planning, organizing and making a move.

"We got support and good advice from several experts that we knew personally," Cummings says.

However, it was the husband of a good friend who provided the much-needed business expertise.

"He talked us through a lot of the big picture stuff, such as our focus and a way of defining ourselves in the market. We were able to bat ideas off of him and he made us think about a lot of areas of business that we had not thought about when we were starting this business four years ago," explains Church, adding that they later hired him, when they had enough money, to set up their website.

Experts often provide the missing pieces for entrepreneurs who are focused on, and anxious about, getting the business off the ground and keeping it afloat. They fill in the gaps by asking questions that start with: "Have you given any thought to..."

#### **"The Techie"**

"Good technical help is difficult to find, and when you find it you want to hold onto it as if it's gold," Banker says. Although your "techie" may be considered part of the "experts" category, someone with the ability to provide such technical help in today's business world can be a godsend.

"I always looked for people with characteristics that I didn't have," says Jerry Jenkins, founder and CEO of The Jenkins Group, a custom publishing company based in Traverse, Michigan. "And I had zero computer skills. The son-in-law of a friend of mine was living in my neighborhood when I was starting the business, and he had the technical skills that I didn't have. He helped by showing me how to do an e-mail campaign, launch and run an active website and then optimize the site."

Jenkins hired this technical whiz, who has been an integral part of the company ever since.

Although many business owners dabble in technology, having someone who keeps up with the latest developments can free you up to focus on the big-picture issues that make up most businesses, even very small ones.

Though it's true that other than cheerleaders, you can hire experts and tech support and even pay for mentoring, having these people in your corner in the early stages of launching a business is both comforting and cost-effective. Some people are fortunate to have such supporters, while others may simply need to look more closely at those people already in their inner circle . . . or get out there and do more networking.