
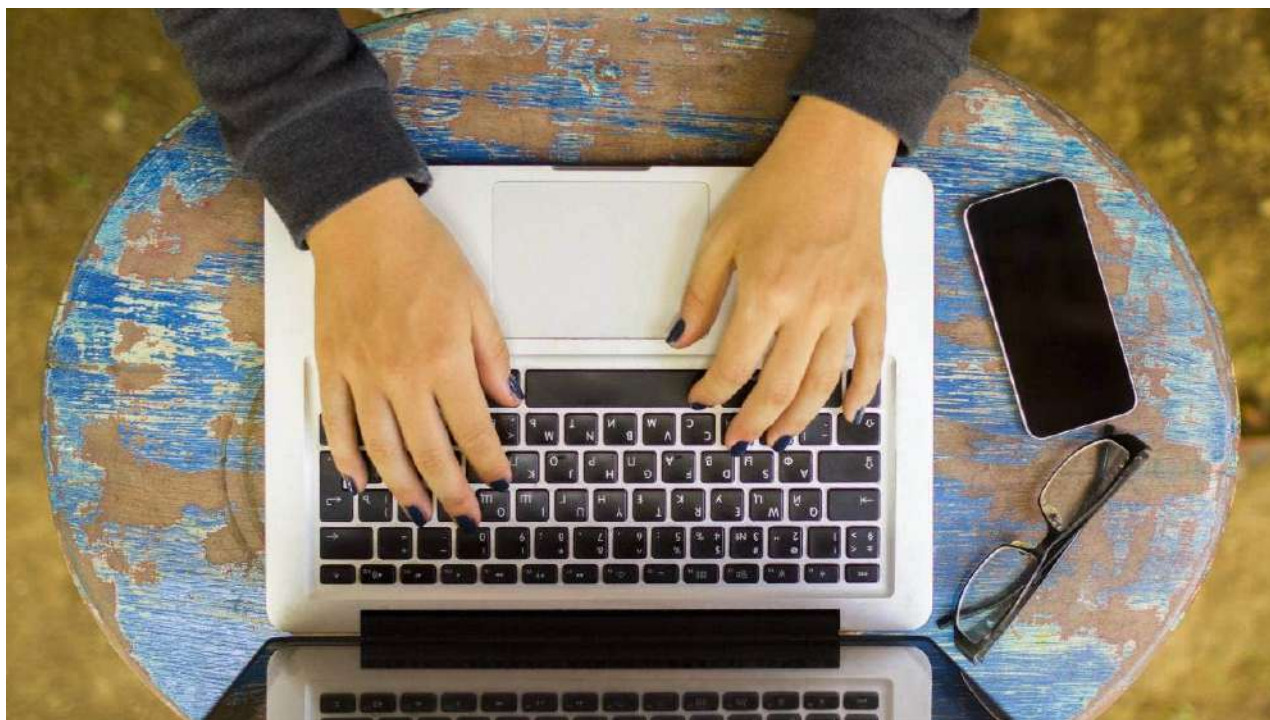


Real Life Business Lessons: Use polite persistence and always look for opportunities

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Graham McGregor

November 4, 2020



123rf

This week's real life business lesson comes from a business that helps other businesses get online.

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OPINION: Many years ago I discovered a simple business success strategy.

Talk to successful business people and ask them two things: What did they do to build their successful business and how did they handle the many challenges along the way?

Whenever I do this I'm amazed at the terrific ideas I get and that's the purpose of this new series, Real Life Business Lessons.

I'll be interviewing a wide range of successful business people around the country and finding out what worked well for them and how they solved big problems along the way, with the goal of uncovering some helpful ideas that you can use in your own business.

One of the things I've noticed about most businesses is that they had a number of setbacks and challenges along the way.

And one of the best ways to handle these challenges was often through polite persistence and continually looking for new opportunities.

In this edition of Real Life Business Lessons, you'll see some great examples of polite persistence and looking for new opportunities.

I was chatting recently with Dahlian Lamy and Alla Kiroshka, the owners of a successful digital marketing agency called [iBeFound Digital Marketing](#).

Alla and Dahlian (better known as Dale) first met online in a Facebook group about internet marketing.

Alla is originally from Moldova and grew up during the Soviet Union era.

Even as a child, she had many business ideas – converting an old movie theatre into a beautiful hotel or having an ice-cream café in the park with the ability to franchise it all over the country.

While her father loved exploring these ideas with Alla, he explained to her that she could not share them outside of the immediate family or she would get into trouble.

So, Alla wrote her ideas in her 'special projects' notebook which she kept hidden in a secret compartment of her desk drawer.

She followed in the footsteps of her parents, pursued a career in medicine and became a qualified facial reconstructive surgeon.

A few years later, when free enterprise became available to the people of the Soviet Union republics, Alla jumped at the opportunity and opened the first private health clinic in Moldova.

Unfortunately, it only lasted for nine months, as it was raided by racketeers, and she was forced to close for fear of safety for herself and her son.

At that moment, she made the decision to get out and move to a country where she could freely have her own business.

Alla eventually immigrated to South Africa where she was finally able to see many of her childhood business dreams materialize.

Over the next 14 years, Alla owned and successfully grew a few companies in a variety of fields: imports and exports, tourism, property development, manufacturing of dietary supplements including her own range of medicinal mushrooms called Dr Alla's MediMushrooms.

In February 2007, with South Africa becoming increasingly unsafe, Alla moved her family to New Zealand and settled in Christchurch.

She initially opened a small retail shop called Organic Health Centre in Bishopdale.

Then, about a year later, she expanded to a second location on Colombo Street.

The new location was ideally positioned for foot traffic and it was much bigger. It housed a retail area offering over 300 dietary supplements plus several consulting rooms for the natural healthcare specialists that Alla brought on.

The business was growing from strength to strength and two years later it caught the attention of a couple entrepreneurs from overseas.

“I was set to sign a lucrative franchising deal on the 15th September 2010,” said Alla, “but on the 4th September 2010, a devastating earthquake struck Christchurch. The building was severely damaged. The buyers cancelled their flights and the deal was off. Less than a year later, my building was demolished as it did not survive the second earthquake of February 2011.”

Seeking to reinvent her business led to Alla and Dale meeting on Facebook.

Dale (originally from Trinidad & Tobago) was a Mathematics instructor at a university in New Jersey, USA.

While he loved math and enjoyed teaching it, he had always wanted to have his own business.

Dale had been teaching himself web design since the early 1990s while living in Trinidad.

When he moved to Chicago in 2000, he completed a number of web programming courses while pursuing his BSc in Electronic Engineering Technology and his MSc in Mathematics.

Later, while Dale focused on his teaching career, he kept his entrepreneurship flame alive by researching and learning about various aspects of marketing, self-employment, and business building.

This eventually led to him joining the Facebook group where the paths of Alla and Dale crossed and intertwined.

On Christmas Day of 2013, Dale arrived at Christchurch airport to start a new life with Alla. They drove to their new home in Marlborough.

They decided to focus on growing Alla’s natural healthcare business which provided health consultations and her range of medicinal mushrooms.

Dale redesigned the MediMushrooms website and then they started to look at ways to advertise it online.



Alla Kiroshka, one of the owners of iBeFound Digital Marketing.

As they looked at the choices of locally-owned online business directories available to New Zealanders, Alla and Dale realised that the true needs of the business owners were not being effectively met.

Yes, the owners were getting a listing for their businesses, but often these listings were drowning in a sea of third-party ads, or they were miscategorised, or the costs to be properly listed far outweighed the promised value.

So, in May 2014, Alla and Dale started an online business directory – iBeFound.com – which now has thousands of members from all the major English-speaking countries.

Dale explained that they did not start off with the intention of offering website design or digital marketing services.

To start with they were just offering listings in their online business directory.

To get clients, Alla hit the streets, going from business to business and talking with them.

She expressed a genuine interest in their businesses and shared with them marketing strategies she had used in her own businesses over the years.

It was slow going at the start for Alla & Dale's new business and it took about six months before they got their first paying client worth \$100!

It turned out that people weren't as interested in having just a business listing!

"As Alla spoke with small business owners in our region, many expressed a desire to have their own website. Having created many websites previously, I knew that the website content was the part that could really drag out a website project. We wanted to provide something that was quick to create, easy to maintain and affordable for many," said Dale.

"So, I took a closer look at the directory platform we had purchased and found that, with a bit of custom coding, I could tweak a directory profile to work as a standalone website.

"That's how our first website offering was born – we called it a custom mini-website.

"We charged \$399 for the first year and \$199 per year thereafter.

"That's when our business began to take off."

Now that they were moving into the world of website design, Dale started to look into creating WordPress websites as well.

Gradually, they transitioned away from the custom mini-websites to only building WordPress websites primarily for local service-based businesses.

I asked Alla and Dave what they did to set themselves apart from their many competitors in the digital marketing agency area.

Alla had a great answer to this question.

"One thing that truly sets us apart from many other digital marketing agencies is the fact that we have personally started service businesses in a range of industries, growing them into six-figure and seven-figure companies.

"This real-world experience guides us when working with our clients.

"So, when we reach out to business owners we start with a genuine interest in their business, looking to see how we can help them grow.

"For example, we had a client who had recently purchased a motel, but she had no previous experience in the hospitality industry.

"I took a tour of the motel with her and gave her some ideas on improving various aspects of it. In redesigning the motel website, Dale discussed with the owner a naming system for the rooms so that it would be easy to refer to them in person, on the website and in the

various booking sites.

“We assisted her in many other areas beyond digital marketing.”

Dale commented: “We want all our clients and their businesses to be successful. This takes more than just having a website or doing digital marketing. That’s why, we are constantly looking for other ways to help our clients.

“So earlier this year, we started sending out a marketing newsletter which includes lots of offline marketing strategies and business improvement ideas.”

Dale and Alla have helped many of their clients to get impressive results with the websites they created for them.

Over the past five years, they have consistently seen their local business websites doing extremely well in Google search results.

In most cases, their clients’ websites hit page one of Google for competitive local keywords within days or weeks of launch.

For example, they launched a five-page website on October 2, 2020 on a brand-new domain name.

Within 7 days, the website was on page 1 for a variety of competitive short-tail keywords.

By October 17, 15 days after launch, the website was ranking on page one for at least 50 competitive keywords. More than half of those are in the top three positions. In some cases, the website is ranking in position No 1 and position No 2 for a given keyword.

Locally, this 30-day old website is outranking some of the major, long-standing competitors like Bridgestone Tyres, Carters Tyres, and Tyreline without any external SEO or backlinks.

I asked Dale what their key focus is when working with clients.

According to Dale: “From the get-go, we wanted to create great looking websites that produced fantastic results. We wanted our websites to be easily found by Google and to be informative and easy to use. Many of our clients have told us that their clients/customers have remarked on how user-friendly their website is.

“Our aim is, and has always been, to use digital marketing to level the advertising playing field for local businesses, particularly service businesses and professional service providers.

“A branded marketing website is at the heart of this.

“For a marketing website to do its job, it must be well-optimised – it must be built from the ground up to be user-friendly, device-friendly, and search-engine-friendly.



Dahlian Lamy, one of the owners of iBeFound Digital Marketing.

“This means that SEO cannot be an afterthought or something you add on later. SEO must start during the website creation process.

“This is definitely one of the things that sets us apart. We put a big focus on website optimisation. When we launch a website, it hits the ground running.”

In researching the business of Dale and Alla I discovered that they also have an instant website service.

This converts a business’ Facebook page into a fully functioning website instantly.

I asked them why they created this service and what businesses that use it really like about it.

Dale explained: “When we began our journey into the world of web design, we wanted to provide a website that was quick to create, easy to maintain and affordable for many.

“Taking the path of custom website design took us away from that goal.

“A custom website design is the best option for many types of business, but it is not necessary for every local business owner to get a custom website.

“However, we do believe that if a business owner is serious about business stability and growth, they should have their own branded website that is uniquely theirs.

“This can be achieved without a custom website design and the associated lengthy timelines and high costs.

“One of the major issues we have dealt with over the years on custom website projects is getting content from clients to complete their websites.

“We have had clients pay us thousands of dollars upfront for a custom website design and then they’ve literally hid from us when we tried to get the info for their website!

“In some cases, it took 3 or 4 years of persistently following up with the client before we finally got what we needed to launch their website.

“The fact of the matter is that until the website is live, it cannot begin to benefit the client’s business and this bothers us.

“That’s where our instant website service comes in.

“PageXtender – our instant website builder – instantly creates a fully functioning website from the content that is already on a business owner’s Facebook page.

“The client’s business website is created instantly by pulling the content from their Facebook page into the various pages of a pre-built website template.

“Our instant website builder has a number of templates to choose from and the chosen template can be further customised.

“Clients who know how, can do so themselves, but we offer customisation as part of each of our website packages.

“Unlike other website builders which purport to be instant but then tell you that you still have to add content (text, images, videos, etc) before you actually have a useable website, PageXtender is a true instant website builder.

“The instantly created website is immediately available live on a temporary subdomain. The process of adding a custom domain is simple. In fact, a free domain is included with each of our instant website packages.”

Alla added: “Clients are amazed (and it’s fascinating to watch their reaction) when they connect their Facebook Page and immediately see a website with their content when they log into the PageXtender platform.

“They are excited about the fact that their new website is synced with Facebook and automatically gets updated as they continue posting to their Facebook Page.

“They are also blown away by how easy it is to add extra custom pages to their new website. And clients are shocked by how affordable our instant website packages are. Some actually mistook our monthly prices for weekly prices and still considered them affordable.”

I asked Dale and Alla about the big challenges that they faced around promoting, marketing and growing their digital marketing agency and how they handled these challenges.

Alla had some really interesting thoughts on this question.

“Back in 2014, we were new to the region and we were starting a brand-new business in a highly competitive industry.

“The first couple years were quite tough particularly because a lot of the sole traders and micro business owners, and even some of the larger businesses, did not see or understand the value of online advertising.

“At iBeFound, we don’t like hard-core selling tactics.

“We prefer to educate people so that they can make the best-informed decision when it comes to digital marketing whether they chose to go with us or with someone else.

“I often spent lots of time explaining to business owners about the importance of having a website. It was quite disheartening at times to keep hearing comments such as ‘Why would I need a website? Everyone here knows me.’

“I would walk away and sometimes come back months later to check in and have another chat. Not trying to sell anything, just having a talk about the business and how things were going.

“Eventually most of these people would ask me, ‘So what can you do for me?’ or ‘Do you think you can help me?’

“A lot has changed since those early days. Especially after the 2016 Kaikoura earthquakes when the region was severely affected financially for almost a year by lack of people driving through town, more and more business owners began to rethink their attitude towards websites and digital marketing.

“They began to realise how important it is to have their business prominently featured on the Internet.”

Today, when Alla and Dale have a presentation meeting to show people what they do and how they have helped other business owners, most see the value that they bring to the table and take advantage of their offers right then and there.

I asked Dale and Alla: “If they were starting their business again what would they do differently?”

They told me: “We would focus on developing the idea we started with: offer quick, easy, affordable and high-performance websites. With PageXtender, our instant website builder, we’ve come full circle.

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“Fully functioning business websites are instantly created.

“They are super-easy to maintain – just keep posting on your Facebook Page.

“Our instant website packages (which include a Digital Marketing Toolkit) are extremely affordable. And the instant websites perform really well in search results.

“We love it. Our clients love it.”

I also asked them: “What advice would you give business owners today about how to do well in a much more challenging business environment?”

Alla said: “Focus on your core idea and go full throttle in developing it.”

Dale commented: “I would also add that it’s important to get clear about your ideal target audience (who you want to work with).

“Sometimes that means saying ‘no’ to people or projects that don’t match your criteria.

“When you fill your pipeline with undesirable, you leave no room for the desirable ones to reach you.”

I really like that last comment by Dale.

And I wrote a marketing article for *Stuff* on that same topic: [Who is not your customer?](#)

One of the things I love discovering about any business is the interesting stories they always have about some of their clients.

Alla shared a story about the owner of a painting and decorating company who had a simple desire:

He wanted his custom website to bring him enough business so that his wife wouldn’t have to rush back to work after the birth of their second baby.

That's exactly what happened.

Within a few months of launching his website, he was getting so much business that he was able to comfortably provide for his family. Soon, he took on a few more painters and is now heading strongly for the next phase where he can focus more on managing the projects.

Dale gave another example: "The real estate industry is a highly competitive one. The first page of Google is usually dominated by the giants of the industry - agency sites or listing sites like realestate.co.nz and TradeMe. It is rare to see the personal website for an individual agent on Google's page 1.

"A couple of our instant website clients are in that enviable position. Their websites are ranking on page 1 sitting among the giants of the real estate industry.

"One agent in particular is ecstatic about how this increased exposure is benefiting her business and has been enthusiastically recommending us to others."

I asked Dale and Alla what was the most effective ways they have discovered to promote their Instant Website Service.

And they said they offer a 14-day free trial of this instant website service, which allows potential clients to see how it works for them.

Summary

Dale and Alla are a terrific example of how polite persistence and continually looking for new opportunities can contribute to building a successful business.

They had lean times to start with, and they had to overcome a lot of challenges.

However, with polite persistence and by continually looking at what was working well and producing great results for their clients they have built a successful digital marketing agency.

Action Exercise

What ideas from Dale and Alla can you use in your own business?

Graham McGregor is a marketing adviser. You can get his free 129-page marketing guide, 'The Plan B Sales Solution,' here.

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