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Finding Your Best and Highest Use

If business has stalled or is just simply idling, here are some "jumpstarting" tips to get it moving in the right direction.
By Andy Birol | March 30, 2006

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Despite your hard work and endless hours, your business has hit a stall. Or maybe that project you were sure was going to take your company to the next level went to a competitor. What now? Do you just grin and bear it? Or do you get off your duff and do something that'll actually help?

Your choice is obvious--you need to take steps that'll get you moving in the right direction. The first step is to sit down and determine your "best and highest use" or BHU. Your particular BHU stems from your unique talents and passions, the things that set your business apart and translate into the distinctive solutions you can offer your customers. Determining your BHU will connect you to the passions and purpose that led you to start your business in the first place. So let's start figuring out just what *your* BHU is.

Finding Your Passion

What do you love to do? What does your firm do well? Why does anyone buy your products and services? Many owners find it difficult to answer these questions because many businesses do not have a clear reason for being. These firms subsist rather than succeed, flowing along with one new trend after another until they get caught in a whirlpool.

Without a sense of purpose, owners pursue survival and sales objectives as if these tactics will lead to wealth, long life, and happiness. In contrast, the stars within any marketplace clearly understand their own core competencies and uniqueness and prosper from them. Since Joseph Campbell coined the phrase "follow your bliss" many years ago, writers, therapists, and high school guidance counselors have urged people to make their dreams come true. There's nothing wrong with this, except nobody bothers to explain how to do it. So, let's get practical. Conviction, the crucial first catalyst, means nothing unless you translate it into the reality of the marketplace by connecting your passion to the needs of your customers.

In its purest form, BHU is the point of convergence between what you love to do and do well and what customers want or need and will pay to get. Don't confuse BHU with the actual products or services you sell; rather, it is the purpose behind the products and services you sell, so it remains a reservoir of energy and ideas that connect you with your customers' changing needs. Best and Highest Use manifests your preferences and talents in ways that fill needs in the marketplace:

- Your *best* represents your preferred choice among all the things you do well;
- *Highest* represents that which is most valued by customers, suppliers, employers, or partners; and
- *Use* is the actual, essential value you provide to others.

Unless you have all three elements, you and your company will eventually experience boredom, dissatisfaction, mediocrity, chaos, or feeble sales and frail profits. Best and Highest Use begins in passion (the owner's), is refined through need (the customer's), and ends in satisfaction all around. When the marketplace says, "Yes, that is what you should be doing to give me what I need!" you have found your BHU.

One of the first things I do with new clients is to take them through the process of identifying their BHU, so get a notebook and a pen.

1. Document your successes. List all the things you do well, practical and impractical. Brainstorm; set a timer for ten minutes and jot down everything that comes to mind, even if it has nothing to do with business. Examine your list several times over the next few days, looking for skills and talents (sung and unsung).

Your personal strengths are the power behind the value you offer to customers. For example, a licensed realtor starting her own company once led her college debate team to a state championship but nearly flunked statistics. She is a crack

negotiator, and this strength is the foundation for her firm.

If you are a sole-proprietor or have only a few employees, your personal talents will drive your firm; otherwise, make a separate list of things your company does well, mundane or dramatic. Remember the 1982 Tylenol crisis, when seven people died after someone laced several bottles of pills with cyanide? Johnson & Johnson set the standard for crisis management by recalling \$100 million of product and introducing tamper-resistant caplets in triple-sealed packages. Several years later, during a similar though less deadly tampering scare, Tylenol marketed itself as the company to be trusted, and consumers believed it.

2. Consider the importance of fun. List the tasks, relationships, and experiences you enjoy, both now and in the past. Look for examples in your personal and professional lives. Whatever you think of the National Rifle Association, Charlton Heston relished his role as NRA president. My former employer, NEBS, takes pride in replacing the business forms customers lose in natural disasters. This enjoyment drives future success, confidence, and self-esteem.

3. Discover what clients, customers and staff like about you. Hire a trusted third-party to talk to your customers and employees. You will get some remarkable feedback. Inside Prospects, one of my clients, boasts the best list of businesses in Cleveland, but what customers most value is the personal service provided by its president, Sandy Szuch. This is an element of her business she can't afford to lose.

4. Distill and simplify. Turn your strengths into your message. For example, based on its reputation, resources, and breadth of businesses, General Electric rightly claimed to "Bring good things to life". Warren Buffett, the world's greatest investor is known for stating, "If I don't understand it, I don't invest in it."

5. Know your blind spots. Too many organizations are proud of themselves in ways that don't matter. How many customers really care if a business is family-owned or has a 100-year history? Some companies waste millions promoting features and services that are irrelevant to their customers.

6. Synthesize, apply and focus. Work with an objective outsider to put it all together. Take the combination of skills, experience, and expertise and state it in terms of what a customer, prospect, or marketplace wants. Ralph Lauren has leveraged his ability to define grace in everyday living not only through clothing but across a home products empire as well. And no matter how much Microsoft wants to be known as an innovator, Bill Gates' obvious genius is to exploit other developers' inventions into necessary tools for all computer users.

Apply these steps and you will gain new insight into your business and its customers. Customers will notice. The relentless logic of the marketplace demands that you deliver solid value to customers in order to keep them loyal to your business, and as they respond positively your comfort zone will expand.

Andy Birol is the owner of [Birol Growth Consulting](#) in Solon, Ohio. A consultant, coach, author and speaker, Andy is a nationally recognized leader in the field of business growth and the host of [Andy Birol's Arena](#), a live and online resource center for business owners featuring live events, courses, interactive forums and community opportunities.

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