

Why “Follow Your Passion” is Bad Business Advice

By Felicia Joy, CEO, Ms.CEO



During Oprah Winfrey’s final show, she masterfully distilled and delivered 25 years of hard-earned wisdom in a few power-packed segments. I attended a viewing party to hear what she had to say. As she talked throughout the hour, I blinked my eyes repeatedly to keep from becoming a hot pink puddle of tears in my cute little summer dress. I was misty-eyed for a few reasons – mostly because I was so inspired. She shared many thoughts that were absolutely profound. As an entrepreneur I believe she made one distinction in particular that needs to be clearly understood. While discussing the fact that everyone has a purpose she said, “You have to make a living, I understand that.” She went on to say, “Everybody has a calling. Mine aligned with my profession, my job. Not everybody gets paid for it, but everybody is called,” she said.

Oprah had just offered a thought that challenges one of the most popular bits of entrepreneurial advice. How many times have you heard, “If you follow your passion in business, the money will follow?” It has been repeated so often that it is now thought to be a business truism; but I’m here to tell you that it is often misleading and in some cases flat out wrong.

The advice is well-intended but the potential problem with using only personal passion as your compass for business is that your passions are about you and your business needs to be about your customers. Your business needs to be about satisfying a group of people who will consistently pay for the product or service you are offering.

If what you love is also something that customers will love, want, demand, and need— which happened to be the case for Oprah—then, great you’re in business. If not, then you’ll have to tend to your passion in the evenings and on the weekends, or in another way. Here’s the rub: Yes, you will need passion in business because passion gives you energy and it takes a lot of energy to build a business. But your passion doesn’t have to be the substance of your business; it doesn’t have to be the product or service you sell. It may be. I hope it is; but don’t kid yourself if it’s not. If not the makings of your business, then your passion will be what drives you in business. It’s your ‘why.’ Why did you start a business? Why is failure not an option?

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Could you imagine the chief executives of SC Johnson, the makers of Raid, spraying their pest-killing concoctions saying, “Hmm, I just love the smell of this stuff, it’s great.” Or, could you imagine them loving any other aspect of the chemicals they use to get the job done? Probably not. But there is multi-billion dollar market demand for chemicals that do away with creepy crawlers, so they went into that business.

Passion gets you out of the bed and keeps you from sitting in front of the television for hours in the evening when you have work to get done in your business. It is necessary, but not necessarily in the way that you have always thought or heard.

Another great example of someone using their passion as energy and a philosophy for a business, but not the product of the business is Tony Hsieh (pronounced “Shay”). He is the former CEO of Zappos.com, a leading online retailer of shoes — and now a retailer of lots of other items since Hsieh and his team sold the business to Amazon in July 2009.

Hsieh joined Zappos as an investor and advisor in 1999 a few months after it launched as ShoeShite.com. He eventually became CEO and led Zappos to sell more than \$250 million in shoes every year even though he didn’t care about shoes at all. This is a guy who cared so little about shoes and clothes that he and his brother literally shared one suit for special occasions.

He recognized the opportunity that existed with a \$40 billion per year retail shoe market and a product already in demand. But money wasn’t his passion either. Tony had just made \$265 million by selling his own company to Microsoft so financially he was set for life. His passion in building Zappos.com was to ensure a great experience for customers and employees. He wasn’t passionate about the company’s product, he was passionate about service — and that passion could have applied to any profitable business.

His lack of interest in shoes didn’t hurt the company in the end because he was totally focused on his customer’s desires. Amazon bought Zappos from Tony and his team for \$1.2 billion: A very nice pay day for focusing on what his customers liked.

Whether your passion is the energy that fuels you in business or the product or service of your business, turn it into an enterprise that makes plenty of dollars and sense.