

Smart Ideas to Grow Your Business

Twenty-nine years ago, I was looking for a creative outlet as a stay-at-home mom. Since then God has turned my hobby into a thriving enterprise.

When I was in high school, I thought I was going to be a rock star, but in 1968 God revealed to me that He had other plans. After graduating from the University of Mississippi, I taught school for a while and then stayed home after my second child was born.

I was happy and fulfilled with my family, but there was something missing—something I longed to do—something creative. I began to look for an outlet.

My search led me to begin “fooling around” with ceramics at my kitchen table. Soon my experimenting became an adventure, and I now have a company that manufactures hand-painted dinnerware and accessories in Ridgeland, Miss.—with hundreds of employees!

It was 1979 when I began pursuing my new career. In the 1980s I took a leap of faith and displayed my pottery at the Flea Market in Canton, Miss. Going into this experience, I reflected on Proverbs 3:5-6 and applied this passage to my situation, trusting in the Lord with all my heart and not relying on my own understanding. The result—success—and Gail Pittman, Inc. was born.

By 1986 I had outgrown my work space at home, and my husband encouraged me to purchase an 1,800-square-foot building in Ridgeland as a studio. I read the book of Jeremiah for inspiration, memorizing Jeremiah 33:3, “‘Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.’” After only three months, our building was

too small, and in February of 1988, we moved into a 7,800-square-foot studio.

The Lord continued to bless me and my small staff, and in 1992 we moved into a new 26,000-square-foot factory in Ridgeland with an increased staff of 80 artisans. In 1994, Gail Pittman, Inc. had the privilege of being named one of INC. magazine's 500 fastest growing private companies. This year, we expanded for the 5th time and now have over 50,000 square feet in our factory.

How did we grow so quickly? What is the secret to our success? The "secret" is not really a secret at all: We submit everything to God. Every time we have to make a decision, whether it is related to design, personnel or a pending expansion, we pray about it as a company—and whatever God tells us to do, we do.

Also, I depend on God continually for wisdom to determine what is important and what isn't. I want to keep my priorities straight, making certain my husband and children come before my work responsibilities.

In addition, I invest spiritually in my employees. I believe it is my Christian responsibility to afford them the very best possible opportunity to grow in their faith. For this reason, every Wednesday morning employees have the opportunity to attend a company Bible study that is led by Jim Doremus, one of the ministers from First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi.

Everyone involved in our company is invited to attend, and for many, this Bible study is the highlight of their week. We sing, share joys, hurts, and prayer concerns, and go to God together.

Serving the community is also important to me and the employees at Gail Pittman, Inc. We helped build a Habitat for Humanity House in Jackson and participated in the Salvation

Army's "Souper Sunday," for which we donated soup bowls. We also helped raise funds for the Salvation Army and its local ministries.

Other than listening to God, following His directives, and caring for my family, employees and community, there are a few guidelines I've learned to follow through the years to help my business grow. These are the guidelines, or tips, I give others when they ask how I did it:

Define success. First of all, define what success is for you. Decide what you value, and set your goals accordingly. Keep in mind that the meaning of success is different for different people. You can't set your business objectives by what others consider success.

Success can be defined in a variety of ways—from sales growth to employee retention to having a strong corporate culture. But don't let money be your only measure of success. Many people who make a lot of money never feel satisfied with their professions.

Be true to yourself. Be true to what you really believe. Pray about decisions, and ask God to help you make the right ones.

When I am facing a particularly difficult decision, I depend on my deepest held beliefs to guide me in my choice. I know I cannot compromise on certain principles, and that makes a lot of decisions easier.

Keep your passion. Keep the passion alive that got you started in business. This will help you stay focused.

In my case, when I'm stretched too thin or feel down from the weight of running a business, I experiment with new patterns. Since designing is my passion, it renews my love for what I'm doing and reminds me why I'm in business.

Stay focused. As you grow, stay focused on the dream set

before you. Instead of competing with other people, compete with yourself to be better than yesterday. Keeping my mind on what I do best rather than on how many people are trying to copy my patterns gives me the energy and the impetus to improve on everything I create.

Be ready for the next step. If your business isn't growing, it's dying; it's that simple. You must always be prepared to take the next step.

Several years ago we had an opportunity to create a private label pattern for a restaurant, something we had never before even contemplated. But we took the risk, and it turned out to be a wonderful growth opportunity for the company.

As your business grows, you will need to add people to help you. Wise people know where their ability ends and someone else's begins.

Recognize that the hardest place to stay is at the top. Awards and achievements are great scorecards, but don't dwell on them. It's healthy to enjoy them and feel proud of them, but then put them up on a shelf and move on. If winning an award becomes the most important thing, then there is nothing to achieve once the award is won. Besides, next year someone else may be winning it.

Build a support network. Surround yourself with a support network of people who truly believe in you. Even when I was selling my pieces just to friends and relatives, my husband always believed in me and never once laughed at my desire to have my own pottery business, although I had never taken an art or business class. Your support network can be anyone who believes in you and your dream and who will encourage you to reach your potential in spite of the obstacles others see.

Set your priorities. One lesson I learned early is that you can have it all, as long as you remember you don't have to do it all.

When my children were young, I decided we would always have dinner together as a family. Many nights we had take-out or went out. Buying dinner cost a little more, but it allowed me to keep my family first.

Now, even though my youngest child is an adult, I still make sure I'm there when one of my children needs me. My daughter was once in a contest at college, and I left a trade show to fly to see her and then flew back to the show when the contest was over. It was hectic, but being there for my daughter was very important to me.

You don't have to choose between family and career, but sometimes you have to be creative in how you balance them.

Maintain balance. Balance your life and your business. It's often hard, but it can be done so you succeed in both.

When my children were small, I stayed home and started my business slowly, designing pottery at my kitchen table. It gave me time to enjoy my children and my pottery. As my children grew, so did my business.

Today, my children are grown and on their own so I've got more time to devote to my business. The result is that my business is taking off at a time when I am able to keep up with its growth.

Have fun. Whatever you decide to do with your business, make sure it stays fun. I often hear women make comments such as, "I work in insurance, but I love to throw dinner parties." If this is your situation, then become a caterer or an event planner!

Realize that you can make money doing what you love. And if you do what you love, then you're going to love what you do every day.

Also, remember to have a life outside your business, with

family first and then friends. It takes a lifetime to cultivate friendships, and you could lose them if you don't make time to enjoy them. You may also lose your perspective!

The Lord continues to bless me and my company. We now have showrooms in Atlanta and Dallas and a display at the New York Gift Fair in the Javits Center. I am privileged that my love for painting and pottery has transformed into a flourishing regional business.

I don't know what tomorrow holds, but I do know who holds tomorrow, and I trust Him to do with my business as He sees fit—and to work in me as He works in it. May He do the same for you.

Read a companion devotional.

Gail Pittman is an artist who turned a love for painting and pottery into a flourishing corporation, Gail Pittman, Inc. Her dinnerware, home accessories and collectibles are sold in specialty gift stores throughout the United States and Canada.