

TO GROW OR NOT TO GROW

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If you run an experiential learning, challenge or adventure-based business then this article is for you.

Do you believe in the work you do?

Do you love the work?

Are you convinced it has value?

Then why not grow?

The answer to these questions always intrigue me. For some programs, the idea of growth inspires well-intentioned concerns of appearing greedy and honest worries that growth could undermine an organization's fundamental mission. For others, growth has become imperative because of a mandate from a Board of Directors or a spike in demand for your services. Still others want to grow but just don't know where to start. This article addresses some of the questions you'll want to consider as you determine whether or not to grow and what strategies to employ.

When I was about seven years old, my parents decided to start an art college in the Yukon. The idea was to create a wilderness expedition experience that would allow aspiring artists and their teachers to immerse themselves in an awe-inspiring environment that was free from distractions. My dad was an art professor, adventurer and fly fisherman while my mom taught sculpture and three dimensional design at the local college.

So, off we went. My dad packed everything we would need into a lime green Volkswagon Rabbit and we headed to the edge of the world. I look back on that time with fond memories. It seems like it took half the summer to get from the Ontario heartland to the far North in that tight little car. I must have played every I Spy game that my parents could think of by the time we were only three hours into the drive. To deal with the boredom I even ran alongside the Rabbit for what seem like half of our journey. I'll spare you the sentimental details but suffice it to say that I still draw on that experience on a nearly daily basis.

This was back in the early 70's and vast stretches of the Alaskan Highway were still narrow strips of gravel road. Even today, when I drive on gravel it takes me back to thoughts of adventure, big white water, running and orange pop. At that time, NOLS and OB were just getting their footing and things like adventure programming, experiential learning, and even outdoor recreation were still new. A lot has changed since then.

Now we are a full fledge field of study and thousands of people make a living and careers out of leading outdoor education experiences. Some people think the growth of our field is

accidental. I do not. The truth is that entrepreneurs, committed educators, and passionate outdoor enthusiasts have made decisions over the past 35 years that have led to the growth we are now benefiting from. So what might you do, to continue this legacy of an ever expanding and positive influence?

Here is one thing I know for sure: Organizations that create intentional growth plans have a greater chance of enduring the trials and tribulations that come with working to stay ahead of market demands. As our field becomes more organized, more people benefit through adventure programming, camps, camping experiences, challenge based curricula, wilderness programs and even adventure therapy. Through these experiences people learn to appreciate the beauty of nature. They learn to work more effectively with others to overcome challenges and they practice making sound decisions in the face of adversity and fear. Challenge and adventure programs give us a rare opportunity to practice making sound, ethical, and compassionate decisions. They give us undeniable evidence of our ability to succeed when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds.

According to the Outdoor Industry Association, “outdoor participants now compromise two-thirds of the national population. We have added 16 million new faces since 1998,” and our programs are growing almost as fast as our insurance premiums. If our growth is to be sustainable, we will also need to focus our attention on things like the quality of the experiences we offer, the results we deliver, the skills we build, and the transferability of these skills into the daily lives of our participants.

If you believe in the work that you do and you want to spread the good work you are doing to a broader audience then growth could very well become part of your mission. Here are a few questions that will help you to take an honest look at whether or not growing is right for you and to help you to develop an intentional growth strategy.

Is your program “safe”?

It may seem obvious but it is worth mentioning. If your programs are not safe, if people frequently get injured or experience emotional catastrophes on your programs then growing to serve more people should not be on your priority list.

Risk is an inherent part of adventure. Chances are, if you are involved in an adventure and challenge based program you are also working to manage risk and reduce unnecessary exposure. Your programs cannot be 100% risk-free, but are they unnecessarily hazardous?

Working with an outside risk management organization is a great way to get an impartial evaluation and to mitigate unnecessary risk. It is also becoming a moral imperative. Knowledgeable risk management professionals keep themselves up to date with current trends, recent accidents, and the legal ramifications of your decisions, training process, and day to day operations. If you have not had a review by a well educated risk management firm, do so.

Ok, so now that you are operating a well managed program and you have a plan to address the every changing landscape of risk management, let’s talk about your relationships with your customers.

Do you deliver on your promises?

All great organizations make and deliver on their promises. Some promises are implied- it is more likely that you will live than it is that you will die for example. Others are direct statements- “we develop young people.” Do you know what your implied and direct promises are?

The first step to accountability is to clearly define your commitment. Ask yourself, what are our specific customer commitment?

How will our customer’s lives be different as a result of an experience with our program? Will they be happier, healthier, better equipped to make good choices? The more clearly you are able to articulate your specific customer commitments the easier it will be to grow. This is true because a clear and concise set of customer commitments allows you to more easily identify the audience you seek- they have to want what you offer. You will also find it easier to evaluate the success of your experiences because you will have commitments that form the basis for your customer relationships.

Be bold and specific about your commitments. Tangible promises are easier to measure and easier to market. Specific customer commitments lead to higher levels of accountability among staff

The best way to get an impartial understanding of your ability to make and keep your commitments is to ask your clients what they expect of you and to ask them what they have been getting from you. This can be done through on line surveys, feedback cards, program evaluations or phone/in person interviews with key customers.

If you approach your customer interviews/surveys, etc with an open heart and humility and you are prepared to act on the feedback you receive, you will be better prepared to grow.

Are you building ICR’s?

How many of your client relationships would you describe as being Ideal Client Relationships?

Understanding the ideal relationship between your business and the people you serve is the first step to creating ideal relationships. For many of us, the ideal is to serve the same client through multiple experiences. It takes a lot of time, energy and money to continually seek new customers. Repeat business is one characteristic of nearly every Ideal Customer Relationship. If your programs provide real value, if they’re safe, and you’re delivering on your promises and not selling “broken products”, it may make sense for you to concentrate your growth efforts on building multi-phase relationships with your current customer base. To do this, you may need to add programs, products, and new options for your existing customers. This is important because it is five times cheaper to serve existing customers than it is to reach new customers. Most growth efforts are centered around new customer acquisition, when current customers are actually the easiest people to reach and the easiest people to please.

Ok, so now your programs are relatively safe, you make and deliver on your promises, and you are building ICRs -- but are you really ready to reach out to a broader audience?

This means marketing. What else do you need to have in place before you can tell the world about your amazing program?

Do you have a brand message?

Branding is simply a collection of perceptions that are created in the mind of your prospective and current customers . Your website, staff demeanor, facility aesthetics, and other characteristics all contribute to these perceptions. The important thing to remember is that you only contribute to brand, your customer actually holds the brand in their mind.

Ask yourself these questions: What words do we want our customers to use when describing us? What do we want them to say about us if they are asked to compare us to other providers? What words do we not want them to use? Finally, how are we going to be understood as unique in the market place? What 2 or 3 things make us truly unique, better, more appealing?

Now look at your marketing materials, look at the images you have selected, the quality of the paper, the quality of the graphic design and the text you are using. Are each of these things contributing to the perception or images you want your customers to hold of your organization? Have you built a phenomenal organization but a terrible “storefront.” If so, you will undoubtedly lose business to competitors who have built a powerful brand identity. It is no longer good enough to offer great service, new prospects need to see that you have committed yourself to building an attractive and unique identity.

Ok, so now you understand your brand message. It is time to get the word out. But first, let's be sure you are prepared to maintain quality.

Are you ready to ramp up, do you have the capacity for growth?

The bottom line is that you need to be ready to respond to the demand you are creating through your marketing effort. The systems you create to support demand will either help or hinder your growth.

We are blessed with a lot of great people in our field. Chances are the people in your organization are good, solid hardworking people just like you. **I often say that when a marketing effort creates more demand than an organization can handle, great people turn sour. That's why in most growth efforts gone awry, the problems lie in the system, not your people.** Without an effective operating system, and a strong business plan at best, your marketing will be ineffective. At it worst, you will be attracting participants only to show them your inability to deliver on your commitments. Build a growth plan, prepare staff, and know that it takes money to build the foundations of an operation.

The key to developing your capacity is to become conscious of your strengths and weaknesses.

What are you really good at?

Keep a log of the things you do effortlessly and teach those things to others so that they can assume a larger share of the work load. Be honest with yourself about the things that you are not good at and then seek advice and guidance for those areas that you to develop.

Becoming conscious of your growth opportunities is the first step toward turning them into strengths.

Are you ready to risk?

Finally, set clear goals. Think big. Know your financial, through-put, growth, capacity, and life style goals and keep them close to your heart like a well worn map. Write them down and make them clear to the other people who will be supporting your effort. Stay on the trail and post your goals where others on your team can see them.

When I was seven I had the amazing opportunity to paddle one of the greatest rivers in the world. We were chased by grizzlies, and spent the summers flying into remote areas of the Yukon to fish and paddle in some of the most beautiful areas on the planet. The experience has shaped my life. Now, in my work, I help adventure and experiential learning programs grow. That to me means helping more people have experiences that impact them the way I was impacted in the Yukon. I am deeply connected to this work because I realize now that had my father not made the choice to start and then grow their adventure program, my life would not be what it is today. I am grateful that he made the choice to grow and that he took great care in his effort.

Since that time, the Alaskan Highway has been paved and our field has blossomed into a full blown industry. Experiential Learning, Adventure Based Learning and Challenge Course programs are growing in every corner of the globe and every day, more people get the opportunity to enrich their lives with experiences like the one I had at an early age. Challenge Based programming is even being used to develop principles of non-violence, reduce marginalization and fight world hunger.

Oh, and by the way, the art college in the Yukon was a success. I'm happy to report that the Atlin Art Center is still thriving. If you go, please tell them I said hello and thank them for me.

To the adventure,

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