

The Recipe for Success

By Patrick Lambe

We behave, much of the time, as though it were possible to take a couple of hundred successful entrepreneurs, put them into a juicer, and create an entrepreneurship tonic.

Let's say we wanted to commercialise this idea and start a business around it. The entrepreneur wastage from our juicing technique would be high, and may not be popular. So we'd call in some analytical chemists and possibly bio-engineering experts, to identify the critical ingredients in our organically produced entrepreneurship tonic. Then we'd look for artificial substitutes, and make millions from our recipe.

Holdon, that's been done. Apart from cookery books (9,997 titles on Amazon), the next largest source of recipes is in the field of business (5,827 titles on Amazon), followed at a distance, by books on health and well being (3,621). The business titles range from the inflated ("How to make a fortune in the next trillion dollar industry", "How to create, win and dominate markets", "How to become rich using your banker's money") where you wonder why the author would actually need to write a book, given authoring's notoriously poor financial return on effort; to the mundane ("How to make meetings work", "How to become a grant writing consultant") where closer examination reveals that 90% of the ingredients are in everyday use already.

No wonder the titles protest a little too much, shrieking "ultimate", laden with promises, screaming secrets and hidden knowledge. Sated with the cover, we forget to notice the shallowness of the interior.

Almost 20% of current business books explicitly use the words "how to" in their titles, not counting the ones that invite you to consider the secrets of the great and good (868), or the rules for business success (511). Irrefutable laws are even more popular, offering, we suppose, marginally more certainty than the pusillanimous rule (8,569). We might reasonably estimate that about half of business and management books in print, are actually recipe books for success.

Perhaps we're being a little unfair. Doesn't it make sense that we should observe successful practices, seek to isolate and identify them, and transfer them to new situations? That's the premise that lies behind a great deal of management theory, and the vast collections of case studies we construct. It's also a premise behind the kind of knowledge we try to "extract" or "capture" for our knowledge management systems (the terms suggest, rather accurately, that knowledge management is a bizarre combination of dentistry and police-work).

And if you look at entrepreneurs, there are certain things that seem to leap out at you. Successful entrepreneurs across continents and historical periods do seem to have a common set of characteristics. Few possess the full set of ingredients, but there is an identifiable list:

Entrepreneurs obsess – they worry their business from every angle, dream, imagine, perform simulations, reflect constantly on every aspect of their business.

Entrepreneurs learn – as part of their obsessing, they try things out, retry, and revisit both success and failure, seeking to discern lessons. They'll rarely code or capture this learning, but it amplifies their ability to discern possibility and threat in new situations. It makes them very fast, and very nimble.

Entrepreneurs are curious – they are always asking questions, looking around them, investigating things, looking for reasons why things are the way they are. They are often supremely discontented, annoying, inquisitive creatures.

Entrepreneurs are charismatic – they have the ability to charm, attract friends, partners, investors and loyal employees. They have to be good at forming relationships and inspiring trust, because their other character traits are extremely difficult to live with, and because they routinely expose their partners, employees and colleagues to risk.

There you have it, the essence of it at least. But place these ingredients into our tonic, mix with tomato juice and stir vigorously and drink, and a successful entrepreneur does not ensue.

There's a deeper secret behind success, one that we find less often represented in the promising multitudes of supremely easy recipe books. I have discovered that secret.

My former landlady in Singapore wants to become an entrepreneur. She wants to start her own small food stall. Her problem is that if she wants good traffic, the rentals are very high and it's hard to make a profit. If she goes for a low rental stall, the turnover will be low, and it's hard to make a profit. So she is casting around for a specialty dish common in her childhood, that isn't so well known now. In Singapore, food is a craze: if you hit the right nerve with the right dish, people will travel from far and wide to sample it, and they'll tell everyone they know. Low rental and high traffic, good profits.

My landlady, Mary, fixed on a type of riceflour cake dish called *wah kueh*. Her next task is to find out how to make it – to get the recipe. The whole idea is that the dish should be scarce, so finding somebody who still makes it is difficult. Her best bet is to find somebody from her network of friends, whose parents made and sold it. It will have to be somebody fairly close to her, because such knowledge is rarely circulated outside the family, even for commercial incentives, and even though the knowledge is quite likely to die with its bearer.

Let's say she finds the parent of a close friend who knows how to make *wah kueh*. They won't be able to show her how to make it, because they no longer have access to the range of equipment required to make it. They'll have to tell her. And they won't tell her precise measurements, they'll just say "add this to that, and do this to it until it's ready". So I asked Mary, "How will you know you are making it correctly?" "I'll have to spend a couple of months feeding my family *wah kueh*, until I get the taste right" she replied. She literally has to eat the knowledge, in order to get the true recipe for success.

This story, in miniature, is how we normally acquire experience in the real world, outside the fantasy world of business book shelves. We don't truly *know* until we have internalised, integrated into larger maps of what we know, practised, repeated, made myriad variations of mistake, built up our own personalised patterns of perception and experience. It's not the recipe, it's the experience that counts. Recipes only get us started.

Emotions too will play their part: Mary's family will gradually increase the pressure on Mary to get her knowledge right quickly, so that they can return to a normal diet. If she gives in to them too soon, she will fail. Deep, performative knowing is a longer, more complex process than identifying a ready made formula to apply across the board.

We might think that we can solve Mary's knowledge problem much more efficiently by setting up a *wah kueh* school, or at least reconstructing more complete recipes. But if such knowledge were so easily accessed, would Mary's enterprise continue to have value? She'd have to go looking for some other, out of the way, hard to acquire knowledge. It's the scarcity of the knowledge that will drive her anticipated profits. A widely known recipe (in a mass produced book, say) has little value.

The secret of successful entrepreneurship, turns out, after all, to be very simple. You just have to stick around for long enough. Staying power, survival, and the strength to keep getting up and starting again, are more important than any other ingredient. The other ingredients we listed above may facilitate our survival, but they won't guarantee success. That's why luck is also much more important than we would care to admit.

This year's winner of Businessman of the Year is a veteran entrepreneur, in a decidedly unsexy, old economy industry. His success, honoured today, does not mark an end to new economy dreams, or disallow the entrepreneurial success of the young. But it does mean that time and endurance combined with constant reflection on hard-won experience is the essential ingredient in real success. And, we, the struggling old, will be reassured that it is not necessary to juice us, after all.

Patrick Lambe is founder of Straits Knowledge (www.straitsknowledge.com), a Singapore based firm that conducts research and consulting on knowledge management, e-learning and innovation. His articles can be found at www.greenchameleon.com.