

Mindset Text

Episode 1 – Startup Survival Podcast

By Peter Harrington

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We are living and working in very strange, very difficult times.

The normal advice and rules for start-ups appear to be out the window and running down our empty high streets.

But with some insight you can make sense of this new world.

It is possible to progress your entrepreneurial aspirations.

And you can develop skills and powerful ways of working that will stay with you forever.

So how do you trade in these challenging times?

And how do you find customers and make sales?

Whatever your venture, this podcast series is designed to help you.

Remember, there are no quick wins and easy solutions. Change takes time and focused work.

So let's get going.

My name's Peter Harrington and this is your Start-up Survival podcast.

And this episode focuses on the survival mindset for turbulent times.

Back in the mid-nineties part of my work involved running week-long sales training courses for people in the finance industry.

I have great memories of that contract because I enjoyed the trainer role, I was well paid and crucially I was learning a lot about myself and other people too.

And one of my clearest memories goes back to the week I ran in Stratford upon Avon.

I was working with a group of about 12 people, most of whom were men who had spent much of their professional lives in sales.

I think it was mid-week, probably the Wednesday when I was suddenly aware that all was not right.

The group were sat around a large table in front of me, preparing notes for an exercise we were about to do.

Apart that is, from Alan.

Alan wasn't preparing any notes. Instead his head was bowed and his hands were covering his face.

Then I realised Alan was crying.

Being only 27, I did my limited best to offer support. But amidst the tears Alan's kind smile and mumbled apology suggested everything was fine.

We agreed to talk at the end of the day.

When we met Alan thanked me for the training course. He said it all made so much sense and meant a lot to him.

But I'll explain his tears a little later.

For now let's turn to the main theme of this episode – mindset.

Or rather, how do you develop a survival mindset that helps you find customers, trade and sell when the going gets really tough?

COVID-19 has created a new world order. You can't simply apply the old rules and expect them to work.

Since the world has changed, you have to change and adapt as well.

To do this there are two fundamental questions to address:

1. What direction do you take
And 2, how fast should you be moving?

Let's take a look at direction first. I'll come back to speed later.

Ventures become successful because they provide what their customers want. Successful ventures make informed, research-backed decisions.

The good news is that amidst the chaos caused by COVID-19 this fundamental principle hasn't changed one jot.

However, your customers' problems have changed.

Making informed decisions requires customer understanding.

As part of my research for this podcast I wanted to learn what others were saying on the subject.

As a result, I came across Mark Schaefer, a US-based marketing consultant, writer and speaker.

For me, Mark makes many excellent points when highlighting the fact society at large is suffering from loss and grief.

We have lost our freedom

We have lost our work-life

We have lost access to money

We have lost social habits

Etc.

And loss leads to grief which affects how we behave.

Mark even highlights the Kubler-Ross 5-stage model of grief which starts with denial and anger before moving onto bargaining, depression and finally acceptance.

I recommend you google Kubler Ross – that's K U B L E R , R O S S so you can spend a bit more time understanding the model.

Understanding will help you to frame how people are thinking right now.

To gain greater insight, Mark also suggests we consider the idea of selling to people at a funeral. And I agree with him.

Take a moment to think about this concept. How might you approach people?

People who are grieving are not looking for deals, promotions or a conversation with someone who wants to take.

These people want help.

They want support.

They want empathy.

And if you want to build trusting relationships with anyone in business, this is always a good starting point.

Your job is to find out how you might help. And this typically means giving first.

But, here's the rub.

Unfortunately, many aspirational entrepreneurs I meet find pro-active customer interaction difficult or at worst a no go zone.

Interaction with people we have never met before is a regular stumbling point for many start-ups because it is the moment of greatest uncertainty and likely discomfort.

But if ever there has been a time to get out of your comfort zone, this is it.

Entrepreneurs like you have ideas and want to change the world in some small part.

But that doesn't mean everyone will agree with your thinking.

In fact, most won't agree with your thinking.

So, accept that you will be rejected or people will offer different or new ideas. This stage is a very important part of the customer discovery journey.

But how do you go about contacting people, especially when so many are not at work.

Rather than talk you through all the detail, it's much simpler if I refer you to worthy advice from the renowned entrepreneur and start-up guru Steve Blank.

If you've not heard of Steve, he is famous for his breakthrough work with Lean Startup as well as his innovative teaching in many of America's most prestigious universities.

Posted on April 7th and entitled 'Customer Discovery in the time of the COVID-19 virus' Steve's writing gives you all the necessary steps and how to fulfil them.

You can find everything at steveblank.com and the same article also appeared on Techcrunch.

Of course, when you start making contact with prospects, you'll find that many people will ignore your social media messages, phone calls and emails.

But remember, it's not you they are rejecting.

They naturally may have more pressing matters to deal with

They may be taking a break from work

Or if they have your missive, it may be your idea just doesn't resonate right now.

Or rather they are rejecting the way you are framing and communicating what you do.

The issue of framing and communicating messages is extremely important. So important in-fact, that I am dedicating the fourth episode in this podcast to that subject.

I'm dedicating a whole episode to it because I want to help you craft human-centred messages that cut through and have greatest chance of generating a response.

But for now, I suggest you spend quality time investing in your own customer research and working through Steve Blank's thoughts on customer discovery.

Dig through all relevant sources to understand your customer's problems right now.

Quality research should mean that any message you do send has greatest chance of resonating.

Earlier in this episode I highlighted two key issues.

The first was direction.

The second was speed of work.

Having considered direction, let's now take a look at how fast you might move forwards,

When life is uncertain we often seek swift passage to a safe-harbour.

As a result of the virus outbreak you may have a tonne of ideas and plans you can't now implement.

And as a consequence you may feel frustrated, worried and possibly angry.

When these emotions are triggered, our fight/flight stimulus controlled by our brain's limbic system typically kicks in.

Do we run away or do we tackle the problem?

An acclaimed author who has brought me much comfort from time to time over the last 30 years is a Tibetan Buddhist, famous for both her teaching and her writing.

When you find yourself in a really challenging situation, Pema Chodron advocates that you don't run or fight.

Instead she says you should simply stay awhile and get used to your new surroundings.

Physically-speaking, the rules of lockdown help us all to stay awhile.

But our heads can be a jumble of confused thoughts continuously fed by nagging doubt and constant desire to do something.

Mark Schaeffer, who I mentioned earlier, also stresses the need to be gentle on yourself in this difficult time. Don't beat yourself up because sales and inquiries have taken a nose dive.

Events driven by the external environment are not your fault.

But as an entrepreneur, how you respond is your responsibility.

As part of further research for this podcast, I found an excellent TED presentation by Dave Jarman.

Dave is a senior lecturer in entrepreneurship at the University of Bristol.

In his presentation Dave talks about the value of succeeding slowly as opposed to the standard term that seems to be woven into many entrepreneurial courses – that of 'failing fast'.

The uncertainty brought about by COVID-19 requires us to change and adapt.

So slowing down, standing back and taking some time to think things through is an important change of behaviour I'd recommend.

And when I look back at my first three years in business, I see someone who worked very energetically but for much of that time, ran around in circles.

I wasted so much time in those first three years. If only I had been wiser and taken a bit more advice.

And that brings me to the final point of this podcast.

Let's get back to Alan and the training course I mentioned at the outset.

Or rather, let's get back to why Alan was crying.

When everyone had left the room at the end of that day's training in Stratford, Alan and I were alone.

Still sat in his chair he looked at me for a few seconds before speaking.

He then told me he was 57

He also said he would probably be retiring within 3 years.

In response, I started to congratulate him.

But he raised a hand and smiled.

After a brief silence, Alan explained that he had started in sales at the age of 20.

But it had taken a training course 37 years later for him to learn how to do his job effectively and professionally.

Alan's tears were all about time.

Alan's tears were all about the time he has wasted getting his job wrong.

If Alan could have started his professional journey in Stratford, his life he admitted would have been so different and so much more fulfilling.

I wasted much of the first 3 years of my life. Alan believes he wasted much more.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be a crisis, but it is also an opportunity.

It's an opportunity to take your time, do your research and get your bearings.

And once you know where you are headed and how to get there, every second of every minute of every hour will count for you.

Finally, with every episode, I'm recommending a book to buy.

If you can use the extra time you have now to read or listen to the suggested text, I guarantee you will be better equipped to get wherever you're headed far more quickly than you thought possible before this crisis started.

And my recommendation is 'This is Marketing' by Seth Godin. It's a belter

In the next episode I'm going to take a look at the subject of resilience. And after that I'll be examining the issue of building trust and then onto effective communications.

Through all this mayhem your feedback is not just welcomed, it's needed.

Like you this is the first time I've ever dealt with a pandemic whilst in business.

So please, let me know your thoughts and questions. I'd love to hear from you.

My name's Peter Harrington

And this has been your start-up survival podcast.

Thank you for joining me.