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7 Key Steps to Starting A Successful Small Business

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Wasmund's whiskey still—a small business dream

I spend a great deal of time in the small Virginia towns of Culpeper, Sperryville, Warrenton and [Washington](#), all about an hour-plus drive from Washington, DC, and none too far from Shenandoah National Park.

My husband and I have a tiny cottage out that way. The vistas of the Blue Ridge Mountains, rolling fields and mountain streams are the lure. And of course, there's the awe of star-strewn night skies.

It's the land of small business and sole proprietors. Everywhere I shop or dine is operated by a small business owner. I'm on a first name basis with most of them. They run the gamut from the corner store grocer to the coffee roaster to my dog's vet to the antique store, the silver and gold jeweler, and the fish market. There are wineries, dairies, pie shops, and simple restaurants touting meals made from locally-grown and raised ingredients.

There's a tack shop for the horsey set with saddles and stylish riding boots that smells enticingly of rich English leather and liniment. As a horse-addled adult, I'm biased, of course.

One bakery, in particular, makes me instantly hungry just by opening the door. And don't get me started about Janet's pies. Then too, there are dozens of artists who have studios here and market their goods privately by word-of-mouth. There are farmers raising sheep and cattle, and stable owners who board and train horses for a living.

This world is a network and community of small business bravehearts with entrepreneurial drive and a belief that they will make it, and the lion's share are... for today. And that's what small business is often all about, the present. It's frequently tenuous, living on the edge.

It can be a struggle when the leaf peepers and park hikers are gone, and the short, cold days of winter set in. But year after year, they keep at it. Of course, there are those that fall by the wayside, and we mourn the loss. We root for them to succeed and put our money where our mouth is by supporting them.

These towns depend on small business to thrive. More than a few of the owners are mid-life entrepreneurs, who have switched careers to do something they love.

Rick Wasmund is one. The 51-year-old sells Wasmund's Single Malt and Rye Whisky, produced at his [Copper Fox Distillery](#) in Sperryville, Va. Wasmund dreamed of running his own business since he was a kid in upstate [New York](#).

But until he took a leap of faith and started his distillery, he spent his days selling insurance policies for Northwestern Mutual, and doling out financial planning advice to many small businesses, as well as accountants and physicians. "I saw first-hand the challenges of running a small operation, and went for it anyway."

Five years ago, he sold his first bottle of single-malt. This year, Copper Fox will produce about 3,000 cases, up from 2,000 in 2009. The challenge is turning a profit. "I have been working basically for free, subsistence level, for a couple of years. You would like to think at some point that money is not going to be an issue," he says.

Luckily, Wasmund is frugal, but with a newborn daughter, he knows he needs to keep the pedal to the metal. For more on Wasmund, check out the profile I wrote earlier this year for [SecondAct.com](#).

Going solo isn't for everyone. You need business chops- an understanding of the whole kit from marketing to sales and finance, or the willingness to learn those integral facets.

At the heart of it, though, is something that can't be taught. It's what keeps Wasmund trucking his whiskey for tastings up and down the east coast and sometimes sleeping in his van –an intense self-motivation and inner drive.

My father, [Jack Hannon](#), ran his own business in [Pittsburgh](#), so I grew up in the world of small business, talking about it over the dinner table each evening. I know what it looks like from the inside.

Here are my seven What's [Next](#) steps to help you get started down this new path:

- *Find a mentor.* Who do you know who might be able to guide you along

your new path? Take the time to meet with your mentor and enlist his or her invaluable help behind the scenes in learning the ropes.

- *Delve into your network of friends, family, and business colleagues.* Tap into LinkedIn and Facebook contacts. If you're interested in starting a small business, check out StartupNation.com, a site dedicated to small-business groups.
- *Broaden your mentor search.* Get involved your local Rotary Club and contact the chamber of commerce near you. Another way to connect with a reliable person to guide you is through [SCORE](http://SCORE.org), a nonprofit association dedicated to educating entrepreneurs and to the formation, growth, and success of small business nationwide. SCORE is a resource partner with the U.S. Small [Business Administration](http://BusinessAdministration.gov) (SBA). Both working and retired executives and business owners donate time and expertise as business counselors. SCORE mentors will advise you for free, in person, or online. [The Association of Small Business Development Centers](http://TheAssociationofSmallBusinessDevelopmentCenters.org), a joint effort of the Small Business Administration, universities, colleges, and local governments, provides no-cost consulting and low-cost training at about a thousand locations.
- *Prime your sales pitch.* Evaluate your skill set and be confident. If cold calling isn't your top move, focus on your best sales technique and hone it to market your new venture.
- *Be prepared for setbacks.* Starting a new business in uncharted territory takes time. It might take off like gangbusters, but in time, you will hit the inevitable setbacks. This not only will require internal fortitude, but also will force you to ask others for help and guidance. This is when a solid mentor by your side comes in handy.
- *Seek and listen to advice from people who have been successful in the field.* They can help you find leads when you're ready to get your foot in the door, but more important, they can give you a real sense of what their work is like on a day-to-day basis. Use their advice to get a sense of what has worked for them in the past and what stumbling blocks to avoid, as well as a sense of what the work entails and what opportunities might be out there for someone with your background.
- *Tap into your personal network.* You never know who can bring you clients or help you build your business. Reach out, for example, to potential contacts through alumni outlets such as publications, Web sites, or regional associations.

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