



How to Create Plan B

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: Here's another offbeat e-update on business communication and current events from Write Company Plus, a corporate training firm located outside Philadelphia. In respect for your busy schedule, writers and editors have arranged seven at-a-glance ideas at the end of this article. Skip directly there if you lack the time to read the entire document.

Last week, I went to the monthly meeting of a large business women's group near my home office outside Philadelphia. Because I normally work out of town, it was the first opportunity I had to attend in several years. I was the guest of Valerie Clemens, owner of Valerie's Dance Studio. While Clemens specializes in teaching fathers of the bride to avoid making fools of themselves in their first dance with daughters at wedding receptions, she describes her market as "anyone with feet."

As always, I was awestruck by the enthusiasm and energy member have for their entrepreneurial and corporate careers. At this particular gathering, held at a large hotel, I also was thunderstruck by a relatively new phenomenon. Almost everyone I talked with is involved in more than one financial pursuit.

Besides teaching ballroom dance, Clemens sells cosmetics. Another group member, Lori Zytkowicz, operates as an auctioneer as well as owner of a bed and breakfast. Reba Larney is an insurance woman who also consults with property owners and renters on energy conservation. Nanci Hagarty inspects real estate; her second role is cleaning, repairing, and installing dryer vents. Patti Klimas specializes in problem hair at her beauty salon while also peddling doggy-danna scarves for pets. Makes you tired just thinking about it, doesn't it?

For me, the women's various and simultaneous endeavors were utterly intriguing. In my view, the individuals I chatted with personify a growing trend among Americans: stop putting your eggs in one business basket by opening and actively pursuing Plan B. To be sure, a fallback position for making of living has been around for decades. It has come and gone with many names: multiple streams of income, serial entrepreneurship, business sideline, career diversification, second career. But active Plan B practitioners back in the 20th century were dwarfed in sheer numbers by people who believed in focusing on their core competence, sticking to their knitting, working from graduation to grave at one organization.

In days gone by, few entrepreneurs dared to confuse clients by offering financial advice while simultaneously scooping dog poop; hardly any corporate employees broadcast at their 9-to-5 jobs auditing books that they were selling handmade jewelry at night on the Internet. Today, honesty has broken loose. And why not? My guess is that in this horrific economy, many people feel they have more to gain – as in customers – than they have to lose – as in befuddled clients or angry employers – by jumping head first into several pools at once. As in any major switch in life, turning from being a single-minded engineer into a multi-tasking massage-therapist-slash-interior-designer, is far from easy. If the process interests you, here are some ideas:

Face the facts. If I were running the educational system in the United States, I'd require every student to take a course in flexibility. Now, more than ever before, you run the risk of destroying yourself professionally and personally if you dig in your heels and resist change. Economists say that most jobs lost in recent years will never come back.



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Go with the flow. Sure, you may wish you felt 100 percent secure in your \$100,000-per-year job at Microsoft or Times Warner. But wake up and smell the Starbucks, which recently announced a huge cutback in prices. Viewing Plan B as a way to expand your horizons rather than a force to ruin your life may set in motion a surprisingly positive self-fulfilling prophecy. You may be fortunate enough to discover, while there's still time to change, that you studied information technology to please your parents when you really always wanted to be a floral designer.

Talk to success stories. I believe there's nothing like a person who is-there-doing-that to gather valuable information. Keep your eyes and ears open to tap into insights from satisfied Plan B-ers. Unless you intend to go into direct competition business-wise and bear their pants off, I predict they'll be delighted to share their experience, strength, and hope.

Create separate identities. In my car following the luncheon, I happened to hear an interview on National Public Radio (NPR) with a highly placed executive with Kraft Foods. The interviewer asked if she were bothered by the fact that most customers don't know that her conglomerate is behind numerous other brands, including Oscar Mayer and Nestles. She said she didn't mind a bit – as long as people kept buying sliced cheese, hot dogs and coffee sold under the Kraft umbrella.

Ration your time appropriately. In my view, time management is among the most difficult tasks in launching Plan B. Like the women I mentioned, I also have two separate careers going. One is training. The other is writing. Because I make the vast majority of my income from speaking in corporate settings, I traditionally have put more time and energy into the first pursuit rather than the second.

Face the key marketing conundrum. Upfront, you need to decide if you can aim your concepts at the same group – or whether you may feel more comfortable developing different clienteles. For Clemens, the fact that she can sell cosmetics to prospective brides and their attendants eases her promotional load. Because the wedding industry tends to remain profitable even in uncertain times, she's running little risk by focusing primarily on a single market. For me, no overlap exists among training directors and book publishers. While I conceivably could survive on either industry if the other went belly up, double marketing is a lot more work.

Keep trucking. According to recent psychological research, resilience -- not lack of failure -- is a key predictor of lifetime success. Even if both Plans A and B go down the toilet, you still have hope as long as you try, try, try again. Why do you think God created an alphabet with 24 more letters?

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