

Learn to say 'No'



By [Anton Ressel](#)

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Saying 'No' can be a liberating experience for an entrepreneur...

How good are you at saying no to your customers? Before you choke on your cappuccino, let me elaborate a bit further, and perhaps you will agree that this much maligned two-letter word has its place in any business strategy.

Start-up disease

On the other end of the scale, we have the word 'Yes', one of the major causes of start-up disease. Never heard of it? Simply put, it is a tendency of start-ups and new or emerging businesses to shoot themselves in the foot or make their own lives very difficult - usually resulting in such symptoms as high levels of frustration, extreme stress, unhealthy cash flows and, sometimes, even death.

How is this possible, you ask - surely saying 'yes' is an empowering business strategy, a way to demonstrate customer focus and commitment, a positive and affirming word that can smooth choppy waters and soothe savage beasts (and no, I am not referring to your bank manager...) Well, saying yes can do all of these things and more - but the 'and more' is not always in your best interests.

Learning to say 'NO'

Imagine a scenario where you are a web developer and under intense deadline pressure, with several jobs for large customers due out around the same time and little or no margin for error, when all of a sudden the phone rings. It is an old and very sporadic customer who you have not heard from in years, who urgently needs you to whip up a one-off electronic mailer - by tomorrow... would saying yes in this case be a good move on your part?

How about a scenario where you get a phone call from a complete stranger, who explains that they are setting up a similar operation to yours in another province, and are in town and want to pick your brains for an hour or two - for free. Is that two-letter word still feeling so hard to mutter?

How about that really discerning customer (an old mentor of mine said there are no difficult customers, only discerning ones...) who contacts you once in a blue moon to order something that you just know is going to be more trouble than it is worth - either too complex, too much margin for error or simply not worth the time investment required. Is 'Sorry, but no' still taboo in this case?

Just do it with a smile

The point I am making is that many of us, especially when we are starting out, are too eager to please - often to our own detriment. When I first got started in business I would take on any order, any lead time and any challenge - irrespective of whether it made business sense or not. Jeopardising delivery of a loyal customer's order to try and perform a miracle for a sporadic and seldom-seen one is just not smart business. Similarly, sharing all your hard-learned trade secrets with a competitor, with little or no prospect of seeing any future benefit, is just plain silly.

So, my advice is learn to say no, but do it with a smile. "I would love to help you Mrs Rabinowitz, but sadly my team is flat out until at least the end of next week - would that work for you? Alternatively I could offer you an off-the-shelf solution that may meet your needs?"

At the end of the day, your core responsibility is to your business - if your willingness to please everyone is putting you, your staff and your company under unnecessary pressure, it may be time to start practising that two-letter word.

ABOUT ANTON RESSEL

Anton Ressel is an experienced business development consultant, mentor and SME specialist. He is the Senior consultant at ED and CSI specialist agency Fetola (www.fetola.co.za), a winning mentor on the SAB Kickstart Entrepreneur Competition, and a published author across multiple publications. His passion is helping small businesses become big ones. Follow @antonres on Twitter.

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