

When Chaos Moves In, and How to Conquer It

The True Story of Entrepreneurship

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600,000 new small businesses will be created in the next 12 months. By the end of the year, half of them will have shut their doors forever.

That is not okay.

Although to some this may be nothing more than a statistical reality, it's time we start to view this as an unacceptable pattern. “

Until the underlying culprit of small business failure is addressed, businesses will continue to close unnecessarily; and small business owners will continue to feel the emotional sting and financial impact of their failed ventures.

So why do so many businesses dry up before they've even had a chance to truly succeed? It has nothing to do with a lack of customers, the economy, the competition, or bad business ideas. With a little bit of determination, each of these obstacles can be easily overcome. The real challenge is an invisible culprit that plagues small business owners through every stage of their existence—chaos.

The moment an entrepreneur opens her doors for business, chaos (the greatest antagonist to any company) creeps in through the entrance and takes up permanent residence. No matter how much experience, education, resourcefulness or outside assistance a new small business owner possesses, she is going to experience chaos.

No one is exempt from chaos. It's an inevitable part of owning and running a company. Perhaps that is why so few business owners do anything about it. In most situations, chaos goes entirely unchecked and is free to lead small business owners down an unstable, treacherous path that ultimately ends in devastation.

Chaos Turns the Dream of Small Business Ownership Into a Nightmare

Proponents of entrepreneurship love to celebrate the freedom and adventure of owning and running a company. Established business owners put on a smile, perfect their elevator speech about “being their own boss,” and proceed to sell you their product or service. The media tells us story after story about the multi-million dollar opportunities grown out of a garage or dorm room.

But few people tell the true story of entrepreneurship—the story of long hours, sleepless nights, endless worry, mental and physical stress, strained family relationships and non-existent social life.

Instead, would-be entrepreneurs buy into a dream that few will ever achieve. Believing in a promise of more money, more time, and freedom from the corporate world, entrepreneurs ignore the less-than-encouraging small business statistics and take the plunge into ownership.

That’s when chaos moves in.

Whether you’ve owned a small business or not, you can imagine the effort required to keep a company up and running. Every week the small business owner must make sales, fulfill on products or services, pay the bills, manage employees, deal with angry customers, update inventory, meet with clients, find vendors, market their business, collect outstanding balances, and read and respond to emails. In addition to all that, somehow you’ve got to stay organized.

In a single day, the business owner plays every role from salesperson to IT specialist to plumber (for when the toilets overflow).

Rather than finding more time, money, and freedom as they had hoped, small business owners end up committing everything they’ve got to their companies—becoming shackled to it.

In other words, what they find is a life of chaos—a life that is ruled by unfinished to-do lists and a growing list of new projects to be tackled.

Eventually, organization fails, plans for improvement are forgotten, and the small business owner is forced to run a day-to-day gauntlet. At this point, chaos has conquered the business and enslaved the business owner. Then it's simply a matter of time before the tired small business owner succumbs completely to the chaos.

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To Survive the Chaos, You Must Take the Offensive

With chaos wreaking havoc, it's uncertain how long a company will last. Some fold within a few short months. Others last years before finally giving up. But in every situation, the small business owner is being raked over the coals. They're doing everything they can to keep their dream alive. Unless the chaos is subdued, they are fighting a useless battle.

Sure, they might experience little wins—a major sale, adding a new employee—but these accomplishments are often buried by a laundry list of other things waiting to be done. As long as the business owner is racing to play “catch-up”, they will never score any real points. They will always be playing defense.

If a small business owner wants to survive, they must learn to take the offensive.

Most entrepreneurs are so busy with day-to-day “stuff”, they have no time to create strategies, improve processes, or actually grow their businesses. So, the growth and success of a company is limited to what the business owner can manage herself. Then, when there are no more hours in the day or money in the bank account, the business comes to an abrupt and painful halt; a halt that could mean the difference between staying in business and throwing in the towel.

To survive in the small business world, you must continue to improve and grow. It's not a choice. The world is moving too fast to stand still. Just to be competitive, a business must have a dynamic website. They should engage in social media. They need to follow up with their contacts, and they ought to be actively marketing their business.

These are all things you know and want to be doing, but meanwhile, there is always another customer who needs your attention. Your competitors will always move in on your prospects and customers. And there will always be another “fire” to put out.

With so much to handle, it's far too easy to lose sight of your goals. Small business owners get stuck in a rut of merely pressing their noses to the grindstone.

Without the tools and strategies to oppose it, chaos alone will determine your actions. And once you lose your focus and ambition...the business will come crashing down. Intentional growth, coupled with a few powerful strategies, is the only way to gain and keep control of your business. It may not be easy, but neither is accepting defeat.

It's time to take control again...it's time to conquer the chaos once and for all.

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3 Critical Steps to Overcoming Chaos

To the overwhelmed, downtrodden business owner, overcoming chaos may be the furthest thing from their mind. All they want is to make it through another day. But even the most defeated business owner will experience random moments when they remember why they became an entrepreneur. If those moments happen often enough, the entrepreneur will find the strength to make changes in their business. The problem is that most don't know where to start.

But the strategy is simple.

1 → Prepare Mentally

Change is never easy—even when it leads to the dream of more money, more time, and more freedom from your business. Breaking out of your daily routine can be just as difficult as battling the chaos, because it takes effort. When your business is already draining your energy level, the thought of doing more can lead to mental devastation.

That is why the first step to conquering chaos is mental preparation. If you want to improve and grow your business, you must be committed to change. You must be willing to give up the coping mechanisms you've put into place. You must be ready to uproot everything you've been doing and replace it with better, more productive processes.

Understand, however, that this is going to be tough. It may mean more work... temporarily. It's definitely going to take faith. But just like a new diet or starting a family, this is not a one-time deal. It's a lifestyle change. If you're not willing to shift your mental focus, you'll never break free from chaos.

So how do you work past the exhaustion to make that mental preparation? Easy. Just realize you're not living the dream.

- Take a few minutes and write down all the reasons you became an entrepreneur.
- Be sure to include the desire for more time, more money, more freedom to be with your family and the chance to be your own boss.
- Once you've got your list, start another one.
- In the second list, write down all the goals you've managed to achieve as an entrepreneur.

Once you see the chasm between where you are and where you want to be, it's a lot easier to tackle new strategies. With that motivation driving you, you'll be able to refocus your attention on the things that matter most. When the big picture (and not the immediate crisis) is the predominant thought, you'll take action with a purpose instead of simply being reactionary.

When it comes right down to it, that project you're scrambling to get done will still be there tomorrow. So is there something more important to be doing today? With the right mental attitude, you'll be in a position to make those decisions.

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2 → Improve Your Processes

Whether you realize it or not, you've already put processes in place. You have a process for how you open and read your mail. When you sit down at your computer, you have a process for what you look at and do first. Every sale that takes place goes through a process that you (perhaps unknowingly) created.

But simply having processes in place doesn't mean your business is organized. Having processes in place is no guarantee you will be able to fight the chaos. Only the right processes will effectively combat the chaos.

We would be willing to bet that the processes most small business owners have put in place lack timeliness or efficiency. After working with thousands of individuals, we've discovered that small business owners spend an awful lot of time doing the wrong kinds of things—things that don't contribute to the growth and success of a company.

For example, a company might create a process for dealing with angry customers after the fourth or fifth customer complaint. They formulate a plan for appeasing the customer, write down the process in a memo, and quickly train employees on the "Customer Complaint Process."

Although creating a process for a critical issue is the right thing to do, the approach could have been better planned. Before launching into another fire-fighting process, why not take the time to discover the source of the fire? Perhaps all five customers had the same complaint. Resolving the issue at the point of conflict will do far more to help the business than pacifying angry customers after the fact.

Again, this idea is going to take time. It will take dedication. But having the right processes in place is well worth the extra time and effort it may take to create them.

If you're serious about regaining control about your business, then:

- 1) Schedule some time every week to work on improving your processes
- 2) Chart all the processes that currently exist in your business (starting with customer-facing interactions)
- 3) Determine which processes are working and which are not
- 4) Stop doing things that are not contributing to your growth
- 5) Document all new business processes

With the right plans in place, you can minimize the number of “fires” in your business, easily cope with stressful situations as they occur, maximize your personal efforts, and improve the efficiency of your business as a whole. You will turn the tables on chaos and regain control of your business.

3 → Use Technology

Chaos exists, in part, because technology is driving the speed of business even faster. Years ago, when phone calls and letters were the only way to communicate, a business owner had time to respond to customer and prospect concerns. Now, with email being the predominant form of communication, business owners have 24 hours (or less) to take care of issues and questions.

Documents can be faxed in a matter of minutes. If you disagree with a customer, an entire blog post—dedicated to slandering your business—could immediately pop up on the internet. Money and other business transactions can all be done without any face-to-face interaction. Yet somehow, the small business owner is expected to keep up with all of it.

Technology is most definitely a major driver of business chaos. But the same thing that is creating this chaos can be used as a tool to conquer it.

If you haven't done so already, it's time to look at a few small business solutions. You see, you're not the only person struggling to stay afloat. Millions of business owners are dealing with the same challenges, and multiple technological solutions have been created just for you.

With the right tools, small business owners can easily and automatically:

- Keep in touch with contacts
- Manage billing processes
- Store and retrieve contact data
- Market their products and services
- Move prospects through the sales cycle
- Monitor employee efforts
- Track comments about your business on the Internet

You cannot fight (or conquer) chaos without attacking the source of chaos. In this case, you must fight fire with fire. Use technology. It's there. It works. What's more, several companies have created their solution with your needs in mind.

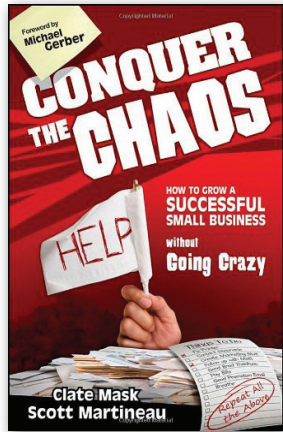
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A New Face for Small Business Ownership

No small business is immune to chaos. When a single individual takes on the responsibilities of an entire company, they're getting in over their heads. Large corporations hire hundreds of employees to do what this one person is trying to accomplish alone. That doesn't mean the entrepreneur will fail. But it's certainly going to be a struggle.

Millions of small businesses are successfully contributing to the health of the economy. There could and should be more, however. Success should be the general rule for new small businesses, not the exception. The dream of more money, more time, and more freedom should be more achievable.

The era of failed business ventures has run its course. It's not okay with us. And this era must come to a close now. Across the board, entrepreneurs need to recognize and accept chaos as a necessary evil. They need to embrace it and then put the strategies in place to defeat it. Because every door that closes is another attack on the small business world. **This is a battle we can't afford to lose.** 🚩



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Clate Mask is the co-founder and CEO of Infusionsoft, the leading provider of Email Marketing 2.0 software for small businesses. Clate loves to help small businesses grow. His passion for entrepreneurship is infectious and obvious from the moment he begins speaking. His dream is to revolutionize small business growth through smart automation. **Scott Martineau** is the cofounder and VP of Product Management at Infusionsoft. Scott is a serial entrepreneur who can't imagine ever working a "regular job." He is a technologist at heart, driven by his vision: to create an easier way for entrepreneurs to run their small businesses.

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