

What does it take to make a serial entrepreneur?

By George Shand

As hard as it may be to define what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur, the true serial entrepreneur is an even rarer breed.

There are differing views of what makes a serial entrepreneur unique. In fact, it's even been studied at the university level. As quoted in a 2009 article in *Entrepreneur*, Clemson University Professor Wayne Stewart says that serial entrepreneurs are bigger risk takers, more achievement-oriented and have a higher preference for innovation – and he believes they are born that way!

Stewart adds that serial entrepreneurship is more than just an interesting occurrence; it's an important economic and social trend. He estimates that about one-third of all new ventures are initiated by serial entrepreneurs and their firms tend to be larger. His belief is that these higher success rates are fueled by their earlier entrepreneurial experiences and the ability to leverage a wider network of customers, suppliers, partners and funders.

A view closer to home

I tend to have a somewhat different view based on my personal experiences and my observations of serial entrepreneurs with whom I have worked. I would suggest that serial entrepreneurs need not be Type A personalities versus Type B and there is no checklist to follow to become a serial entrepreneur.

All entrepreneurs must be able to stand on their own two feet, follow their dreams and turn them into reality. Perhaps the real difference between one-time entrepreneurs

and serial entrepreneurs is their level of persistence and resilience. Remember the nearly lifesize toy you had when you were a child that had a base of sand and an inflatable body above? You could punch it over and over and it still popped up. That's the serial entrepreneur – someone who is willing to work through rejection and even failure to pursue his or her passion.

Although we tend to think of the technology community when we discuss serial entrepreneurship, the concept has existed for millenia in the traditional economy. We can look back to the last century which produced such business icons as Henry Ford, R.H. Macy and Walt Disney. Ford started a number of failed businesses that left him broke five times before he founded Ford Motor Company. Macy started seven failed businesses before establishing the department store chain and Disney was fired by a newspaper editor because “he lacked imagination and had no good ideas.” He went bankrupt before finding the right fit.

You can see from these examples that serial entrepreneurs can run the gamut from passion to addiction. In addition to personal satisfaction, there's often an element of getting it done and proving people wrong – that the business concept was not only possible, but also profitable!

The fundamentals – and beyond

As with so many success stories, serial entrepreneurship begins with the basics. Serial entrepreneurs come from a variety of different backgrounds and must recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. A former executive may have good fundamental

skills but lack the ability to work out ideas alone, whereas the guy in the garage may have a crazy idea, but lack the business experience needed.

One school of thought is that serial entrepreneurs – more than one-time entrepreneurs – tend to be the “idea guys,” the big picture thinkers who do best at the conceptual level but struggle at the operational level. Again, one size does not fit all and there are certainly examples that both prove and disprove this idea. It comes down to understanding and realizing what it takes to be a serial entrepreneur and often finding the right partners to carry out the dream.

A final thought

Too many entrepreneurs believe that if their idea is good, investors will flock to them. This false impression often sets would-be entrepreneurs and even serial entrepreneurs on the wrong path. The simple fact is that in most cases a business must demonstrate that it can build revenue and meet business targets before people will be interested in funding it. That, of course, is one of the great lessons we learned from the Tech Boom and subsequent Tech Bust in the early 2000s.

Above all, entrepreneurs of all types should stay true to themselves. Yes, surround yourself with good advisors and partners, but hold onto the dream. T. S. Eliot stated it well when he said, “Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.” Entrepreneurship and serial entrepreneurship both require commitment, persistence and passion, and the most successful entrepreneurs are those who have these qualities in the right proportions.