



FINDING THE MAGIC IN "TINY" BUSINESS

Sharon Rowe

If you're like most people, you need to work and make a living. But, more than that, you want to be part of something, to contribute, and to add value.

You want to make a great living doing something you stand for. You may not know exactly all of what you want, but you know a lot about what you don't want. What you need and want may look a little different than others, but there are common threads. I'm going to guess you want:

Time: the freedom to choose when and how to use your time.

Resources: the money to support yourself now and in the future.

Relationships: people to share your life with.

Meaning: the knowledge that what you do matters.



Maybe you have an idea, either brewing or formed. Maybe you're tired of selling little bits of yourself in order to buy lattes and avocado toast, or maybe, what you're doing isn't quite enough to pay the rent. Maybe you want to use your voice to make an impact, to “create the change you want to see in the world.” Whatever your motivation, if you are ready to start something new, bring a new idea to life in the open market or challenge an existing idea, you are starting your entrepreneurial journey.

Maybe you've learned some things in school or picked them up on the street. Maybe you're totally green and all you have is your enthusiasm. This is the day when, as Seth Godin says, you decide to “pick yourself” and put your eggs in your own basket to proceed. Most people will say you have to “go big or go home,” but why not “go tiny” and be able to go home when you want?

Tiny business is business on *your* terms—that fits *your* life. It is driven by consciously chosen limitations that increase your focus on the things that matter. This focus helps you prioritize your “why”—the things that matter to you and that you want to create—in life, in business, and in the world. These priorities guide every decision in your “how”—the business realities and practices that get things done. Focus, priorities, and clarity create a magic that lets you enjoy the process. You remember to breathe, and you thrive through it all.

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What do you need to be a successful entrepreneur? If you talk to ten entrepreneurs you'll get ten different answers. Here's what I think from playing in the social entrepreneur space for almost thirty years operating a business: Being an entrepreneur is an endurance sport. It's also a lot like riding a rollercoaster, so get used to it.

My own journey started in 1989 when I was a new mom and partially working actress. The partial part wasn't paying the rent. From my own experience, I saw a social problem (wasteful single-use plastic bags) and I decided to challenge the problem and create a solution: reusable bags. Here are the simple steps I took:

1. I connected personally with a problem.
2. I test drove a solution in public and listened to the market responses (in my case, I used reusable bags when I shopped and watched and listened to the people in line behind me).
3. Seeing that my "tiny" idea inspired curiosity, I decided to build a business model to create the change I wanted to see in the world (and to create a good living).

We Are Disrupters

Twenty eight years ago, I set out to create a new market. That's what entrepreneurs do. We create new markets or improve existing ones. We're not step and repeat people. We are disrupters. There was no internet when I started. I knocked on doors, set up meetings, talked to people, created product, and built a business based on my personal "why" with limited, bootstrapped resources, one satisfied customer at time. I hustled.

People listen to connect. They listen to stories, not sales pitches. And my customers embraced, elevated, and expanded my brand concept and story beyond my wildest dreams or personal resources. Because of that, my brand is credited with pioneering the reusable bag movement!

Identify and Get Personal With Your "Why" to Inform How You Do Business

With my carefully articulated and personal "why" to create social change, and build a business without compromising my personal family time, I moved deliberately, persistently, and patiently forward. When you identify your own personal "why," it informs "how" you do business—which you can say is how you "practice" business every day, what your culture is, what your ingredients are made of or come from, etc. If you approach business like a pianist, then you know you need to practice every day to get better. When you practice, you build muscle and you become disciplined in your approach. Trust me when I say that being disciplined will help you when you are low, and support you when your business takes off. Business is hardly static. It is always a dance between external and internal pressures. If you decide to stop work at 5pm to have dinner with your family, you will organize your life to support that priority.

You have to focus in on what's most urgent and what matters most to you. I keep bringing up you, because at the core of my entrepreneurial journey was family and self-care. If you do not take care of yourself, you cannot take care of your business.

Have you heard of the Tiny House movement? It is the growing trend of people intentionally downsizing their living spaces for a number of reasons, and the one that seems to resonate the most is the freedom and time that efficient and purposeful Tiny living brings.

Like a Tiny House, a Tiny Business is built by keeping a laser focus on what you deem essential and eliminating what’s nonessential—all the extra stuff. Tiny House advocates say it’s about creating and living an intentional life with less. The first step is deciding when to say no. You have to get tough on what to include and what to throw out. By identifying what’s important and essential, you make it easier to eliminate physical and mental clutter and experience life—and business—with greater ease and more abundance.

A Tiny Business is defined by your priorities and intentions, not how many employees you have. It has everything to do with your level of focus and not just how much revenue you bring in. It recognizes that growth is good—but not growth at all costs.

A Tiny Business approach takes a long view. It requires a disciplined mindset that breaks down problems into opportunities and encourages taking incremental, deliberate steps to keep you and your business healthy and vital, and your personal priorities intact.

In my case, I made up business rules to support my environmental goals (leave no trace) and social priorities (fair wages for fair labor). I intentionally grew a Tiny Business, Eco-Bags Products, from a tiny idea into a profitable multimillion-dollar operation at my own pace, while prioritizing family and vacations, the environment and economic justice.



“I know sweetie, but the environment doesn’t make Daddy any money.”

You don't have to scrape by or sacrifice everything to make a great living! You can build a profitable, million-dollar Tiny Business without working weekends and nights! It can be done!

But don't get me wrong: it's not easy. Building a Tiny Business requires great agility, creativity, and discipline. With decisions to be made at every turn, standing for something bigger than (but including) profit presents interesting challenges. That's what makes articulating your “why”—a clear and simple vision for what you want to create in life, business, and the world—so important. Tiny Business is about setting your intentions to create value and impact now—and for the future.

When you take the time to get very clear on what you want, choose a direction, and remove all obstacles, you'll find yourself moving with a greater sense of ease and freedom, creating a kind of “magic.” I'm defining “magic” as the freedom and joy you experience when you combine exquisite focus and consistent effort over time. When you know exactly what you want, it makes it easy to push everything you don't want—all the clutter and noise—to the wayside.

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Tiny Business is a smoother journey, but it requires you to consciously choose your limitations—whether it’s leaving work at 5:00 p.m. every day without fail, having a positive environmental impact, or enjoying a flexible schedule. It will force you to be clear on what do you want for your life, your business, and the world. Why do you want to start your own business? Why are you passionate about selling this particular product or service? Breaking down the answers to these questions will help you get clear on your brand and your story—the unique value you are adding to the marketplace.

And, although profit may not be you primary motive, it will force you to be intimately involved with money, your profit and loss. As a business owner, you need to be intimate with your numbers. Even if you have a bookkeeper, and accountant, and a CFO. With almost three decades in business, I still speak entrepreneur more than I do numbers. But I know my numbers. That is because the lifeblood of my business (of most businesses) is cash flow.

In addition to managing your cash and growing profit, as a Tiny Business owner you have other key things to measure around how you want to be in business (your “why”). It’s important to check in and measure how you’re doing with your personal and professional priorities on a weekly, if not daily basis. It’s easy and normal to get thrown off course.

For example, it’s easy to make a commitment to “fair wages for fair labor” from a comfy office, possibly thousands of miles away from your manufacturer, and then reap the benefits through effective marketing. But to be true to your Tiny Business values, you need to establish relationships on both a personal and professional level with your partners and make sure you are on the same page. You have to see how they do business with your own eyes and use measurements and third-party certifications to ensure promises are kept. The bottom line is that you have to establish trust and metrics.

Establish criteria to meet your Tiny values and measure the criteria. One great (and free) resource is the B Corp Measure What Matters assessment to help you measure your impact on society and the environment.

Get crystal clear on the numbers that matter most to your Tiny Business—like your cash flow, your performance against your forecasts, and any metrics you use to help you stay true to your “why.” Then lead consistently with those metrics front and center for all your employees to embrace. You may have started the business but your team is responsible for running it, so make sure the culture supports their efforts.

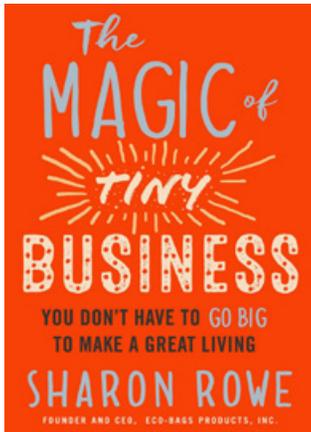
You need to know your numbers like the back of your hand, adjusting and using forecasts and budgeting to shape the actions you take to sustain and scale—all the while keeping your “why” front and center.

It is about keeping you whole throughout the process. A Tiny Business is about making a good living and a great life. You need to be able to stop and smell the flowers, or get a glass of water, or take a walk when you feel like it—you need to enjoy the journey.

Entrepreneurship doesn’t need to be a competitive race to the peak, as popular myths and media want you to believe. It can be a pleasurable, educational hike, from point A to point B, step by step to the summit, where you arrive in healthier financial and personal shape than when you began. With a Tiny Business, you get to stop and smell the flowers (and have fun) along the way. **You eventually get where you’re going, and you’re more whole when you get there.** 📍



Info



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About the authors

Sharon Rowe is the founder and CEO of Eco-Bags Products (a certified BCorp), which grew to become a \$2.2 million business. Featured in *TIME* magazine and in the indie film *Bag It*, Rowe has been the recipient of several awards, including the Business Council of Westchester's Entrepreneur of the Year, Enterprising Woman of the Year, and the Women's Enterprise Development Center's Lilian Vernon Award. She is a member of the Social Venture Network and Women President's Organization.



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