

6 tips to help scale up your small business

By  Grant Lapping

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I managed to create a job for myself when I first left the world of full-time employment and went into business for myself, just like many other consultants, creatives, developers and other service professionals.



Source: [Unsplash](#)

And like many of my colleagues, I aspired to take that base and turn it into an asset that had value beyond my ability to sell my time and skills to my clients and secure repeat business.

The journey took a good seven years, but I managed to build a one-person company into a dozen-strong operation called DataCore Media.

In 2021, the acquisition of this business was closed by +OneX, a new-age solutions and systems integrator that Reunert established to spearhead its growth in the IT services and systems integration space.

Here are some of the key things I have learnt through this process:

1. Focus on your core strengths

I started my digital career in 2005 as a digital executive with a bias towards the technical operations side of the industry.

By 2012, I found myself as head of digital strategy at a creative agency. I recognised that the creative side would never be my comfort zone and furthermore that I could not become an expert in all areas of digital marketing, including design, development, UX, social media, paid media and analytics.

I chose to focus on building up my skills in the areas I was best at, including data, analytics and programmatic media.



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This emphasis enabled me to build up specialist expertise and competencies that I could sell on to clients. When I resigned from the agency I was working for, they weren't begging me to stay on in a role that wasn't the best fit for my skills.

However, they became my first client because I could offer them digital media skills they didn't have in-house.

At that time, creative and traditional media agencies didn't have much digital capability and tended to outsource these requirements to digital specialists.

I agreed to manage the digital media clients for a share of revenue rather than a salary. Three years after I resigned, I hadn't left the building, as they were kind enough to let me stay rent-free in their offices, even though I had grown my client base to other companies.

2. Start building your network before you start building your business

My network, built up in the roles I'd held in the previous years, helped accelerate the growth of the business.

Some of my biggest allies and advocates were former colleagues rather than my ex-bosses.

For any professional, but especially one that wants to build a business of their own, working well with and impressing colleagues pays off.

The mid-level or junior person you work with on a team today could have a decisionmaker's ear tomorrow or even make the decisions themselves.

As people moved agencies or ascended the career ladder, they referred me and my business grew to a point where I could hire my first employees.

I then won my first big client — a large online retailer.

As a small one-person agency I would normally not have got a foot in the door, but I was given a chance by the head of digital who was a colleague I worked with at a past agency.

This colleague gave me a modest test budget to demonstrate the returns I could generate. And, based on those results I was able to secure them as my first significant direct client.

This breakthrough marked a pivotal moment in my business journey, enabling me to expand and bring on board dedicated employees.

3. Partner strategically

As a small B2B services business, it pays off to partner with other companies that need your niche skills and to keep laser-focused on the areas where you can add value.

We built many successful relationships because other digital agencies regarded our offering as complementary rather than competitive to theirs.



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The downside was that we couldn't pitch directly to large brands because they wanted full-service agencies rather than needing to manage multiple specialist agencies themselves.

4. Invest in people

If you want to run a business rather than be self-employed, you must be able to let go of some of the work. You need to invest in people to build scale.

The first hires were key as I prioritised recruiting smart people at the graduate level with strong analytical skills. Rather than emphasising experience, I sought out people with the right aptitude and attitude, whom I could train to excel.

These people alleviated much of the day-to-day client responsibilities, allowing me to concentrate on shaping the strategic direction of the company.

As we grew into a team of campaign managers, we primarily offered digital media capabilities, but we needed tangible assets beyond talented people in order to be sellable. Recognising the need for foundational structures, I brought a finance and operations manager on board.

This move was aimed at establishing robust systems and processes, each aligned with a clear strategy for fostering the growth of our company.

The guidance from consulting company Aurik was invaluable in this regard. Their advice helped me to get out of the engine room and onto the bridge to steer the ship.

5. Document your ways of working

Formal systems and processes are essential for transforming a small-services operation into a sellable asset.

We documented sales and marketing strategy, HR plans, operations, finance models, performance reviews, and employee and client contracts over the course of two years.

That process meant we had an asset we could show to investors in the form of processes and strategies that could be continuously monetised.

Without that detail, it's impossible for a prospective financier or investor to do their due diligence and understand the value

of the business.

6. Scale with the right investors or equity partners

If your business is successful, you'll reach a point where you'll reach the ceiling of what you can achieve without external support. It took me nine years to reach this point.

At this stage, we had 12 employees, and it was increasingly clear that we would need to expand our offering to scale to the next level.

My goal was to find a large partner that could help us to grow, yet would also allow us to retain our entrepreneurial culture.

A few years earlier, the obvious step would've been to join a creative agency. However, I recognised that our business was increasingly about technology and data rather than creative execution.

To get the most from 1st party data that can be easily integrated with platforms such as Google and META, you need technical skills.

We wanted to work with a complementary business that could help our clients leverage data, analytics and machine learning to drive better results from programmatic platforms.

ABOUT GRANT LAPPING

Lapping joined the +OneX team in May 2021 after the company he founded in 2012, DataCore Media, was acquired by +OneX, a new-age solutions and systems integrator. He manages the digital media and marketing team within +OneX. Grant has worked in digital media and strategy since 2005, and has a holistic perspective on the market due to the roles he has held across the agency, client and publisher spectrum
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