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# You Can Do It!

DESPITE SOME BUMPS IN THE ROAD, THESE 5 ENTREPRENEURS CREATED THRIVING BUSINESSES.

LEARN FROM THEIR CHALLENGES TO HELP KEEP YOUR COMPANY ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

BY PATTIE SIMONE

**T**he five hardy entrepreneurs profiled here all made it through lean or rocky times. Their takes on what a newbie needs to know can help you achieve success.

## KEEPING IT REAL

David Huertas, the owner of Santa Fe, New Mexico-based El Meson, saw a niche not covered by any other local establishment and decided to go for it. This chef opened his authentic Spanish-cuisine restaurant in July 1997, and at the end of 2000, he completed an expansion to double El Meson's capacity. Today, Huertas, 35, expects 2006 sales to reach \$900,000.

### Q: WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE TIPS FOR STARTUPS?

**1. FOCUS SPECIFICALLY ON WHAT YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH.** Says Huertas, "It was tempting to say 'The heck with it' and do hybrid [Spanish-Mexican] dishes, but we had a good plan, so we stuck with it."

**2. ONCE YOU IDENTIFY YOUR GOALS, KEEP IT SIMPLE.** "We set a pace, as far as setting the standards for authentic Spanish cuisine."

**3. DO SOMETHING YOU ENJOY.** "This will be your life for a while," says Huertas. "Be prepared to sacrifice a lot of time while you're getting going."

### Q: WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE ON GROWING A BUSINESS?

**1. KNOW THE MARKET.** Huertas did his homework, working for other food establishments in the area where he wanted to open his restaurant.

**2. KNOW THE BUSINESS.** Working at restaurants showed Huertas the ropes of being a restaurateur: pricing, portions, sourcing, employees, etc.



**Local flavor:** Working at area eateries before opening his restaurant gave David Huertas the edge he needed to succeed.

## CREATIVE ENDEAVORS

When her garment-industry employer defaulted in 1989, Jamie Kreitman used her unemployment checks to start Jamie Kreitman/Kreitman Knitworks Ltd. Specializing in whimsical apparel and footwear, Kreitman launched her New York City metropolitan area firm in 1991 with a line of only 12 pieces. Now the 49-year-old entrepreneur expects sales of \$1.5 million to \$2 million in 2006.

**Q: WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE TIPS FOR STARTUPS?**

**1. DO RESEARCH.** Kreitman always loved to create things, but she needed concrete information to start her business. "Use the skills you've learned since childhood, but don't leave any stone unturned," she advises.

**2. BE STUBBORN.** Although Kreitman had experience in the garment industry, she still had to learn the ropes. "Getting one big order doesn't mean your path is set. Being an entrepreneur takes sheer guts and demands way [more than] an 'employee' mentality."

**3. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR ANYTHING THAT COULD GO WRONG.** "Vary your accounts, because even the best-rated store can default." Kreitman recommends exercising caution and diligence, getting credit info before delivering and requiring signatures on all orders.

**Knit picky:**

Being selective when it comes to clients helps Jamie Kreitman keep her knit apparel moving.



**Q: WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE ON GROWING A BUSINESS?**

**1. OUTSOURCE.** Kreitman decided to move production to China. When she began, she was the head designer. To grow, she had to find cost-effective sources that could produce top-quality embellished garments. She also outsourced her shipping, sales force, bill collections, web design and more.

**2. BRANCH OUT.** For Kreitman, this meant venturing into footwear. The fashion industry is all about what's fresh. Kreitman saw a niche for high-end fanciful footwear that would complement her existing apparel lines.

**3. BUILD A WEBSITE.** Initially, Kreitman sold through wholesale boutique accounts, but she needed an outlet that could generate sales 24/7, both directly and by driving business to the retailers that carry her lines nationwide.

**Q: WHAT PERSONALITY TRAIT HELPED GET YOU THROUGH THE LEAN TIMES?**

"My stubbornness and the way I think," says Kreitman, who previously taught at the college level. "My academic background trained me to think differently, to think things out."

**Q: WAS THERE A TIME YOU WANTED TO QUIT? WHY DIDN'T YOU GIVE UP?**

Some of Kreitman's best retail clients defaulted on payments, so she came close to closing shop more than once. She says, "I didn't quit because I would miss the creativity!"

**Q: WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST MISTAKE?**

Kreitman had her trust violated several times before finding reliable partners. "Every day is a whole new scene," she says. "Now I'm a bit more cautious before I make decisions."

**EYES ON THE PRIZE**

At her kitchen table in January 2001, Grandee Ann Ray

**ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:** Find out how more entrepreneurs overcame challenges—and get fired up to become your own success story—at [www.entrepreneur.com/worklife/success](http://www.entrepreneur.com/worklife/success).

started Grand Ideas, a corporate gift and specialty product fulfillment firm in Charleston, South Carolina. Though she began with little more than a cell phone, a fax and minimal inventory, Ray, 47, has grown the business to 2006 projected sales of more than \$1 million.

**Q: WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE TIPS FOR STARTUPS?**

**1. VISUALIZE WHERE YOU WANT TO BE.** "Every day, do something to get yourself there," says Ray. "My vision was to have a million-dollar business."

**2. STAY FOCUSED ON YOUR GOALS.** "I wanted [to do] something autonomous and relationship-oriented," Ray explains.

**3. DO WHAT YOU SAY YOU'RE GOING TO DO,** and do it on time. "My customers know they don't have to worry when I'm working on a project for them."

**Q: WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU GIVE ON GROWING A BUSINESS?**

**1. RECRUIT AND MAINTAIN A STRONG CUSTOMER BASE,** and deliver great service. "I love working with people and do whatever I can to help them find creative solutions," says Ray.

**2. GET GOOD HELP.** When looking for help, you must know your weaknesses. Ray says, "I don't feel threatened by people who have talents I don't."

**3. GET YOUR TECHNOLOGY IN ORDER.** Ray swears by her BlackBerry, and she invested in a small-business server two years ago.

**4. HIRE A BUSINESS CONSULTANT AND A BUSINESS MANAGER.** "It was the best thing I ever did," says Ray. "It helped me get a better focus on things"

**Q: WHAT PERSONALITY TRAIT HELPED GET YOU THROUGH THE LEAN TIMES?**

Ray attributes her success to her perseverance and diligence. Despite major legal and personal struggles (she started her company during a difficult divorce) and hard economic times after 9/11, Ray decided gift fulfillment offered the creativity and flexibility she yearned for.

**Q: WAS THERE A TIME YOU WANTED TO QUIT? WHY DIDN'T YOU GIVE UP?**

"About a year and a half ago, I was working 16-hour days, bogged down with operational details like bills, ordering and filing," says Ray. "I was pretty burned out, but I didn't want to go back to working for someone else, so my mantra was, 'I can do this.' That's what kept me going."

**Q: WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST MISTAKE?**

"Blindly trusting people." Ray had to pay over \$14,000 in back taxes after her new accounting firm discovered sloppy reporting done by another firm.

**FIT TO A TEA**

With a thirst for "something fun and creative," Arsen Avakian wanted to launch a company with relatively little competition. His big idea—to do for tea what Starbucks has done for coffee—was born out of reflective time spent in downtown Chicago's bustling coffee cafes. Avakian, 30, started Argo Tea, a wholesale tea company and cafe, in Chicago in 2005. With 2006 projected sales of about \$5 million, Avakian plans to expand beyond Illinois in 2007.

**Q: WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE TIPS FOR STARTUPS?**

**1. DO YOUR HOMEWORK.** "Exercise due diligence, but be flexible," says Avakian. "Dreaming and being passionate about what you do is great, but knowing the business is a must." Before launching Argo Tea, Avakian mulled over the performance histories of other successful companies, including Microsoft and Starbucks.

**2. DEFINE YOUR GOALS.** "Our passion is to offer healthy choices, using the best tea blends to make signature beverages. We are laser-focused on where we want our product to be seen and heard." Avakian and his team have forged a relationship with Whole Foods Market, where health-conscious consumers are introduced to Argo Tea through samples.

**3. FOCUS ON EVERYDAY RESULTS.** Says Avakian, "Our mission is to deliver one cup at a time, one store at a time."