

On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

Sam Vander Wielen: Hey, welcome back to On Your Terms. I'm your host, Sam Vander Wielen. I'm an attorney turned entrepreneur who helps online coaches and service providers, course creators, educators legally protect and grow their online businesses using my DIY legal templates and my trainings.

And here on my show every single week, I bring you fresh legal tips about how to legally protect your business. But I also talk about marketing your business, scaling your business on your terms as well.

So, if you're new around here, for the month of May, I'm kicking off every single episode with a little bit of a Norm Tip. So, my dad was Norm. My dad passed away last year in May. And so, this month I'm just honoring him by kicking off every single episode with talking about something he would have told you if he was around.

So, one of Norm's best tips - actually, he had a lot of crazy tips. But this one, this one was a good one. This is a hot tip - Norm was the car guy. He loved cars and he had a hard rule about never buying a car, that was the first year of any make or model. So, like, if Ford or Toyota or Lexus releases a new model of some sort, he always said, "Don't ever buy it the first year they release it. Let it go through at least one cycle, if not two. And then, get the car because they always work out the kinks."

And he is so right about that because I was a little rebel and I also love cars. And so, I would go against his advice and go and get cars like this because I would get really excited about it and I get really, really excited about technology. And he is totally right. There are always little problems. There are things that they correct and make better the next time around when they learn. There's usually some sort of recall. So, I really think Norm was on to something. So, thanks for the tip, Dad.

So, the episode I'm going to share with you today is actually based off of an email that I wrote to my email list a couple of weeks ago, so I thought I would share that here. If you don't get my emails already, I email twice a week with legal tips, marketing tips, lots of behind the scenes advice, a lot of inspiration and motivation to keep going when things

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

get hard. So, if you don't get my emails already, just click the easy email list sign up below in the show notes because you can sign up to receive my emails without going through any sort of marketing funnel. So, that's really cool.

One of the reasons why I'm sharing this email today in particular or this topic from that email is because today is the one year anniversary, when you're listening to this, of my dad's passing so I had scheduled something else. And so, I hope you're not going to mind, but I'm calling an audible on this one. I was supposed to chat with you today actually about ChatGPT and AI technology and I was excited about that episode. I'm still going to do it. I just kicked it down a couple of weeks. But I am not in the mood to talk to you about AI, chat AI because of it being the one year anniversary of my dad.

Like, when I saw this episode in Asana and I was assigned to do this episode, I was just like, "There's no way I can talk about pretty much anything else. Like, it just feels so stupid. Everything feels so stupid." If you've ever been through anything hard or been through any grief, everything kind of feels trivial for a while. And so, yeah, just honestly, that's where I was at with it.

I cannot believe it's been a year. I can't believe that it's been a year since I lost my dad to leukemia. I feel like I've heard people say that before or been like, "I can't believe it's a year. I can't believe it's five years." And now, I just completely know because I feel like it's been like the blink of an eye and it's been a year. I feel like he was at my house yesterday. It really, really doesn't feel real. And I miss him terribly.

So, I think also this year has been really, really hard personally. And a lot of things have happened that haven't given me the full ability to just grieve my dad, which I think would be enough in and of itself for anyone. But because of a lot of stuff that's been going on, especially my mom being really sick right now - my mom's in the hospital - it just feels like these things have come up that have not allowed it to fully sink in. And then, when it does, I'm like, "Oh, my gosh. I cannot believe he's not here." So, it's really crazy.

So, you know, during the time that I've built my company since 2017, I have had the

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

roughest personal time of probably my entire life, other than the fact that I had a really hard and very traumatic childhood my entire childhood. But in my adult life, since I started my company, I had brain surgery when I first started. My dad got cancer, literally, as soon as I got better. My dad got cancer out of nowhere. Literally, just his stomach hurt. I brought him to the hospital and they were like, "He has leukemia." It was totally out of left field. I had no clue.

And that was at the end of very end of 2018, very quickly I became his caregiver. My dad was single and so I jumped into the caregiver role and tried to figure out health insurance, and money, and healthcare, and chemo, and pills, and schedules, and all kinds of surgeries, all kinds of stuff. It was a brutal couple of years.

He was sick for a long time. He lasted like a million times longer than they said he would. He said it was because he loved vegetables. So, take that for what it was worth. I think he taught his oncologist a thing or two about nutrition, or at least he thought he did.

My dad was sick, and then really suddenly, last May, my dad passed away and completely broke my heart. And my mom has been sick for the last couple of years. But ever since my dad passed away last summer, her stuff has escalated really badly and she's been really bad. So, it's basically like my mom is gone because my mom was not able to really communicate fully with us. She can't move. She can't walk. So, it's really quite awful, to be honest. As of at least the time that I'm recording this, she's been in the hospital for the last four-and-a-half weeks.

So, it's more complicated than you could probably ever imagine. And maybe one day I'll be able to talk about it. I don't know. But definitely not now.

So, in between all of those - what I would call - capital T, traumas, I've had lots of little bumps along the road, like you might have, too, the last couple of years. We've gone through a worldwide pandemic. I've definitely lost friendships. I have one of my closest friends I've not heard from since my dad died. It's broken my heart. I had a big move. At

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

least for me, I moved out of Philly for the first time in my entire life. I moved to the North Shore of Long Island, which I love.

But it was a lot. I've had so much house stress, which has been my own fault. It wouldn't have been such a big deal if all this other stuff hadn't happened. But I didn't know my dad was going to pass away in the middle of construction. So, my house has been under construction because we were building space for him. And so, we've had guys here. It'll be a year soon just nonstop. And if you've ever done construction, you can imagine just having guys here all day, everyday for a year, stuff's moved around, everything's dirty, stuff's all shoved into a corner. I was saying to a friend earlier today, I've reached the point of construction of the get the heck out point of I just want everyone to go.

I've had a lot of my own health challenges or at least health related symptoms to stress. And - oh, my gosh - for months after my dad died, I remember I couldn't take a deep breath without going, like, what you do when you're crying really, really hard. It was like every single breath for months. It was awful. It was awful. I've had bouts of gastritis because of it. I've lost weight. I've gained weight. It's just a whole thing. I've been exhausted. Just a depth and a level of exhaustion that I cannot describe. It's not that anyone else hasn't ever experienced this, but I cannot articulate it and it's been for years. So, you can imagine what kind of havoc that wreaks on your body.

And, of course, I've had business stress. I'm a human and a business owner. So, businesses come with some stress. All things considered, my business is pretty stress-free but things have come up. And I know that if you're listening to this, you've had your own stuff too. So many of you reached out to me about sick or loss parents or loved ones, and health challenges, and business challenges, friend challenges, all kinds of stuff. And so, we've all been through so much.

And so often when people reach out to me and they tell me that they're really inspired by me - which is very kind of you to say - they're often asking me like, "How do you keep going? How are you doing this? How do you keep it all together?" And I'm always

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

like, "I don't. It's not together." And I don't think that people think I have it together either.

But I think a lot of times what people share with me is that what they feel really comforted by is the fact that I show how I'm continuing on despite the fact that things are not all together.

And I think that's inspiring, I hope to some people, in that you don't have to wait until everything's perfect. Because as I always say, if I waited until things were perfect, I'd still be waiting so we'd be in real trouble.

So, I thought I would break my weekly Thursday tradition of answering one of your questions, if you don't mind, and chat with you about how I'm kind of sort of somewhat sometimes keeping it relatively together. And I thought I would give you some concrete examples as well.

So, when people ask how do I manage my business and all the stuff that I've got going on in my life, I'm like, "Ah. I don't know. I mean, not necessarily well." But there are three specific things that have helped me to manage my business. And not only that, to keep growing my business at the same time as all of this stuff has been going on.

So, I think the first thing that has really helped me, and I hope will help you, obviously, is pruning. So, the first thing I do in my life or my business whenever I have intense moments of stress is to prune back what doesn't need to be there.

So, I know in the earlier years in my business, this would be like cancelling coffee chats and things that were kind of more just connections or spinning my wheels. And I would really pare down - I'm going to talk about that in tip number three - and get focused on what helps to move my business forward, what brings in leads when I'm not working, what pieces of content can I create that will pull in new people so that I'm not constantly having to chase after individual clients or sales. So, I like to prune back in terms of the business in that way. And, also, maybe it means you put some stuff aside that you were thinking about working on or whatever.

On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

In my life, it's usually canceling appointments I don't need or having to just be honest and upfront with people in my life that I don't have extra capacity right now, saying no to a lot of things. And it might also be anything that's just feeling kind of excess or just for fun things, like things on social media that take up a lot of time but that don't necessarily make the business move forward. They're just kind of would be great things but don't need to things. You know what I mean?

I also always look, obviously, if there's any sort of launch or new product that I'm working on. I mean, I've cancelled so many promos and new product creation stuff, like so much stuff over the last year or two, because of all this and everything worked out great. The business is very, very healthy. It's continued to grow. It's continued to be a multi-seven figure business even without adding on new things. I think that was a really good lesson.

And I think if you're into gardening or plants, you know that when you prune stuff back, it gives energy to the rest of the plant that's really healthy and thriving. So, that's the way I like to think of it, because maybe you were planning something extra, like a new product or - I don't know - starting a TikTok account after you've tried to be on Instagram or something like that. But you're like, "You know what? Instead of adding on a new branch here, we're going to cut that branch off." That was the snipping noise. We're going to snip off that branch and we're going to give more energy to the main branch that's already working, what's working at your core.

So, for me, usually when I've done this kind of pruning, I focus on my core business components. I would say that I have three main core business components. So, my first core business component are my customers. That's kind of if I was drawing an upside down triangle, I would think everything else is hitting the fan, I have to take care of my customers because, first of all, they mean the most to me.

And second of all, my customers, if I treat them really well, they tend to tell other people about me, and it's a really great word of mouth referral business. So, at least you have that part of your business kind of churning and working for you when things are tough.

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

So, for me, that means answering their questions in the community that they get access to with the Ultimate Bundle, answering their questions in my inbox, wherever else. So, really taking care of my customers.

The second core business component that I focus on during this pruning period is my core content. So, for me, that's my podcast, writing emails to my email list, and writing SEO optimized blog posts.

So, my podcast, well, first of all, the podcast has grown a lot. So, my podcast is really important to me. And I've noticed that it's been one of the more nurturing things that I've ever done in the business. So, I get a lot of feedback about it and people seem to like it. I hope you like it. I hope you let me know if you like it because it's always nice to hear from you and to hear that you do like it. But people tell me how they feel about it. And so, I also know that it's moving people through my funnel. People sign up for my free legal workshop, Five Steps to Legally Protect and Grow Your Online Business, because of it. They buy the Ultimate Bundle because of it. So, it's a really important piece of content for me.

Writing my email list is also super important for me because we've got over 23,000 subscribers. They're really active and engaged, really high open rate, really high response rate. People really like the emails. And I just tend to write. I don't know, I guess I write differently or I write things to them that I don't talk about here or I don't talk about on social media. I kind of like the idea that wherever you hang out, you get a little different vibe or flavor depending on the platform. So, writing my emails are really important.

It's also really important because, in those emails, when we're not in a promo season, I do what I call soft promos. And I've talked about this in my email marketing episodes. I talk about my products. I talk about what's going on behind the scenes with my products. I talk about my customers. And I sometimes kind of have a soft like, "Hey, you can find my legal templates here" or "You can go purchase the Ultimate Bundle here." But it's not a buy, buy, buy email. And the email itself has a lot of other value. So, I write

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

all my own emails. I love writing my emails. I do those, so that's a piece of core content I focus on.

And then, my SEO blog posts. So, I can link to them down below, but we work with a company called InfluencerSEO. Don't be thrown off by the name. I'm not an influencer. But they help all kinds of people, including influencers, but also people like us. And they send me outlines of SEO blog posts. So, I tell them topics that I want to write about. And then, they also offer me lots and lots of topics in my niche that they're like, "You should write about this topic or that topic."

And like I said, we also send them like, "Hey. Here, I have ten ideas about things I could write about." But then, they take my ideas and say like, "Here's how you would write it from an SEO perspective. This would be the title of the post or the keyword." And then, they give me like a rough outline. So, they'll tell me what the headings need to be, what keywords need to be in the post, and then they optimize the post once I write it. So, I really recommend it. I find it very affordable for the level of quality that you get. I can link to them down below. They offer different levels of services for people. So, that's kind of the core content that I focus on when stuff is tough.

The last thing I focus on are my SEO tasks, which are high level strategy and delegating the implementation of my ideas and my campaigns that I come up with. So, if I have an idea to run a promo, basically now I'm just like, "Okay. I have this idea. This is how I want it to run. Here's the strategy behind it. Here's the pieces I want it to go into it." And then, I delegate the execution of all of those things to the team and then I'm really just reviewing.

So, if I'm just doing those three things, if I'm taking care of my customers, I'm producing my core content, and then taking care of my CEO tasks, that's pretty good. And I've been in that mode for a very long time. I hope one day to be in more visionary mode, white space mode, more marketing, more outward marketing. I'm fortunate to get asked to be on people's podcasts a lot and I love being on people's podcasts, but I want to keep doing that and I want to keep getting on bigger podcasts and bigger stages, like

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

that's all a goal for me. And then, obviously, working on my book.

So, that's kind of where I'm at right now. So, that's my pruning phase and what I like to focus on.

The second thing that I do when things are getting really tough is that - and this is only recently - I wave the white flag. So, I really have never done this in the past. But in my most recent situation with having my mom be hospitalized and being very serious condition while getting to that point in the grief journey that it's getting really hard again for me, it really caused me for the first time in my life to say I'm not okay.

So, either when people ask or for high level people on my team or closest friends being like, "Hey, just so you know, I'm really struggling. I'm not doing well. I got to let this go. I can't do this. I don't want to do stuff on video right now. I'm not going to be up for that meeting, can you reschedule it?" I just had to let people know. And I, personally, choose to be honest and upfront about it. I think there's no right or wrong way about doing that.

But in general, just not doing things that you don't feel like you have the energy for because all you're doing is going back to the pruning thing. It's like you're just taking energy away from that core content. So, that's where I suggest just kind of waving that flag.

Now, the third and final thing that I do is really diving deep into that core component, the second core component that I talked about, with core content. So, I make sure that any of the content that I'm creating right now is evergreen content. Meaning, that it has a long shelf life. It will always lead somebody to somewhere, whether they watch it today or six months from now, or if it's a blog post today or six months from now. So, it leads people to my top of funnel resource. So, for me, that's my free legal workshop, Five Steps to Legally Protect and Grow Your Online Business. For other people, it might be a freebie or a video series or some quiz.

So, I create content that only leads people to my top of funnel resource. That means -

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

you might not want to hear this - that my lip sync reels, the dancing reels, the blogs with no purpose that are just about my day and what I ate, our pointless Facebook posts, all that stuff, it takes a backseat. To be honest, I'm not really doing any more of those anyway. I would say, I would kind of run with random content ideas. But right now, it just has to be this core content is enough. We're basically taking podcast episodes and emails I write and creating content for social media out of my core content, and it's just a million times easier for right now. So, it doesn't always have to be a season of growth and going viral.

So, I'll be honest, as always, my business sort of runs like a well-oiled machine these days and it has for a long time. So, it's easy for me, I feel, to put this pared back system into place because it's not really that far off from what I want to do or what I do day to day. But that is super intentional on my part. My life circumstances have made me build such a successful business that I haven't had a lot of time for BS and going with trends and getting on TikTok and going on - what was the other thing? - Clubhouse or lots of doomscrolling or something like this. And that's what's made my business really strong.

So, a lot of times when people are like, How are you able to keep doing this with your business despite all the things you have going on in your life? I kind of see it the other way where I'm like, my life has actually made the business really, really successful because it's kept me laser focused.

If you ever played sports growing up or in high school or college, I feel like you probably can relate to the idea that when you have, like, two hours after school to do everything that you need to do from eat dinner, to do homework, to shower, to get ready for the next day, you somehow magically become a freakishly efficient person. You figure it out because you're crunched with time.

And so, I played volleyball my whole life. Volleyball was way more important to me than everything else. And so, I played more volleyball than I did anything for school, which I highly don't recommend. But I do think it made me really, really efficient and it makes you focus on core components, and so it leaves out a lot of the fluff.

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

And I do think with business, a lot of times we do mix up the idea that you have to be working 1,000,000 hours, but you spend all these hours, like, creating TikTok content or dancing reels or lip sync reels, when if you made, like, three SEO blog posts, for example, and drove traffic to your website, it would work for years.

My blog post that I wrote years and years ago are still bringing in people to the website everyday, and then they're opting into my emails, and then they're signing up for my webinar, and then they're purchasing the Bundle. So, I don't know, I like to see it as more of an investment of time versus this very quick turnover. And I think that's where people get stuck spending so much time doing stuff and feeling like they don't have a lot to show for it.

While on the one hand, you might not be able to change your life circumstances. You can use it to fuel, I think, your business's success and efficiency. A lean business, there's nothing wrong with that. It's no worse than some other kind of business. I have an episode on using your challenging times to fuel your business. I'll link to that below. I'm also going to link to my evergreen content episode that I did on the show before, so I'll link to that below.

And I just want you to remember that a lot of the things that you feel right now are so urgent or so pressing, or things are passing you by because you're not opting in to some new trend or app at the moment or whatever, it's likely it's not that urgent or it's not that useful to ultimately moving your business forward. A lot of this stuff really is distractions, to be honest.

So, even if it doesn't feel like it right now, your hardships might make it really apparent that things aren't that urgent or that things aren't that important to actually moving your business forward. And, ultimately, that might help you grow as a CEO and might actually help you grow your company.

So, I hope this episode was helpful. I feel like it went in a little bit different of a direction

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On Your Terms Episode 117:
How I've Grown My Business During Tough Times

than I intended, but it was fun because I got to dive deeper than I did in the email. But like I said, if you don't get my emails already and you like the sound of what I'm talking about now, you definitely want to sign up for my email. So, click the easy email list sign up button below.

With that, I just want to say hi to my dad and tell him I miss him a ton.

And I just so appreciate you all listening and being here every week and being so kind and thoughtful. And I just so appreciate your support. Talk to you later.

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