

10 Questions to Answer When Writing Your Mission Statement

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In their book Start Your Own Business, the staff of Entrepreneur Media Inc. guides you through the critical steps to starting your business, then supports you in surviving the first three years as a business owner. In this edited excerpt, the authors explain the importance of your mission statement and offer guidelines that will help you write one for your new business.



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When you're creating a business plan for your new business, you need to include a mission statement. A key tool that can be as important as your business plan, a mission statement captures, in a few succinct sentences, the essence of your business's goals and the philosophies underlying them. Equally important, the mission statement signals what your business is all about to your customers, employees, suppliers and the community.

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The mission statement reflects every facet of your business: the range and nature of the products you offer, pricing, quality, service, marketplace position, growth potential, use of technology, and your relationships with your customers, employees, suppliers, competitors and the community.

Your mission statement should reflect your business's special niche. Studying other companies' statements can fuel your creativity. Consider the statement one entrepreneur developed for her consulting business: "ABC Enterprises is a company devoted to developing human potential. Our mission is to help people create innovative solutions and make informed choices to improve their lives. We motivate and encourage others to achieve personal and professional fulfillment. Our motto is: Together, we believe that the best in each of us enriches all of us."

To come up with a statement that encompasses all the major elements of your business, start with the right questions. Answering the following 10 questions will help you create a verbal picture of your business's mission:

- 1. Why are you in business?** What do you want for yourself, your family and your customers? Think about the spark that ignited your decision to start a business. What will keep it burning?
- 2. Who are your customers?** What can you do for them that will enrich their lives and contribute to their success—now and in the future?
- 3. What image of your business do you want to convey?** Customers, suppliers, employees and the public will all have perceptions of your company. How will you create the desired picture?
- 4. What is the nature of your products and services?** What factors determine pricing and quality? Consider how these relate to the reasons for your business's existence. How will all this change over time?
- 5. What level of service do you provide?** Most companies believe they offer "the best service available," but do your customers agree? Don't be vague; define what makes your service so extraordinary.
- 6. What roles do you and your employees play?** Wise captains develop a leadership style that organizes, challenges and recognizes employees.
- 7. What kind of relationships will you maintain with suppliers?** Every business is in partnership with its suppliers. When you succeed, so do they.

8. How do you differ from competitors? Many entrepreneurs forget they're pursuing the same dollars as their competitors. What do you do better, cheaper or faster than competitors? How can you use competitors' weaknesses to your advantage?

9. How will you use technology, capital, processes, products, and services to reach your goals? A description of your strategy will keep your energies focused on your goals.

10. What underlying philosophies or values guided your responses to the previous questions? Some businesses choose to list these separately. Writing them down clarifies the "why" behind your mission.

Putting It All Together

Here are some tips to make your mission statement the best it can be:

Involve those connected to your business. Even if you're a sole proprietor, it helps to get at least one other person's ideas for your mission statement. Other people can help you see strengths, weaknesses and voids you might miss. If you have no partners or investors to include, consider knowledgeable family members and close friends, employees or accountants. Choose supportive people who truly want you to succeed.

Set aside several hours—a full day, if possible—to work on your statement. Mission statements are short—typically more than one sentence but rarely exceeding a page. Still, writing one isn't a short process. It takes time to come up with language that simultaneously describes an organization's heart and soul and serves as an inspirational beacon to everyone involved in the business.

Plan a date. Set aside time to meet with the people who'll be helping you. Write a list of topics to discuss or think about. Find a quiet, comfortable place away from phones and interruptions.

Start smart. Explain the meaning and purpose of a mission statement before you begin—not everyone will automatically know what they're all about.

Brainstorm. Consider every idea, no matter how silly it sounds. Stimulate ideas by looking at sample mission statements and thinking about or discussing the ten questions noted above. If you're working with a group, use a flip chart to record responses so everyone can see them. Once you've finished brainstorming, ask everyone to write individual mission statements for your business. Read the statements, select the best pieces, and fit them together.

Use "radiant words." Once you have the basic idea in writing, polish the language of your mission statement. Your statement should create dynamic mental visuals and inspire action. Use offbeat, colorful verbs and adjectives to spice up your statement. Don't hesitate to drop in words like "kaleidoscope," "sizzle," "cheer," "outrageous" and "marvel" to add zest. If you want customers to boast about your goods and services, say so—along with the reasons why.



Written By

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Entrepreneur Staff

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