

Doing it all - what it took to get here! A letter to all young entrepreneurs



By [Kay Cheytanov](#), issued by [3RC](#)

5 Aug 2022

When I started my business 21 years ago, I genuinely didn't think I was starting a 'business'. I was simply following my passion and looking for a way for it to pay for itself - and for me.





To some, it didn't seem likely that I would find much success. You see, I hadn't done any business courses or gotten a degree in management and so it probably appeared as though I was woefully underprepared to make any sort of income. However, armed with just a secretarial diploma, a bit of my intuition, and plenty of drive, ahead I went. I'll be the first to admit that from the outside it may not have looked like I was going to get far, but those three things allowed me to fulfil my dreams.

A word of warning

The year was 2001. It was 21 years ago and I was a musician, singing in a band. I loved singing and seeing the joy that people felt during live performances, but after years of touring the country and singing in dingy bars and clubs, my spirit was broken. I had become tired of drunken audiences, high patrons, and living life at night. I realised that I needed a new audience, but who would that audience be? Where would I find them, and how would I make enough money to live?

The journey I went on for the next two decades is not for the fainthearted. It has been an epic adventure, yes, but one that cost blood, sweat, and tears. More than that, it was the cause of many broken relationships, required me to work around the clock, non-stop for years before I saw any rewards – and don't get me started on the mental and emotional trauma I experienced during that time.

Yip, it doesn't sound pretty, does it? But as write this today, I will gladly tell you that it was worth every moment of sadness, panic, and loneliness. At least, it was for me.

Expect the path to change

One morning, driving along Sandton Drive, I heard a radio ad for The Zone Computer College, and in that moment a lightbulb switched on in my head.

I decided I would take my music to high schools around the country and get colleges and universities to fund this by giving them a platform through which they could introduce their study options to the same students. This 'shared stage' approach worked, and, in my mind, it was a match made in heaven. I needed an audience to test my music and these institutions needed kids to know about their offering.

What I didn't realise, though, was while my audience was going to grow, singing would be the last thing I would end up doing. Having heard the radio ad, I was inspired to contact schools and tertiary institutions with my idea. Within three months, I was out there singing a few songs before switching over to a lively introduction, talking to matric learners about the various career options available to them.

My message at the time was simple: "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life" and because I was dressed like a rockstar and clearly loving what I was doing, I sold this message to my young audiences. Little did they know that after the performances I was grabbing my pencil skirt and blazer to present a more corporate vibe when I needed to see clients and partners.

Expect criticism

My parents were so worried about me. They just couldn't understand why I needed to travel this hard and lonely path, especially when I was so clever and passionate. They asked the usual questions, like: "Why didn't I simply apply for any position and get a 'real job'?"

The truth is that if I had a cent for every time I heard that phrase, I would quite literally have been a millionaire by the age of 30. You hear that all the time, but back in the mid 2000s, this was the truth in my world.

It was hard for my parents and others to grasp my vision, to watch me struggle, and harder still for them to stress about me potentially failing. As a mother now, I can see why they were so fearful, and yet, I'm still grateful that I persevered and followed my heart.









You will do everything, and I mean *everything*!

What most people didn't know was that for the mere 20 minutes that I got to sing every other day, I was spending hours and hours doing absolutely everything else. I was recruiting more schools, convincing more tertiary institutions that this was the new way of marketing, completing all the admin required, capturing hundreds of learner records until the early hours of the morning... the list of my responsibilities was endless.

That's because I was the boss, the singer, the presenter, the salesperson, the financial director, and the everything else in between. It's not just because this was my passion, but also because there wasn't enough money to hire more staff. Added to that, the band that I was touring with wasn't exactly what you would call 'employable administrative personnel.' They were more the beer-drinking, weed-smoking kind of characters, bless them.

So really, I had to do everything. I had to get stuck into all the jobs that needed to be done, and I had to do it alone. Trust me, it was far from glamorous and the rewards weren't exactly streaming in.

Keep learning but know when to get help

It was during my second year when I decided to go solo with my music. I let go of the band and hired only a sound engineer and road manager to tour with me. I also got an accountant to come on board and balance the books, but the rest was still on my shoulders. It was admin heavy and not particularly stimulating, I have to admit, but I learned invaluable skills ranging from best business practices and client relations to conflict management and how to read an income statement.

In my third year, I landed our first corporate sponsor. This was a big moment, and it was this milestone that catapulted the company to new heights. It opened the door to so many things, but in that moment, it meant that I could hire a data capturer, a booking agent, and a PR company to raise awareness and get the company's name out there. It set me free to do more of what I loved – reaching the youth of our country.

What to do when disappointment strikes... and it will

In the beginning, we had the same sponsor for three years in a row. It was a solid working relationship that benefitted both parties and I was so sure that this was it. This was the big break we had been waiting for, and it was... until it wasn't. I remember quite clearly that it was a Tuesday morning when our sponsor called to tell me that they couldn't sign on for a fourth year. It may sound silly, but we genuinely all cried in their boardroom that day, knowing that we had just lost half of our revenue with one simple *no*. I felt lost and let down.

Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start over again!

Yes the panic did set in, but I made a simple choice to go back to basics, starting with checking in with myself about what I was doing. I asked myself if my 'Why' was still the same and, upon reflection, I realised that my passion had shifted from singing to running a company.

The thrill of signing a deal and managing people had become my main driver and motivator. During this time, I had also

become a mother and I knew that my little boy needed more stability and security – more than what could be given to him if I was in a different town every week.

That's when I deliberately changed my business strategy, so that I could give my son more stability and be wholly focused on giving learners the absolute best options for their future careers. This meant adding more clients to the show, and as a result, our 'show' transformed into an expo with a twist. We created a choreographed performance, with emcees, music, and prize giveaways. It wasn't just that we added more pizzazz, but that the new format and approach created more time and space for us to add more clients.

Upselling became my new game, and my aim at the time was to never, ever rely on just one stakeholder who could have such a tremendous impact on my bottom line.

It worked. Business was booming and the company grew. We added more shows to different demographic groups and by the end of 2014, I had employed 32 young people and diversified my offering to reach a very broad market.

As the business grew, however, so did the stress. The pressure mounted and I was constantly feeling like it was a case of being 'always on.'

You won't always feel okay

You won't be surprised to learn that by 2015 I was starting to experience burnout. Again, I had to ask myself if my 'Why' was still relevant and, once again, I went back to basics and listened to my heart and body. This time, I cut all the shows and staff who weren't true to the vision of the company. It was a tough time – I struggled with depression and felt as though I had failed everyone, including myself.

It took some time to win back my confidence and feel positive about my contribution to this life.

All the while, I stuck to my core values and I made sure to keep seeking out the right people to join the company who would support our mission to educate, motivate and inspire the youth. It was also important to keep the team small and reliable and hire contract workers wherever and whenever needed so that we weren't overburdened.

It took a few years and a couple of do-overs, and there were a couple of lessons to be learnt along the way, but perhaps the truest nugget that I picked up was that every time you think you've reached the end of your tether, you actually have a little bit more to give.

Every challenge I encountered, whether I 'failed' or succeeded, it made me stronger and more resilient.





Enjoy the highs

Fast-forward seven years. It's 2022 and my business is still going strong. In spite of losing all face-face contact during Covid-19, this only made me and the company stronger. In fact, it was as a result of the pandemic that I was forced to find a revolutionary solution or lose the business entirely. It took some hard pivoting, but rather rapidly [swivel.com](https://www.swivel.com) was born and we were able to take our roadshow onto the Internet. This has since morphed into a game-like portal for learners to explore study options online, anytime.

My journey has been hard and I have been stopped at many red lights over the last 21 years. But because I have always chosen to keep true to myself and to my vision, I have been successful. Case in point, this year we reached over 35,000 matric learners from 230 schools across South Africa through our live expo, and over 10,000 learners through our online platform.

There's no two ways about this. The path of an entrepreneur or business owner is not for everyone. But, if you think you have what it takes, I urge you not to let the chance pass you by.

Wishing you only *green lights*!

ABOUT KAY CHEYTANOV

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