



Boss Life: Surviving My Own Small Business

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When columnist Paul Downs was approached by *The New York Times* to write for their “You’re the Boss” blog, he had been running his custom furniture business for twenty-four years strong, or mostly strong. Now, in his first book, Downs paints an honest portrait of a real business, with a real boss, a real set of employees, and the real challenges they face.

Fresh out of college in 1986, Downs opened his first business, a small company that builds custom furniture. In 1987, he hired his first employee. That’s when things got complicated. As his enterprise began to grow, he had to learn about management, cash flow, taxes, and so much more. But despite any obstacles, Downs always remained keenly aware that every small business, no matter the product it makes or the service it provides, starts with people. He writes with tremendous insight about hiring employees, providing motivation to get the best out of them, and the difficult decisions he’s made to let some of them go. Downs also looks outward, to his dealings with vendors and to providing each client with exemplary customer service from first sales pitch to final delivery. With honesty and conviction, he tells the true story behind building and sustaining a successful company in an ever-evolving economy, often airing his own failures and shortcomings to reveal the difficulties that arise from being a boss and a businessperson. Countless employees have told the story of their experience with managers—*Boss Life* tells the other side of that story.

Boss Life: Surviving My Own Small Business Details

Date : Published August 4th 2015 by Blue Rider Press

ISBN : 9780399172335

Author : Paul Downs

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Business, Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir

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From Reader Review Boss Life: Surviving My Own Small Business for online ebook

Sonya Mann says

Paul Downs runs a furniture-making business, but Boss Life isn't about woodworking. It's about business, which means human nature and economics, but it's not a dry textbook examination of those topics. Boss Life is fascinating because Downs is brutally honest about his own experiences and financial success (or lack thereof). Boss Life is really about sales. It's about marketing and customer acquisition. It's about cash flow, accounting, and management. It's about relationships.

Downs brings the reader through a year in the life of his company (specifically 2012), beginning each chapter by stating his bank account balance, the value of sales to date, and whether he's lost money overall. Then he explains the month's events and why they had the financial repercussions they did. Part case study and part memoir, Downs' book is worth reading if you employ people, are employed, or work in any capacity, no matter the size of your operation.

Richard Natali says

Great book! I have been dreaming about starting my own business and reading as much as I can to prepare. Paul's book is fantastic because it really is a "day in the life" or more like a year in the life of a small business owner. The business lives or dies on cash flow. Very candid, very honest telling of a very interesting story! It is full of suspense; I couldn't put it down!

Here are just some of my thoughts after reading the book: People who start a small business because they think they'll get rich WILL FAIL. And I don't mean 9 times out of 10, I mean 10 times out of 10. I have seen many small businesses that are failing, and you can tell within a few minutes of walking into the place why it's failing. One very big reason is ego. These people who think they know best are driving the business into the ground and will not take any advice.

You can read Paul's struggles in his book. On one hand, he's the only one who is shouldering all the burden of the company. Not paying himself a salary, loaning the company money from his own pocket, and constantly worrying about cash flow. That's all on his shoulders. However, he knows enough and he's not so proud that he won't take good advice and seeks it out when he knows he needs it. I think that's why his business has survived so long and his employees stick around.

I'm still thinking about this, and I don't feel Paul really answered this: Why keep going? If he knew how difficult it was going to be, would he do it again? This is oversimplified, but in my estimate, in the 23 years discussed in the book, the business overall, has done just better than breaking even. Personally for Paul, over the years, he has loaned the business \$500K of his own money and been paid back \$150K. His salary has averaged, what? \$60K per year maybe? From strictly a spreadsheet standpoint, it makes no sense to even start a business like this, or several years in, to cut your losses and become an employee somewhere. However, Paul is still running this company, and lots of small business owners are continuing to run their small businesses. Why? Paul's company employs 15 or so employees and provides a lot of tables to happy customers. Paul himself works long hours, long weeks, stressful days full of worrying about cash flow... Why do it? I can only guess that he enjoys the challenge, enjoys being his own boss, enjoys providing quality goods to deserving customers, and employees good people - helping them with their lives.

Paul said there are no lessons in his book, but I think the real lesson is, if you are going to start your own small business, do it for the right reasons. The "right" reasons being those reasons that mean enough to you personally to see you through some really rough times. Thank you, Paul for giving us a glimpse into your world and opening your kimono, as it were. I certainly haven't found any other book like this.

Jason Schrock says

If you love the nitty gritty of running a small business (which I do), this is the book for you. A very down to earth, honest & practical look at the day to day life of a small business owner....including all the day to day decisions to make, the delicate balance between work and home, employee issues, it's all here. I do not own a small business but I am fascinated by it. This book did not disappoint!

Mary Heller says

Quick & interesting read - a look into the life of a small business owner. My husband will be reading it next.

Janet says

Highly recommended for any business owner who knows what it's like to be caught in the day-in, day-out routine of managing employees and cash flow. If you don't have firsthand experience in this world (or aren't looking to ever open a business), this probably isn't for you. But if you are indeed in charge of your own small business, this storyteller's journey of a particularly up-and-down year will bring you a lot of comfort and camaraderie. I underlined many a sentence and appreciated Downs's candor as he revealed details of his work life, even when he knew outside critics would not agree with his decisions. This made me realize yet again that even the most polished businesses can be messy and, at times, full of struggle behind the scenes. I love owning my own bookstore and wouldn't change it for the world, but boy oh boy is it good to hear that other happy business owners make mistakes and have struggles.

Guillaume Lbw says

This book is a brutally honest portrayal of the struggle in becoming and being a successful small business owner. Reading and experiencing how Paul Downs created his own woodworking company was a remarkably interesting inside look in being a small business owner. The main character is likeable and easy to sympathise with, but it is also easy to relate to him and to learn from his own experiences.

Randal White says

I Never Knew! Boss Life is the story of one man's small business experiences. Down's is the owner of a woodworking shop, and this is his chronicle of a year in the life of that business. Except it is so much more. Down's bares his soul and discusses all aspects of running the shop, and of his own personal life. I admit to being very surprised by this book. I know very little about running a business, having been employed by the

government almost my entire life. I always thought it would be easy to start, and run my own business. I had NO idea! Down's lays out the nuts and bolts of what happens on a daily basis, from employee relations, advertising, production, shipping, taxes, and on and on. Things that I never even considered. But don't think that this is a technically driven instruction book, because it is not at all. It reads and unfolds like a great story. He has a way of making you feel like you are there with him, wondering what the next day will bring. I really could not put it down. I learned so much from his story, and hope that he keeps writing, as he has a wonderful gift for doing so. Highly recommend this book to all of us salaried, secure in our next paycheck, wage slaves; so that you get an idea of the life of a small businessman!

David Klenk says

An exceptional book about the year in the life of a small business owner. Paul Downs owns a custom furniture business making mostly custom conference tables. The book is the story of his decisions, experiences, and efforts to keep the business going through the trials that arise during the year. From customer rejection through employee challenges to a trip through the middle east looking for contacts and more, Paul lets us see what he is thinking and feeling. He opens the books and explains why buying an expensive finishing spray gun is worth the investment to save material and time. He also shares the hardship of his family life with a developmentally challenged son who has grown so large that his wife can't take him shopping anymore. It is all there for us to read and learn from.

michael says

This book is straight to the point. For a small business owner, i found this book very insightful and inspiring. Not only does Paul talk about the day to day challenges of being a boss, he also talks about his Family. Written in a narrative form, this book is very hard to put down and very easy to read.

Business principles, Family principles, and just being a great human being. The guy tell it all with a great sense of humor. My favorite read of the year!

Paul Downs says

Well, I wrote this book so of course I'm going to give it 5 stars. But here's why: I've been running a small business for the last 29 years. And all that time I've been reading business journalism. And I never see anything that reflects my own experience: that business is confusing, difficult, and nerve-wracking. I've never arrived at a point where I suddenly have a lot of money and the wisdom to match. My days are filled both with ordinary duties and random catastrophes. That's the story I wanted to tell. What it's actually like to be the boss.

As it happens, the same year I was invited to write a book, 2012, was chock full of events that told that story. The book is a straightforward and honest account of what it's like to guide a small factory through a difficult year.

This is not a book of advice. It's a narrative. I went through some very bad months, and I wasn't sure how any of it would turn out. I've done my best to take you along with me, not knowing what will happen next. I hope you enjoy the ride.

Minh Ngoc Pham says

What can I say? I love love books that come at the right moment in time and resonate so personally that it feels like Providence must be answering my questions and doubt in the voice of another human.

I have started a small business last year. At that time, I read Shoe Dog & Rework.

I have been in the business for a little while, getting excited to test my products everyday, receive direct feedbacks from customers, growing frustrated with money in, money out, labor, hours, supply, you name it. I read Boss Life. Ok, the business is so tiny and so new; also I am not anyone's boss at this stage. It's just the Surviving-my-own-small-business part that is really like, oh, "This is us".

Other than being personal, I love it because 1. this is business so grounded and detailed, to the minute.; 2. It doesn't try to keep the person separate from the job. When one founds and runs a small business, the business is integrated with his/her life. And the author open his home's door to let us know what it takes. I think that is very very brave.

I might have given it 4 star and not 5 because - sometimes it boils down to so much number and I was hoping for more of the craft. Otherwise, thank you so much for telling the story with such openness.

Christopher Brown says

A Peak Behind the Curtain

As a fellow small business owner serving a similar clientele to Paul, I found this book to be a bit like looking into a mirror. If you've ever thought of starting and running your own small business, read this. This WILL be your experience. Not might. WILL. Not 100% identical of course, but these are the types of joys and headaches you'll be dealing with every day.

The cash and employee troubles can be mindboggling and completely unpredictable. You can be the world's greatest salesman, but what happens when your top employee just doesn't show up one day so you can't deliver on the product as promised? Or the buyer "forgets" to send in the deposit but still needs the project by a specific date? Do you risk losing a big sale and call the bluff or do you forge ahead and hope for the best, potentially risking bankruptcy?

Large companies don't have these headaches usually. A few employees don't show up for a few days & things chug along just fine. Small shops can be crippled. I suspect that most people who fantasize about opening their own "Mom & Pop" operation have never been exposed to the raw experiences so honestly portrayed in Boss Life. It's a fantastic "warts & all" look at the reality of one way to make a living.

I love running my own small business partly in spite of these challenges and partly because of them. If you are similarly running your own small business, I guarantee that you will pull some good lessons out of this book even though that wasn't really Paul's intent in writing it. If you simply enjoy reading about how other people make a living, this one is right up your alley. If you have any interest in opening a small business, stop what you're doing right now and read this. Think about it. Your business maybe completely different, but many of the experiences here will be replicated in a huge variety of different enterprises.

Highly recommend it.

Franz Ozaeta says

Main Topics:

Sales

Operations

Money

Power

JANUARY:

The numbers that track

Running Costs: Rent, electricity, equipment leases never stop. Payroll and material costs start the instant someone shows up to work.

Positive Cash Flow: Having a little bit left over and to steadily accumulate that surplus over the course of the year.

Profit: The value of the product shipped exceeds the costs incurred during a given time period.

Sale: a sale occurs when a finished product is delivered to the client.

3 ways of bringing cash in the company: Sales, Investors, and Borrowing.

I aim to have:

Positive cash flow at all times by: Setting SMART Goals and Setting Sales Targets.

What will we do to meet the goal?

A manufacturing business must perform six major functions to stay alive: Design, Marketing (attracts paying customers), Production (actual making of the product), Logistics (moving your finished goods), Warranty Service (responding to customer issues) and Administration (keeps track of all the other functions).

Outsourcing: letting others who are competent to do the job for you

Selling our work takes a lot of time:

Fielding inquiries; writing proposals; closing deals; and managing jobs. To increase efficiency, develop a standard work flow that involved: analyzing a client's situation and then sending a detailed proposal, including plans and elevations of the table, a virtual model of the design, and pricing.

FEBRUARY:

Use quickbooks to make sure that your accounting conforms with the standards methods.

Use spreadsheets for cash management.

Use spreadsheets or other software for project development (bill of quantities, etc.).

Use commercial photography and cheap software for ads.

Utilize feedback loops. "The more clients I work for, the more designs I developed. The more designs I had, the better the chance that the next buyers would see something they liked."

Utilize websites. And utilize google AdWords.

You can divide employees into two groups: the ones who want to perform their job competently then go home; and the ones who are always thinking about ways to get ahead.

Jim Knight says

Entertaining book. Basically just a small business owner's story. Not a blockbuster but interesting. It reads like a diary. e.g. "June 10, we only have 50k in the bank and payroll is due next week..." I enjoyed it but wouldn't go out of my way recommending it.

Katie Bruell says

I really enjoyed this book. It was suspenseful and well-written. I sympathized with the main character, and wanted him to succeed!
