

The innovative new approach to growth for the
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THE BLUEPRINT

CHRIS THOMASON

The Blueprint

by

Chris Thomason

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the small to medium-sized business*

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Chapter 1 Tuesday morning

Slater stared down at the highly polished, wooden table top in front of her. The dark, oval knot in the otherwise pale panel of wood seemed to move and swirl, like the eye of a hurricane when viewed from space. Many years ago that knot was a small branch sprouting out from the main trunk of a towering tree, reaching out towards the sunlight. Possibly hoping that as it grew, it would later produce seeds, which falling to the ground below would spawn saplings that themselves would grow into more lofty trees.

That was how Slater felt when she'd started her own business—but not anymore. As she shifted her gaze, that knot changed its meaning to her. Now it was simply a blemish on a table top. In fact it was just one of a handful of other knots on the table where she sat, which was, in turn, one table out of twenty others in this, her uncle's café. And his café was just one of a dozen or so other similar eating venues and coffee shops in town.

Would her business end up being just like that knot? A mark in the pages of time where a business had once lived.

A mug of coffee was placed on the table in front of her, obscuring the troublesome knot from view.

“Wake up girl, I think he's here.” It was Uncle Nick's voice that brought Slater out of her reverie.

Coffee & Company was the name of Nick's café which he ran with his wife and daughter, and as it was also the closest one to the small industrial unit that Slater used as the base for her business, this was her regular place for a break. Especially as the coffee was good and the food too, whenever she grabbed a bite to eat. Slater liked the place, as beside it being run by family—it was Nick's wife who was actually her auntie—it usually wasn't that busy, which frequently allowed her to strike up a conversation with Nick on whatever interesting topic was in the news that day.

It was a few weeks ago when she'd popped in for her usual coffee and noticed that Nick seemed quieter than normal. She'd become quite close to him over time and felt she knew him well enough to ask if everything was okay. Nick told her that business had declined, especially since one of the big coffee shop chains had opened a store not that far away from his. She knew that the insurance company he'd been working at for many years had closed down their offices in town, and as he didn't have much chance of getting another

job, he'd invested his redundancy money and a good chunk of his pension in setting up his own café some years back, but it was barely making a profit these days.

Slater had then shared her own situation with Nick that day, telling him about how she'd started her own kitchen fitting business three years ago, and how she had vision, excitement and hope about what she was doing. The hope was still there but the vision and excitement had faded as her business just made enough to provide a modest living, but no more.

"I'm good at what I do," said Slater, "and I know that my business could be doing an awful lot better than it currently is. But I'm surprised that *you* say things aren't so good for you. Your coffee and food is really amazing—and your prices are probably the cheapest in town too."

"Thanks," said Nick. "But we just aren't getting enough customers in. That's my problem."

"We're in very different businesses but with very similar problems," mused Slater aloud.

"Have you ever got any advice on how to grow your business?" asked Nick.

"I've read some stuff online but it's all so generic. None of it seemed meaningful to my specific situation," replied Slater.

Nick grunted in agreement, paused, and then said "What if we could find someone to give us some really practical advice?"

"You know someone?"

"No, but I could discretely ask around. Some of my regulars may know someone."

It turned out one of Nick's regulars did know someone.

And this someone had just walked in the door.

Nick led a tall, but otherwise indistinguishable man towards Slater's table. He put the two drinks he was carrying down and introduced Slater to the man, whose name was Zak. They shook hands.

"Zak owns Compleat Home Services—the company that has those bright green vans that we see all around," said Nick.

"I can't take all the credit as I do have a partner in the business" responded Zak with a smile that Slater thought was one of the most genuine smiles she'd ever seen. *I need to practice that* she thought.

“Very kind of you to give up your time to meet with us,” said Slater as the two men sat down. “But can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” replied Zak.

“I’ve seen your vans before with the name on the side, but haven’t you spelled the word *compleat* wrongly?”

“We get asked that a lot, but it’s the correct spelling as the word *compleat* means highly skilled or accomplished in all aspects. It describes how we try to be in the services we offer. And it also gets conversations started—just like you commented now. Our logo even has that word in a different colour to the other two words in our name so it stands out.”

“And that’s a good thing?” asked Slater.

“If we’re at someone’s house, the adults are often too polite to point out the fact that they think we’ve spelled our name wrong—but kids aren’t. And the first thing our workers are trained to do is to give them one of our business cards.” He handed one from his shirt pocket to both Slater and Nick.

“On the front it has our company details as you’d expect, including what we do. But on the back is the definition of *compleat*.”

They turned the cards over and saw the definition printed there.

“The first thing it does is to provide the tiniest bit of education to the parents. The subtlety is that they are a little bit smarter because of us. The second thing is that ours is probably the first business card that any child has ever received, and as such they talk about it with their parents. Which of course helps to embed ourselves with the parents as potential clients.”

“Neat idea,” said Slater, pocketing the card.

There was a pause in the conversation before Nick spoke.

“Thanks very much for agreeing to meet with us,” he said.

“Well, I couldn’t miss an opportunity like this to learn so much from the two of you, could I?” responded Zak.

Slater and Nick gave each other a look of confusion before Nick spoke hesitatingly “But I thought we were going to be learning from you?”

“All I can do is to tell you some of the things I know. Whether you learn anything from that is entirely up to you. However, if there’s one thing I’ve understood over the past few years, it’s that if you are open-minded and willing, you can learn useful and valuable things from almost anyone. And that’s why I’m here today, to learn from you two.”

“But both our businesses are...” Slater paused and then continued, “*stagnant*.”

“Stagnant?” repeated Zak in an enquiring tone. He looked at Nick, clearly indicating he wanted his input on this.

“Yes. Another word might be *stalled*. We both feel we could be doing a lot better in each of our businesses,” said Nick.

“Better? What do you mean by *better*?” asked Zak.

They both hesitated, not sure what to say.

“I suppose I mean getting more customers so there’s more business coming in,” replied Slater.

“Reducing your prices will definitely get you more business,” replied Zak in a slightly mocking tone.

“That means I’ll have to work harder—and potentially for the same money,” replied Slater.

“What do you mean when you say *harder*? I never understand that word.”

“I mean working more hours in a week,” replied Slater.

“You’re self-employed, so shouldn’t you be willing to do that for the long-term benefit of your business?”

“I suppose so...” said Slater. Her words trailed off as she realised she was getting herself into a loop of confusion.

Slater tried another approach. “I suppose I want to make more money.”

“Wouldn’t working harder do that for you?” said Zak, who smiled the smile again.

Slater realised that she didn’t actually know what she wanted out of her business.

“And what about you, Nick?” asked Zak.

“We are open six days a week as it is, so I don’t want to work longer hours. I just want to get more customers coming here, rather than them going somewhere else.”

“And what are you doing to achieve that?”

“I keep our prices low to compete with the other eating places in town but still try to offer good quality food and drinks.”

“Is that working well for you?”

“We’re just about holding our own and making enough to pay myself, wife and daughter a small wage each week.” He waved a hand in the direction of two women working behind the counter, and continued. “But, I want things to be better for them in the future.” He then waved his other hand around the interior of the café.

“Too many empty tables.”

“You used that word better again,” prompted Zak. “What precisely does that mean for you Nick?”

“More business. But I can’t afford to offer superior food or reduce prices further because I’d start to make a loss otherwise.”

Zak leaned forward over the table and looked at both of them. “You work full-time in your businesses, right?”

Slater and Nick nodded in agreement.

“And you both own your businesses outright don’t you?”

More nods.

“So I imagine your personal and business lives are closely intertwined?”

Even more nods.

“That isn’t necessarily a bad thing by the way. But you are each totally in charge of your business. You could make the decision to close your business down tomorrow or to change into a totally different direction, right?”

“Yes,” agreed Slater and Nick unanimously.

“And you can each decide how your business and work life combine to give you an overall better life, right?”

“Obviously,” answered Slater, beginning to get a little irritated.

“But neither of you can tell me precisely what this *better life* is that you’re looking for,” concluded Zak.

Both of them sat looking at Zak like rabbits caught in the headlights.

“I can see that neither of you are sure what *better* actually means for you, so let me explain. Wanting a better life is a completely meaningless term unless you’ve defined what that means for you personally. In truth, everyone on the planet wants a better life. Many people are employed full-time in jobs that they dislike doing, but they still want a better life. Yet they are unwilling to make a change either because they can’t handle the risks or because it seems like too much work for them to do.”

He took a sip of his coffee.

“You two, on the other hand, have already done the hard thing and made the change to be running your own businesses. And a true owner-manged business has only one purpose—which is to grow. But that’s not just growth around financial goals like sales and profits, but to grow the owner running the business in the way that *they* want to grow.

Whether that's personal development or getting a perfect work-life balance, that's totally up to you."

Zak continued.

"There are any number of reasons why people want to start their own business. Some people make the choice because they want to be in control of their own life in order to create a better work-life balance, or to be their own boss and work the hours that suits them. Maybe it's because it offers financial independence or a brighter future than you'd ever have working for someone else. For some it's to follow a dream or because they want to make a difference to society in what they do. For others, they had no choice. When they lost their employment they were effectively forced to set up their own business."

He took another sip of his coffee.

"Whatever the reason, it has to be part of your definition of what will give you a better life. Before we meet again, I want you both to define what you mean by a *better life*. Does that make sense?"

They nodded in agreement.

"Nick, I know you own and run this café and Slater, all I've been told about you is that you're involved in installing kitchens—so let me ask you both a question. Do you enjoy doing the core part of your respective businesses?"

"Absolutely," replied Slater.

"Definitely," answered Nick.

"And that's normally the case when you run your own business. You do something you enjoy doing. Which means you've just got to identify ways of growing your business by changing some peripheral aspects of the core business that you do. You two aren't just starting out, you have several years of experience under your belt, and hopefully you know what you do well and what you don't do well. But more importantly, the bulk of what you do is right, because that's the core of your business—and that isn't going to change. It's what you are known for and it's obviously working to a degree—but you just need to improve it slightly. To put icing and cherries on top of your cake to make it *better* in some way."

"That makes sense to me," said Nick.

"Me too," added Slater.

"So over the next two weeks I'm going to help you to re-design both your businesses. Agreed?" said Zak more as a statement than a question.

“Agreed. But we should probably talk about money for this,” suggested Slater shyly and looking towards Nick.

“How much are you going to charge me?” asked Zak.

“Surely you’ll be expecting payment from us for this?” said Slater, confused again.

“Let’s agree to learn from each other. Anyway, as my business is bigger than both yours, then I’ll potentially get more value from you than you will from me.”

“At least let us provide the coffee each time,” offered Nick.

“Okay, you’ve got a deal there. We’ll meet here at eight o’clock each morning for the next two weeks. But there’s something else I’ll need from you both—and that’s commitment.”

“In what way?”

“You must have the attitude that you *want to change*. Recognise you have to give something up to make time—because change takes time. You probably can’t give anything up in your daytime as you are busy working in your business. But what will you give up in your personal life in order to make some time to change?”

“How much time do we need for this?”

“About 90-minutes each evening for the next two weeks. But it’s essential you give up something to make the time as a signal to yourself that you’ve made a change. For example give up a bit of time watching television or catching up on social media. It’s up to you, but you have to commit to change. Can you do that?”

“Of course,” replied Slater, “but can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” Zak replied.

“What are you going to do with things you learn from us?”

Zak laughed.

“I’ll tell you. We’ve agreed that we’re going to re-design your business right? Now, given where you both are, there will be some significant changes to be made to give you a slightly new direction and to help you build momentum in that new direction. However, when you get that momentum, you don’t want to be making any more major changes—you want to be making smaller changes that help increase your required momentum in some way. Have you heard the old adage that you can be too busy working *in* your business that you’ve no time to work *on* your business?”

“Yes.”

“Every month I take a half-day off from working in my business to spend that time working on my business. This is when I consider all the changes I made in the previous month to see how well they’re working and to review all the things I’ve learned over the past month to see what smart changes I could make for the coming month—or longer. This is me constantly improving my business for the coming period.”

“So we’re going to make a plan are we?”

“No. A new business needs to have a plan to keep them on track, and a plan is something that you stick to. You’ve already got a business that’s working to some degree so you don’t need a plan—you’re going to have a Blueprint, which is different.”

“How?” asked Nick.

“A Blueprint allows you to have options to choose from. To do different things in different situations. It’s similar to a plan but without the rigidity as it offers you flexibility. If something works you can immediately do more of it. If something doesn’t work you either stop doing it or change it. Plans don’t offer this flexibility, but a business Blueprint does.”

“So it’s like a map where there are different routes you can take to get to a destination?” suggested Slater, making sure she understood the approach.

“Partly, but with a map the routes are already pre-defined. A blueprint helps you to create your own roads to your own pre-determined destination.”

“So it’s like a map without any roads on?”

“Precisely, and this allows you to create the roads to where you want to go. Some roads will be highways while others will be meandering drives. All totally dependent upon what you want to do and where you want to get to. Some of the roads will develop as you drive along them for you may not be sure what the end-destination is—just that it’s a direction in which you want to go.”

“Interesting,” said Slater. “But how will you use what you learn from us?”

“It’s two weeks until my next Blueprint review and so let’s aim to be finished by then. That will allow me to apply what I’ve learned from you into that review, and it will get you both into a new place without overly burdening your time. Does that make sense?”

They both agreed it did.

“When I review my Blueprint, that’s me trying to work smarter, and not harder. It’s one of the most enjoyable parts of my business too and I’ve come to look forward to this time each month.”

“So what should we be doing first?” asked Nick, keen to get started.

“For our next meeting tomorrow, I want you to think back on why you started your own business in the first place, and to answer these three questions.”

1. If at some stage in the future a business competitor came to you and wanted to buy your business, what would be the successful elements that they would be looking to acquire? Don't focus on the money side of the business; focus on the qualitative aspects that you'd point out to them in order to force them to increase their offer to you.
2. What does 'having a better life' from your business mean for you? Again, don't focus on the monetary aspects, but highlight the quality elements of your work-life balance.
3. And finally, what are some of the things about your business that make you get out of bed in the morning and looking forward to getting to work?

Chapter 2 Tuesday evening

Slater sat at the breakfast bar in her kitchen, absent-mindedly swivelling the seat she sat on from side to side. This was where she tended to do most of her work as the high-level work surface allowed her to be seated on one of the two bar stools, or she could work standing up if she wanted to. She preferred this whenever she was doing her kitchen design sketches.

Slater knew she had a good eye for home interior design, especially for what she thought was the nerve-centre of any house, and that was the kitchen. She'd previously worked in sales for a national DIY chain of stores that offered a fitted kitchen service. She'd go out and show the potential customer brochures of the units and finishes they offered and then she'd measure up the existing kitchen space and prepare a quote for them. If they accepted it, then she made her sales commission when the job was completed.

She'd been the top salesperson in her area as she was able to help the customer understand the benefits that their finished kitchen would deliver to them. She was the only woman in the sales team and while she knew other salesmen talked about how it would look—which was important, of course—she also recognised that the kitchen was a working and socialising area, and she had a good way of including this in her sales pitch. This, she knew, helped her to frequently connect with the woman of the house to understand their ultimate need, and that was how she'd become such a successful salesperson.

Slater also recognised that people still had issues when their kitchen was of a smaller size, and apart from the new-build houses which tended to have larger kitchens, people generally found their kitchens to be too small. And especially so considering the increased number of appliances they had. Unless the people with the smaller kitchens were planning on a building extension, they frequently thought the cost of re-fitting their kitchen was way too high for the extra value they'd get out of it.

She'd always thought that there must be a way to help out these people with small kitchens, and that was why she'd started out on her own a few years ago with the aim to offer a cheaper and more personal service than the bigger kitchen companies. And while she'd got a steady (but low) stream of business, customers still thought the cost was too high for them. Which was why her business was struggling.

But Slater's thinking now wasn't directly about her business. It was around what she wanted to get *from* her business. The *better life* that Zak had focused on. She'd felt slightly

perturbed that she couldn't say precisely what she wanted from her business when Zak had asked her. She thought about this now.

What successful elements of her business would she point out to someone who was interested in buying it so that they'd increase their offer to her?

Some businesses wanted to get loyal customers who were committed to buying from them on an ongoing basis, but with kitchens it was different. For it would be many years before you needed another kitchen refit—so that wasn't of value to her thinking. The phrase 'would you like fries with that' came to mind and she wondered if she could sell another service on top of kitchens—like bathrooms. But who would want to do both their kitchen and bathroom at the same time. Or even close together in time as they were both expensive items to renovate. And she didn't have any experience in bathrooms either—so that was a non-starter.

If someone were interested in buying her business it would be because it was making good profits, which meant she needed to be busy for most of the year. Or it would be because of something that only she could do, or only she had. *But what could that be?*

She decided to move on to the next question.

What does 'having a better life' from your business mean for you? Again, don't focus on the monetary aspects, but highlight the quality elements of your work/life balance.

Slater knew she enjoyed all the different elements of her work. From going to site to meet the customer and to give them her vision of what their kitchen could look like. She could measure up and give the designs to Gerry the carpenter that she worked closely with who'd make all the items. Sometimes she even assisted Gerry to install the kitchen if she wasn't busy and she quite enjoyed that aspect of the business too. She could work from home when she wanted to, doing the quotations and the designs, or she could work from the little office in the small workshop unit she rented to store all her materials in. So for her, there was flexibility in how and where she worked and she thought she could have a good work-life balance however successful her business became.

Let's look at the last question, she thought.

And finally, what are some of the things about your business that make you get out of bed in the morning and looking forward to getting to work?

As she'd been thinking through these questions she realised she'd been absentmindedly sketching on the paper in front of her. It was a corner cupboard with a double-hinged door. She enjoyed sketching and was quite artistic with a pen in her hand. She loved the design process where she incorporated some innovative new space-saving device into her designs, as customers were always excited to hear about it—and even more thrilled when they actually saw it installed as an integral part of their new kitchen. She realised that she truly enjoyed the front parts of the entire design and installation process that she was good at, as Gerry could handle all the manufacturing and actual fitting. And she knew that he enjoyed that part of the work too—so it suited both of them.

If she was honest, it was the designing work that really excited her. Looking at an existing kitchen and visualising how it could be better and more efficient to suit the needs of the owner. She started to realise that it wasn't so much the designing of an entirely new kitchen from scratch, but the re-design where she had to apply clever ideas to make the best use of existing spaces. That was the really fun part for her. But if only there was more work coming in...

That same evening in Nick's study.

Nick was pondering the same three questions that Zak had asked them earlier that day. They seemed like obvious questions that should have obvious answers, and Nick was a little uneasy that he couldn't answer two of them. The first question about a getting a potential buyer of the business to raise their offer was more straightforward. For Nick, he realised that he would have to tell the potential buyer how he had regular customers who he knew by name. For if his café was busy for most of the time, then there wasn't much more he could do. And in a town like theirs, it was all about getting regular customers rather than trying to appeal to the once-off passing trade.

Zak's second question had been around *What does having a better life from your business mean?*

One of Nick's hobbies was coffee. When he was younger, he'd spent a few years in the Royal Navy and had toured the world and sampled coffee from so many different countries he'd lost count. When he'd left the navy and joined the insurance company, his love of coffee continued and he'd always had coffee making devices of some kind in his home. From a simple coffee percolator, to a Turkish copper cezve for making the intense Eastern coffee, to a French press and moka pot, and eventually a fancy espresso machine. He'd experimented with different beans from around the world too. And now that he could order beans from anywhere via the internet, he'd sampled some really interesting coffees. He'd even got a small coffee roaster so he could buy green coffee beans and roast them himself. He'd started flavouring his beans as he roasted them and even he had to admit that his hazelnut-roasted Colombian Arabica beans produced an amazing cup of coffee. It was what he was sipping now as he pondered Zak's questions.

Nick, his wife and daughter were a very close family and they'd always talked about doing something together someday. Nick's wife Alicia was a sensational cook at home, and her food was never overly fancy, but always extremely tasty. He'd often joked to Alicia that with her cooking and his love of coffee, they should open a café together. And when he lost his job at the insurance company, that's what they did.

After his daughter left school, she'd completed a course at the local college on food nutrition and computer studies. He'd asked Alicia what sort of strange combination that was and what she'd do with it to get a job. She'd told him that it was what their daughter wanted to do and so they shouldn't interfere. It turned out that his daughter *had* struggled to get a job and so she'd joined them in the café. This wasn't a problem for Nick as they needed the extra help, and they all got on well together, so it made things quite enjoyable during the day to be working in their own family business.

It had taken a sizeable amount of money to lease and fit out the premises and he was desperate for it to be a success as Alicia was younger than him and he was keen that she would have a source of income if anything ever happened to him. He knew that he wasn't the healthiest person and so he had to be planning for his family for the future. And this all summed up what having a better life meant for him. It was about Coffee & Company being successful and providing a fair income for the three of them.

Zak's final question concerned the things about your business that made you get out of bed in the morning and look forward to your work. For Nick, it was about having regular customers, for he was the chatty type and loved making his customers feel special. In his time at the insurance company he'd discovered that he was excellent at remembering names and

faces, which now stood him in good stead with recalling the regular customers in his café. But he knew that regular customers didn't always want to eat and drink the same thing. So he'd always thought it would be essential to offer new and varied items on the menu to keep appealing to them. This way a first time customer would return again and again, and so become a regular.

This appealed to Nick. He imagined himself speaking with his regulars, and making recommendations from the menu on the day's speciality coffee he'd be offering or on the dish-of-the-day Alicia had added to the menu. That was the sort of thing that he'd really look forward to. *Surely that would help to create more regulars and increase profits?*

He absentmindedly swirled the coffee in his mug and the hazelnut aroma this action released stimulated him into action. He began to write down his answers to Zak's questions in his notebook...

Chapter 3 Wednesday morning

They stood on the corner of Church Street and High Street, which was nominally the centre of their town, watching the early morning traffic perform a sadly-repetitive dance in tune with the changing colours of the traffic lights.

Zak had sent a peculiar text message the night before explaining there were some potential customers he wanted them to see, and that their meeting venue had changed to be this road junction.

“Do you know what *better* means for you now?” he asked as he drew close to them.

They nodded, and greeted him.

“Good, you can tell me while we walk,” and he set off at a brisk pace along Church Street.

Slater started. “Your first question was around why someone would see value in what my business does. There are numerous companies who make kitchens and many people who install them, but I know I’ve got a good eye and can design a kitchen that a house owner will fall in love with. I believe that my work could even win a regional design award as it’s much better than some of the previous winners I’ve seen. So, I would be the reason that people would want to pay more for my business—for the awards that my designs win.”

“That’s ambitious and I like it. What about you Nick?” asked Zak.

“I’m very different,” started Nick hesitantly. “I don’t think I could win any awards, but I will be recognised for the speciality coffees we offer alongside our regular drinks. My self-roasted beans will be something that makes our coffee stand out. Also, my wife’s own recipes that will be our speciality cakes and dishes. The other thing will be the fact that our coffee shop is located a bit further away from the centre of town but close to two schools and the business areas. If I could build up more regular customers then these will be the reasons that my business will have greater value.”

“You roast your own beans?” asked Zak.

“Coffee has been my hobby for years,” said Nick.

“You should try his hazelnut-roasted coffee,” prompted Slater.

“I will,” answered Zak. “You say that you don’t think you could win awards. But don’t you realise when you get a regular customer, then they are awarding you with their custom—and paying you for it at the same time?”

“I’ve never thought about it that way,” replied Nick.

“That’s an informal award as opposed to Slater’s formal one. But both can be equally as valuable depending on how you use them,” said Zak. “What about the second question around making a better life for yourself?”

“Having a steady income is important of course, but the most important thing is flexibility in when we work. Because there’s my wife and daughter working with me, we would have the flexibility to take time off whenever we needed to—or wanted to—and still leave my daughter in charge. Whether it was doing something for the business, going on holiday, or even when one of us just wasn’t feeling well, it’s knowing that there are enough of us to cover the running of the business, and still have someone you can trust completely to be in charge. That means I’m not a slave to my business.” Nick’s head was nodding slowly and he had a slight smile on his face as he spoke about his ideal future.

“Not being a slave to your business—I like that. If you’re not careful that can easily happen,” commented Zak.

“For me,” continued Slater, “it’s about being able to outsource all the manufacturing and installation work so I can focus on the design work and meeting clients. I can do my designs and costings from anywhere—home, office, even Uncle Nick’s café. And at any time too, as I have the flexibility to do my designs at night or at weekends, and to take time off during the week if I wanted to. Better is about being in full control of my work-life balance.”

“You both mentioned flexibility and that’s a key benefit of running a small business but it can be a curse too. Some people don’t know how to handle this flexibility. They either try to do too much and don’t focus on what they need to focus on, or they get bogged down in too much trivial detail.”

They paused while the traffic passed and then crossed the road. Slater noticed they were heading towards the carpark of the main supermarket in town.

“What about my final question of why you get out of bed in the morning?”

Slater started. “I love what I do. And your three questions helped me to understand this—so thanks for that,” she said nodding to Zak. “Knowing that when I have to design something very special for a client to fit within all the constraints they have of space, shape and budget—I really enjoy doing that. Even more so if I were to get some recognition for it—like an award or something.”

“For me, and my wife too, we’ve created a special café that we’ve fitted out and decorated in our own way. Actually it’s my wife’s way—but I like it a lot. Coffee & Company is a place we all look forward to going to each morning as the background music

we play is the upbeat kind we both like. So we work as a family in a really nice place. And what's good is that we get immediate compliments on what we serve. People tell us how much they liked this cake or that savoury dish. Even my special coffees get mentioned too. Someone actually asked if they could buy some of my home-roasted beans once. It makes you feel good to be complimented that way."

They entered the supermarket car park, but didn't seem to be heading towards the supermarket's entrance.

"Now you've heard each other's views, is there anything else that you'd like to include under the description of *better*?" prompted Zak.

There was a brief pause as they both considered this.

"I think that the fact we have the ability to try new things and to learn what does and doesn't work for our business is interesting. Obviously, you'd only continue with the things that help establish your regular income—and which you enjoy doing. That would make things better all round," said Slater.

"Some people said I was mad to start my own business," said Nick. "But I think that when you achieve success in whatever way you define that, then that's something to be proud of. It's a challenge that many others wouldn't be willing to take on."

"Nick used a good word there—success," added Slater. "It's how you define success. Being your own boss and having a steady income could be all the success that some people would want—and they may stop there. But if you want to do more—then you can do. I suppose there's no upper limit to success, as it's just how you define it in your own mind. If I can win an award then I'm being recognised for my success—for being special or different in some way. And there's something else too..."

Slater paused while the thought formed in her mind.

"If you do create a success out of your business, then there's another thing that you get. It's a stronger, more-valuable business too. If you wanted to pass your business on to your daughter at some time in the future, Nick, then it would be in a more robust state as a starting point for her. Alternatively, if I wanted to sell my business, then it would be worth more over time. I suppose success accumulates. It only goes forward getting bigger."

"Interesting insight," replied Zak. "We'll come back to that thought of accumulation again at some point. But for now, we're here."

Zak stopped walking. They were in the middle of the supermarket car park. The car park was about a third full, with most of these vehicles being parked closer to the entrance

than where they were standing. Around them were a few trees protected by raised kerbs to prevent the parking cars from hitting them, a number of covered shelters where neat rows of shopping trolleys awaited their next turn of duty—and several hundred empty spaces for cars.

“I thought we were going to meet some customers,” she said.

“No,” corrected Zak, “I said that we were going to see some potential customers.”

“Where are they?”

“Tell me about the people you’ve seen on our walk here this morning,” Zak said.

“There were people in cars—drivers and passengers—and people on the streets,” said Slater slightly confused.

“Parents walking children to school. Other people heading towards the railway station going to work in the city,” added Nick.

“Other people were already at work,” added Slater, “opening shops, driving buses and delivery trucks. But where are the potential customers we’re supposed to be seeing?” she asked.

“Do all those people you mentioned live in homes with kitchens?” asked Zak.

Slater paused, then answered. “Of course. Every one of them will have a kitchen of some kind in their home.”

“Do those people like to consume nice food and drinks?” asked Zak turning to Nick.

“I’m sure they do,” he replied.

“Then isn’t everyone one of them a potential customer?”

“I suppose they are,” answered Nick, hesitantly.

“No. They *definitely* are,” admonished Zak. “*You’ve* got to realise this, and you’ve got to make *them* realise this fact too. Some will be easier to convince than others, and you just need to focus on these initially. *The none-customers you can convert into actual customers.* There is never a shortage of potential customers—it’s just that you haven’t converted them as yet. Once you understand this fact the rest is just a process that you need to follow.”

“It’s that easy?” asked Nick.

“How hard have you tried to convert them?” asked Zak.

“Probably not as much as I should,” he replied sheepishly.

“And that’s what you are going to understand,” replied Zak. “Your next exercise is to understand your customer—and we’ll start with a simple question.”

He paused for effect.

“Which of these two things is the most important? Selling your product or service to a customer, or a customer buying your product or service from you?”

“Aren’t they the same thing?” asked Slater curiously.

“Absolutely not. Because you are a business, you are aiming to be selling all the time—but that doesn’t necessarily mean customers want to buy what you are selling. On the other hand, a customer may walk up to you wanting to buy something but you can’t help them because that’s not what you sell.” Zak paused, then continued. “The art of great business is to sell what customers want to buy.”

“Are you saying we’re not selling what customers want to buy?” asked Nick.

“Do you know precisely what your customers want?” asked Zak.

“I think so,” answered Slater.

“If you only think so—then you don’t know,” replied Zak. “That means you have to go and find out. Time for you two to do some customer research to find out what your customers actually want.”

“How do we do that?” asked Nick.

“There are many ways to do customer research—but what you want to hear is called the voice of the customer. Understand their needs and listen closely to what they say,” replied Zak.

“Do we have to actually interview them to hear their voice?” asked Slater.

“That’s one good way. Or you can get them to do a survey where they write things down or tick boxes on a form. There are many ways to do surveys and you’re both computer savvy so you’ll be able to find information online regarding some interesting ways to achieve this.”

“Okay,” said Nick nervously, “how long should this take?”

“It will take as long as you let it take—but I want to see your results when we next meet on Monday. So you have three working days. One to think and prepare your material, and two to actually do it. This is called guerrilla testing. Short and sharp in nature but highly-valuable in the outputs it delivers.”

“Is there anything specific we want to get out of it,” asked Slater.

“Fresh insights on what your customers say they want to buy from you. Meet me at this exact spot on Monday morning at eight o’clock. I want to hear the voice of your customers,” he said, and walked off leaving them alone in the car park.

Chapter 4 Monday morning

Nick and Slater were standing in the car park of the local supermarket, again.

“Tell me the interesting insights you’ve learned about your customers,” called out Zak from behind them.

As he came closer, Nick could see he was drinking a take-out drink branded with the Coffee & Company logo. Nick smiled at this, and then spoke.

“After your talk last week, I realised there are two types of people. There are my current customers that come into my café and there are the potential customers who don’t come in.”

“I already like the way you’re talking,” said Zak.

“It was easier to talk to the people who already come in, so I decided to find out why they come in and what they like—because then perhaps I can do more of that for the people who don’t yet come in.”

“That makes sense,” said Zak.

“My daughter created a one-page questionnaire on the computer which she printed out at home. We handed one out to each person when we took their order and said they’d get a free home-made cookie if they completed it before they left. One of the questions was what time they arrived, and when they left and handed the questionnaire back to us, we just wrote the time they left next to it—so we could see exactly how long people stayed with us. If people sat together at a table, we stapled all those questionnaires together so we could understand how they behaved as a group. Some of the questions revealed really interesting things while other questions didn’t. I think we phrased some questions wrongly. It was a really useful exercise and I’m going to run this again, but next time I’ll do some things differently,” added Nick.

“Smart thinking on giving a reward—and also for wanting to do this again. That’s one of the things about guerrilla activity—do it rapidly so you learn quickly for when you repeat it. Don’t spend an age trying to get it perfect,” said Zak. “What did you find out?”

“People come in for very different reasons and the same people can want different things on different days. I thought they’d have the same reason for coming in—but no. I found there are three different types of customer that I have. From around eight-thirty to late morning, there are the mums who come to meet in groups after they’ve dropped their kids off at school. They normally just have drinks but would also have breakfast if we had healthy

breakfast options—as they are often too busy getting their kids ready for school to eat first thing. Then there’s the lunchtime crowd who want to sit down to eat but are actually interested to try something new. My wife always cooks a dish-of-the-day, but the peculiar thing is that sometimes they want a hot dish and sometimes a cold dish—like an interesting sandwich. My daughter created a second questionnaire that we used with the lunchtime crowd just on Friday, and she asked two questions. They were *If you could have any hot dish to eat right now what would it be?* and also *What is your all-time, favourite sandwich?* We got lots of great ideas we can make from that. And then there’s the time from three-thirty to five-thirty in the afternoon when mums bring their kids after school. Now this was really interesting as the mums want to give their kids a special treat, but they’d like it to be healthy—and something the child really looks forward to having.”

“Do you know how you’re going to respond to all this?” asked Zak.

“I’m standing back,” said Nick with a chuckle. “My wife and daughter are on to this in a big way. My wife loves to cook what she calls comfort food, like the hearty meals and traditional cakes. My daughter on the other hand prefers the healthy side of things—and the two of them have ideas on offering both. They’ve come up with the phrase *healthy and hearty*, which I kind of like,” he added.

“They have this idea of different cakes for mornings and afternoons—with larger slices of the healthy ones or smaller slices of the more-decadent ones. They also want to offer special fruit and vegie shakes after school for kids. My daughter read an article where you have to use bright colours to appeal to kids and they’re busy experimenting with beetroot for a purple colour, and carrot for orange. They also want to get involved in some way with the two schools that are quite close to us to engage the parents there.”

“And do you feel that there’s potential for growth by doing this?” asked Zak.

“Definitely. It seems that this is what people want and so this is what we’ll offer them,” said Nick.

“And what about you Slater?” asked Zak.

“I’m the opposite to Nick as I don’t have many existing customers to ask, so I had to take a different approach. I set up an online survey using one of the free survey tools that I found. I created a simple questionnaire to understand what issues people have with their kitchen as it is now, and what they’d ideally—but realistically—want, to make it better in some way. I asked my family, friends and existing customers to send it on to people they knew.”

“Why didn’t you ask them to fill it in?” asked Nick.

“Because I felt that family and friends might give me the views they thought I’d want to hear rather than the truth. Also, my existing customers should ideally have what they wanted and so their responses wouldn’t add any value.”

“That makes sense,” said Nick. “How did you get them to fill it in though?”

“I said anyone who forwarded it on or completed it should send me their email and I offered a set of three home design books as a prize, and that I’d draw a name at random from the people who entered. I also put a deadline of two days for the draw to encourage people to complete it quickly.”

“Good idea—and also that you used a relevant reward,” said Zak. “And what did you find out?”

“I found that the majority of people weren’t satisfied with the size of their kitchen as there wasn’t enough storage space for all the appliances they had. They also wanted a new kitchen look but were unsure of what to do, as they need different things all at the same time. They want a kitchen they could change to suit the different needs and feel of the time of the year, but they also knew they couldn’t afford—or want to do—a complete kitchen rebuild or extension, as that was too much trouble. When I got all the responses in and realised this, I had an idea. I emailed all the people with an extra question and offered an additional book prize to those who answered this one additional question. I asked what was the upper limit of what they’d be prepared to pay for a make-over that would address all their issues rather than them buying a completely new kitchen. The numbers I got back were nowhere near the cost of a new kitchen—like I’m doing now—but were surprisingly much higher than I’d thought they’d pay for a well-designed make-over. It appears there’s a threshold where people who don’t want a new kitchen can be triggered to act—and I’ve realised there’s so much I can do in this space and still make a good profit. I’m going to make a change from what I currently and offer rapid kitchen transformations as this seems like an interesting and sizeable opportunity. And you know what else appeals to me about this?”

“Go on,” prompted Zak.

“It’s the opportunity to do more design work, as there’ll be more projects, but less intense and of shorter duration. I’m quite excited about this.”

“And that’s good to hear,” said Zak. “So listening to the voice of the customer appears to have been of real value to you both then?”

They both nodded in agreement.

“Then let’s move straight on to the next part. What’s your story going to be?”

“I don’t understand. What’s a story?” asked Slater.

“In days of old, poets and minstrels wrote songs about great heroes as it was easier for people to re-tell the story by learning to sing the song. And the song would spread as other people started to sing it. This is what you need to have—people singing your heroic song or re-telling your story.”

Zak took a sip from his coffee and then continued.

“You want people to be re-telling your story in a way that includes you as part of the story. They need to be saying *I was at Coffee & Company and had the most amazing cup of coffee* or *Our kitchen was designed by Slater*. Not just *We’ve had our kitchen re-done* or *I had a nice cake the other day*. And often it doesn’t matter *how* you’re a part of the story, just as long as you are *in* the story in some way. It could be about your business, your premises, your location or, more likely, about you personally. Customers must intuitively feel that they need your service, and that you are the only one they know or trust who can do it for them. So you need to have a story that is unique to you. You must be their hero.”

Zak sipped his coffee again, smiled and raised it towards Nick in a silent cheers movement. “Hazelnut-roast. Very nice,” he added—and then continued.

“There are two sides to a good business story—your side and the customer’s side. You keep telling your side because that’s how you sell what you do. But there’s only one of you and there are countless potential customers of your business, and it’s their side of the story that’s important. *The story they’re going to tell and re-tell about your business*. This is your *why*. It’s your purpose for being in business and will be how you actually connect with new customers and keep connected to existing customers. Make it personal to show you care.”

“Have you got an example?” asked Nick.

“I can tell you my story—or stories—for they changed over time as I started doing new things,” replied Zak.

“This I want to hear,” said Slater.

And Zak told them his story.

“I left school at sixteen and had a number of different jobs before I ended up as a window cleaner. I did this for seven years and was happy in what I did. I’d often sing while washing the windows as I carry a tune quite well. One day, I went to one of my customers

who had a friend visiting. They were in the garden while I was doing the windows and this woman's friend called out to me *So you're the singing window cleaner are you?* For that was how I'd been described by my customer—and which obviously stuck in this friend's mind. I replied that I was indeed that person and gave her one of my business cards. She became a new customer, I became a new person—the singing window cleaner—and that became my first story. I came to realise that cleaning windows was just the function I performed, but what made it personal was that people could hear my singing. It also reminded them that I was about and they should remember I could see into their houses.”

“You were a window cleaner? But your business is everywhere around this part of the county. How did you manage that from being a window cleaner?” asked Slater.

“I have a good friend Jake, who was a taxi driver at the time covering this area. I asked if he ever carried any famous people and he said he did, but he told me it was the memorable advice these people gave him that was more important, and not the actual person. Apparently Jake had a question that he asked every passenger and it was this. *You are an accomplished person in your own right—so what advice would you give me as someone who doesn't want to be doing the same thing for the rest of their life?* Jake said that people have similar issues to you—or they don't because they've overcome them. So either way, there's an interesting conversation to be had. And of course he knew that people love to give advice, especially when it's asked for. So he'd always ask his passengers this question as a conversation topic, and of course he learned a great deal from it too.”

Zak sipped at his coffee which seemed to trigger the next part of his story.

“While we were having a drink, Jake once told me that he ate a hamburger on a bagel instead of on a bun—because there were no buns available, and that it tasted really good. As a joke he said he wanted to try a hamburger on a doughnut one time to see what that was like. We started talking about strange combinations and got onto the subject of a business that a taxi driver and a window cleaner could do together. That might sound a bit crazy, because a taxi is always moving and windows never move, so how could the two go together to form something meaningful? As a joke we set ourselves the challenge that the next time we met for a drink, we'd both have a business idea for something to do together.”

He indicated that they should walk as they talked and he set off on a slow circuit of the car park.

“Jake picked up a passenger who must have been one of the first people to move into a new housing estate. He was talking to the passenger who said there were going to be 160

properties in the development—and that was just the first stage. Jake realised that was 160 houses that would need to have their windows cleaned—so he told me about it. This development was located out of town and beyond normal walking distance, and so as a taxi driver he knew there was an opportunity for him to get regular business too. We talked about him spotting all these new developments as he drove around and that we could both service them for our own businesses. And that’s how we got started.”

They all stepped aside to allow a car to pass.

“On this new development I offered to clean the windows for free for the first three people who moved in for six-months—if they’d act as references for other new residents. Naturally, these initial customers agreed, and each time someone new moved in I could say that I was already doing most of the houses and so the new residents started using me too—because of the references I could supply. Soon I was doing almost every house on the estate, which meant I had very little travelling between jobs—which was the unfortunate situation I’d been in before.”

Zak continued.

“These new housing developments are built with very little being done to the gardens. It's mainly big lawns front and back with a few new trees in the middle of them. It always looks quite bare. My wife's a keen gardener and as we've lived in this area for many years she knows what plants do well. So because people were busy with other things in their lives, my wife started to speak to some of the owners about garden design. When there were a number of houses in a row, she suggested that some key components of their gardens should be consistent so that in a few years’ time, if they ever decided to sell their house, the more-established and consistent gardens would increase the value of their property. She had an overall vision but suggested a staged approach for the owners. Some took up the full vision immediately and others just took up the first stage to save money. However, she'd always try to come back to them later to finish it off. This worked well, she enjoyed the work, and because of the volumes of plants she was buying she got big discounts by using a commercial plant supplier. And because I was on the estate doing the windows regularly, I'd do the daily watering for the first week or so.”

“I was at this estate nearly every day, which meant I could offer competitive pricing that kept my competition out. Jake did the same with taxi driving and we had the idea that maybe we could provide a whole range of services for a localised area. By keeping things concentrated and busy we were able to keep prices very competitive. We both started talking

to our customers about how we were the local provider of services and people started asking if we knew someone who could provide additional services to the same standard we did.”

Their stroll continued as more cars drove into the car park.

“We realised that we were helping people to turn their house into a home and that we could handle the maintenance aspects of keeping that home in good shape—so we started looking for more things we could do. Do you know that magnolia is the standard wall paint colour for new-build houses? While there's nothing wrong with it, do you want a whole house of this one colour? We got a retired painter and decorator on board who wanted to get some extra income and who had a keen eye for how to use colour. We introduced him as part of our service and people started to listen to him as he explained about painting just one wall in a room as a feature wall to match the furnishings they had. Apparently, people often believed they had to change their furnishings at great cost when they re-decorated, but he said that it's much cheaper to just re-paint a feature wall a different colour every two to three years to completely refresh the appearance of their home at minimal cost. He became part of our team and he actually found his niche as more of an advisor on decorative painting. He's enjoying his retirement even more now—and he earns money as he actually does the painting too. We added a handyman service for the installation of new goods and the assembly of DIY furniture. After all, who wants to spend half of your weekend installing some Ikea wardrobes or cupboards when you've got busy weekday jobs?”

They'd already walked one lap of the car park, but just continued as they were curious to hear more about Zak's story.

“Jake would be identifying all the new developments that we could support during his driving, but he did something quite smart. When he was taking his passenger somewhere, he'd engage them in conversation and would explain how he was trying to better himself by taking night school courses (which he actually was doing) and that he and I had started our own business. He wanted to know if they had one piece of valuable advice they'd learned that would be useful to us. They'd always tell him something, and if he didn't understand it properly, he'd ask them to explain in more detail. He's a very good listener and after dropping his fare off he'd write down what they had told him. But what's interesting is that without fail, they would always ask him what kind of business we were in. He'd always reply that we were trying to make people's lives easier and more enjoyable for them and their families by taking away all the mundane chores—such as the different types of work we are doing now. This clearly hit a chord with them as they'd invariably ask for a card as the business sounded

to be of use to them. The interesting thing was they got to trust him as he'd normally be picking them up from their home or dropping them off there—so they knew that there was an implicit sense of him not being a complete stranger to them. Naturally, he told them that if they ever needed a taxi driver they should call him directly too.”

Slater and Nick were enthralled with this story and prompted Zak to continue.

“We got some invaluable advice from one of his passengers and that was that it’s in people’s nature to like and support local businesses wherever possible. This person was some marketing executive apparently, and they explained how the principle of local can change. For the local pub it can be the one that is close enough for you to walk to, but for a holiday, the term local means somewhere in your own country rather than going to another country. They explained how the concept of local isn't fixed and can change dependent on what you relate it to. This passenger said that local in terms of your home might even be your street, building or the development where you live. We suddenly had a great idea to include the name of the development we were servicing on the side of our vans using magnetic signs. The business name stayed the same but when we drove onto a particular development we would put the magnetic sign on the side which said 'servicing Winslow Park' or whatever the development's name was. This meant that when people saw our vehicles—they could see that we were the only trade who had their development in our name and so they made the connection that we were highly focused on their locality.”

Zak took a long drink to drain his coffee cup.

“Another passenger was involved in IT and this person thought what we were doing was really useful to them. He set up a website for each of our developments which shows local events and news and also keeps the residents informed of council activities and other things that are relevant to the residents of each development we serve. The sites are very similar in content as they are all in the same county, and so it doesn't take much to keep all of them updated. But because the website is so local to where they live, almost everyone in the development has signed up to receive the monthly newsletter too. This helps to keep reminding people of all our services and the IT guy advertises his services about helping people with their IT issues. The interesting thing for him is that he doesn't have to go to their homes as he can fix up their problems over the internet.”

Zak crunched up his paper coffee cup and looked around for a litter bin.

“With new housing developments, there are many services they don't need as they are new builds, so we started to look at existing developments where we could offer a new range

of services. People may want to have their whole house decorated, pathways re-laid, external roofing and window repairs and so on. So we'd target a number of older developments and speak with the body corporates about what we were doing and how we could offer services at highly competitive prices if a number of people signed up. They helped us spread the word within their development and we started expanding into many existing developments too—but all within tightly defined areas. We didn't realise it at the time, but by being highly concentrated it wasn't long before people who used our services had friends in the area who also used our services. And because we offered great service they started telling others about what we did. We even do individual houses now that lie within our area as they are often close-by the developments we serve.”

Zak deftly tossed his crumpled coffee cup into a rubbish bin as they walked by.

“We only recruit local people wherever possible as this helps our business by being seen to be truly local. Because we are so busy in such a small area we can charge very competitive prices which keep the competition out. We've won lots of local business awards because we ask the people we work with to support us as *their local business* which helps us to get even more publicity. We're now offering full-property care for home owners. We're cleaning windows, gutters, roofing, paving, and doing plumbing repairs, electrical and handyman work too. *Care* became our key word and part of our current story. All our tradesmen carry vacuum cleaners and dustpans and we make a show of cleaning up your home after we do any work. We care for our customers and we make a little reminder file of the things that don't change such as their family's names and the ages of their kids. It's little things, but it makes a huge difference when you go round to someone's house and you know how old their kids are and their names. We form a connection with our customers that is so strong, it's hard to break.”

"Don't you think that you'll eventually saturate your area and so you can't grow anymore?" asked Slater.

"Yes and no. We *want* to saturate our area so we become the natural choice for local residents—but this then helps us to expand at the edges of our hub and to set up similar operations around this one. We've already got four other hubs developing and we are looking to franchise the model too."

"That's an amazing story," said Nick.

“This is how we started to build. Accumulation is about being in it for the long run by helping to build up business steadily in the medium term. As long as people were living in

that housing estate and we were giving great service at fair prices—why would people ever want to change? Our vision was to capture customers in the short-term. Build them up in the medium-term and benefit in the longer-term. We talk about how we want to help people care for their families by taking away having to care for the things related to where they live. Our strapline is *Compleat care for your home, so you can care for your family*.

“Nice,” said Nick.

“Note that it incorporates our name into a story for re-telling,” replied Zak. “Also, part of our growth aspiration actually came from Japan. Soichiro Honda is the person who founded the Honda company in the 1940s. In later years he stated that he wanted to see *five Hondas in every home*.”

“He wanted to have five cars in each home? That seems a bit ridiculous,” said Slater.

“Not necessarily cars, but five Honda products. From cars and motorcycles to lawnmowers, blowers and generators—and we want to achieve the same. To have five of our services in every home in our area.”

“That is truly an ambitious goal,” said Slater. “I’m impressed.”

“Thanks. For tomorrow I want you to have your own stories ready. It’s one short sentence that sums up what you do in a way that’s different, so it’s easy for people to remember and re-tell. Make it something that reflects what you’ve learned so far—and that if you overheard someone telling it in public, it would inspire you. We’ll meet tomorrow morning outside the town hall at the usual time.”

Chapter 5 Tuesday morning

They were standing outside the town hall as they heard the parish church clock chime the hour. Zak was reminding them of the task he'd set...

"Though your story is your story to tell, its main aim is to be the story your customers tell about you. Something pointed and easy to remember—and so easy to share. So let me hear two powerful stories."

There was a silence as Nick and Slater both looked at each other before Slater hesitantly offered to go first.

"The story I want customers to share about their re-designed kitchen is that it was *transformed for me by Slater*," she said, somewhat shyly. "The story reflects how I took a personally-designed approach which was tailored to suit their needs. I was a bit unsure whether I should include my personal name or my business name, but in the end I went for the personal route."

"That's a great approach because you're so personally involved in the work. I like it. And Nick, what's your story?"

"My story is..." He paused, glanced around, cleared his throat and then said *Coffee & Company is the place to talk about old things and the place to try new things.* He looked at Zak and sheepishly asked, "Was that okay?"

"Of course it was," Zak answered. "You both seem quite hesitant about your stories—why?"

"It doesn't seem right to be telling the customers what to say about our business, because they should be making their own minds up about it."

"Oh they will," replied Zak. "And they'll decide whether they want to say something good or say something bad about you based on the experience they've just had of your service. However, I'm going to assume that it will be a great experience, so you want to prime them to re-tell your story. Remember, it's not what you do. *It's what you do for them.* They've got to feel that it's *their* story they are re-telling, not yours. In any small business, you are your business. When people talk about your business they are effectively talking about you and what you've done for them. So you need to keep building on your story in a consistent manner so it becomes a memorable story for them that is easy to re-tell—and *that they want to retell.*"

Zak paused as a large and loud truck passed by them.

“The way you embed your story is in the many small interactions you deliver to your customers and the experiences that are created from the sensations that your service or product interactions elicit in them.”

“I’m not sure I understand that,” said Nick.

“Me neither,” added Slater.

Zak explained.

“As a small business owner, you and your team are your brand. Especially if it’s a small team of people like your family for example Nick. Or your regular installer,” he added, nodding towards Slater.

“You’ve got to embed some consistent behaviours that show you as being authentic in all that you do. But while these behaviours are important for you, what’s more important is how they actually manifest themselves to the customer in the feelings and emotions they arouse in them. This consistency helps to show the customer that you are authentic in what you do. You aren’t just putting on a show—this is how you, and your business, truly are.”

“So these sensations that we need to deliver are designed to create specific feelings and emotions in the customer towards our business?” asked Nick.

“Absolutely. Maya Angelou was an American poet and civil rights activist and she said that *people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel*. The feelings and emotions you create in your customers need to be aligned to your story—the one you want your customers to re-tell to others. When customers re-tell your story and the person they’re telling it to asks a question, they will draw on the experiences they had with you and will start to repeat the sensations that you aroused in them.”

“Music stars do this don’t they?” asked Slater, who then continued to answer her own question. “They have their own sense of dress and lifestyle which is aligned to the type of music they sing. Rap stars are very different to pop stars, who again are very different to ballad singers.”

“Sometimes singers change, don’t they?” asked Nick.

“Yes, but only when they’re evolving into a new look or style, when they want to re-position themselves. And I suppose businesses sometimes do this too,” said Slater.

“Which is precisely what you and your businesses are doing with me now,” added Zak. He continued...

“As an example, it isn’t just pop stars who have an image. Some years ago I used to play golf, and one member at my club was called Mike Saunders. He had a nickname of *The Colonel*, which apparently came from the fact that he looked a bit like the Colonel Saunders character of KFC fame. Now that was just a nickname, but his golfing clothes were always a bright red top with matching trousers. I never saw him wear another colour out on the course. People used to make jokes about it, but he was consistent, and never changed. You could always tell The Colonel on the course even when he was too far away to recognise. This was his authenticity and character when playing golf.”

They’d been slowly walking along the High Street and came to one of the big-name coffee chains.

“Shall we go inside?” suggested Zak.

“Do we have to?” asked Nick. “I avoid these places at all costs,” he added. Unfortunately, his own café was at the other end of town, too far away to visit.

“Consider it market research,” suggested Zak. “Before we leave here, we’re going to do a little exercise, which I’ll explain later.”

They ordered their drinks and took them to an empty table at the back of the building.

“I emailed an extra task to you yesterday. Have you done it?”

They both nodded.

“These are the sensations you just spoke about aren’t they?” asked Slater, opening her notebook to reveal what she’d done.

“That’s correct. I sent you some examples through and asked you each to identify four sensations that you’d like all aspects of your interactions with customers—or potential customers—to elicit. Do you want to show us yours Slater?”

Slater showed them her notebook page.

Slater’s kitchen transformations

Sensation	Description
<i>Inspiring</i>	My designs, and the way I present them, are so elegant that it creates a sense of immediate desire in the client when they realise their kitchen space could actually look this good.
<i>Functional</i>	I incorporate relevant space saving kitchenware and devices to show them how to reduce their required storage space in an appropriate and practical way. It also comes through in how my paperwork is clear and gets straight to the point.
<i>Affordable</i>	I show them how my transformational approach is cheaper than a major refit—and how it requires minimal interference with their daily lives and their ability to use their kitchen.
<i>Collaborative</i>	Customers feel they want to work with me as I always try to do what’s best for them. They feel they could trust me to be in their home when I’m doing the installation—even if they weren’t able to be there themselves.

“And have you thought about some other ways that you can make your customers experience these sensations when they deal with you?” asked Zak.

“I have. In my brochure I’ll only use photographs and sketches of work that’s actually been done by me. I won’t show really expensive installations that would just be dreams for most people. I want to show images of stylish looking kitchens with space-saving devices and storage methods. This shows how *functional* their new kitchen will be and in a manner that *inspires* them to want to spend more time in there. I’m going to re-design my website to have a cleaner, more elegant design too that matches my kitchen design aspirations. I’m also going to offer three types of pricing. The first is where the core of the work is to make the kitchen look good—new doors, surfaces, flooring, lighting and repainting. The second is to install space-saving storage and devices to make the kitchen operate more effectively. And the third is a combination of the first two. This shows how it can be *affordable* for almost anyone in the options they choose. And naturally, I’m hoping they’ll take the third option, but I *collaborate* with them to help them choose the range of storage options and devices which is best for them based on what they tend to do in their kitchen.”

“Very interesting,” said Zak. “Nick, what are your sensations?”

The Coffee & Company café

Sensation	Description
<i>Fresh</i>	Obviously in our food, but also in the clear colours we use in our décor and dress—there are no drab or grungy colours anywhere in Coffee & Company.
<i>Appealing</i>	Some of the food and drink we offer is enticingly different, such that customers will want to try something new—but it isn't too much to be off-putting.
<i>Lively</i>	We're an uplifting place to come to due to it being full of chatter and happy people. We're the café customers want to bring their friends too.
<i>Homely</i>	We offer home-cooked food in a family-friendly environment. It's your home away from home, with people you can trust in a place to talk and eat.

“It goes without saying that our ingredients are all *fresh*, but we want to have daily specials so that there are always *fresh* things on the menu. Food that is *freshly* made, that *appeals* to people to try something new. I'm thinking about what Amazon do online where they make recommendations for you based on what you've previously bought. We'll aim to offer similar items in our daily specials to things that have previously been popular.”

Nick sipped his coffee, grimaced, and then continued.

“People don't just come for refreshments; they also come to catch-up on news and gossip with friends, give their kids a treat after school, or meet over a light lunch. So we aim to be their home away from home. To make it feel *homely*, and because some people have untidy homes and don't like inviting people round, we want it to be their second home where they meet up with people and make new friends. We'll make the place *lively* in the colours we use and in the bright clothes we wear. Who wants to have someone making food for them wearing grungy coloured outfits? We can have things on the menu like healthy smoothies with exciting names for kids—so parents don't feel guilty about treating their children. My wife and daughter also came up with many more ideas around these sensations too. Even they're getting excited by this!”

“And that’s perfect,” replied Zak. “Because you need to be living and breathing these sensations all the time so they become automatic and second-nature to you. Well done to both of you, that’s great thinking.”

“Now a little exercise for you in adaptation,” said Zak. “Look around you inside this coffee shop. It’s part of a big chain and so they’ve probably got their own branded experiences, or the style in which they serve people to ensure it’s consistent whenever you go into one of their coffee shops. Look closely and see something in what they are doing that you can adapt and apply to your own situation.”

“This is just for Nick’s café, right?” asked Slater assuming to answer her own question.

“Actually, no. This may seem unusual, but it’s for both of your businesses,” replied Zak.

The answer surprised Slater, but she began to look around, just as Nick was doing. She startled herself by being the first to blurt out a comment.

“They actually collaborate on creating the coffee you want. If a hot, wet, skinny, grande cappuccino is what you want—then that’s what you get. I could actually create a list of all the potential options that I’ve ever provided in a kitchen, and potential customers could craft their own kitchen from these options,” she said excitedly.

Then Nick had an idea.

“I could allow people to create their own sandwiches from the various fillings we offer and if we thought it might be popular with other people, we could ask them to give it a name and we’d then offer it on the menu under the name they call it. We could even create a top five customers’ sandwiches list each week to appeal to our customers,” said Nick. He then continued...

“And I like the classical music they are playing. It’s quite homely and different to what you’d normally expect. I’m thinking we can have a classical hour twice a day.”

“Do you see the importance of having your own defined set of sensations? They act as guidelines to ensure you are differentiating your business from that of your competitors and they also help you to filter any new ideas you have. There are many things in here that you could have considered, but you were using your sensations to act as a filter. You only want to be doing things that help you to boost your sensations in some ways in the minds of your customers. Once you have your sensations defined, then whenever you go somewhere, or do something, they help you to be collecting new things to do that help build up your businesses’

own authenticity. Anyway, time for me to go,” said Zak, who immediately finished off his drink.

“I’ve got work to do. And so do you!”

Chapter 6 Wednesday morning

“Do you know what your customer lifecycle is?” asked Zak of both Nick and Slater. They shook their heads.

“Every customer has a lifecycle with you which covers the entirety of their interactions with your business. Their total lifetime dealings with your business produces what’s called a lifetime customer value for you. In effect it’s the entire amount they will ever spend with you, and as a business it’s your aim to make that as large as possible. Take someone who lives in our town here. That person may spend a sizeable sum of money getting a new kitchen from you Slater, but their direct spend with you will be limited to that one significant purchase. However, that same person may come into Coffee & Company several times a week for many years and they will eventually spend far more with you Nick, than they did with Slater. And there’s a second layer of value they offer you—and that’s how they talk to others about you—re-telling your story—and so bring you additional revenue that way too.”

“I never thought of it like that,” said Nick. “I always assumed that Slater would make more money from a customer than I would.”

“That’s true in some ways but not true in others. Nick, you have the opportunity to serve someone who is passing through our town for the first and last time in their lives. As a non-local person, their lifecycle with you will be for that single transaction—which is still valuable business of course. As well as having long-term, higher-value customers, you can also serve the low-value customers—which is something that Slater can’t do. For a café business like yours Nick, the location will help define your customer lifecycle. For example, here in our town, you may well have regulars for many years, however, if you were a beachfront café at a popular holiday resort, then all your trade may be casual, drop-in traffic. Or it may be that you try to make them regulars for the week or so that they are on holiday in that resort. Once you understand the nature of your customer lifecycle then you can start to design your service around this to maximise the value you get from customers.”

“Can you tell how much a customer is going to be worth to you in total?” asked Nick.

“That’s difficult, because you can’t know how much a customer will use you in advance. But what you can do is to shape your business, and the way you interact with customers and prospects, such that you maximise your chances of increasing their overall value with you—and you achieve this through identifying your customer lifecycle and all the

appropriate touchpoints that go with it. Let me show you a generic customer lifecycle first of all and then you can each modify it to suit your business.”

Zak wrote a list of words in his notebook:

AWARE
INTEREST
DECIDE
BUY
USE
SERVICE / SUPPORT
LEAVE

“Let me explain each of these. A customer has to be AWARE of you before they will ever consider buying from you. After all, how can you spend money with a business if you don’t even know they exist? Then, when they are aware of you, they need to have an INTEREST in what you do. For example, you may become aware of a new cosmetic surgery clinic opening in town, but if you have no desire for cosmetic surgery then this new clinic is of no interest to you whatsoever. Next, assuming the prospect does have an interest in what you offer, they have to DECIDE to use your company instead of one of your competitors, before they actually commit to BUY your product or service. Then they will USE your service either once or many times, and during this usage, they may have cause to complain about something, or require some kind of SERVICE assistance or SUPPORT. Finally, they will LEAVE you, either because they have no further need of the type of service you offer—or because they have found another provider. Either way your relationship with them has ended.”

“So do customers pass through this lifecycle in a linear way?” asked Nick.

“In the first part, yes, and let me explain with an example. Think of yourself buying a new car. If you’d never heard of the electric car maker Tesla, then you’d never consider buying one of them. However, when you do become aware of their brand you may be curious and want to learn more about them—now you’re interested. You may assess the pros and cons of buying an electric car and decide that it’s the car you want. You then proceed to buy one. This has been a linear journey up to now, but once you’ve bought the car you will use it every day. At regular intervals you’ll take it in for its routine service as you continue to drive

it. This part of the lifecycle may continue going round and round for many years. At some point you may have reason to complain about something or you need to get something repaired. Once this support issue has been attended to, you continue using the car for another period of time before you eventually decide to get rid of the car. Tesla will hope that you'll buy another car from them to remain within their customer lifecycle, or you may decide that you don't want another electric car and you decide to buy a non-electric car—which means your lifecycle with Tesla has come to an end. Does that help you understand the customer lifecycle model?"

They both nodded.

"Now I want you to create your own customer lifecycles. Think about it, then write it down and show me."

Nick and Slater spent a few minutes working individually in their notebooks before coming to their own final conclusions.

Slater went first. "Here are mine," and she turned her notebook to face them.

AWARE
INTEREST
DECIDE
BUY
DESIGN
INSTALL
USE

"Talk me through this," instructed Zak.

"The first four stages are the same as your standard model where they get to the point of placing an order on me. The next stage is where I design the kitchen for them and then I install it. Finally they use the kitchen and hopefully tell others about it."

"That's good," said Zak. "Now yours please Nick."

Nick swivelled his notebook around to reveal his lifecycle.

AWARE
INTEREST
VISIT
CONSUME
SHARE
COMPLAIN
RETURN

“The awareness and interest stages start off the same but then as there’s less investment in time and cost in coming to my café, I think that it will often be more of an impulsive visit rather than making a formal planned visit. While inside, they may eventually decide to have something to eat rather than just have a drink and then hopefully the next stage is for them to share their experiences with others. They may have cause to complain about something at some time, so we need to appreciate that and be prepared for how to handle it, but hopefully they will return repeatedly to us.”

“Again, a good understanding of the lifecycle model. Now we’re going to overlay your touchpoints onto your lifecycle.”

“What’s a touchpoint?” asked Slater.

“Touchpoints are any interaction you have with your customer either directly or indirectly. Examples can range from your website, flyers, newspaper adverts, to business cards, your invoice or receipts, your branded vehicle, the uniforms your staff wear, your signage, emails you send, the way you answer the phone, and obviously in the food, drink you provide Nick, and in the installations your customers receive from you Slater. As you can see, it’s every potential interaction point a customer can have with your business.”

“Okay, so what do we do with them?” asked Slater.

“You need to list every single one of your touchpoints and then allocate them to the particular lifecycle stage where they add the most value. Each touchpoint can only be used once—so sometimes you have to make a choice as to which lifecycle stage it falls under.”

They both started to make a list of their touchpoints.

“You’ll probably find that you inadvertently miss some the first time you try to list them all, so do this over several days and you’ll find that more reveal themselves to you over time. What you can do now is to take a few moments to think of a couple of unusual ones that are specific to your situation.”

Slater and Nick paused for a few moments before Nick broke the silence.

“My menus are a touchpoint and quite an important one too. Also, there’s my front window, as potential customers often look through the window if they’re unsure whether to come in or not.”

“Those are good examples of your specific touchpoints,” said Zak.

Slater then spoke. “When my fitter and I are installing the kitchen, it will obviously be a disturbance for the customer, so we want to do our best there and we should look professional—and stylish—while we are doing it. That will be a major touchpoint.” She paused. “In fact now that I think about it, the installation may consist of quite a number of separate touchpoints rather than just being one. Such as what we ask them to prepare and do before we can start work; how it appears to them when we first arrive; how we remove the old kitchen parts—and so much more.”

“Yes, a great comment. A big touchpoint can usually be broken down into several smaller components which then makes it easier for you to think about—and to identify ways to improve each of those component touchpoints ,” added Zak.

“Some touchpoints are more important than others in the way that they create value for your business. Some work in the immediate timeframes, such as your menus Nick, while others are important in a longer timeframe, such as the methods you use to turn browsers into buyers of your kitchen transformations Slater. When you’ve completed your customer lifecycle and overlaid all your touchpoints onto it, you’ll then be able to highlight the most important touchpoints. These will be the ones that trigger the most value for your business. You need to interrogate these touchpoints to ensure they are in the best shape and format they can possibly be for you. All touchpoints are important and should be improved wherever possible, but if you only have limited time and resources, then focus on the ones you identify as being of the most value to you.”

He continued.

“So can you see how it’s important to understand how to drive maximum value out of your customers? For you Slater it’s very much about the front end of attracting customers, while for you Nick, it’s likely to be in the moment when they taste your wares in your café. And never underestimate the value of advocacy where satisfied customers refer other people to your service. Make it easy for them to do this in some way.”

Zak checked his watch.

“I have to go now, but good work today on your lifecycles and touchpoints. I’ll see you here tomorrow at the same time.”

Chapter 7 Thursday morning

“I notice you’re both wearing lace-up shoes,” said Zak, pointing down at their feet. They both unconsciously glanced down, and then agreed with him.

“Do you remember tying your shoelaces this morning?”

“Not really,” said Nick.

“I think it was just as I was leaving,” said Slater. “Why?”

“Do you have any idea how difficult it is to teach a child to tie their shoelaces properly? Yet both of you did that task this morning without thinking about it. And do you drive a manual or an automatic car?” asked Zak.

“Manual,” they both replied.

“When you were learning to drive, do you recall how hard it was to master the skill of releasing the clutch gradually as you pressed the accelerator to get the car moving, without it leaping down the road like a kangaroo?”

They laughed at this knowingly.

“But if you go on a long drive somewhere today, you potentially change gear several hundred times without even thinking about it, don’t you?”

Again, they both agreed.

“In both these examples you learned the pattern of what you had to do so that it became part of your automatic behaviour. You no longer have to think about either of these things—and that’s how the mind works. It learns patterns of behaviour that it can run in the background to help give your brain the ability to focus on other things that occur. Things that you don’t yet have a pattern for—or which are different, so that the pattern you know has to be adapted in that moment.”

Zak sipped his coffee and continued.

“You’ve learned patterns for nearly every aspect of your life, and that’s what makes you so effective as a human being. You have patterns that range from tying your shoelaces to changing gear in your car. And most of the time that’s really useful—except for when you want to do something different. *Like when you need new ideas on a topic.* Then you want to think differently about it, otherwise you’d simply come up with the same ideas that you’ve had before. The obstacle is that you’ve probably already got a pattern for thinking differently in your mind—which is a problem in itself. You need to break out of your thinking pattern to

help you find something that is truly new and different. And that's where a thinking tool can help you."

"What's a thinking tool?" asked Slater.

"It's a mechanism that forces you to think differently by the very nature of the way it works. It directs your thinking to consider issues from specific directions that are intended *not* to be the directions that you'd normally consider. I've found several that are really useful to help me think differently, and I'll share them with you."

He opened his notebook and drew a simple diagram of a circle with a curly line on each side of the circle.



"Imagine a tennis ball with a spring attached to each side. I take the end of each spring in my hands and stretch them out. The tennis ball will now be held in mid-air by the springs, right?"

They nodded.

"Now assume that the tennis ball represents your business and that if the tennis ball moves to the left, things are worse for your business and if it moves to the right, then things are better for your business. Naturally, you want your business to be better, so you want to see the tennis ball move towards the right. So tell me what you'd have to do to make this happen."

"Well, you could make the spring on the right side stronger, and that would tend to pull the ball to the right," said Slater.

"Or you could make the left spring weaker, then that would also allow the ball to move towards the right," added Nick. "In fact you could do both at the same time and that would make the ball move a lot more to the right," he exclaimed.

"Absolutely right," said Zak, "the best way to achieve greater success is to do both."

"So what does this mean for our businesses?" asked Nick.

“Most people in business are smart enough to recognise the things they could start doing—or that they should be doing more of—that will benefit their business. But, unfortunately, few people consider what they should *stop doing*, or *do less of*, to help their business grow. Now you think about some of the things you do that could be holding your business back, and how you’d lessen the effect they have.”

They were both quiet while they thought, before Nick broke the silence.

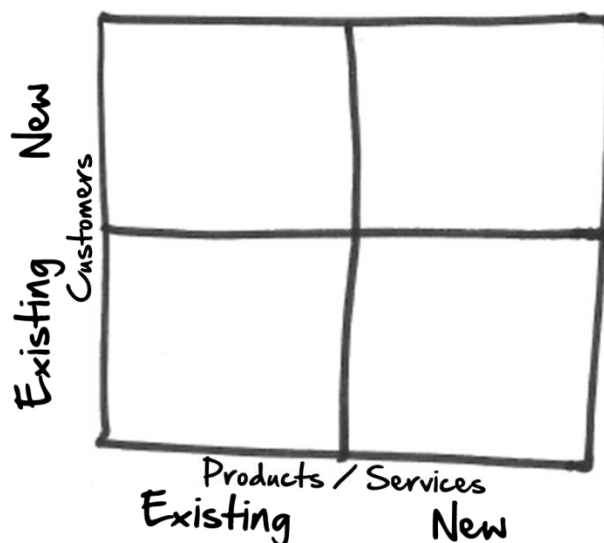
“I’ve never liked trying to cut our prices to appeal to people. When I see the amount of money people spend in upmarket restaurants in their desire for good food and drink, it tells me that I shouldn’t ever try to be the cheapest—as that’s not why we want people to come into our café. If anything, I should consider increasing my prices a little as that would help our business out a lot.”

“Good thinking,” encouraged Zak. “Anything else?”

“You know how the Government tries to minimise smoking? It’s the law that shops selling cigarettes have to keep them in closed cupboards where they can’t be seen. What if we did the same for fizzy drinks? We could store them hidden in our counter fridges and keep our own healthy drinks on display. This might appeal to parents trying to get their kids to consume less of the high-sugar drinks,” Nick added.

“Yet another great idea. And the more you consider each aspect of your business the more you will start to identify other things that you could stop, do less of, or do more of” said Zak. “Now let me show you another business thinking technique.”

He drew another diagram and labelled it.



“This two-by-two matrix helps you to focus on what products or services you can supply to different types of customer. You are obviously in the lower-left quadrant now, supplying your current products or services to your existing customers. But the question you need to ask—and answer—here is *how can you sell more of them to get a deeper share of your customers’ spending?* Then in the block directly above this, you need to consider how you can take your existing products and services to new customers. This is where you want your current proposition to appeal to wider markets or new segments.”

Zak tapped his pen on another quadrant and continued.

“In the lower-right quadrant, this is where you want to identify new products or services, or new ways to extend your offer, that will appeal to your existing customers. And finally there’s the top-right quadrant where you are offering new things to new customers. The aim with this technique is that you focus on each quadrant in turn to consider how you can increase the value your business derives from that quadrant.”

He paused then turned to Slater.

“You’ve previously told us how you’re going to re-align your business to cover the new transformational offer you’re developing, but how might you consider the quadrant of new products and services to old customers—both now and in the future?”

“That’s a tricky one,” replied Slater.

“And that’s why I’m asking this question of you. It’s important to face the hard questions in business, as these are the ones that other people have difficulty answering—so if you can answer them, then that will be a real advantage to your business.”

“Mmmm. Let me think.”

Both Nick and Zak noticed Slater straighten as an idea suddenly came to her.

“Looking at the new products and services to existing customers quadrant, I automatically assumed that when I’ve done work for a customer, then there’s no chance of me doing more work for them. But actually that’s not true. I’m thinking that I can send them a regular email newsletter showing some new and innovative space saving devices I’ve found over the past few months. Things that they may want to consider for their kitchen. They won’t be high-value items, but if they decide to order them through me, then I can get a commission. The big thing is that it keeps me in touch with them at minimal cost. They may also share the newsletter—and the fact that I was the one who transformed their kitchen for them—with their friends. That means I can get more business via old customers.”

“That’s great thinking. And if you were to consider the new products quadrants, what might you do there?” asked Zak.

Slater gave a laugh. “That’s suddenly such an easy thing to consider. People tend to have so much more stuff than their house is capable of holding, so I could consider smart storage solutions for garages, sheds, and outside areas. It’s a natural extension of what I do for them in the kitchen. Wow! Another idea just hit me. It could even include me doing a deal with a shed manufacturer to install some kind of custom-designed outdoor storage space too.”

“You see how powerful some of these tools are?” said Zak. “They’re intended to help you ask questions about your business that stimulate your thinking and to allow the ideas to flow. Often, it’s as if the ideas are in your head already—just waiting for a mechanism to help release them.”

“That one impressed me,” said Slater. “Are there any more of these tools?”

“I’ll show you two more. The next is called Never a Dilemma. A dilemma is when you seem to have a choice between two mutually-exclusive options. You believe that you can either take this route, or that route—and that’s all the choice you have.” Zak had used his hands to point in two opposite directions to demonstrate the polarity of what he was saying.

“Slater, can you think of a dilemma that you face right now?” asked Zak.

“Yes, that’s an easy one. I have a van that I use to deliver all the kitchen components when they are ready for installation. It’s a few years old and I’m not sure whether to buy a new one or not,” she stated.

“That’s a good example. Now rather than considering it as a dilemma, or a choice between buying and not buying, what are some alternatives?”

“I suppose I could consider leasing a vehicle or financing it some other way,” replied Slater.

“Or you could buy a used van instead of a new one,” suggested Nick.

“Maybe I should have my existing one given a good overhaul to make it good for a few more years into the future,” Slater added.

“But you don’t know what the future holds, and as your business grows you may need one bigger van or two smaller vans,” said Nick.

“Good point,” said Slater. “As I don’t know what I’ll need, maybe I should put off making a decision until I do know.”

“Saying you’ll deliberately delay making a decision may often be a good course of action if the decision isn’t crucial at that point in time,” added Zak.

“As your vehicle is getting older, maybe you could have it modified to look like a kitchen on wheels as a publicity stunt,” joked Nick.

“Well, there could be something in that idea,” said Slater. “I did see a vehicle for a company that made artificial grass that was covered all over in artificial turf—which was the product they made. It was a good way to show how robust their turf was I suppose. It really got their message home to me. Look, I’m actually telling you their story,” and she smiled broadly.

“So you see how we inadvertently turn many of our decisions into dilemmas by making them a choice between just two options. You’ll normally find there are many other options if you just think differently about it,” concluded Zak.

“There’s one last thinking mechanism that I want to show you called MARISA. This is an acronym for Magnify, Add, Rationalise, Integrate, Speed-up and Adapt. For each of these terms you don’t just use the single word itself—but all associated terms to that word. For example, if you were considering MAGNIFY, you could include ideas around increasing things, focusing on something, zooming in, making it bigger, wider, thicker or taller. You might also consider how to intensify it, boost it, amplify it or extend it in some way.”

Zak took another sip of his coffee.

“I’m going to give you two terms to think about to show you how effective this tool is. I want you both to think about Nick’s café. Slater, I want you to focus on how to MAGNIFY the food items, and Nick, you must think about how to RATIONALISE your food items. For each of your terms from the acronym, you should consider all possible interpretations of that term.”

“But aren’t MAGNIFY and RATIONALISE opposites? So while I’m looking at making something bigger, won’t Nick will be looking at making it smaller?” asked Slater.

“It might seem that way—but remember, you’re always trying to identify things that will be *beneficial* for your business in some way. Now, start thinking,” instructed Zak.

Zak observed that initially there was a silent stillness from Slater and Nick, but he knew patience would pay rewards. Suddenly, Nick started jotting things down in his notebook, followed closely by Slater a few moments later.

It always takes time for the mental cogs to engage he thought. He let them continue for a little while then asked for their feedback. Slater went first.

“If you want to offer something unusual to get people’s attention, what if you offered the healthiest cookie in the county for kids? Or what if you could get people to focus on the

‘five a day’ portions of fruit and veg by creating shakes or smoothies that deliver this to help ensure people consume more goodness? What if you could boost health in different ways by offering the same thing in the morning under one name, say, a daily kick-starter—and in the afternoon offer it under a different name as an energy booster? Especially if it can actually do both things. What if you could offer health drinks for kids that would be a better alternative to the sugar-filled fizzy drinks they have now?”

“That’s good thinking. And Nick, what ideas did you come up with?”

“I was thinking about reducing the number of menu choices I offer. Rather than offer seven different cakes each day, instead we’d offer the three or four that we recommend or are our home-baked speciality cakes. I’ve also seen an upmarket restaurant where they only have five main course dishes on offer. Each evening there’s a short menu explaining that the chicken is cooked this way, the fish is cooked that way, the pork is covered by this particular dish—and so on. The five meats of chicken, fish, pork, beef and lamb are offered each evening—but in only a single, but different way each night. I could consider doing this with our specials.”

“That’s interesting, because did you know that too much choice can sometimes be a major turn-off for customers that deters them buying from you? In a study, 30% of shoppers who sampled different jams in a supermarket made a purchase when there was a choice of only six jams. However, when that choice was increased to 24 different jams, only 3% of the shoppers made a purchase as the bigger choice had become too confusing. So you may have a good point Nick,” said Zak.

“You each focused one word on one specific area—and it was the same area too. And even though you thought they were opposites, they still produced a number of interesting ideas that you could action quite easily. The skill comes when you make a list of many specific areas of your business, and each day you spend a few minutes addressing one area with just one of the six MARISA terms. How many ideas do you think you’d come up with?”

“A huge number I’m sure,” said Slater.

“And that’s what we’ll discuss at our next meeting—what to do with all your ideas. See you here at the same time tomorrow.”

And with that, they all stood up to start their days work.

Chapter 8 Friday morning

“Tell me what you think of this new blend of coffee,” said Nick, placing two mugs on the table in front of Slater and Zak.

“Doing some market research are we?” asked Slater.

“Of course,” Nick replied, grinning widely.

Zak then spoke.

“We’ve seen how you can identify new ideas for your business—but what do you do with them once you have them? Well, the last thing you’d ever do is try to keep them in your head because you’re bound to forget some of them.”

“Probably all of them in my case,” said Nick, touching his temple with a finger and flicking it into the air.

“It’s important to write ideas down as soon as they come to you and it’s best to keep them all in one location—and not scattered around in different places. The ideal place to keep them is in an ideas hopper.”

They both looked quizzically at Zak, so he continued.

“An ideas hopper is your store of potential opportunities that you believe are worth considering. You’ll most likely have far more ideas than you will ever have time or resources to deliver—but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. You can keep moving these ideas around, building them up, or breaking them down into smaller components. You don’t have to do all of your ideas, as you’ll keep adding new ones that may replace older ones because they’re better in some way.”

Zac tasted his coffee and nodded approvingly towards Nick to indicate his satisfaction.

“Another thing to understand is that every idea has its time. Occasionally an idea that has been lurking in your hopper for a good while will suddenly appear to be the perfect thing to do at that moment. As you only have so many hours in a day, it’s fine to keep re-prioritising your ideas based on your time and resource availability—and immediate need. Your ideas hopper is your backlog of opportunities—or things you want to do to grow your business.”

“And when you’ve got time you just pick one and do it. Is that right?” asked Nick.

“You don’t pick one at random,” admonished Zak, gently. “You select the best one to do at that particular time—and you don’t just *do it*. It’s much better to have a structured

process that helps you deliver it quickly and with some validation along the way to give you greater confidence it's a good thing to be doing. This structured process is called a *sprint* and it helps you to do one of two things. Either you deliver it speedily, in order to get the value from it sooner—or you learn quickly that there's a major issue with it that isn't going to pan out for you. Then you stop progressing it to prevent you wasting any more time and effort on it. Does that make sense?"

"Is this what they call *failing fast*? Where if something is going to fail, you need to know this as early as possible?" asked Slater.

"Exactly. Let me explain how a sprint works." Zak opened his notebook and drew eight small boxes in a horizontal line.



"This is a sprint track to rapidly advance your growth idea through to completion. Each sprint has eight components represented by these boxes to ensure you have the greatest chance for that particular sprint to be successful in its delivery and outcome."

He tapped the first box with his pen. "This box is the *What and When*. Give your sprint a name to identify it and decide when you want to have it completed by. And that's the first stage done."

"That's all there is to that stage?" asked Slater, surprised at the simplicity.

"Yes," responded Zak. "All these stages are simple—but so important for success. If you don't put a completion date down then it may get pushed out by other items and end up as something you started but never completed. Has that ever happened to either of you in the past?"

They laughed guiltily, both well aware that this was true.

Zak moved his pen along to the second box on his diagram.

"The next stage is to ask yourself the question *Why will the customer want this?* It's important to make sure that your customers will definitely want this idea you are doing—and that it's not just something you *think* the customer wants. Your growth needs to be based on facts—not fantasy. Write down your view of why the customer would want this thing. Sometimes it may be obvious to you from your business perspective, but put yourself in the

mind of the customer. *Would they really want this from you? And What would their reasons for wanting it be?*”

Zac moved his pen again to the next box in line.

“This stage is where you get proof of need, and there’s no better way of doing this than hearing some actual customer quotes as validation. This is called the *Voice of the Customer*. It’s an extremely powerful tool in determining what you should do to grow your business—for it’s the customer telling you what they like, and don’t like, about your proposition. Doing this research may feel a bit uncomfortable to you, as it’s hard to hear a customer saying they wouldn’t want to buy something that you want to see happen. But it’s much better to hear these words at this stage rather than go to a lot of effort creating a new product and then finding out nobody wants to buy it. The questions you ask shouldn’t all be closed questions that require a simple yes or no answer. They should encourage the customer to talk. Ask questions like *What appeals—or doesn’t appeal—to you about this idea? What would make it better for you? Would you buy this from us—and why, or why not?* These are the sort of questions that provide gold dust in the answers you get back that enable you to change what you propose to do to suit what customers are saying about it.”

“We spoke about doing research previously too,” said Nick. “I never realised the value and importance of it.”

“It’s vitally important,” replied Zak. “Getting this kind of feedback from customers or potential customers is the best thing you can possibly do in many ways. Because the entire future success of your business depends on their willingness to put their hands in their pockets and pull out money to buy your product or service. This might sound a bit mercenary, but it’s a fact of life—or should I say a fact of business.”

“So what’s the next stage?” asked Nick, keenly.

“It’s to define what success will look like,” answered Zak. “You need to identify some kind of measure so you’ll know that this sprint has been a success. It could be a hard business metric such as the number of units sold—or it could be something softer such as what customers will be saying in social media about your service. How you measure the success is entirely your choice—but when you come to review the sprint, you need to know for sure whether it’s a winner or a loser.”

His pen tapped the next box in the sequence.

“Your next action is to work out how you can quickly test this idea. For example, with you Slater, if you wanted to produce a fancy, glossy brochure showing your kitchen

transformations, then rather than getting it professionally designed and printed, why not first mock something up and show it to people you can trust to give you honest feedback. Of course you'd explain it's a prototype, but if they came back and said there's too much text and not enough images, then that would be the case even if it was professionally laid out and printed on quality paper. In the start-up world they call this the Minimal Viable Product or MVP. It's the most basic form of something that enables you to put it in front of your target customers to gauge their reaction to it. So you need to think how you can get a low-fidelity sample in front of customers that you can test to get their feedback. And how quickly you can do this—which leads onto the next stage which is *Which customers should you test it on?* You need to decide which of your customers you want to use to test and validate the demand for this. Consider the best way to set this up—and then make it happen. For you Nick, you may want to invite some of your regular customers back for a tasting session where you provide them a number of different dishes and ask them questions about which appeal to them and which don't—and of course, why. This is a good way for you to get an idea of what the demand for a particular product might be.”

“And that wouldn't be difficult or expensive for me to do considering how much I'd learn from what they said afterwards,” commented Nick, making a note in his notebook to try this approach.

“We then come to the penultimate stage which is *What key problems need resolving?* As nothing ever goes superbly-well the first time, you need to identify what the biggest issues are that you will face in bringing this sprint into reality—and make a plan for how you'll overcome them. This leads into the final stage where you *identify the activities you need for final delivery*. Here's where you list and detail all the tasks required to make this sprint a reality in your business. Once these items are in progress or completed, then you can go back to your hopper to consider what idea will form the next sprint that you'll undertake.”

“And is that it?” asked Slater.

“Yes. Eight stages—all quite small—but each with a specific purpose. And at each stage, if something negative arises that you can't overcome, then you drop that idea and move onto finding another idea to execute. You see how this helps you to stop an idea that isn't going to succeed early, before you've spent too much time and effort on it?”

“Definitely,” replied Nick, turning to Slater who also nodded in agreement.

“Time for me to go now. And our next session on Monday will be our final one,” said Zak. “See you here at the same time—and have a productive weekend.”

Chapter 9 Monday morning

“As this is our last session together, I want to explain some of the key learnings I’ve gathered over time,” said Zak. He wrote five words in his notebook and turned it so they both could read it. It said:

Commit to making a change

“In your business there are some things that need complete commitment for success, and change is one of them. You need to decide that you want to grow your business and accept that certain things will have to change—or you can decide that you’re happy with your lot in life right now and that nothing needs to change. The degree to which *you* change, and what *you* decide to change, are entirely up to you. But the nature of change means doing different things—and spending some of your time and resources on identifying and making those changes—exactly as we’ve discussed over the last two weeks. Commit to changing or commit to not changing—but don’t get caught in the middle or you’ll be doomed to failure.”

They both murmured positively as Zak wrote the second item down:

Happiness and success

“Which comes first in business, happiness or success?” asked Zak.

“Success,” they both chimed.

“I’m sure that if you’re wildly successful you will be very happy. However, for most people—and this includes the small business owner like you two, it’s happiness that breeds success.”

Zak paused to let this sink in.

“I read a lot. It helps me to learn things I could do in the future—but also to understand the things I’ve done in the past. Remember I told you that I used to sing while I was cleaning windows?”

They both nodded.

“I was really happy when I was cleaning windows, and when you’re happy you don’t have to consider what you are doing as work, you can consider it as a pleasure—or even a privilege. For then you start to think of problems not as something negative that are blocking

you, but as opportunities that have to be managed in some way. And when you manage your way around them, you feel even better for succeeding.”

“Is this about having a positive mindset to what you do?” asked Slater.

“That’s one component of course, but it’s also about recognising that you’re not in a job where you effectively have to do what someone else dictates. You own and run your business, so you are in control of your own destiny to a much greater degree than someone in a job. I read *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor some years ago and he showed that in 200 studies on 275,000 people worldwide, happiness leads to success in nearly every domain, including work, health, friendship, sociability, creativity, and energy. When we’re happy, then that’s when our mindset and mood are positive, and then we are smarter, more motivated, and so more successful. Achor summed it up beautifully when he gave the model that happiness is the centre of what you do and that success revolves around it.”

“That does make sense,” added Nick, thoughtfully.

“So be happy in what you are doing and success will likely follow that happiness,” concluded Zak. He then wrote down his third point:

Everyone has value for you if you connect with them

“We’ve spoken several times about doing formal research to find out things about your customers, but you’ll find most people have at least one gem of knowledge or a life-learning that will be of benefit to you. I told you how Jake—my taxi driver partner—used to ask his passengers about the best bit of advice they could offer him. I’ve learned so much from Jake and from other people—just as I’m learning so much from helping you now.”

“You’ve learned from us?” asked Nick incredulously.

“Of course I’ve learned things off you. And this is one of the key reasons I spend part of my time working with small business owners like you and Slater—to help you, but also to help me learn. I try to do this at least once a quarter.”

“But what have you learned from us?” asked Slater.

“Look, I’m not in the café owning or kitchen design businesses—and I don’t plan to be either. But learning how your business works, how you overcome issues, and the interesting ideas that you’ve come up with, all helps me to think differently about my own business and how I can apply the way you address your issues and opportunities to my own business. As I mentioned, I’m doing my monthly review of my own Blueprint—today

actually—and I want some fresh thinking and different ideas that I can apply. We’ve shared ideas and just as you’ve learned from me, I’ve learned from you. In fact, I’d be a fool not to have learned anything from you. So thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

Nick and Slater were taken aback that Zak had thanked them. They’d previously discussed how they could ever repay him for what he’d done for them—and here he’d turned the tables by thanking them.

Zak then wrote his fourth item down:

Take an Agile approach

“When I spoke to you about the sprint tracks for delivering your ideas, that’s based on something called Agile working, which started off being used to write and test computer code several years ago. Rather than spending months or years writing a huge computer programme and then testing it as one big item, with Agile it’s about breaking things down into do-able chunks and building and testing them in rapid two-week cycles. Every two-weeks you build part of the code that can be tested to ensure it does what is required. You learn quicker and if it fails, you fail fast and rectify it rather than taking a long time to understand it was wrong. And there’s many other industries doing this now for they see Agile as the best way to test and learn about doing something new. I mentioned to you that I do a monthly business review, and for me, my sprints are in periods of one month. That’s why I was insistent on us moving quickly in what we’ve just done. Think how far you’ve both come in just two weeks.”

“Nick and I had a drink together over the weekend and we were saying the same thing—it’s been the most productive two weeks we’ve both ever had for our businesses.”

“And that’s the benefit of Agile working. Good that you’ve appreciated it—and there’s something else that you’re both very good at too.”

He wrote down his next point:

Use pen and paper to capture all your ideas

“I notice that both of you carry notebooks to capture your thoughts, and that’s good. Never try to remember your ideas as you’ll forget too many, especially as a single idea—even

a small one—has the potential to deliver thousands in extra revenue for you. So it's worthwhile investing a tiny amount in a decent notebook, which is a far superior method than trying to use your mobile phone as an idea collection device. With pen and paper you can sketch things, add comments, or link ideas with arrows to make them more valuable, which are all things you can't do on a mobile phone. I actually have some small sticky-notes in the back of my notebook for my ideas. This way, I can move them around, cluster them—and then transfer them easily onto my business Blueprint.”

“You've spoken of this Blueprint thing before, what exactly is it?” asked Slater.

“I'll tell you shortly,” replied Zak, but here's my last learning point:

Apply creative thinking in your business

“The most critical thing for success is the way you think about your business. Thinking is free, easy, quick and highly valuable when done properly. Whatever business you're in, you need to recognise that for change to happen, you need to break out of your existing thinking patterns which are pinning you down in your current place. You need to change your attitude to thinking in order to change your business. If you are committed to growing your business, you need to be committed to growing your thinking too.”

“You've shown us some techniques that work really well, but are there any others?” asked Nick.

“Plenty,” replied Zak. “I'll send you an email with some useful links in when I get back to my office. But before we finish, do you have any questions?”

“I've got one,” said Nick.

“Me too,” added Slater.

“Go on, Nick,” indicated Zak.

“If you had to summarise your success—and as such your advice to us as small businesses wanting to grow, what would it be in just a few words?”

“Mmmm. A few words,” muttered Zak thoughtfully. He paused, and then wrote just two words on his notebook.

MOMENTUM ACCUMULATE

He paused to reflect on these words and then continued.

“*Momentum* is when something builds up speed and mass so that it’s hard to stop. This requires consistency in what you do—and the need to ensure that all things work towards having a collective direction. If you keep stopping and starting, going backwards and forwards, or moving in different directions, then you can’t build up momentum. You need to create some initial momentum in your chosen direction such that everything you do builds up your momentum incrementally. That’s why clearly defining your experience sensations is good practice so that you are consistently building on these—and that that’s what you get known for by your customers. When your story gets re-told, then that’s also building momentum for you. Momentum is good because as long as you’ve chosen a direction that’s good for your business, if you have to ease off for a period of time, your momentum will keep you going. Without momentum, when you ease off, you simply stop.”

“Okay, and what about *accumulate*?” asked Slater, making notes of what Zak was saying.

“To accumulate is to constantly get more of something—and often just little bits at a time. It’s like a ratchet mechanism where you can incrementally inch forward, but the ratchet stops you from slipping backwards. An example might be a new customer for Nick who may only come in every two weeks for a coffee and some cake with a friend. But if they like the coffee, cake and environment, they might make it a regular occurrence for a long time. They may also tell their friends, who then come into Coffee & Company and who then also do the same thing. It’s like getting a customer who doesn’t spend much with you but spends regularly over a long time with you. Their value accumulates for you. So always look to find ways to get incremental accumulation in your business. Remember, you are likely in this for the long-haul, so an accumulated customer is going to be worth a lot of money directly—and also indirectly through referrals—to you in that longer-term period.”

“Just two words. A concise answer, thanks” said Nick.

“And your question Slater?”

“You talk about your Blueprint and how it helps you grow your business. How does it do that?” asked Slater.

“It’s often hard to get an overview of all the different aspects of your business at one time. I’ve tried different ways, but a Blueprint is the big picture view of my business. It’s wall mounted so that I can see what things I want to change when I do my review. It’s the place that I add all my ideas to. If I think of something new that will help grow my business, I simply write it on a sticky note and add it to the relevant part of the Blueprint. The various

aspects I've explained to you are all included on my Blueprint. My business sensations, lifecycle, touchpoints, the thinking tools, an idea hopper and also three sprint tracks to guide my execution of the ideas. They're all in one place so that when I do my monthly reviews, I can re-prioritise things to ensure that the sprints I do over the coming month are helping me to build momentum and to accumulate business. Does that help?"

"Sure. Can I get one of these somewhere?"

"Of course," said Zak, "I'll include that information in the email I'm going to send you. Anything else I can help you with?"

Slater and Nick shook their heads.

Zak finished his coffee and rose from his chair.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, today's my business review day. And I'll be adding a few more ideas onto my Blueprint based on our discussions over the last two weeks—so thanks for your time. And let's make sure we keep in touch as I'm interested to see your future successes."

Nick stood and shook Zak's hand warmly. Slater then gave Zak a big hug and held it for slightly longer than Nick thought appropriate. But when she pulled away, he could see why. Slater's eyes glistened, and a tear rolled down her left cheek.

"Thanks for all you've done for me over the past two weeks. It means so much and I'm actually sad this is the end," she said.

"But it's not the end," said Zak. "It's the start of a whole new future for you, Slater. For you too, Nick. And especially for both your businesses."

And with that Zak stood, headed for the door, then paused.

"Just promise me that you'll commit to doing it," he said

"I will," they replied in unison.

And with that he strode out the door.

He had a business to grow...

Chapter 10 An hour and a year later

Shortly after Zak had left them alone with their thoughts and eager anticipation, they both received an email:

Dear Slater and Nick

Our meetings have been a pleasure for me, and also very enlightening. So thanks for your help, and here's the information I said I'd send you:

A copy of the Blueprint can be obtained here: <http://sprintforgrowth.com/blueprint/>

There's also a newsletter called Consider this... which is worthwhile reading.

If you want more ways to identify new business ideas read The Idea Generator book published by Pearson. It's available from Amazon [here](#).

For more information on developing your customer experiences, look at [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#). And for a great selection of free business books go [here](#).

Best regards

Zak

Twelve months later...

Zak had kept in contact with Nick and Slater and they'd even met up a few times. They'd both been sending him news of their growth and the new ideas they were working on, and he'd been following their successes closely. He had to admit that even he was impressed with what they'd each achieved.

Slater had gone back to all her earlier customers to ask them for testimonials shaped around her new business focus—and had received numerous responses. She'd used these successfully in her new brochure and website to attract new customers. Her overall value per order had reduced by about two-thirds with her re-focus on kitchen transformations rather than complete installations, but instead of only completing four projects in three-months (as she'd typically done before), in this quarter she'd completed 28 projects. And due to the high

visual and functional change for a relatively modest cost, when the customer's friends visited their new kitchen—and of course the owner was always pleased to show it off—each project delivered approximately three new enquiries with over half of these becoming projects themselves. She'd effectively had to stop all marketing efforts as her customers were doing the word-of-mouth marketing and selling for her.

She now had four semi-retired tradesmen working for her. These older people really enjoyed the opportunity to carry on in their trade on a part-time basis and earn some extra income. They were also very experienced and good with the home-owners—which was precisely what Slater needed.

She'd started advertising in one of the free home-delivered magazines in the county, showing before-and-after photos with the cost of the make-over transformation. The magazine then asked her to contribute a short article every month on the latest space-saving kitchen devices she'd seen. She got more exposure for her business and in return they give her free advertising. Zak thought this was a particularly smart move by her.

Slater does the quoting, the design work and orders all the different space-saving items needed. This helps her keep abreast of all the new products on the market. She then does the final sign-off with the client. At this point she takes along one of Nick's home-made cakes as a welcoming gift for the owner for their new kitchen. She said that the owner invariably offers her a slice of the cake and a drink, and she uses that time to ensure the customer is perfectly happy with their transformed kitchen. She'd told Zak that these thirty-minutes she got to spend with the customer was the most valuable for her, as that's when she can suggest that if the customer is happy, they share her details with their friends. The cake time helps her to make a connection with the customer at a personal level.

Slater had also told Zak about a difficult customer she'd had, who subsequently became one of her most insightful successes. This customer wanted her kitchen to make her feel warm in winter and cool in summer, and she couldn't make up her mind on a colour scheme. Slater was about to give up and walk away when she'd had an unusual idea about what she could do. Among the other work she'd done on this project, she'd replaced all the cupboard doors and work surfaces with a neutral, slate-grey colour and then added sets of readily changeable colour-matched accessories, including tea-towels, tray cloths, floor rugs and a wall print. The colour theme for these items was warming reds and oranges for autumn and winter, which could be easily swapped-out for the same accessories in sharp blues and greens for a freshening look for the spring and summer seasons. For a modest additional cost,

it enabled the owner to perform their own seasonal transformation to radically change the appearance of their kitchen in just a few minutes.

Slater had submitted three photos of this transformation into a major interior design magazines' make-over of the year competition. The before picture, the after picture with the warming colours, and also the after picture with the cooling colours. For this, she'd made the short-list and was waiting to see if she'd be a category winner at the grand evening event in a few weeks' time.

This had put an interesting, new idea into Zak's mind that customers who are demanding in some way aren't actually problems—*they are assets*. Because if you can develop something new that satisfies *their* needs, it potentially gives you something that you can offer to other customers too. He realised that it was these demanding customers who forced you to develop your business offer, and that rather than walk-away from them as many business owners would want to do, by understanding their needs and thinking creatively about how to achieve this for them, it actually extends your business boundaries. This made Zak think that he ought to try to find more difficult customers in the future. He wrote this idea on a sticky-note, stood up, and placed it in the idea hopper of his Blueprint which was on the wall in front of him.

In Coffee & Company, Nick's home-made cooking and cakes had been a great success. He'd shied away from offering the overly-rich items and went for the healthily fulfilling items. His speciality coffees were also one of his major drawcards too. Zak had popped in one day and was surprised at how busy it was. Nick had told him how people were trying his meals at lunchtimes and bringing their children there for an early evening meal. He'd explained how some customers had asked if he did takeaways of his specials. He'd asked them if they'd buy it if he did—and they'd responded very positively. Zak was pleased to see that Nick was still doing some guerrilla customer research. Nick had experimented with offering chilled portions of his main dishes and was surprised how popular they were with people taking them away to re-heat that night. His daughter wanted to start to offer this as a regular service, even if people just wanted to buy the food as takeaway for the family evening meal.

His home-made cakes were very popular, and again someone asked if they could have three different slices to take-away as their family dessert for that evening. This had given Nick an idea as he was sure no-one would want to buy a full cake of one type—*but would*

they buy four different quarter-cakes? He'd created packs with four different quarters in and was surprised at how popular they were. He suspected that people were passing them off as their own home-baked items—but that didn't bother him. His daughter had another idea around doing this over the internet and selling his four quarter-cakes online.

Nick had told Zak that his café was now almost as busy as it could be, for it was nicely full most of the time. He recognised that to grow even more, it would be by doing things he'd never imagined—like offering chilled meals for home re-heating, and selling cakes over the internet.

Zak smiled. It seemed like both Nick's and Slater's businesses were taking off very nicely. However he had to curtail these thoughts as he was late to meet another two companies he was dealing with. *And learning from...*

A personal message from Chris Thomason

Hi, I'm the author of *The Blueprint* and I hope you enjoyed reading it, and of course that you'll find it useful in your business life. I've consulted to many large organisations over the years and have developed tools to help them achieve the growth they required. However, smaller businesses don't normally get access to techniques like these, and as businesses like yours form the backbone of any country's economy, you also deserve to use the principles and models of the bigger companies. And this is why I wrote *The Blueprint* for you.

Writing any book takes a huge amount of time and effort, so if you enjoyed it and found it useful, can I please ask two small favours of you?

1. To leave a short review of the book [here](#).
2. Also tell others about *The Blueprint*, for if you got benefit from it, then so can they. You might even form a working group and be like Nick and Slater. *Zak may not be available for you, but this book can take his place!*

Best wishes for your future success!

Chris