

6 lessons from a 'shark tank' winner essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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I recently had the privilege of appearing on, and winning, ABC's " Shark Tank," an honor that was a decade in the making and stemming from a common parenting challenge. In 2002, I was potty training my son, then 2, and noticed that without the added bulk of a diaper, his pants were loose and required a belt.

He wanted to be independent after mastering potty training, but belts with buckles just didn't work with his small hands. I struggled to find a solution. He simply needed something that could be quickly undone at a moment's notice as he raced to the bathroom and there really weren't any belts on the market geared towards young children. I mentioned my frustrations to my sister, Danielle, and she said, " We should do something about this!" Out of this frustration (and my living room), was born - an easy to use line of belts with a patented one-handed belt closure, designed for children (ages 2 - 12) who are potty training, in preschool, wear school uniforms, or just like a cute accessory. The belts also have use for teens and adults with hand-dexterity difficulties stemming from physical or cognitive challenges. Related:

Launching in 2004, we grew steadily for the first five years but hit a plateau following the 2008 recession.

Flash forward to 2014. I was running a profitable business, had employees and was growing brand awareness. But I also knew that Myself Belts could be more, and decided to apply for *Shark Tank* as a means to gain exposure for Myself Belts, and hopefully gain a strategic partner who could help take the

brand to another level. Yes, the “ Sharks” would be tough but I hoped that my innovative product and its potential in the marketplace would peak their interest. In hindsight, more than anything, the experience on *Shark Tank* was an amazing learning experience. Here are the six lessons I learned from the process and overall experience:

1.

BHAG's can happen.

At an Entrepreneurs' Organization Accelerator Meeting last year, our assignment was to consider a Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG), an exercise aimed at helping you to “ think bigger” about your business, although it never seemed practical to me. My BHAG was *Shark Tank* . I never thought that a seemingly lighthearted pipe dream would lead to something real.

I now know that dreaming big can be purposeful, but you won't know the outcome unless you throw your hat in the ring.

2. Asking for help is a sign of strength.

I am not shy in asking for help. I know what I don't know and don't pretend otherwise. This has served me well both as a student when I was younger and as an adult in my professional life.

I have always believed that asking questions from experts and seeking out help is a sign of strength, not weakness. It is how I learned about best practices when manufacturing overseas. It is how I formed productive relationships with other business owners. And it is what led me to realize that I needed a partner to help take Myself Belts to another level. I believe

the *Shark Tank* producers could understand my business goal and openness in my pitch video. That is what propelled me through the audition process.

3. Entrepreneurial training comes in handy.

Being an entrepreneur is a grind. You breathe your business every minute of the day, always trying to determine the correct next step to propel your business forward. When I was selected for *Shark Tank*, I truly couldn't believe it that of 40,000 applicants they picked me.

Crazy. Show preparation is intense. My belief in my product and my hopes for a positive outcome kept me moving forward. My decade as an entrepreneur prepared me, as I knew how to push through, stay optimistic, take one step at a time, trust my instincts and see the finish line. As a business owner, the finish line is always moving but it is the little victories that keep you going.

Shark Tank reminded me to keep sight of the bigger goal.

4. Shark Tank is a reality television show.

Many go on *Shark Tank* for 15 minutes of fame, for brand exposure or for reality TV fun. I went on the show for sincere business reasons, to help Myself Belts reach its potential.

As I prepared with producers and practiced with co-workers, I was focused and pragmatic. It wasn't until I was standing on the set being attacked by viscous Sharks that I remembered I had agreed to go on a reality television show and that there would "entertainment" at my expense. It was a tough realization, as I defended myself and my business, stated the business case

for Myself Belts and tried to gain a partner. I wasn't fully prepared for how emotional this vulnerability would be, but luckily it was worth it. The happy ending was an amazing partnership with Daymond John.

5. Patience is a virtue.

Myself Belts launched 10 years ago after I created a business from a simple idea inspired by motherhood. I have learned a new industry and enjoyed finding my way in the world of retail. But after 10 years, in the back of my mind, I have occasionally questioned the end game. Could I take the business to another level? What was the best direction to move forward in a tough economy? I was steadfast and tried to be patient while trying different angles to increase brand awareness.

Now, after our appearance on *Shark Tank*, there is a new energy to Myself Belts. We are "fresh" again and have been introduced to so many new customers. Sales are at a happy new "normal." Our partnership with Daymond John is opening doors and creating new sales.

Patience has paid off.

6. I am a St. Louisan.

When I introduced myself on *Shark Tank*, I said, "I am from St. Louis.

" This was a strange sentence for me to say as I am from Providence, Rhode Island, and I consider myself an East Coast girl. Being on *Shark Tank* changed that for me. My entrepreneurial journey began in St. Louis. Myself Belts was born in the city.

I found mentors and entrepreneurial organizations for support in St. Louis. The response from my home, the St. Louis community, before and after my *Shark Tank* airing, has been so overwhelming.

St. Louis has been a great place to start and grow a business and I am grateful to the community. It is officially home.