

A COUPLE OF ENTREPRENEURS



SURVIVAL GUIDE

Stories, tips and advice from couples who started a business together and...survived.

By podcast co-hosts
Micki Pagano-Parente and Tony Parente

PREFACE



Micki & Tony's Story

Owners of Branding Shorts,
Podcast Co-hosts

Yes. We survived. No, not a natural disaster. But starting a business together as a husband and wife. And, yes, we are still married.

In 2008 we started our production company, Branding Shorts, and we're still going strong, growing with clients around the country. We know first hand the challenges of running a business with your significant other - and the rewards.

And, as we grew our business we were surprised to encounter so many couples in the same boat - starting and running a business together. That sparked the idea for our podcast, [A COUPLE OF ENTREPRENEURS](#), which is available on all podcast platforms.

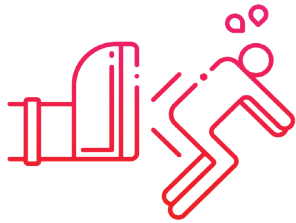
We learned a lot from interviewing couples during these past three seasons. So we decided to capture and share some of the nuggets we collected in our new Survival Guide. It's packed with stories, valuable tips and key takeaways, helpful secrets to their success in business and in life together.

So, if you're considering starting a business - or if you're already on this journey - this guide will provide helpful "survival tips" and share insights anyone embarking on an entrepreneurial adventure can use. Enjoy, feel free to share, subscribe to our podcast and stay tuned for the full book. Coming soon!



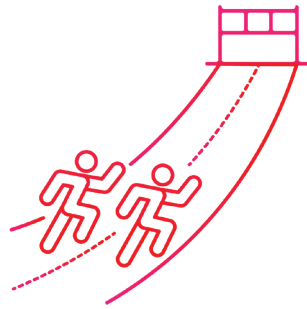
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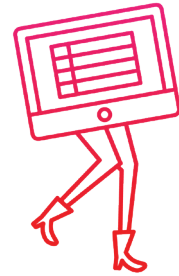
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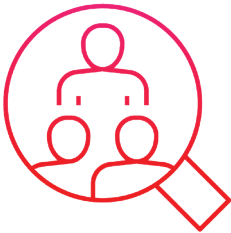
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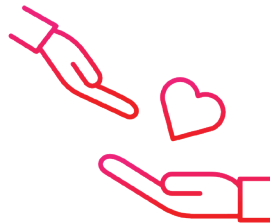
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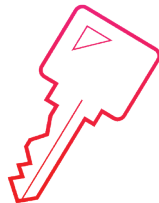
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THE PUSH

“If not now, then when?”

Are you thinking about doing your own thing? Becoming an entrepreneur? Fulfilling a that desire or a lifelong dream? How do you know when it’s time? Maybe you’re comfortable. Maybe it’s too risky. Maybe you need...a push.





Vito & Amanda's Story

Owners of BLAST 7D

"I WAS LOOKING DOWN THE BARREL OF MORTGAGE, CHILDREN, SCHOOL AND ALL THOSE OTHER THINGS."

Meet Vito and Amanda Zarrillo. After a lifetime in the Ad business, Vito was laid off at the age of 47. "It's a very traumatic experience, especially when you put your blood, sweat and tears into it all." Father of three children, he was looking down barrel of mortgage, with children and saving for college. What was he going to do now?

"What do you want to do with the second half of your life?" His wife, Amanda, wanted to know.

"Give me two weeks," he said, and gave it a lot of thought.

They were a family of great faith. There was a lot of prayer. Introspection. Self-evaluation. "I know what I want to do," he said. "I want to bring fun to people's lives." Vito always dreamed about being in the amusement business, and told her what he wanted to create a new kind of ride experience.

Amanda's response? "Well, alright, dummy. How are you going to do that?"

"If you know Amanda, you know that she kind of speaks to me like this. And it was lovingly."

And that was the trigger. Now in his 50s, Vito was about to make a major career change. They researched and came across technology that sparked an idea. With his background in advertising and branding, he put his experience to work.

"I went into a room and about an hour and a half later, I came out and I had the foundational elements to what Blast7D actually is. The name, the logo, the look, the feel, the premise around it. And we went from there."

With Amanda's business experience and Vito's creative expertise, they launched BLAST 7D, a first of its kind fully immersive experience. Now at American Dream.



[Listen to the full episode](#)





Paul & Lynn's Story

Owners of Paul's Custom Pet Food

"WE DROVE HOME FROM BOSTON IN TEARS. IT'S A THREE YEAR OLD DOG. WHAT DO YOU DO?"

In 2010 Lynn and Paul's beloved pup, Hunter, was diagnosed with cancer on his jaw.

"We wound up taking our dog to Angel Animal Hospital in Boston. They gave him six months to live, if we didn't do the surgery, then the chemotherapy and everything to follow up afterwards." Lynn said, recalling the heart wrenching moment that ultimately changed their lives.

They drove home from Boston in tears. They knew another vet in New Hampshire who practiced food-based Eastern medicine and paid her a visit.

Her first question was, "Are you willing to cook for him?"

"Of course, we'll cook for him," Lynn said.

They left with a recipe, Chinese herbs and medications.

"It's all about the food. It's these medications, exercise, and love," The vet said and sent them off.

"In 2010, I was a smoker and a drinker," Paul said. "I gave up both and figured, well, if I can spend \$20 a day to kill myself on cigarettes and alcohol, I can put \$20 a day into my dog and see if this works."

It worked. Hunter ultimately lived until the age of 13.

"One day we just said, hey, let's start this little business."

Inspired by the amazing transformation, the couple moved to Connecticut and started "Paul's Custom Pet Food" to help dogs - and all pets - live long and healthy lives.

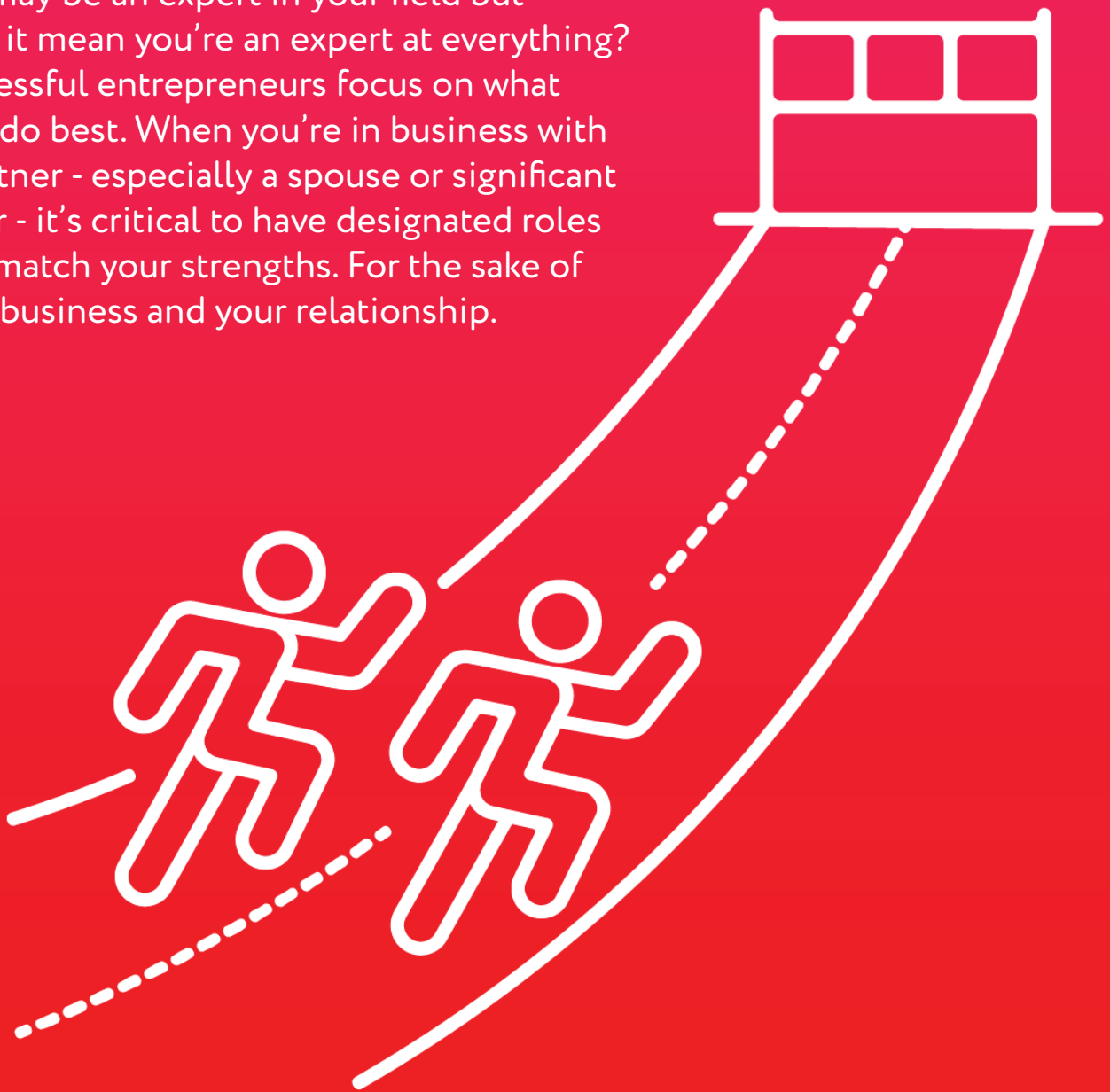


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STAY IN YOUR LANE

You may be an expert in your field but does it mean you're an expert at everything? Successful entrepreneurs focus on what they do best. When you're in business with a partner - especially a spouse or significant other - it's critical to have designated roles that match your strengths. For the sake of your business and your relationship.





Red & Jeff's Story

Owners of HBB Group

“ONCE WE HAD ACTUAL CLEARLY DEFINED ROLES...WE DIDN'T WANT TO KILL EACH OTHER.”

Red and Jeff Bonk, who run Homes By Bonk (HBB), a real estate agency in the NYC area, are married with two kids and a dog. Running a business together presented some challenges. They had a lot of pow-wows and hit some bumps.

“We tried to go on appointments together, we'd talk over each other, cut each other off, we'd be contradicting each other and it's not a good look,” Red says. “So we were like, wait a minute we're doing something wrong. So through coaching, we learned how to stay in our lane. ‘All right...what do you do well and what do you hate?’”

The couple found working with a coach helped them discover their unique strengths and succeed as an entrepreneurial team.

According to Jeff: “If you don't figure out that formula, you can either be duplicating efforts or even worse diminishing your efforts.”

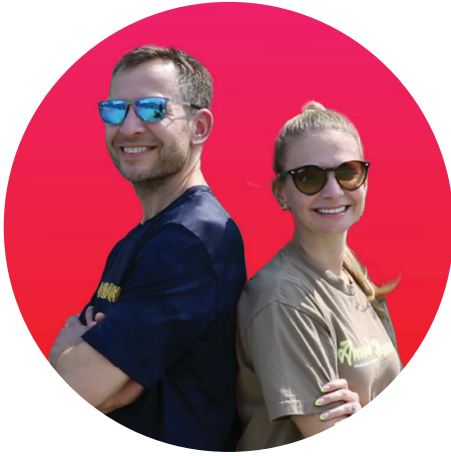
Once they had actual clearly defined roles they were able to succeed and excel in what they liked and were passionate about. According to Red, “That's when we started to become a more cohesive unit. And we didn't want to kill each other.”

Jeff believes, “If you do find the right ways to make tweaks, to stay out of each other's way but also support each other, you make the life of the other person more effective and efficient and better.”



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Amanda & Steve's Story

Owners of Amanda Bananas

“IF WE DIDN'T HAVE DEFINED ROLES, IT WOULD JUST BE CHAOTIC.”

Steve and Amanda work together in a confined space (inside a food truck) for hours, and days, at a time. They've been running an award-winning dessert truck business together for over ten years successfully without hurting their relationship. Their soft-serve banana business has grown into a franchise.

Here's how they do it:

Amanda calls herself the “face” of the business. “I like talking to people. being at the window. doing the toppings. I like things looking Instagram ready and Instagram pretty.”

And what's Steve's lane according to Amanda? “Steve is more the back of the house. He can tell you how much a cup costs, how much a spoon costs, how much each thing. He goes nuts when I hand out extra spoons and extra cups”

While they don't always agree, they've found their lanes to make it work.



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MY WIFE MAKES SEXY SPREAD SHEETS

Plan for success

If you're setting out to be an entrepreneur, and especially if you're asking for funding, you definitely need to think about business plan. They may not be fun to write, but they will make your life a lot easier in the long run, as you steer your business through unexpected turns.





Vito & Amanda's Story

Owners of BLAST 7D

Vito and Amanda started out with a vision and a dream: to build a fully immersive amusement ride. No small task.

So, how did they do it?

“We knew this was a large undertaking and we needed to be adult about it. We created a business plan. It took us forever. Seven months.” Vito said. And one of the keys to building the plan according to Vito, “My wife makes sexy spreadsheets.”

Developing a plan took a while. The couple had to figure out what's involved in starting and running a business like theirs, getting financing and finding a location. To ensure the plan was solid they had other people vet it and point out possible problems. Amanda believes this was super important.

“We used all our life savings and a fair amount of our children's college savings. We took a HELOC out on our house and got a big SBA loan. We were in it.” Vito recalls.

Building a business plan helped the couple validate what they set out to do. Their combined backgrounds in branding and finance led to a tight plan with all the financial aspects, forecasting and assumptions. “And it was instrumental in helping the couple with the twists and turns any small business encounters.”

“Vito would come to me and say, we're not making enough money. This is this is going to be a disaster. And I'd say, well, no, Vito, we are doing okay. And this is going along with with our financial modeling. And yes, Monday and Tuesday are going to be super slow, but we're going to make up for it on on the weekend. So, so being able to kind of look at things from that intellectual standpoint when the emotions are running high, I think what has been really important for us.”



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IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE

Hiring

People - the most important assets to any business. It's important to find people with the right skill set. But what else should you look for to build a successful team?





Carolina & Don's Story

Franchise Owners of Sugaring NYC

"WE CAN TEACH SUGARING. WE CAN'T TEACH ATTITUDE."

Carolina and Don are franchise owners of Sugaring NYC, a growing business that offers a natural alternative to waxing.

Carolina, who is in charge of hiring, stresses the importance of bringing in the right people. And, it's not just about the right skill set, it's about the right personality.

Carolina put an ad out on Indeed - just a free ad - and had so many girls apply for the job. They were planning on hiring five employees to start.

"You know, when they introduced themselves, and it was not the right attitude, I thought, I can teach sugaring, but I can't teach people ethics or attitude." Carolina says of the hiring process.

Attitude is everything.



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Andy & Brittany's Story

Owners of Pro Quick Draw

"PEOPLE MAKE THE DIFFERENCE"

Andy Bischoff, an NFL coach, and his wife Brittany started Pro Quick Draw, a company that digitizes the game planning work for coaches across the NFL, College, and High School football. As a professional football coach Andy has a lot of experience building teams at the highest level of sports.

"For me personally, team members are the most important thing. People matter. People make the difference." Andy said.

What do Andy and Brittany look for when they bring on a new team member?

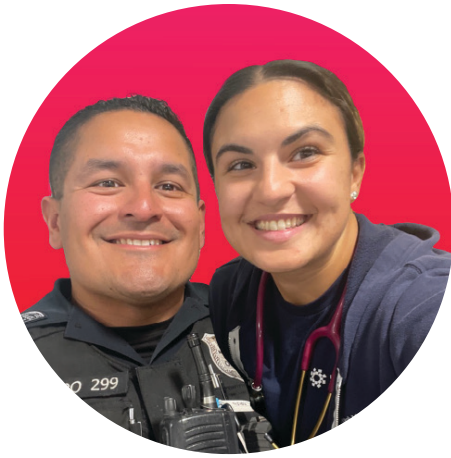
"The number one consistent factor has been champions of our product. And that's really remained consistent with our core team because we can't just hire any old salesperson who has had success selling." Brittany says.

Andy believes, "There has to be a tie-in to your understanding of football and your understanding of the work of a coach. And so that's been the most consistent hiring piece for us - being a champion of our product."



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Letisia & Harold's Story

Owners of Morelia Gourmet Paletas

“WE WANT TO PROVIDE EVERY SINGLE CUSTOMER WITH AN EXPERIENCE”

Meet Letisia, a pediatric nurse, and Harold, a police officer, the couple who opened Morelia Gourmet Paletas in Hoboken, NJ. Being the first location in the northeast, it draws crowds from all over NJ and NYC. Morelia Gourmet Paletas is a Mexican ice cream pop franchise that originated in Florida.

It's a unique interactive ice pop experience. A customer picks a gourmet ice pop, chooses a dip, then a topping, and watches a Morelia employee bring their pop to life behind the counter. So it was important for Harold and Letisia to find the right employees who had that special magic touch with people - especially kids.

“The number one thing is finding someone with people skills and someone outgoing. We're selling Paletas, which essentially, is a popsicle at \$6.49. We want to provide every single customer with an experience, you know, because anybody can go to the gas station in the corner and buy a popsicle for \$2.” Letisia said of the hiring experience.

Letisia and Harold look for people who are outgoing and engaging. Someone who is happy to help customers through the fun process of decorating their ice cream pop. Choosing toppings, dips, etc.

“We look for friendliness. People are already happy they're coming to get ice cream. You want somebody, when you walk into the place, they'll say, hi, hello, how are you? And then explain it to them, because this is new.”



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MAKE IT HUMAN

Building Relationships

Establishing strong business relationships fosters trust and loyalty, which are essential ingredients for success. When clients and partners trust you and your brand, they are more likely to choose your products or services repeatedly.





Alexandra & Alexia's Story

Owners of Little Studio Films

“WE BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS.”

Alexandra and Alexia, owners of Little Studio Films are the international mother and daughter team that broke the glass ceiling in the male dominated world of Hollywood. Building relationships is key to their success.

“We believe in the power of relationships. In Hollywood, everything is about - what can you do for me?” Alexia says.

Alexandra adds, “We’re human. Not just professionals. I think that’s important because people want to work with someone they know and trust.”

“We need marketing. But I think if people were to spend more time relationship building versus just, oh, let me do a newsletter blast, people will remember you.” Alexia says. “That impresses people because they’re like, okay, you acknowledge me. You see I exist.”

“I think to have success, is to have a human and real connection first. And that’s what we pride ourselves on.” Alexia continues. “And we do relationship building and we want people to build a relationship with us.”



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Mike & Debbie's Story

Owners of Cork Wines & Spirits

STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH COMMUNITY

Mike Garcia and Debbie Kemp are the owners of Cork Wine stores in NJ. They invest a lot of time in building relationships, because they see the many benefits to developing strong relationships in their community. And they get creative with how they form those bonds.

"Mike is phenomenal at building relationships with our customers. And one of the things we noted when we started the store and on our website, is we really wanted our people to know us as *that community*, that really *relationship-type* environment."

They take specific actions to strengthen relationships throughout the community. They invite vendors who live in the community to create a pop-up shop in their Hoboken store. Whether it's an artist or a candle maker or candy, or flowers, we bring those individuals into the store. They live in Hoboken and really care about our community," Debbie said.

The vendor guests bring in customers, so it benefits their Cork business as well. It's a real benefit for everyone, especially around the holidays.

Mike adds, "It really comes together for many families because they're able to get more, like a bottle of wine and flowers or some chocolates or whatever. And it's really fun."



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BALANCING ACT

Family First

You're a couple, and you're starting a business together. Maybe you have kids. A home. And, many many other responsibilities. How do you find balance when you're together all the time?





Karen, Jared & Jordan's Story

Owners of Schmidt Brothers Cutlery

"SOMEONE TAKES THE FAMILY SEAT FIRST. SOMEONE TAKES THE WORK SEAT FIRST."

Karen Schmidt, a partner with her husband and his brother Jordan in the very successful Schmidt Brothers Cutlery business, leverages her corporate experience along with her husband's expertise to make the balance work.

"From the days of us meeting fourteen years ago, we both used to travel...and work a lot. As a couple, we were able to figure out our routines. So there's at least enough experience of someone's taking the family seat first. Someone's taking the work seat first. And, that may switch over the course of a day, a week or a month, but we are able to at least tag in and out and work as partners in how to balance everything because we all know there's no on and off switch."

The Schmidts believe in the importance of working as partners and always putting "family first."

"You're raising families. We want our kids to have us present. We are very deeply involved in all of our families. So it's just a matter of communication and making it all work."



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KEY TAKEAWAYS



LISTEN TO THE UNIVERSE FOR THE PUSH

TURN A PROBLEM INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

TURN YOUR PASSION INTO A PROFESSION

DEFINE YOUR STRENGTHS TO DEFINE ROLES

DON'T DUPLICATE EFFORTS

TAKE THE TIME TO BUILD A SOLID BUSINESS PLAN

HAVE OTHERS VET YOUR PLAN

LOOK BEYOND SKILL SETS TO BUILD A STRONG TEAM

(continued)

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS TO BUILD TRUST

**FIND CREATIVE WAYS TO LEVERAGE RELATIONSHIPS
TO ACQUIRE CUSTOMERS**

**DON'T AVOID DISAGREEMENTS, USE THEM TO MAKE
BETTER DECISIONS**

**IDENTIFY A PERSON TO BE A TIE-BREAKER TO
RESOLVE DISAGREEMENTS**

USE YOUR MORAL COMPASS TO HELP GUIDE DECISIONS

TAG IN ON WHO TAKES FAMILY VS WORK SEAT FIRST

INTEGRATE WORK INTO LIFE

NEVER STOP COMMUNICATING





THANK YOU

Whether you're a Couple of Entrepreneurs or a Solo Entrepreneur, we hope the insights in this guide provides you with inspiration and tangible tips to help you launch your business or enhance your journey.

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To learn more about what we do, and how we can leverage storytelling to help you promote your business, visit brandingshorts.com.

Look out for the full SURVIVAL GUIDE book, coming soon!

Best,
Micki & Tony

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