



20 Things I Learned in the Horse Business

By Sean Jones

What I post is my always evolving philosophy on the horse business. Some of my ideas are original, some are plagiarized from other professionals and industries. I prefer to call it research. This is a list of some of the things I wish I knew before Day 1 of my business launch (in no particular order):

1. Attracting high net worth clients involves a lot of work on aesthetics. This should include a paved driveway, or at least no potholes. Invest in a good lawnmower and weed-whacker. The moment I paved my driveway, was the moment the dads started coming to lessons in their nice cars. The grass next to the driveway should look like a golf course.
2. Train your staff so well that they could get a job anywhere. Treat and pay them well enough that they do not want to.
3. Footing is a priority. You can save money in a lot of areas, but footing is not one of them.
4. Always pay your vet and farrier on time and treat them like gold. I don't need to tell you, they are your best friends in times of need.
5. Make every single client experience positive. Always end on a good note. Never let a client drive away mad or discouraged. I know this sounds impossible: it's hard, but not impossible. That's why you get paid the big bucks.
6. Do not offer discounts. You are not a discount store - "Save Money, Ride Better" is not a good tag line. What you charge is a reflection of your own self value. If you charge less than everyone else, you're broadcasting that everyone else is better than you.
7. There is value to offering a lower rate or scholarship to an underprivileged young client. Odds are, he/she will work harder and be your best ambassador. However, everyone else should be full paying clients.
8. Invest in a good washer and dryer for the barn. The parents will do the laundry while their kid is riding. Bonus: This will keep your tack room smelling better with all the saddle pads, polo's and wraps regularly cleaned.
9. Search the continent for sales and barn closures. Buy more than you need of these items when they're on sale: Double ended snaps, buckets, pitch forks, lead ropes, halters, ¾ inch floor mats, bridles, lunge lines. You will never not need a surplus of these items.
10. In contrast, you will always have too many: saddle pads, mismatched polo wraps, girths that fit no horse, bits that are borderline illegal (how did you get that anyway?), crops that are too long, too short, too sparkly. Get rid of them. You'll most likely get more at horse shows for free.



11. Have an objectives oriented system for progression for your clients. Show them the exact path to success. Semi-Annual 1 on 1 meetings with clients (and parents). Highlight accomplishments, establish future objectives, establish budget. This is crucial, value added client bonding time. Motivate the heck out of your client. They should feel like a million bucks after these meetings.
12. Most clients are not fully aware of how much they would prefer a group lesson over a private lesson. Don't underestimate the positive social impact a group of like skilled students can make. You can do an occasional private tune up session if needed. In my later years, I never gave private lessons – even to my top showing clients. People are social, horses are social. Don't separate them.
13. Factor in time and money for your own advancement. You need to keep learning and getting better. There is always someone within trailering distance that you can learn from that would be willing to give you a riding lesson. With permission, use a clients horse for this. If you're doing things right, your clients have nicer horses than you anyway.
14. Identify your ideal client and what their values are. Build your business model around that. Interview your prospective clients before allowing them in. If they don't fit your definition of an ideal client, politely tell them about your competitors barn down the road. Call that trainer and tell them you just referred a good client to them. This is great networking. A less desirable client to you, might be your competitors dream client....and vice versa.
15. A dose of reality: You are not just in the horse business. You are in the people pleasing business. Your greatest skill may be your ability to make people feel great in your presence regardless of your equine knowledge (reread point 5).
16. Although word of mouth is good, your conduct at a horse show is best. Most of my new business came to me because people saw how much my clients enjoyed being at the horse show. As a kid, I did exactly that. I was at a barn and saw kids from another barn having more fun, so I went there - and rode better as a result.
17. You cannot do everything. Hire out your weaknesses. If you're not good teaching beginners, hire an enthusiastic – yet safe – instructor for your beginners. In this case, you can make it a goal for riders to make enough progress to graduate to lessoning with you.
18. Establish fees based on minimum double the cost. Establish your “per unit cost” on everything. Then double that number. That's your baseline. You can now increase accordingly. Then see next point.
19. Start with a personal financial plan. This will help determine what kind of income you need to run your family. This will also keep those in your family not involved in the business more tolerant.
20. Have a succession plan, a retirement plan—an exit strategy. Contrary to popular belief, you cannot breathe your last breath telling Suzie to change her diagonal.

Want to learn more about starting your own equine business or growing your existing business? Check out Equine Guelph's On-Demand course [Equine Business 101!](#)



Sean Jones is not only an advisor for Sun Life Financial, he is also an avid equestrian and past facility owner. He understands the challenges equine professionals face. Sean's role at Sun Life involves advising and educating clients on all aspects of financial planning including owning a home, starting a family, education planning, managing your career and preparing for retirement. Sean develops economical, efficient and client-driven plans that are manageable and tailored to meet individual goals.