



# NURSING THAT WORKS™



CENTER for American Nurses®  
Serving the Needs of Nurses Today & Tomorrow

May 2009

## Nursing and Entrepreneurship: Perfect Together

by Donna Cardillo, RN, MA

**B**usiness ownership is part of the American dream. And why not? It provides the opportunity to be your own boss, make your own hours, and have creative freedom, flexibility of time, and unlimited earning potential. And while the concept of “business” is foreign to many nurses, we actually make great entrepreneurs.

### The Right Stuff

Nurses have what it takes to be successful in business. We’re smart, think on our feet, have excellent communication skills, are good listeners, and are versatile and adaptable. We’re hard working, ethical, and totally customer-service oriented. We’re even good salespeople. Every time you have to convince a patient to adhere to a regimen or follow up on some tests, you’re selling! We also possess a great body of knowledge and experience that is marketable, valuable, and in demand.

### One Nurse's Story

Years ago, I had a job where I was forced to give a lot of presentations. Believe it or not, I was a reluctant public speaker — like everyone else. But I began to get some positive feedback from those who heard me speak. After hearing two terrific speakers, one of whom was a nurse, I began to aspire to someday become a professional speaker. But what to speak about?

Around the same time, other nurses were asking me for career advice. They were curious about my nontraditional nursing background and wanted interviewing tips, help writing their resumes, and information about other opportunities within nursing. I started to realize that average nurses weren’t aware of most of the options available to them and didn’t have traditional job-finding skills. These topics were never stressed in nursing programs. I began to think about someday developing a seminar for nurses in which I would discuss nontradi-

tional career opportunities and give information about how to find and get those jobs.

I had that idea in my head for about 10 years before I acted on it. I was approaching my 40th birthday and contemplating what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Although I had a lot going for me, I had a gnawing feeling that something was missing. I wanted to take all of my experiences and find a way to pull them all together and really make a difference. Many people assume that I was brimming with confidence and drive when I started my business, but the exact opposite is true. I was actually at a low point with almost nonexistent self-confidence and a poor self-image. I also felt rather sluggish about things in general.

When I started to break down the barriers in my mind that told me what I shouldn’t or couldn’t do and asked myself where I should go from here, I didn’t have to think long or hard. That idea had been rolling around in my head for a decade. This was in the early ‘90s, a time when nurses were being laid off from their jobs for the first time in the history of our profession. I knew the time would never be more right to take my show on the road. I also knew that if I didn’t do it, someone else would, and I’d be kicking myself for years to come. So I made a decision and a commitment to start my own business, become a professional speaker, and develop a full-day seminar for nurses — Career Alternatives for Nurses™.

Other nurses often say to me, “But Donna, you don’t understand. I have such fear about moving forward.” I understand more than you could ever imagine. In the last 10 years I have experienced fear, the likes of which I had never experienced in my life. I discovered that fear is always part of the equation when trying something new or taking a risk. So rather than waiting for the fear to dissipate or letting it become an obstacle, I learned to move forward in spite of it. I noticed it would start to



# NURSING THAT WORKS™



CENTER for American Nurses®  
Serving the Needs of Nurses Today & Tomorrow

May 2009

subside after I did something for the first time or mastered a new skill. That is, until I had to try something else. I also learned that the bigger the goal, the bigger the fear. Talk about stepping out of your comfort zone!

Did I face obstacles along the way? You better believe it. My husband was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis just as I was getting ready to launch my first seminar. I had to rethink my goals and decide if this was the right path. After two weeks of soul searching, I decided that I and my family would be better off in the long run if I relied on myself, rather than an employer, for financial security. Those first few years were rough. With my husband disabled and me starting a business, our household income took a nosedive. We had to severely adjust our lifestyle and try to live within our now meager means. But there is no better motivation to being successful than knowing you have to put food on the table and get the bills paid. I clung firmly to my belief that I could make this work and kept plowing ahead, more determined than ever.

## Lessons Learned

After ten years in business, I've learned several invaluable lessons:

1. Owning a business is like raising a child. It's something you have to make a long-term commitment to. You'll go through different phases, some fun and rewarding and some challenging and trying. But if you put enough love, respect, and sweat equity into it and always believe in it, you'll end up with something you can be proud of.
2. No one succeeds alone. This is especially true in business. You've got to surround yourself with positive, successful, motivated, and talented people. Not only will their drive and enthusiasm propel you, but they will likely be eager to support and advise you. Seek out people who are successfully doing what you want to do. You can often find these people through professional associations related to business, such as the National Association of Women Business Owners ([www.nawbo.org](http://www.nawbo.org)) and those associated with your area of practice, such as

the National Speakers Association ([www.nsaspeaker.org](http://www.nsaspeaker.org)) or American Association of Legal Nurse Consultants ([www.aalnc.org](http://www.aalnc.org)). There will always be nay-sayers, those who are eager to tell you why you can't or shouldn't do something. I once heard someone say, "If someone tells you can't do it, it may be because they're afraid you will do it."

3. Each of us is capable of doing much more than we ever realized. I'm not talking about getting more things done in a day. I'm talking about developing aspects of ourselves that we never knew existed. For example, when I started in business, I was convinced I had no ability to write. However, I knew, as an educator, I would be expected to get something published, so I set out to try my hand at writing, never expecting to be more than mediocre. Today, I'm an author, columnist, and writer with almost 100 published articles in numerous magazines. Benjamin Disraeli once said, "Most people die with their music still locked up inside of them." Who knew I had a writer locked inside of me? I often think how this part of me could so easily have stayed buried.
4. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. You may pick up one big client early on that sends a lot of work your way. The temptation is to think, "Wow, this is great. I don't have to advertise or look for other work because I get enough work from this client to support myself." That's a dangerous way to think because things can change almost in an instant. That company can go bankrupt, get sold, decide to change its focus, have massive budget cuts, a change in administration, etc. You've always got to have more than one iron in the fire if you don't want your business to go cold.
5. Everything happens through networking. Networking is crucial to building and maintaining a successful business. It's the best and most effective way to stay cutting edge with knowledge and information, market your business, develop a client base, and develop a support network. Whether you do it by getting out to professional association meetings, joining a listserv on the Internet, or staying in touch



# NURSING THAT WORKS™



CENTER for American Nurses®  
Serving the Needs of Nurses Today & Tomorrow

May 2009

by telephone and e-mail, you've got to make new connections all the time and stay in touch with old ones. You need to nurture and develop relationships. You also have to develop your social skills and force yourself, if necessary, to overcome your shyness and fear about meeting and talking to new people. Fortunately, this is something you can get better at with practice and by reading related "how-to" books.

6. Customer service rules. Distinguish yourself with service. Treat your customers well, and they'll always come back to you. Go the extra mile for them, do something extra, and they'll never forget you. Treat them with the utmost respect and courtesy at all times. Demonstrate your care and concern for their welfare in everything you do, and you'll never go hungry. Motivational speaker Zig Ziglar says, "You can have anything you want if you give enough other people what they want." This has been my mantra throughout my business years.

## Realities Of Business Ownership

While contemplating whether or not to take the plunge into entrepreneurship, consider some of the facts:

- It takes time and money to build any business or consulting practice. Nothing happens overnight. Even if you pick up clients or contracts immediately, you'll have start-up expenses over the first few years. You'll be reinvesting any profits you make back into the business as it grows and develops. These expenses will include marketing material design and printing, which will need to be upgraded as your business develops, and website development and upgrades. You'll be investing in capital equipment for your office that it may take a few years to pay off. You'll need money for licenses, fees, and professional services. You have to be willing to hang in there and keep at it through the lean years. It can take years to become profitable.
- People may treat you differently. The prospect of owning a business intimidates some people; therefore, others may be intimidated by you when they learn you're self-employed. They may also assume you are rich, equating business ownership with

wealth. Others may label you lucky or opportunistic, having no concept of how hard you've worked to get where you are...all the hours, all the sacrifices, all the risks, and all the knowledge and skill that had to be acquired.

- You need to remain flexible and always stay ahead of the curve. Many outside factors can affect your business, such as new technology, emerging trends, changes in reimbursement, world events, and consumer needs and interests. You have to be willing and able to adjust to those changes. When I started my business in the mid-'90s, nurses were flocking to my seminars. In the late '90s, as the job market began to shift once again and online learning became popular, seminar attendance dropped off. Although I continued to do some seminars, I had to shift gears and seek more speaking engagements from associations, hospitals, and schools. You've got to keep moving forward. I also developed a home study version of Career Alternatives for Nurses™ as another source of income. Multiple streams of income derived from multiple products and services help to increase your cash flow and serve a broader client base.
- Learn business basics. You might be thinking, "I want to be self-employed, but I hate the business and marketing part." Believe it or not, many entrepreneurs feel that way. We want to "do our thing" and let someone else worry about running the business. That would be nice, but it's not practical or realistic. The good news is that anyone can master business skills. I started by reading books in the public library on business basics. You can also take courses, such as those offered online or at a local community college by the Small Business Administration ([www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov)) or Small Business Development Centers. If you don't pay attention to the bottom line, you'll be out of business.
- Market all the time. The famous movie quote, "If you build it, they will come" does not apply to business. You can have the best product or service, but if no one knows you exist, you're sunk. Marketing isn't just about print ads and mailings. It's about being active and visible in all the right places, including related pro-



# NURSING THAT WORKS™



CENTER for American Nurses®  
Serving the Needs of Nurses Today & Tomorrow

May 2009

fessional associations, industry publications and conventions, the World Wide Web, the media, networking events, etc. I knew absolutely nothing about marketing and public relations when I started my business. But I became a marketing and publicity whiz by reading books, taking courses, and consulting with experts. It's all part of the learning process.

## Good Things

Despite all the challenges and hard work, business ownership offers many rewards. After all, that's why those of us who do it, love it. One of the things I value most as an entrepreneur is the flexibility I have with my time and schedule. Sure, I have to be in certain places at certain times and have lots of deadlines to meet. But for all intents and purposes, my time is still my own. It allows me to better tend to the needs of my family, take time off when I need and want to, and sometimes be more spontaneous in my life rather than locked into a rigid schedule governed by someone else.

Self-employment also offers the opportunity for unlimited earning potential. When you work for someone else, there is just so far you can go with salary until you hit a ceiling. With business ownership, the world is your oyster. You can choose to have a small, part-time business that yields supplemental income, or you can go for the gold and turn your passion into a full-time operation that grows and develops with time and experience.

Creative freedom is also something I value as an entrepreneur. I do things my way, the way I want to see them done. I bring my own vision to fruition. I can try out my ideas and be as creative as I want. I don't have to present things to a committee, write up any proposals, or get approval from anyone. I research things, discuss them with people in the know, listen to what my clients want and need, and then move forward. Creativity breeds more creativity. When you are free to think and try and experience and do, your mind begins to open up to even other possibilities. This paves the way to self-actualization.

Today, ten years after starting my business, I can hardly believe how far I've come, how much I've grown

as a person and a professional, and how much more about the world and myself I've learned. I have more confidence, more joy, more enthusiasm, and a greater capacity to care and to give. Have I made any mistakes? Plenty. Do I have any regrets? None at all. Do I still get scared when I have to do something new? You better believe it. But that's all part of learning and growing. You truly can do anything you put your mind to. I'm living proof of that. I'm "living large" and loving every minute of it.

© Donna Cardillo [www.dcardillo.com](http://www.dcardillo.com) 800-801-5796. All rights reserved.

*Donna Cardillo, RN, MA is the Career Guru for Nurses. She is a keynote speaker, Dear Donna columnist for the Gannett Healthcare Group, and author of Your 1st Year as a Nurse and The ULTIMATE Career Guide for Nurses. [www.dcardillo.com](http://www.dcardillo.com)*