

Shy people can run successful businesses too

In a world full of noise and egos, how easy is it to be critically shy and run a large business? Despite the archaic assumption that you need to be loud and proud to get ahead, Steve Witt believes you should never underestimate those of a quieter nature.

I'm co-founder of [Not Just Travel](#), one of the largest travel companies in the UK, and its recruitment arm, [The Travel Franchise](#). The company has trained over 800 people with no previous experience in travel to become award-winning, home-working travel consultants. Before this, I built UKdomains.com from his bedroom aged 32 and made his first £1M. Yet, despite his previous successes, he says he's one of the shyest people you could meet.

The first time I had to speak on stage to simply introduce someone, I couldn't even utter a syllable and was eventually whisked off in humiliation. Now that I manage a home-working travel agency with over 800 self-employed agents on its books, I travel the world, speaking to conference rooms full of hundreds of people.

Overcoming adversity

I was born with an enlarged palate in my mouth, making it difficult to speak and underwent years of speech therapy, but "the damage had already been done." I was a painfully shy child, got picked on in the playground all the time

and was bullied throughout school. I am still very self-conscious and find it difficult to speak to an individual or a small group of people.

Back when I was in school, bullying was just a thing that you had to accept. It's a horrendous obstacle to overcome. It affects you and can make you really self-conscious. I got picked on constantly and as a result I didn't like drawing attention to myself to make myself a target in any way. It was a real negative at the time, but I think it makes you stronger and more resilient in the long-term. I've come to terms with it and have learned to turn it into a positive, but if you're not resilient, you can make the mistake of letting it define you.

At school, social shyness and bullying held me back, turning me into a bit of a geek. I became a swot; I put my head down and studied hard. I certainly wasn't the most fun person in the playground. Schools are more inclusive now and recognise different people's traits. Shy people are helped far more – perhaps even too much, as it defines them rather than challenging them to overcome their fears.

Yet one of the positives – especially in business – is that people can relate to shy people better. Most people are more shy than they are confident. When you're talking to people in a room and they realise you are shy, they warm to you better. Admitting you're nervous and shy puts people at ease. By honestly communicating your fears with an audience, people empathise and connect with you. The louder, more brash people can turn people off.

Building relationships

I do presentations to new trainees in our business, and I'm also onstage presenting at various times of the year. The first thing I say is, "I'm the shyest person you'll ever meet." With all the AV tech and lights behind me, they all laugh and think I'm joking, but then I go on to explain my shyness and they understand.

When I talk to people about my insecurities, they relate to me better as we then have common ground and so a genuine connection. Most people look at me and think, "I could never do that because I'm so shy," but then I open up honestly and they think, "if he can do it, I can do it".

In business, there is a tendency for our franchisees to put my business partner Paul Harrison and I on a bit of a pedestal because we've built a big business and think they can't achieve the same level of success. They might think we've been gifted it, or that we've had a lucky break, but we're human. When we start to explain we're just like them with similar fears and insecurities, they start to realise that we're human and they can achieve big things too. That's

how I like to inspire people.

Embracing individuality

I now speak to conference rooms full of people, but I get more nervous about one-to-ones. The secret for me is something that a good friend, Paul Farquhar, an NLP coach and MD of health supplements company Wiley's Finest UK, told me. He said that having butterflies in your stomach simply means you want to do a good job. Nerves are the excitement that you want to succeed. Recognising that really helps.

I've found that on stage, in your head you're petrified, but when you speak you don't sound as shy as you feel. It's about controlling the voices in your head. The first time I had to speak publicly, the only thing I had to do was stand up and introduce the next speaker. I literally got one syllable out and someone had to leap onstage to help me out and speak for me. Now, I'm able to go on stage and talk for hours. I've done it 200 times now – it's simply practice.

The bullying and the shyness has probably made me a tougher person than I would've been. My shyness is part of me and I've accepted that. Shyness is not a problem that needs to be fixed.

I really wanted to build a successful business and to do that, I recognised that I would need to step up and outside my comfort zone. I saw that people needed a strong leader, not a timid person. In front of my team, I go into 'work mode', hide my shyness and put on a front that looks like I'm super-confident, which I am about my work. That doesn't make me a fraud, but it is like putting a uniform on. I will then happily relax into 'shy mode' as soon as I'm out of the office.

The idea that to be successful in business, especially in sales, is that you need to be bullish, loud and aggressive is just not true. These are the male stereotypes we've grown up with. Real life business is about relationships and sales is about being honest and happy with what you are selling.

My advice to my fellow shy persons out there is to put yourself in positions that

make you more nervous; challenge yourself in different ways. I still look for opportunities to speak to individuals on a one-to-one basis as it really helps me.

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