

This is an edited transcript of the April 8, 2015 SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast interview titled – [Solo Professionals: Tap the Business Building Power of Innovation with Brainzooming](#).

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving for small business success? There is help. Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host.

Have you ever asked yourself how can I set myself apart from the competition in an innovative way that my clients will value? That's an important question that we all need to ask as solo entrepreneurs if we want to succeed long-term. [Mike Brown](#) is my guest on the podcast today, and he's here to provide you with some practical answers to that question.

Mike is a former Fortune 500 company vice president of marketing. He's also a well-respected marketing innovation strategy consultant, a prolific blogger, and a dynamic speaker. Mike founded his company, [The Brainzooming Group](#), 10 years ago. Since then, he's tested and refined a number of unique approaches to strategic innovation to build his own business and those of his clients.

Today on the podcast, Mike reveals some of his most potent innovation strategies. So if you're hungry to create a competitive advantage for your business and acquire more of your ideal clients, then this interview is for you.

Thanks for making the time to join me, Mike.

Mike Brown: Thank you, Steve. I appreciate the opportunity to be back, as always, to talk about things that we're working on and how they can benefit solopreneurs.

Stephen Lahey: You've joined me on the podcast a couple of times, but I'm guessing that not everybody knows you, so tell us a little bit about your professional background and what triggered you to become an entrepreneur years ago.

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Mike Brown: Well, first job out of grad school was an entrepreneurial venture with another person. We did market research. After about 2-1/2 years that wasn't going so well. So, then I made the jump to the Fortune 500, and I was at a company, a variety of names, Yellow Freight, ultimately YRC Worldwide, but people have seen their trucks out on the highway that say Yellow. I was there doing strategic market planning and research and marketing communications for 18 years and, quite honestly, I loved Fortune 500 life. Loved the corporate life.

What prompted me to make the jump to an entrepreneurial life? Well, really there were three things. YRC was going through some real financial challenges and we were making a 75% reduction in our marketing staff. We were going from 60 people down to 15. The first push was to try and save jobs in the department. I told my boss, hey, if you can get multiple people for me, you need multiple people. The other thing I was concerned with was going backward in my learning and just doing things that I'd done 10 and 15 years before. Then third, I really just wanted to leave on my own terms.

So, it was a quick decision to make the jump into an entrepreneurial venture, probably within about 48 hours, although I had done a lot of preparation over previous years with this as my Plan B. I had been developing what became the Brainzooming techniques when I was in that corporate environment, to be ready to roll out on my own, if needed. For me it was just the right opportunity at that point and so I made that jump.

Stephen Lahey: We won't get too deep into it, but I think there's a really important lesson to be learned that you didn't necessarily emphasize here. But I know the back story – you dug your well before you were thirsty – that is, from a sales perspective you developed a rapport with various organizations, industry organizations, and companies by getting out there as a speaker. You also blogged for years before you left your corporate job as well, if I'm not mistaken. Right?

Mike Brown: Yes, and since we're going to talk about innovation today, I'd say that approach probably is innovation in that for four or five years before I left I was thinking creatively and being strategic about preparing the way for my Plan B to launch. I didn't want to be in a position someday where they come in and they get the corporate gun out and fire a package at the back of my head and I don't know

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what to do. I saw so many people that happened to. It was literally here's a box, you have 15 minutes get out of the building, and these were people who had given their lives to the company. So I started doing speaking and blogging. And the work that I was doing inside the company was developing these tools and these approaches to innovation and planning and creative thinking for people where that wasn't necessarily their core skill set. But it was all done with the idea of this isn't about how does this work in the transportation industry that I was in, it was how is this going to work in the next industry and the industry after that.

I had already met with my boss and said look at this amount of intellectual capital I'm developing. It's not really what we do. And he just told me ultimately that's yours. You're going to be able to take it with you. So those pieces really came together so that I could make that decision to make the leap to entrepreneur in 48 hours. But had started with innovating within my VP of marketing job, changing the job I was in so that I'd be prepared to innovate as we, now as [The Brainzooming Group](#), go out and offer these services to other companies.

Stephen Lahey:

What a great lesson too. Okay, as we get started I'm going to frame the idea of "innovation" up front from my point of view. Innovation is about foresight and anticipating needs as much as it is about anything else. And it's having a vision that you don't want to just try to be better, to do a little bit better job, you want to be different in a way that customers value. That's my opinion. But from your perspective, Mike, how would you define innovation?

Mike Brown:

There are three definitions, and I'm not a huge definition person because I think people use those to get out of doing smart things that they should be doing that are tough. But there are three definitions that really fit together and get at the heart of it. From an innovation standpoint, we talk about innovation as a fundamental improvement in the status quo. That's a very low hurdle. Doesn't have to be the newest app or the newest billion dollar company that came from a startup, just – are you making improvements? So that's one piece of it.

We add the definition of creativity in there as seeing things in new and different ways. And, importantly, that's not a definition that says "talent" or I "grew up" creative, it just says can I see something differently than someone else sees it. And we've got

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tools and techniques and exercises that allow people to do that, so we take it out of the “I’m not creative, I can’t do that” frame. Now everybody can be creative.

The third, then, is something that we call strategic impact, which goes beyond “we had really interesting ideas and nothing ever happened with it” to say you’ve got to go from ideas to implementation and what that means in business success. We talk about strategic impact as addressing what matters with insight and innovation.

What’s interesting about those three definitions is that they sort of start plugging into each other. Innovation is in the strategic impact, getting to the fundamentals and status quo improvement. I think you can make the distinction between insight and creativity, of seeing things in new ways.

I think across those three definitions, we wind up pretty close, Steve, to what you set up in terms of foresight and anticipating needs, and then being able to approach the market, approach your customers in a different way than other providers are. So I think we’re pretty close there.

Stephen Lahey: In your experience, what are the main barriers to innovation for people? And how can we overcome them?

Mike Brown: A really interesting question. I was just thinking through some of that. We have two paths of innovation work that we’ve done. Back in the day of the corporate world, one of the first innovation pieces I did was for speaking to a class, a marketing communications class on innovation, and I’d never really thought before about what I thought about it. That one came out as [*Taking the NO Out of InNOvation*](#), and it was very much around personal barriers. Coming out of that, then, I did another one called [*Taking the NO Out of Business InNOvation*](#), which was more about organizational barriers. So it’s interesting with solopreneurs to think about the fact that the personal and the organization are the same, how does that change things?

On the purely personal side, I think a lot of the barriers to innovation become tied to we get stuck in history and we get stuck in being resistant to change. That could be very successful history of, wow, I’ve been doing this for 15 years on my own and I’ve

been successful and could you tell yourself, no, I don't have to change. You could convince yourself that you don't have to look at new possibilities because of your historical success. But, in point of fact, the market may be changing and a small weakness you spot right now might be an important signal telling you that need to innovate.

Another personal barrier becomes lack of diligence. You know, I've got so much going on, it's tough to do, I don't have time to innovate, I'll do that next quarter or I'll do that next year. But at times it may be crucial to create a Plan B too. I know you work a lot to make your business successful, but you've got to start this other track, as well. I think there it becomes about prioritization. How do you make those good tradeoffs?

So I think those are some of the big innovation barriers from the personal side. And then how that personal side translates to organizational is, I think, it's about the fear of risk. The pressures of today can become a big impediment. And if I change, what will happen? How do I even think about what the future might look like because I've been so focused on today? I don't really have any other people to bat these ideas around and think about it. Or that I'm resource constrained. Whether it's time, investment dollars, expertise, whatever it might be, there are some resource constraints. I think addressing those really comes down to how do you envision your future? How do you get away from the business that you're right in the middle of and start considering a different kind of future? And again, we use exercises to help people make that jump.

I think it really all comes down to how do you adopt a newer and fresher mindset on an ad hoc basis. Personally, I also need to think fresh even though I'm tremendously experienced. And that's where, again, a lot of creativity and creative thinking techniques allow you to, as I describe it in presentations and workshops, almost temporarily forget all your knowledge and expertise so that you can think fresh and you can look for innovation ideas.

I liken this forgetting to using that little red light from Men in Black where they point it at somebody and they forgot everything, except that creativity exercises allow you to do that temporarily and so you don't really lose all that experience. It's a great combo

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of experience plus a fresh perspective that helps you to conceive of new innovations.

Stephen Lahey: One of the things that occurs to me when you're saying all that is I believe that with solo entrepreneurs particularly, just by definition, we're often alone. I guess that can be good for creativity, at time. Some people say that you have to isolate yourself and that's where the real creative thinking comes from. But others say you need a catalyst. Maybe batting ideas back and forth with other people is better. What are your thoughts on that? As a solo, is innovation a solitary pursuit, is it something you do with others, is it both?

Mike Brown: I think it's both, Steve. And I think that's one of the important things for solopreneurs to keep in mind – don't define your sphere of influence or your sphere of inputs based on I'm one person in a home office or I'm sitting in a little shared office, or whatever. Of course, if you're in a shared office space, that's a great opportunity. Some of the business incubators where you've got a lot of solopreneurs they come together and can share ideas. They're making those connections. I toured one here in Kansas City a couple of months ago, and the person who put it together talked about consciously thinking about where they place people to force that interaction. So if you're in a shared environment, that's great.

If you're by yourself, then I think it becomes incumbent upon you to think about what are other teams I can be a part of? That may be forming a team yourself. Is it forming a mastermind group? Is it forming a group with other people who are doing what you do non-competitively? In your community or online you're taking the initiative to bring that group together.

I think the other thing is, and I know I certainly see it, a lot of people who reach out and say, hey, could you be part of something I'm trying to put together? So I think for the solopreneur it isn't always you leading, sometimes it's sitting back, letting somebody else take the lead.

But the important thing is don't just do that with folks who are like you with the same experience, the same background, the same gender, same racial, ethnic, everything else. Look for that diversity. Where can you put yourself into different situations that will give you a fresh perspective, force you to look at things in a new way, or even have other people react to things in ways you

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would have never thought of before. Those are going to be keys to unlocking innovation, for sure.

Stephen Lahey: That makes perfect sense. And certain practices and ways of thinking that are very normal in one industry may be innovative and life changing in another. It's one of those situations where if you don't sort of cross pollinate, you probably lose something.

Now, here's something to explore for the listeners. I think that for solo professionals being better than the competition is always a good thing, of course. But to successfully compete for new business especially, we do have to be different. We have to be different in ways that those target clients are actually hungry for. That gets their attention. You have to stand out in a meaningful way to them. How does differentiation relate to innovation from your perspective, Mike?

Mike Brown: Well, I think it's right in the heart of it, Steve, with this idea of what's a fundamental improvement to the status quo. So, that might be an improvement in how I position my company or how I talk about or market my company, but even more importantly, at the next layer how does that innovation lead to the specific change in the status quo? What am I actually doing that creates value for those clients? And again, we've got tools for that. We put together [an E-Book focused on outside in innovation](#). It's 14, 15 tools that you can use individually, that a single person can work through these, or they're enhanced and enriched if you've got a couple other people to work through.

But there's one exercise in there that unlocks about seven of the other exercises. It, interestingly enough, came from a FedEx ad. When I was a competitor to FedEx, they had an ad that talked about when packages don't arrive on time, all the horrible things that happen. Not just that the package wasn't there, but that jobs are lost and deals are broken and a list of things, but when packages do arrive on time, then everything is fine. And it struck me, that's a great creative thinking technique. So we've turned it into this exercise about brand benefits.

I think it's easy for big companies and it's certainly easy for solopreneurs to get focused on features and to think about those as benefits. You know – I do this, I do this, I do this, and those are my benefits. Well, they aren't your benefits. They're what you do.

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The benefits come down to what's the value, what's the time savings, what's the cost savings, what's the growth, what's the excitement, enhancement? Whatever it does for your client.

The way to think about it, and the way that this exercise is structured, is what if you didn't exist? What would be the bad things, the negative things, the challenges, the problems that this would then create for your customer? Come up with as many examples as you can, from minor things to big things, and then look at that list and say what am I actually alleviating for my customers by being here? That list becomes your benefits.

When you've got a nice tight list of here's the benefits I'm offering to my clients, then that becomes a huge platform for innovation because you can now say, well, if my benefit is time savings and I'm doing that through personal coaching, what are other ways I could help my clients save time? And you now get to a whole other list of things.

It can also be a new way to think about competitors. Who else has credibility helping clients with time savings? Who may be able to get right in on my accounts?

So this E-Book is found at Brainzooming.com/innovationfakebook, all one word, and the "fake book" idea comes from, if there are any musicians in the audience, well, a fake book is a skeletal way that musicians get music, then they can play together and collaborate, and that's what these approaches that we provide there are. They're sort of skeletal ways to get you started. But that's an exercise in there and related exercises, and I would really encourage your readers, go grab it. It's free. And go to town in using those because it will help you think about innovation in a very realistic and a very practical fashion, even as a solopreneur.

Stephen Lahey: Absolutely. And so go to Brainzooming.com/innovationfakebook. Right, Mike?

Mike Brown: That's correct.

Stephen Lahey: And then the other thing is, if you'd like somebody to help you stir the pot of your innovative thinking, then absolutely subscribe to Mike's blog. We all like those catalyst type blog posts that help us to think a little differently, right?

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Any other thoughts you'd like to share as we wrap up here, Mike?

Mike Brown: I think you've got to make innovation a focus. And it may be what happens on Friday night or over the weekend, but it's important as a solopreneur, to look to others and increase the diversity around you because that will help you become more innovative. Also, take advantage of exercises and tools that can help push you in that direction. I know for me, I was always paired with very creative, visionary leaders. But when I got out on my own, I realized I needed to be that type of leader, so I've used those same kinds of exercises to help change my business pattern and my business habits and think a lot better.

And, as you said, about this particular E-Book, you can either go to Brainzooming.com and subscribe to our blog, we'd certainly appreciate that, or Brainzooming.com/innovationfakebook, all one word, and you can download these 15 tools that you can use as makes sense within your business to look at innovation and doing things differently.

Stephen Lahey: It's an outstanding resource and your blog is as well. Thanks for making the time to be here, Mike.

Mike Brown: Thank you, Steve. I always appreciate it, and look forward to next time we get together and talk.

Stephen Lahey: And thanks again to our listeners for joining us. I appreciate you spending time with us today. If you like what you heard, visit SmallBusinessTalent.com and subscribe to this podcast by email. When you do, you'll be alerted whenever I post fresh podcast content, of course, but you'll also receive special resources for email subscribers only, including my LinkedIn guide to attracting ideal clients and much more. Thanks again for listening today and best wishes for your success.

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