

**BOTTOM LINE**

# HOW TO TRAIN YOUR BRAIN TO MASTER UNCHARTED TERRAIN

A LEADERSHIP COACH TURNED RESTAURATEUR SHARES HIS EIGHT PRINCIPLES THAT HELP HIM SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATE A DIZZYING LIST OF CAREER SHIFTS.

BY JANE PORTER

**It took me three hours to figure out exactly what Jason Watt** does for a living. He's a branding guy. He's a leadership coach. He's a restaurateur. Tomorrow, he might call himself something else entirely. He'll be the first to admit--even he couldn't tell you.

When we met last month, Watt and his business partners had just bought seven houses in Burlington, NJ, with plans to revitalize the town. "Today our mission is rebuilding great American cities," he told me.

"It is?" said his PR agent, sitting across the table from him. "That's a new one, even for me."

But that kind of uncertainty and surprise is exactly what Watt wants. "We actually don't know what we are doing," he admits. "Most people don't do things if they don't know what they are doing. We are acknowledging that we are making it up and it's not a set process."

Before they opened their first restaurant, Brickwall, in 2006 in Asbury Park, N.J., Watt and his partners had virtually no restaurant experience. They were running a branding agency and had started offering leadership coaching through a firm they called Fishbird.

**"It might take 600 attempts to find the right solution,**

But coaching companies--even with big-name clients like Virgin Mobile and Johnson & Johnson--wasn't satisfying

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3024534/bottom-line/how-to-train-your-brain-to-master-uncharted-terrain>

**but if you never let yourself get past your fifth attempt, you're 595 tries away from getting there."**

enough. They liked food, so restaurants seemed like a good idea. So far it's worked out. Watt and his partners have joined forces with an architecture firm and they call themselves Smith. Today, their restaurants in Asbury Park have helped to revitalize the city. In March, they are opening their

seventh restaurant and recently bought up real estate in Burlington, N.J., where they plan to start building and opening more restaurants.

Breaking into unfamiliar territory wasn't easy for Watt and his partners, but he says these eight principles helped them along the way:

### **1. LET YOURSELF BE TERRIFIED.**

When Watt and his partners decided to jump from branding and leadership training to buying up property and opening their own restaurants, he admits he was a bit terrified. It could all be a giant flop. But that terror is a feeling he's grown familiar with. "There needs to be a feeling of terror that you have to get over every day," he says. "That to me is a good sign and not a bad sign."

### **2. DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING? FIND SOMEONE WHO DOES.**

Today Smith has more than 350 employees and is growing by the day. When Watt is hiring, he could care less what was on a person's resume. If your personality isn't a good match, all the experience in the world won't help you get hired. But beyond personality, he says: "You must surround yourself with people who are smarter than you. That is absolutely key." When the idea of starting a restaurant first came up, Watt and his partners turned to his brother, architect Jim Watt to design the space. He has since partnered with Smith in designing all its restaurants.

### **3. QUIT BEING A CRITIC.**

If Watt and his partners had been too quick to judge their idea, they never would have opened their first restaurant. After all, none of them had ever built or opened a restaurant before, besides one partner who'd run her family's deli. "Being judgmental too quickly is the downfall to almost every brand," says Watt. "Judgment gets in the way of design." Early on, you're better off imagining that all your ideas are great ideas. Write them down. Let them get a little crazy. "You have to let people dream and say crazy shit before they

decide what they want to do," says Watt.

#### **4. SLOW DOWN. SUCCESS TAKES TIME.**

It took two years before Smith opened their first restaurant. They had to figure out how to do it, for starters. "People want to execute ideas too quickly. They haven't incubated them sufficiently," says Watt. You don't get a royal flush the first time you deal your cards. You have to pick some up and put some down, pick some more up and put them down."

#### **5. MAKE CREATIVITY A DAILY PRACTICE.**

If you want to break into a new field, it's important to make time for creativity every day. Often people associate creative thinking with just starting out and they go into execution mode after laying down the groundwork. But that's not enough. "You need to be creative every day," says Watt. It might take 600 attempts to find the right solution, but if you never let yourself get past your fifth attempt, you're 595 tries away from getting there.

#### **6. QUIT DWELLING IN THE PAST.**

Often, we let the past dictate what we are capable of doing in the future. Big mistake. The past can help you identify what you want to do moving forward, but it shouldn't be a marker of what you're capable of doing. "If something already exists and you look to create it again, you are starting inside of constraints already," says Watt.

#### **7. BE PREPARED FOR YOUR VIEW TO CHANGE.**

When you're driving, you don't stop paying attention to the road ahead. Your view is constantly changing and what lies in front of you determines what action you take. "In leadership, it's imperative to always be looking because your view will change year-to-year, week-to-week, day-to-day." Don't let yourself go on autopilot.

#### **8. FIND PERFECTION IN THE IMPERFECT.**

The Japanese aesthetic wabi-sabi is based on the notion of seeking perfection in the imperfect. It's a concept Smith lives by. "Build a business and let it have personality," says Watt. "It needs to be wabi-sabi. It needs to have character and warmth."

--**Jane Porter** writes about creativity, business, technology, health, education, and literature. When she isn't busy freelance writing or editing, she's at a desk somewhere in Brooklyn, N.Y., toiling away at her own fiction writing.

[Image: Flickr user [John Lemieux](#)]



## JANE PORTER

Jane Porter writes about creativity, business, technology, health, education and literature. She's a 2013 Emerging Writing Fellow with the Center For Fiction. Jane has written and edited for publications including The Wall Street Journal, BusinessWeek, Entrepreneur, Fortune and The Chronicle of Higher Education. She has a B.A. from Brown University and an MFA from Warren Wilson College. When she isn't busy freelance writing or editing, she's at a desk somewhere in Brooklyn, NY, toiling away at her own fiction writing.

**CONTINUE**

January 9, 2014 | 6:34 AM

## YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



FROM THE WEB

Why is no one reading your content?

OUTBRAIN



The Porn Industry Goes Social With PinSex

FAST COMPANY



FROM THE WEB

Finally, a Wine Club Done Right

THE HUFFINGTON POST



5 Ways To Make Hotel Bathrooms Less Awful

CO. DESIGN

[?]

ADD NEW COMMENT

LOG IN

Type your comment here.

COMMENTS

Burlington VT and Burlington NJ.. coincidence?



Share Link Reply