



# *Start & Run a Tattoo & Body Piercing Studio*

*Kurtis Mueller and Tanya Lee Howe*

**Self-Counsel Press**

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# Introduction

“You want to open a tattoo studio?” This was the question most people asked me with some level of bewilderment almost a decade ago when I was opening my first shop. I had management skills, and although I had received training as a piercer, I had no skill set as a tattoo artist, which was certainly not the norm in the industry at the time. To those who questioned me, I replied, “Times are changing.” I was determined to be the one to bring that change to the tattoo community.

Back when I opened my shop the industry resembled more of an elitist club than a business, as there were and still are minimal regulations in the United States and Canada. In the last ten years this has changed dramatically in

regards to elitism. Now anyone from artists to entrepreneurs — even celebrities — are opening studios. I have seen many positive changes within the tattoo and piercing world during this period of time, such as some increased regulation of current sterilization procedures, upscale interiors, and a focus on customer service. Though body modification has been practiced throughout history by various cultures and civilizations, in the last decade it has become more widely accepted by mainstream North American society.

You can find tattoo motifs on virtually everything these days, from underclothes to home decor and even in toy stores, a move that is definably attributed to a shift in society’s

perception of the industry. I once read a quote that stated, “Tattoos aren’t just for sailors, bikers, and prostitutes anymore.” The variation in clientele — everyone from professionals to grandmothers — definitely attests to the uniqueness of the various forms of body modification. Popular shows such as *Inked*, *Miami Ink*, *LA Ink*, and *London Ink* have all helped bring tattooing into the mainstream population. Regardless of the popularity, I believe as with starting any business a true interest for the work must be present — a reason beyond making a profit, or boosting the ego.

For me, opening my business was about the art, the people, and the belief that I could bring more to the industry because I looked at it from a business perspective while maintaining a respect for the art and culture of tattooing. It was my dream that the artistic value of tattoos and piercings be showcased in a positive environment for the artists and the clients. Though it is an industry that can be portrayed to have a quazi-rockstar persona for the artists and owners of shops, the reality behind each successful tattoo shop is a lot of long hours, hard work, and self-motivation to continually produce quality artwork and attract clients.

Part of the responsibility that artists in my studio have is educating their clientele about safe body art. Leading by example, I have taken on that responsibility as an owner to educate my community by teaching safe body art to high school groups and youth facilities. This came about from the health officials deciding they were going to add a safe body art component to a program they were running in high schools about risks.

The health board secretly sent around representatives to every tattoo and piercing studio in the city. They posed as clients and asked for a tour of our facility along with loads of questions. The next day the “customer” I had

helped came back and told me that she was an administrator for the health board and they were inconspicuously “interviewing” all of the tattoo and piercing studios to see which one would be the best representative to teach safe body art. I was honored by the offer of being the chosen representative. It was because of our knowledge and commitment to providing the best experience possible that we were selected. Needless to say, for a fledgling business the opportunity provided a more positive image and reputation than any amount of advertising could have given us. It also verified that my concepts for creating a higher level of professionalism within the industry locally had paid off. This is, in part, why I believe there is always something new to learn within the industry, and researching new methods and executing them for the betterment of both my clients’ experience and my artists’ abilities has always been a priority for me as an owner. Because of this priority, I have included health-related information in this book to help keep our industry clean and safe.

With the tattoo industry gaining such notoriety you will be hard pressed to find a town or city that does not have at least one studio already operating, so you will have to make sure what you plan to offer is different and innovative. It is helpful to find your own niche, something not already offered by other studios in your area, and focus on it. Competition between studios can be fierce or friendly, depending on the location, so be prepared to have a thick skin. You will also find that keeping on top of the industry and new developments is an asset to this type of business, which will also be discussed in this book.

To enter into the tattoo and piercing industry, it is a necessity to be artistically talented or creative. It is not enough to think it would be a cool job because you have a few tattoos or

piercings. To view a studio as only a business or, worse yet, as a status symbol, would be to operate at only half of its potential. I have seen a few shops open and close within six months because they employed that kind of mentality. A tattoo studio can be a very rewarding venture, but is certainly not for the faint of heart.

This industry has little to no franchises as of yet so there is still room for small businesses to operate. This fact allows more uniqueness between studios within the tattoo and piercing world.

Coming from a background in economic development, I knew my ideas could be highly profitable if I was willing to put in the effort to maintain a higher standard. There are many benefits to opening a tattoo and piercing studio and my experience in doing so has taught me many valuable lessons. The journey has not been without its own sets of trials and tribulations which at times have been very stressful. Some of the unexpected trials have entailed theft by employees, the stress of worrying if the staff is making enough money, and if they are happy with their jobs. There is a constant burden of wondering how the business is doing even when I am on a vacation or just at home for the evening, not to mention the balancing act of trying to keep artists adhering to a schedule and rules while allowing their creative talents to flow. However, the fulfillment I feel, knowing I have created a successful business, is a feeling that is hard to match.

By owning your own tattoo studio you will get to see your ideas and concepts come to life through hard work and determination, which is very rewarding. To be the one making all the decisions can be the most empowering or the most deflating experience.

The best parts of this industry are the people I have met, the artistic ideas that have

transpired between the clients and the artists, and watching everything come to fruition. This industry's acceptance and embracing of new ideas of body modification never ceases to amaze me. Being witness to the tears of joy when a memorial tattoo is finished or to see a group of people come out of the piercing room full of laughter and excitement is a true perk of the job.

There are also the comical moments. One of the most off-the-wall concepts that I have had the privilege to bear witness to was a urinal back piece, like the ones you find in a public men's washroom, covering the entire back, complete with the urinal cake!

I would recommend that anyone thinking of opening a tattoo and piercing studio really understand the process of tattooing and piercing. It can be very involved and more demanding than one might think, and to not understand it could result in many problems.

Throughout this book we will discuss the various steps to opening, running, and maintaining a successful tattoo and piercing studio, while highlighting the important aspects particular to this industry. In writing this book, our hope is that you, the reader, will open a studio that benefits the tattoo and piercing industry. Opening a clean, organized, and safe studio will benefit the industry as a whole and it will also benefit your business.

You will find many books out there on how to become a tattoo apprentice and they will go into detail about the industry from that perspective. This book is from the perspective of a successful business owner and it will help you start your own studio from the beginning. This book will help you get on the right track to running a successful tattoo and body piercing studio.

The CD included with this book contains some work from the artists that have worked at Jaded Body Arts Inc., along with links to information to further your understanding of the tattoo industry and the regulations and health codes for many areas across the United States

and Canada. We hope to encourage strong morals and ethics in regards to the procedures used to perform the tattoos and piercings in your studio. The CD also includes worksheets to help keep your business organized.



# *Is This Business Right for You?*

In most areas in North America, you don't need to be an artist or piercer to start and run your own tattoo and body piercing business. However, you do need to do the research and have an understanding and respect for the industry in order to make it.

Many studios fail due to the owner's lack of business skills. Many artistic types of people are not cut out to do the business side, just like not all businesspeople are qualified to become tattoo artists or body piercers. Starting and running a business requires just as much skill as the services (i.e., tattooing and piercing) you are offering to clients. A balanced combination of understanding business aspects as well as

the artistry is crucial in this industry. If you are getting into this industry just for the money or lifestyle, then your business may be doomed from the beginning. You need to love what goes into creating the art and understand how to run a business in order to succeed.

The tattooing and piercing industry can be very competitive and territorial. Note that if you are opening the studio as a businessperson as opposed to a businessperson/artist, you may not get a lot of support, understanding, or information from others in the industry. Also note that in some locations in North America, you cannot own a studio without having at least a 50 percent partnership with someone

who is a licensed tattoo artist. You can find this information by reading the regulations set out by your state or provincial government. The website EveryTattoo.com includes information about each state's laws; however, for the most up-to-date information, check with your state or provincial government.

Your decisions and responsibilities in this industry reach far beyond what type of advertising to choose or what decor to go with; the reality is your decisions could result in infections to clients, allergic reactions, severe illness, or in some extreme instances, death. Tattooing and piercing should be viewed as minor surgical procedures by the artists, piercers, support staff, and owner.

Also, many moral and ethical decisions will be encountered, such as whether to allow faces to be tattooed, whether to allow names to be tattooed, whether you will purchase a lower-quality ink that contains heavy metals even though it is legal but will limit the customer from ever having a medical MRI in the future. What about purchasing body jewelry that contains nickel because it's less expensive, even though most people have an allergy to nickel? These are just a few of the many decisions you will need to consider when opening your studio.

Passion may keep you interested but you should continually be looking for ways to improve and grow your business. This in turn leads to success and innovation. When people think that they know everything is most often when failure occurs.

Before you begin writing your business plan (as discussed in Chapter 3), consider the topics in this chapter. You need to know if this is the right business for you. Motivation, thick skin, connections in the industry, financial savings, and support from others are all things you will need to get started and to continue if you want to succeed.

## 1. You Must Have Motivation

It can take two years or more before you finally make a profit. So you will need to have the motivation to stick with it until you can make money for all your hard work.

When you are setting up your business you will put in a lot of long hours. When you finally open the doors the long hours will continue until you can afford to hire the staff to help you. Many new business owners suffer burnout from the effort and stress involved in setting up and then running a business. Be prepared mentally for this strain.

Take a good hard look at what type of worker you are. Are you self-motivated or do you need someone to push you to get things done? If you are not self-motivated, and you have a lot of tasks left undone in your current job or home life, this may be an indicator that you will not perform well as a business owner.

If you don't understand how to do something, will you do research to find out how to go about the task the right way or will you just wing it and hope for the best? If you are serious about opening a business, then you will need to do the research. Reading this book is a good start, but you will still have to find out information after reading it, such as what are the health regulations in your area? What are the zoning laws? What type of insurance do you need? These are all questions you need to find answers for among many more, in order to open your business and make it a success.

In your current job, do you need praise in order to feel motivated? As a business owner, you will not have a boss to give you praise. Instead, you will need to make sure your business is running smoothly and that your clients

return happy in order for you to feel like you are doing a good job. Some days will be hard and filled with complaining customers, while other days you may find your customers filled with the joy of having a beautiful piece of art on their skin.

## 2. You Must Have Thick Skin

Not everyone will be happy that you are opening up shop in their neighborhood. You may have opposition. It is not unusual for people to protest something they don't understand or support. How will you deal with protestors outside your shop demanding you shut down your business?

What if you found the perfect location to rent in a strip mall, but the neighboring businesses refuse to allow the landlord to rent to you? Will you get mad and yell at them or will you try to talk to them about it? Maybe you will have to consider a different location and let that place go. (See Chapter 2 for more information on finding a good location.)

You may also encounter criticism from others in the industry who do not want a similar business setting up shop in the same area or city. How will you make your studio different or get along with others in the same industry located in the same area?

As mainstream as the industry has become in recent years, there is still a fair amount of stigma attached to operating or working at a studio. How will you deal with the prejudices and opinions of other people when you tell them what type of business you own? As an owner you are the frontperson of your business. Always. No matter where you are, your responses and interactions will have direct impact on your business.

As you can see, you need a thick skin to start up and successfully run a tattoo and body piercing studio. This type of business, more than other small businesses, can have a lot of unexpected challenges. However, if you are determined and have a plan, then you can get through any opposition you face.

## 3. The Importance of Connections in the Industry

Connections in the tattoo and body piercing world are important. You need to find good artists. Businesspeople who lack artistic talent themselves may have a harder time attracting artists to work in their studios as they may lack an understanding of the needs and requirements of the artists. However, many artists like to concentrate on the artwork and not the business aspects, so you may find some artists that are willing to work for you doing the creative work while you deal with the paperwork.

A new studio may have trouble attracting veteran artists due to the fact that it's new and hasn't proven itself yet. It may be easier to hire newer artists who need a break into the industry, but you will still need to know where to find good artists. So where do you begin?

You begin by researching the industry and finding connections and places that advertise for artists looking for work. You also have to consider whether the artists will bring a client base. If they are extremely new to the industry themselves, then you can't count on them having an already established clientele. (See Chapters 9 and 10 for more information about finding artists and piercers.)

Networking, getting to know people in the industry, going to tattoo conventions, and

talking to other owners may provide you with some valuable connections. Having a general interest in learning and wanting to improve the industry where you're living will also go a long way to ensuring you receive proper information from associates. Know where your information is coming from and back it up with your own research. A caveat: It is not unheard of for existing shops to attempt to sabotage new shops at start-up.

## 4. Be Prepared Financially

The most negative aspect to opening your own studio is the risk. For example, the risk of losing all your hard-earned investment (i.e., bankruptcy), and having wasted hours of time and effort only to be left with nothing and still owing money. For some individuals this can cause serious mental and physical setbacks, and deepening of the financial loss over time.

Another negative aspect is the unpredictability of income; basically how money will come in and when. When you cannot determine your cash flow, making a budget or just paying the bills can be difficult and extremely stressful.

Determining start-up costs is a difficult task; it is a good idea to have at least three to six months of money to carry you if minimal money comes in. Also note the unpaid hours you spend to start up a business will reach into the hundreds.

Unless you are independently wealthy you will probably have to make some lifestyle adjustments, meaning cutbacks to your personal spending from the start, until clients are gained and revenue starts coming in. Statistics have proven time and time again that the failure rate of new businesses is much higher than for existing ones. Lack of staff at the beginning can be difficult if you become ill or need time

off, because there will be no one to cover for you if you cannot afford to close the business for that time.

It is almost impossible to dedicate the time needed to open a new studio if you have a current full-time job. But if your new business is not making money, how do you pay the bills at the business and at home?

One of the last hurdles to consider is the amount of effort and sheer number of things that need to be completed in a timely manner to open; it is intense to say the least. Costs will quickly add up and so will the pressure to do everything right.

See Chapters 3 and 4 for more information on business planning and financials.

## 5. Have a Support System

In starting a new business you must have the support of your partner or spouse if you have one, as this endeavor will also change his or her life. The extremely long hours spent in the first few years are intense, as are the many stressful situations that will be encountered, not to mention the financial stress at the start. Without your partner truly supporting you, failure of your business or relationship could be possible.

Having someone listen to you vent about the business, or give you advice and help you solve problems may be what you need to keep you motivated and moving forward in your plans. Also, having someone there to celebrate and remind you of the small and big rewards of a job well done can be a great way to keep you going when times are tough.