

From Overwhelmed to Empowered: Navigating Neurodiversity as a Service Business Owner with Maggie Peterson (she/her/hers)

Here's what we're talking about today:

If you run a service business, if you're a coach, a consultant, or a creative, you have probably experienced the feeling that these things don't really work for me.

How we're taught to run our service-based business, doesn't serve us. We run ourselves ragged trying to do all these things for our clients, trying to fit into a mold.

Today we are going to talk about a twofold thing of the typical advice that doesn't work necessary if you're a neurodivergent, and the online business advice that doesn't always adapt well for a service-based business.

Common advice doesn't always work for us or fit how we approach our businesses and how we think. It leaves us feeling frustrated or frazzled. It might leave you feeling burnt out. I have felt all these things at different junctures of my business career.

If you felt any of those things or you're simply starting out with our service business, you've been running for a while and you want to improve on things, you are in the right place.

Who am I?

I am Maggie Patterson, the creator of BS-Free Business. I have twenty-five years of communications and marketing experience, and have been self-employed for eighteen years. I have been in the online space since 2013, and am an agency owner (Scoop Studios), and I have mentored hundreds of business owners.

I am also neurodivergent. My specific flavor of neurodivergency includes ADHD, anxiety and depression, and I also have dyscalculia. If you're not familiar with dyscalculia, it's basically numerical dyslexia, so numbers are challenging.

You can't run a service business if you can't serve yourself:

A lot of people run themselves into the ground serving clients and they believe that working with the clients is the problem.

What really happens is that we run ourselves into the ground trying to be everything to everyone. We:

- Offer too many services
- We work too much,

And, so we cannot run our service business effectively.

Online business does service business owners dirty

A lot of what we see in online business is trash talk about other service businesses, myths about service businesses and things made to make us feel bad about ourselves, abandon our businesses, and buy expensive things. We invest, we buy, and we even sell our own fair share of “things” to our clients.

From my perspective, most people selling to service businesses don't even run service based businesses any longer. What they are doing is positioning service businesses, and positioning client work as your villain... and it doesn't need to be that way.

Especially ND ones...

I believe if your a neurodivergent, the way advise is dispensed there are a lot of rigid frameworks that:

- Can make us feel misunderstood
- Make us feel like the advise doesn't work for us
- Make us frustrated as we try and try again
- We put our effort in, and it just doesn't connect

The “I did it and you can too” culture is toxic

This is everywhere. It isn't an online business but a much larger systemic problem, especially in North American culture. It's the idea that you should be able to figure it out, pull yourself up by your bootstraps because we all start from the same place.

This is toxic.

This feeling is what is going to move you forward today to feeling much better about how to run your service business and figuring out a way forward.

Cookie cutter solutions

We don't need them. Nobody needs to be told what they are doing is wrong.

This is especially important when so many things that are taught are actually harmful to anyone with any sort of difference.

As a neurodivergent person, you cannot necessarily approach things the same way. For you to be told to follow the five step formula might actually feel terrible for you. Sure you can muddle your way through it, but it feels terrible.

This is not a YOU thing, it's a symptom of greater forces in the industry

Service of businesses are the villain, cookie-cutter advice, the I did it and you can too culture it makes a lot of assumptions about us. We're all unique individuals.

Favorite quote

I love this quote because this is really the heart of what we're going to talk about today.

My goal in this is not to provide prescriptive advice, it's to give you a jumping-off point for you to explore and give yourself a little bit of permission.

This quote is from one of my absolute favorite podcasters, Michael Hobbes. He's the co-host of *If Books Could Kill* and *Maintenance Phase* podcasts.

"The only thing that's available is this generic take the stairs instead of the elevator advice. You cannot meaningfully help people unless you understand the specifics of their situation."

If you are not working with someone who understands the specifics of your situation, who is providing one-on-one support, who understands what it's like to be neurodivergent, these things are going to become a little more challenging.

Examples of business advice we receive

- **Planning should be done yearly or quarterly** - for me I prefer to plan seasonally because I need to account for certain things
- **You need to have set days for specific types of work** - setting specific days to do specific tasks. This may or may not work for you.
- **You need to have calls with clients** - this really depends on your client and what works best for them.
- **You need to market a certain way** - there are so many different ways to market your business, and everything doesn't work for everyone based on your energy and your sensory capacity
- **You need to create content and be everywhere to be successful** - this is a way to get burned out for a lot of people, and it's not true. If you run a service business, you are not a content creator; you are a service business owner, and content creation is part of your marketing strategy.
- **You need to use an XYZ tool or system** - these systems come and go.
- **You need to scale your service business with a program** - if you want to great, but this is one of the biggest misconceptions with running a service business.

Every example I just shared, none of them are required. You can choose your own adventure when it comes to running your service business, and you can do it in a way that is going to be in service of you, let you show up for your clients, and let you run a business that's actually going to work for your brain, and more importantly your life.

All of this advice is reductive and it leaves us feeling overwhelmed.

Typical Teachings

Often rely on reductive, overly simplistic solutions.

Period.

If you take nothing else away today, take this. Have a part of your brain that challenges every time something is taught to you to see if it is going to work for you.

You get to choose what works for you and leave the rest.

To the rule followers... permission granted

I have created a permission slip for you to print out and leave by your desk. Feel free to contact me for your own copy (details below).

The permission slip reminds us that we don't need to do that thing.

If you are a person that needs permission, this is for you.

Why?

We have dispensed the business advice. We have thrown some of it away.

You may be wondering what to do instead.

A lot of it starts with the foundational things.

Foundational Things

Remember you are in a service business, you are creative, you are a service professional, and you can do this in a way that works for you because a service based business should be simple. The business itself is about:

- Marketing
- Selling
- Serving

Start by figuring out what DOES work for you and why.

One thing that works for me is I don't work on Fridays. My brain doesn't do five days a week. That's not even a function of wanting to have a day off, it's that I need to strain my capacity because I only have that much energy and emotional capacity in a given week.

What's one thing that really freaking works for you?

If you had to get up on stage right now and do a TED talk, what's one thing that you know without fail really works for you in your business, really works for your brain, really lets you feel like, "Yes, I've got this."

It's got to be at least one thing that you can look at right now and what you need in your business is more of that and less of this other stuff. Really thinking about.

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What can you learn from that?

For me, with the Fridays off, I learned my energetic capacity is not what it used to be five years ago. It's just not, so I needed to reinvent my systems. I needed to reinvent my approaches and also adjust my expectations and be kind to myself in terms of what I can or maybe not going to do in a given week.

Get curious about your various types of capacity

Ultimately, the best place for you to start is getting really curious about various types of capacity. We often talk about capacity in the context of time and workloads. We are very clinical about it. Like, "*Okay, my capacity is I can work 20 hours a week and 10 of that can be client work.*" There's way more to capacity than that.

Energetic Capacity

- **Work schedule** - maybe you don't start work til noon. Maybe you only take calls one day a week, or start calls until 4pm.
- **Types of work** - think about the types of work, creative, strategy and set specific parameters around what you can do. Oftentimes we think of our work in billable client hours and leave no room for creative strategizing.
- **Need for rest and recovery** - maybe after doing a presentation you need an entire day off to recover. Maybe you need longer weekends.
- **Daily ups and downs**
- **Seasonal cycles**

You might have things because of how your neurodivergence shows up for you where perhaps one week a month, you need to really dial it down. Knowing where you can flex up or down on energy and being very cognizant of that.

None of this is designed to be a quick fix for you to go walk away today and immediately fix all these things. I would encourage you to look at one of the things we're going to talk about regarding capacity and consider where you might be running into a bit of a roadblock and starting to really focus on that.

Emotional Capacity

This is very much impacted by the types of work you do. I feel like we talk so much about energetic capacity, but we don't talk about emotional capacity. This might be:

- **Types of work you do**
- **Types of clients**
- **Receiving feedback** - if you have issues with rejection, anxiety, or thinking your clients hate you, that's taking up a lot of emotional capacity
- **Being seen and visible** - make sure you feel safe in your business

I will give you an example. I used to work a lot with clients in the online space. I found this was not a great fit because their businesses were so precious and I felt like I was always on the emotional roller coaster, and that was really unhealthy for me. By working with corporate clients in our agency, I am able to protect my emotional capacity because I just don't have that same investment.

We don't talk about this enough, the emotional toll of sometimes our marketing activities. It's, oh, play bigger, stop playing small. Again, more neurotypical advice that makes us feel like crap.

Sensory Capacity

- **Your workspace** - do you need noise dampening or special earplugs
- **Level of peopling**
- **Communication systems** - do notifications spike your anxiety, turn your camera off in group calls, or where you need to adjust
- **Processing information** - do you need more time to do so. Setting hard boundaries with what works for you and your businesses.

Create processes to communicate how you work. For example, in our agency contracts we communicate how we receive feedback, that we do not receive feedback on a call.

You can create those boundaries.

That may feel like a lot for you, just think about where it can make small improvements to make things feel like they're serving you better.

Incremental improvements over time do add up.

Explore what things may be causing friction for you in your business

There's so many things on a day-to-day basis that are just like tiny chipping away at you, day in, day out. These includes:

- **Specific tools** - perhaps the project management system someone set up for you does not work for your brain, so you don't use it and things slip by
- **Client processes** - that you have in place and need to be changed or refined.
- **Level of peopling** - that you can energetically handle within a week and sustain. Perhaps move clients to Voxer, or decrease their number of check-ins with you
- **Communication systems**

- **Communication styles** - do you read to processes? Or do you have verbal processors? Learn the best ways (and systems for you to communicate)
- **Marketing** - perhaps your marketing leaves you too exposed, and it's energetically taxing for you.

There are always different ways to do things.

Maybe you haven't thought of it yet.

Or perhaps you thought that others wouldn't go for that.

It will work.

Focus on observation versus judgment. It's not good or bad, it just is.

Commit to experimenting

Commit to experimenting and see what might work for you.

You may be surprised what works for you, but going back and looking at your energy, your emotional capacity, your sensory capacity, and looking for those friction points.

I really hope that for each of you, this has given you the permission, it has given you the inspiration, if you will, to know that you can do this in a way that works for you, or that small things can make a big difference.

Ultimately, so that we don't have that universal you must do typical business advice, you must do-- there is no you must do.

You can figure out a way to do this that will indeed work for you.

Finally, the reason I didn't give you prescriptive advice is because what works for my neurodivergent brain may not work for yours. Your friend over here, that's also in the summit, what works for them may not work for you.

Be open to seeing what might work for other people.

It's really important that we don't set expectations and we're not trying to be super prescriptive.

That we understand how our special flavors and what makes each of us unique,

That means we need unique solutions to our individual challenges, or how our brain functions on a day-to-day basis.

Do what you need to do to support you as a business owner, the rest you can figure out.

What you need and what works for you will likely change and evolve over time. Be a really attentive and curious person. Ask questions about what is going on, what may have shifted, or if you need to make updates or changes.

Stop worrying about how other people are doing it. It doesn't matter.

Stay in touch! (or “take this further!” or whatever works)

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I look forward to chatting with more of you and thank you so much for checking this out.