

It's always the little things . . .

My grandfather lived to be nearly 103. Or it might have been 102. We were never quite sure. All we knew was he crossed the "Little Water" (the Black Sea) and then the "Big Water" (the Atlantic Ocean) at the age of 11.

He was at various points in his life a farmer, an entrepreneur, a pinochle savant, a lay leader in his church . . .

And a bootlegger.

Which would have worked out fine except for the smudge of coal on his brother Joe's nose.

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Peter and Margaret Wickenheiser married in 1916 on a freezing winter day in North Dakota. To reach the church in town they rode across miles of prairie in a horse-drawn sleigh, blankets bundled around their legs and heated stones warming their feet.

During the first years of their marriage they farmed near Strasburg, but in the early 1920s they moved their growing family into town and Grandpa started a pool hall with his brother Joe. Prohibition had arrived a few years earlier, but of course the customers expected something more than just a chance to rack 'em up and play a little eight-ball . . .

So Grandpa and brother Joe built a still in the basement and ran a tidy little business selling shots upstairs. Everybody in town probably knew about it, but nobody seemed to care.

Except the revenuers, the federal agents chasing moonshiners. These guys followed rumors from town to town like a mongrel sniffing its way down an alley and one day appeared at the Wickenheiser pool hall.

The brothers had been warned by half the town that the Feds were on the way, so they took precautions. They started hiding their still by covering it with some of the coal from the chute on the other side of the basement.

Trouble was . . . the revenuers arrived before they were finished moving the coal, so Grandpa had to stall them upstairs while Joe finished the job.

Trouble was . . . Joe failed to erase all the evidence. When he arrived upstairs to join the others, one of the revenueurs noticed the smudge on the side of his nose.

Trouble was . . . it was summer. Nobody needed coal in the summer. It just sat there in the chute waiting for the weather to change.

“Hey, Joe, what’s that on your nose?”

Well, my goodness. Grandpa and his brother were among the leading citizens in Strasburg. They were lay leaders at St. Peter & Paul Catholic Parish, respected members of the business community, all-round good fellows.

Even the judge thought so.

But he had no choice. Sentenced them to a stretch in the big house in Bismarck, about 75 miles away.

The cops in Strasburg didn’t even bother sending an escort. Grandpa and brother Joe drove themselves up to the prison and checked in for their 60-day sentence. The warden promptly made them trustees and gave them the run of the place.

Thus ended my Grandfather’s criminal career. Made a great story for the grandkids, though . . .

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Jeffrey Sudikoff founded IDB Communications Group in 1983 and built one of the world’s largest telecommunications companies. Eleven years later he shared with *Inc.* columnist Norm Brodsky a lesson he’d learned immediately: “A start-up needs to focus on little things,” he emphasized. “Not the global strategy. Not the Big Plan.”

But his lesson isn’t relevant only for startups. It’s *always* the little things:

- ♦ Tony Wagner realized almost immediately his training as a nonprofit manager in Minneapolis didn’t prepare him for the realities of operating a business. “I’d been running a nonprofit for more than 25 years,” he once told me, “but I never had to watch the numbers *every day* until I started a social enterprise.”
- ♦ Rich Gilmartin grew a tiny social enterprise into a \$60 million holding company based in Pensacola that spans nine states and the District of Columbia. Gulf Coast Enterprises operates 12 businesses and employs more than 1,600 people, most of them disabled or disadvantaged, and Rich believes one of the key ingredients for success has been concentrating on the little things that make customer service special. He explained what he meant a few years ago by telling me about his custodial services company. “If you just do what people expect, and that’s it,” he said, “they almost don’t know you’re there -- and when it comes time for contract renewal or adding contracts there’s no substantial

advantage. On the other hand, it makes a difference if you do something a little out of the ordinary, like leaving behind your business card with a handwritten note, or leaving a Hershey's candy kiss on someone's desk, or if you find a \$5 bill on the floor calling it to the attention of the ownership instead of shoving it in your pocket and walking away. It all sets a tone that's different from what customers typically expect."

- ♦ And Dave McDonough 's Los Angeles social enterprise had a bad accounts receivable problem as it went through a growth surge in the 1990s and "we discovered the primary reason was our inability to get our invoices out on time. Then when they *did* go out they were wrong! So the customer would say, 'Well, this one's wrong, I'll just set it over here.' It was amazing, really. So we hired a woman for our finance department who had a background in collections -- and it turned out it wasn't really a collections issue at all as much as it was a follow-up issue. After that we made sure the invoices went out on time, called customers to follow up, and in just a few months went from having about 60 per cent of our accounts receivable unpaid after 90 days to having the bulk of them paid within 45 days."

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So you might want to ask yourself a simple question: What are you overlooking that could either endanger or enhance your business?

And you probably shouldn't depend solely on your own checklist.

Why not ask your employees?

After all, they're closer to the little things than you are . . .