



Principle #1

Find Your Focus and Develop Your Niche

Successful creative entrepreneurs are very focused on a single career. They easily define what they do when asked, and they work daily to develop a deep and narrow niche within their field. Having both a career focus as well as a niche allows them to become go-to experts who command the highest fees with the least competition.

This is absolutely crucial for success. Yet so many creatives resist making a definitive career choice. Instead, they spend valuable time and energy on a multitude of projects where they remain overworked and spread too thin, rarely reaching their financial goals. I've never seen a successful painter who is a bookkeeper on the side, nor a famous singer who also sells real estate for a living. In fact, virtually all successful creatives are deep niche specialists in a single field. If you as a creative entrepreneur do many things, but you don't do one of them very well, your chance of success is slim.

Jane Needs a Focus

I recently met a new client named Jane. When I asked her what she does she replied, "I'm a voice over artist for commercials, teach speech, coach sales people and write articles for magazines as a free lance author." Does Jane actually do all of these things? Yes, sometimes. Does she make money? No, not much. In fact, she is working part time as a waitress to pay her bills. When I met her she was disappointed, frustrated and trying desperately to hold on to her dream of having a full-time career as a voice over artist—a dream that she thought she was going to have to give up. She asked me, "Why can't I make money doing what I love?" I said, "There's an easy answer. It's because you're not focused on being an expert voice over artist. And when you're not in focus, you spread out all of your valuable time and money resources on projects that don't really matter." I knew our work together was just getting started.

Why is it so Hard for Creatives to Focus?

As an entrepreneur and a creative you are likely the kind of person who sees possibilities everywhere. At the same time you may be afraid that if you focus and specialize within one career you may miss other opportunities to earn money. This is understandable, but remember Jane was unable to support herself even though she had four businesses going at once! And this is usually the case. Focusing is the key to success as a creative entrepreneur.

Common fears that may hold you back from a true focus:

- **You are afraid you might make the wrong career choice and will never find enough work to support yourself.**
- **You worry that you may not be good enough to succeed.**
- **There is a part of you that whispers, “Who do you think you are? That career is way beyond your reach.”**
- **You take the path of least resistance in order to have immediate money, even when the money is insufficient for your needs.**
- **You are afraid to take a great leap into your dream career and instead wander off on a path that does not fulfill you emotionally, spiritually or monetarily.**

There are two kinds of fear: one that indicates danger and one that indicates a new and exciting adventure. When you know the difference, you can turn the excited fear into an energy that propels you forward. This is the secret of all great athletes and performers. Like them, you can use your fear as a catalyst to choose a career focus.

Am I a Focused Entrepreneur?

The following questions will show you where you are now in terms of focus, and the exercise will help you create a clear picture of the one area you want to pursue as you move forward towards a successful career.

How do I describe the type of work I do?

What do I consider my greatest expertise?

What other projects do I have going at this time that are separate from this expertise?

What would be my career focus if I didn't have to worry about money?

Do I have a day job I want to quit?

Can I answer the question “What do you do?” with a few short sentences?

What does my heart say it wants to do?

Exercise: Find Your Focus

The following exercise will help you get clear on where you are now in terms of your business and then help you find work that fits the four criteria of success in your field: talent, passion, money and growth. In the chart below you will rate your current career choices in the following areas:

- **I am really good at this work (talent)**
- **I really love this work (passion)**
- **There is a market for this work (money)**
- **There is a strong future for this work (growth)**

Your goal is to find a focus that meets all four of the above categories. This is a good time to be brutally honest with yourself. It may be you have a great talent and passion for what you do, but it’s not a viable source of income. Or you may be paid generously but you have no passion for the work and you dread even one more day of the project. It’s important to note that the goal of this exercise is for you to find an area of focus for your business, not a ranking for current individual projects within your focus. This would be a niche and is discussed later in the chapter. An example follows at the end of the exercise.

Directions:

List each type of work that you do on the chart below. Give a rating of 1-5 in each category listed with one as the lowest and five the highest. Total the points for each. If the work rates less than 16 points, it is not usually the area on which you should focus. The goal is to concentrate on a career that rates between 16 and 20 points. If two are tied, analyze them in more detail until you can truly choose your future focus.

Work	Talent	Passion	Money	Growth	Total Score
Work	Rate 1-5	Rate 1-5	Rate 1-5	Rate 1-5	

It's not necessary for your focus to be perfect in every category. Look at the strength of your answers. Are you really talented and really passionate? Do you make really good money and have a focus with really good growth potential? Or are one or two of those criteria only mediocre for most of your offerings?

The results of this exercise may surprise you. So many creatives focus on the wrong area without knowing why their work isn't successful. Once you have a better idea of your future choices, you will begin to shape your business to deliver the product or service that best meets the combined criteria. This is when you take the plunge and let the other paths you have taken move to the background. If you are a creative who does have a specific career focus but would like to become more successful in your area, you will come back to this exercise and use it to find your niche.

Ed's Story

Here is a sample from Ed, one of my clients who has two different careers. He knows that he loves being a fishing and river guide, but he has never really focused on that career. Rather, he keeps taking on small, low paying jobs painting houses.

Work	Talent	Passion	Money	Growth	Total Score
Work	Rate 1-5	Rate 1-5	Rate 1-5	Rate 1-5	
House painter	5	2	2	3	12
Odds and ends construction	4	2	2	2	10
Fishing/ River Guide	5	5	5	5	20

I asked Ed why he would choose to work as a painter and construction worker when it was very obvious that working as a fishing and river guide fulfilled all four criteria for a passionate and lucrative business. This is especially true as he is known for his expert knowledge of Northwest Salmon fishing and history. He said, “Jackie, I know that I want to be a guide. I am the best around, especially on the river I float. I belong to associations and I have two boats and all of the equipment and licenses and receive excellent reviews from my clients. But I have to make money for my family. I am always sucked back into the painting even though I have to drive around town posting ads just to get work. Especially in the winter. I can’t see being a guide full time because I just don’t know how to find the time and resources and marketing ideas to keep it

going. I get energetic about it sometimes, but then start to feel overwhelmed and the next thing I know I'm back painting."

Ed had a decision to make. After we talked, he decided to stop driving around town posting painting flyers and instead create a plan to find fishing clients. He first called all of his former clients and said he would enjoy working with them again. Then he wrote an article for a fishing magazine that was accepted within a week after sending it out. He also started posted his opinions and advice on various online fishing chat boards, and he started working with a fishing gear store nearby the river he floats. Word got around that he was back in business, and he is now making much more money than he did painting. And most importantly, he loves what he does.

I always tell my clients that choosing a focus doesn't mean you have to immediately stop all that you are currently doing and rush blindly into a new career. There is certainly a transition time, but it's a transition with a purpose. You will decrease the work you do that doesn't fit the four criteria for success and increase your energy and talent towards your new body of work.

Jane's Story continued...

Jane tried very hard to make a choice between doing voice overs and developing speech training. She continually told me that she wanted a career in voice overs and shared that she eventually wanted to voice film animation. But she could not give up the money she was making teaching speech. Over and over again she would say she was committed to her voice over business, but then an opportunity would come up to "just teach one speech class." She would look at the "easy money" she was going to get for teaching and she would turn her focus to the class. An audition for a lucrative voice over contract came up, but Jane was too busy teaching. She had lost her momentum and another, more focused entrepreneur got the job.

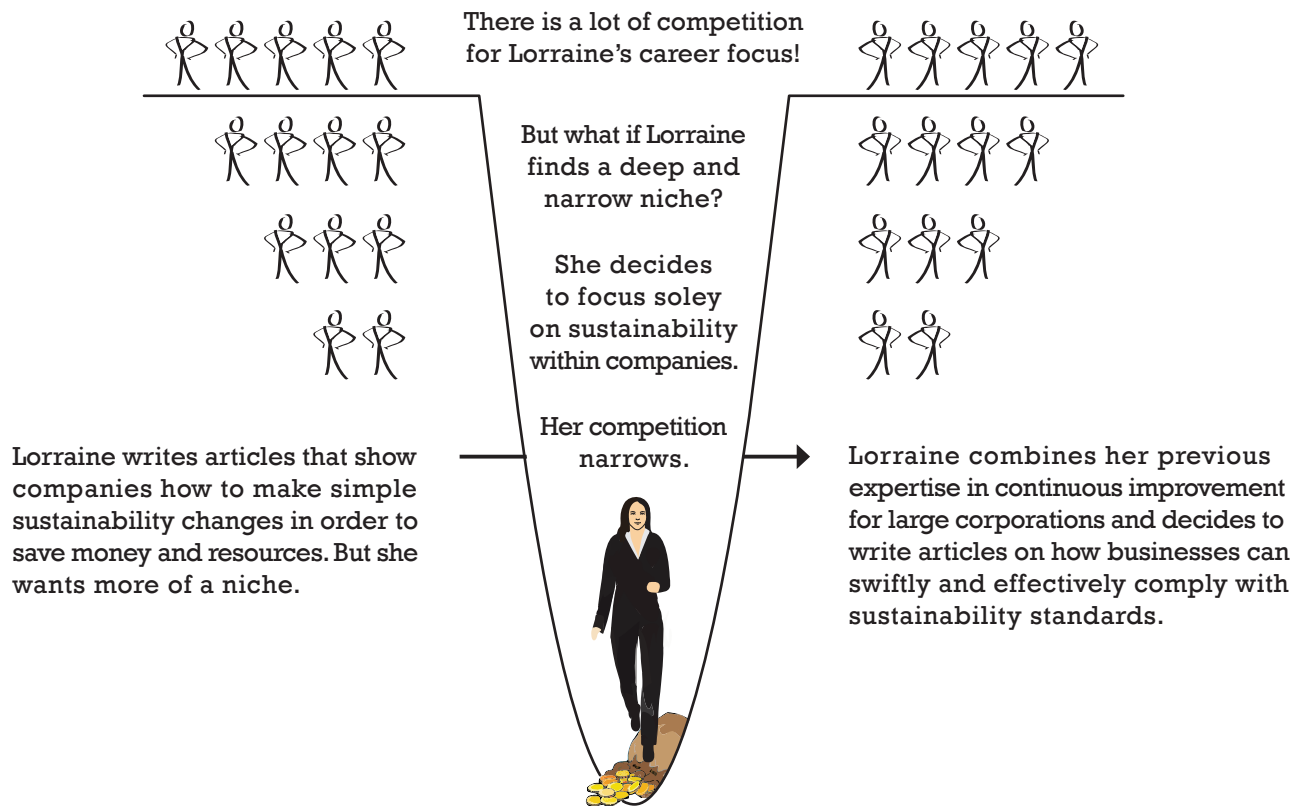
What work have you lost because of an inability to choose one career path?

Niche: The Gold at the Bottom of the Well

Once you have chosen a career focus, you can then turn your attention to finding your niche within that career. I define a niche as any special service you offer in your business that few others can provide. A niche makes you a 'go to' expert and allows you to command a higher price just for this reason. I call your niche the gold at the bottom of the well. Think of the successful creative entrepreneurs you admire. Do they specialize? Of course they do. In fact, the most successful creative entrepreneurs are so sure of where they fit in their career, they work in that area only.

The following graphic demonstrates how choosing a deep and narrow niche in your field leads to higher compensation, less competition and more clients. I use the example of my client Lorraine, a writer who wants to focus on a career in sustainable lifestyles. She knows her competition is high in this general field as many people write about sustainability these days. Here is an example of how Lorraine found a successful niche within the sustainable writing field.

Lorraine: Writer on the topic of green living and sustainability Opportunities: Magazines, Books, Websites, Blogs, Articles



**The least competition with the highest fees.
Lorraine's niche = Gold at the bottom of the well.**

As you can see in this example, a niche reduces your competition. When you offer a broad array of services within a career, you become vulnerable to competition at every point along the line. It's important to remember that having a niche does not eliminate the clients you really want. Instead, it winnows out those who do not serve you. A niche also makes it incredibly easy to market yourself. If Lorraine is at a business event and says that she works as a writer in the sustainability field, the listener will know what she means, but if she says, "I write books and articles on how businesses can go green in a short amount of time, even when they have limited resources. I am especially interested in helping businesses comply with world standards regarding sustainability," the listener knows that this is a writer who knows her talents and has taken the time to do what she does best. This is what leads to an interesting conversation, a valuable business connection and the promise of future work.

Write your 100% dream job here:

Finding Your Niche

If you are unsure of your niche, or would like to go even deeper into your chosen field, answer the following questions:

1. Is there some part of your body of work that very few people do?

2. Is there something that distinguishes you from others in your craft?

3. Is there some trend that you can see forming: a trend that is creating demand that as yet is unfilled?

4. Is there some part of your work for which clients are willing to pay a premium?

5. Is there some part of your work for where you are possibly the only expert?

6. Is there some part of your work that you love, it fulfills you and, when you do it people comment about it and refer you to others?

Joanne's Story

One of my clients, Joanne, has a very clear focus. She is a massage therapist. The problem is that there are literally thousands of massage therapists in the US. She consulted me about how to distinguish herself so that she could make a nice living doing what she loved. We brainstormed many ideas, when suddenly she said:

“What I really want to do is massage for members of rock bands. I have had this dream forever, of being hired by the bands that come into town to work with the musicians before and after their performances. I love the music and have a great admiration for them and how hard they work to entertain us. I have always had a secret dream of owning an Airstream trailer that I outfit as a massage treatment room, and use it to travel with the musicians and am part of their support system.”

Joanne certainly knew her niche. I have learned that many creatives have a dream they tell very few people about, usually because they are afraid of ridicule or having their idea dismissed. I have also learned that when someone is talking to me and they lean forward and say, “What I really want to do is...,” that they are finally speaking their heart, rather than what they have decided they must “settle for.” When I hear those words, my job is to help them figure out if it is possible to make that vision a reality. And it usually is with focused thinking, planning and determination.

Joanne and I brainstormed a lot about how she could make her dream come true. We made a budget and a plan. She began to let music agents, booking agents and clubs know that she was a massage therapist who specialized in working with musicians and that she would even be available at 3AM after shows and would travel if necessary. Her first big job was at a regional music festival. From there

she made connections to other venues and performers. She wrote a short business plan and borrowed some money to buy an Airstream trailer. She outfitted it as she had wanted, and soon she had secured a six week engagement traveling with a world-class musician. Her dream came true and Joanne developed her own niche that really didn't exist before. She is now known in her field and is paid well and doing what she loves to do.

Being as specialized as Joanne is possible. It's might not happen overnight and there can be fear and self doubt along the way, but all change goes through these phases. Joanne decided that she was talented and experienced enough to be a great masseuse, passionate enough to voice her true career desires, dedicated enough to market herself fully and fearless enough to find the money needed to get started. And finally, choosing her niche made it possible for constant growth.

Take Charge of Your Career

You are truly in control of your career when you decide to focus and find your niche. Here are the benefits of following Principle #1:

- **You can easily tell others what you do. This eliminates confusion when you meet a business prospect or referral for the first time.**
- **Marketing becomes much easier as you know exactly where to advertise, who to talk to and how to get your ideas to the public.**
- **You can command the highest prices as you are the go-to expert in your field.**
- **Competition reduces significantly.**
- **Life is less stressful and you are happier because you know who you are and where you want to go in your career. This comes across to your clients and they will want to work with you and only you.**

Remember:

As a creative entrepreneur you are a talented businessperson who sees possibilities everywhere. Choose one and become a specialist in your field.

Ann's Story

I have a client, Ann, who is a woodworker, a carpenter, a very talented artisan. She started out doing general carpentry for a window manufacturing and repair facility. She found that she not only loved the work, but she had a real talent for it. Over time, she became a specialist in building and repairing wood sash windows. There are many old buildings and homes with wood windows in her area so when she quit her job and went out on her own, she decided to specialize in building and repairing wood windows.

Ann wanted to keep her practice simple- she did not want to build a business, which would entail hiring apprentices, training others in her trade, and then having them do the work while she became the manager and marketing face of the company. In that model, Ann would no longer have time to do the work herself; the actual work on windows would be delegated out to others

Instead, Ann chose the path I call 'being the business'. In this model Ann would develop her specialty into a deep and narrow niche where she could develop a reputation as the expert. Ann totally loved working with hand tools, not power tools and she did her best and most satisfying work when she was working on projects in historic buildings. She began to focus on projects with historic preservation societies whose main interest was rebuilding or restoring buildings back to their original condition. Ann found this work to be very satisfying, profitable and possibly more recession proof than general window replacement work.

Ann built relationships with the government agencies that have a mandate to manage and preserve historic structures. To preserve buildings it is crucial that their windows be authentic, maintaining their original looks and style. Ann had found her niche. She began to market herself as an artisan who repairs and restores windows on buildings built before 1854. Why 1854? Because that's when power tools came into popular use and the windows built that way were no longer historically authentic.

All along the path to discovering and then naming her niche, Ann was uncertain that this was the right way to go. What she did know was that she loved this work, she had

pride in doing outstanding hand carpentry, she needed to make enough money to support herself and her family and she did not want to grow a business by hiring others and teaching them her skills- so that they could do the work while she ran the business. What she wanted was to do was the hands-on work itself and get paid enough to do it well.

Ann's first break came when a news reporter heard about her and filmed a feature in her shop. Ann got a copy and posted it on her web site. That publicity gave her the impetus she needed. Now potential customers could find her and find her they did. Her niche has been highly successful. When a local landmark was slated for restoration with federal funds, the selection committee told Ann that she was simply the only artisan they would hire to do the windows. They had seen her web site, checked her credentials then sought her out to give her a large federal contract.

Recently Ann told me she has sold her power tools. She no longer feels the need to hang on to them "just in case" because now she feels secure in her special niche. As a result of having a deep and narrow niche, Ann is now being solicited to do window preservation projects for buildings in other states. She has become the out of town, go-to expert. She is soon to be featured on a Public Television program about the reemergence of artisans and fine craftsmanship. She expects this will forever secure her career.