Natalie Yuse, Owner of Deckhand Detailing

Natalie talks about starting her boat detailing company in 1990, training her customers to be good customers, and includes other lessons learned in over 30 years in business.

Natalie Yuse, Deckhand Detailing · Host: Jeremy Rivera · Unscripted Small Business Podcast

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Starting Deckhand Detailing

JEREMY RIVERA

I'm Jeremy Rivera, your Unscripted Podcast host, and I'm here with Natalie Yuse. Why don't you introduce yourself and your business, focusing on the experience that led you to opening it?

NATALIE YUSE

Thanks for having me. I started my boat detailing company in 1990. I'm located in Seattle. I got started about a year after I graduated from high school. I was determined to start my own business. I came from a family of entrepreneurs, so I was like, I'm going to do it myself.

I had no experience detailing boats or anything. I did not come from a boating family. I had really never touched a boat before. And I'm afraid of water. But as a 19-year-old, it made perfect sense to start a boat detailing business! It sounded great to me at the time. So that's exactly what I did.

I went out and bought probably all of the wrong products, the wrong types of soap. I just knew nothing. The learning curve was really high. My very first job was for an old crusty sea captain who clearly saw right through me. In 1990, I didn't have Google, I didn't have a cell phone. I had the Yellow Pages and an answering machine at home. It was also the days when people thought it was okay to say, " you're a girl, do you think you can do this kind of work?" I thought he was joking and I was waiting for the punchline, but there wasn't one. He was serious.

So not only did I need to prove to myself that I believe I can do this, but also as a woman in a male-dominated industry, I really had to prove myself. And so I did. He was so impressed with my work on this dirty sailboat that he continued giving me more business, which helped me grow my business, learning as I went. It was hard work, but I stuck with it and the company grew. That was 1990, and I'm now way older, but much wiser. So it worked out.

JEREMY RIVERA

I love the journey that entrepreneurship pushes you into. You said you're literally afraid of the water. What was the inspiration? There's got to be some slight inspiration. Maybe a friend who had a dirty boat once?

NATALIE YUSE

As a 19-year-old with not much experience at all, I was thinking about what kind of business I was going to start. It had to be something where the startup costs were fairly low. I didn't have much money to start with. I didn't have any investors. It was just me. And it also had to be something I could mentally and physically do.

I initially thought of car detailing. I do have this knack for being detail-oriented, keeping things clean, taking pride in my work. I love working outdoors with my hands. But there's a million car detailers out there. Here in Seattle where I live, surrounded by boats everywhere, I'm like, wait a minute, who cleans those?

So I actually walked down to a marina and asked someone who was out on their boat. “I have a question, who cleans your boat?” And they were like, “well, we don't know of anyone, do you?” And I was like, “I'll be right back”. I literally ran to the store and bought a bucket, soap and a scrub brush.

So between the old crusty sea captain and just walking out there and asking people who does their boat cleaning, I realized I had to put myself out there. I'm an introvert and I don't like putting myself out there. So for someone who never wanted to leave the house, I had to actually go out and talk to people, and that's what made it all happen.



BEST QUOTES

> *“I train the customer to be a good customer.”*
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> **Natalie Yuse**

> *“A lot of people say, the customer is always right. No, they aren't. Sometimes they just don't know.”*
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> **Natalie Yuse**

> *“My employees to me are everything.”*

Fake it till you make it, but don't fake it till you break it

JEREMY RIVERA

Not everything takes seed capital. There are jobs that need to be done, and if you want it, you can just start paying yourself. You've been in this business for a while now. What would you say are some of the hardest lessons you've learned about entrepreneurship?

NATALIE YUSE

I just wrote a book about this. A lot of people say, I want to start a business, and I've got to get it all perfect before I start. My idea when I was younger was: fake it till you make it. I know what I'm doing and I believe in myself. I do need to hone my boat detailing skills, but just put yourself out there.

Some of the things I've learned along the way were saying yes to a job I should have said no to, because it was more advanced than what I was ready to take on. That hurt me a little bit and it set me back. I had to remind myself, wait a minute, I'm not actually invincible. I need to learn and slow it down, but at the same time keep moving forward and keep learning.

It's funny. If someone had handed me a list on a Monday of everything that's going to go wrong this week - at one point you're going to be deep inside an engine room cleaning greasy stuff you never thought you were signing up for - I'd have been like, I am out. No way. I will find an office job. But because no one did, I just kept forging ahead because I believed and I had hope. I got through it. And I kept reminding myself, this is part of the learning curve.

Now I look back and I'm very proud of myself for being in that engine room and doing all that hard work, because now I run the company and I have 25 employees who are doing all of that. When you're an entrepreneur bringing on employees, the most important thing is being able to say: I've been there in the trenches. I understand what you're going to go through and how hard you're going to work. So now my job is to support you in the best way I can.

Train the customer to be a good customer

JEREMY RIVERA

There's a trap in solopreneurship: the too-big client. Do you let the white whale go, or try to scale up quickly to capture it and end up tied to that one client? What's been your experience with right-sizing your business as you grow?

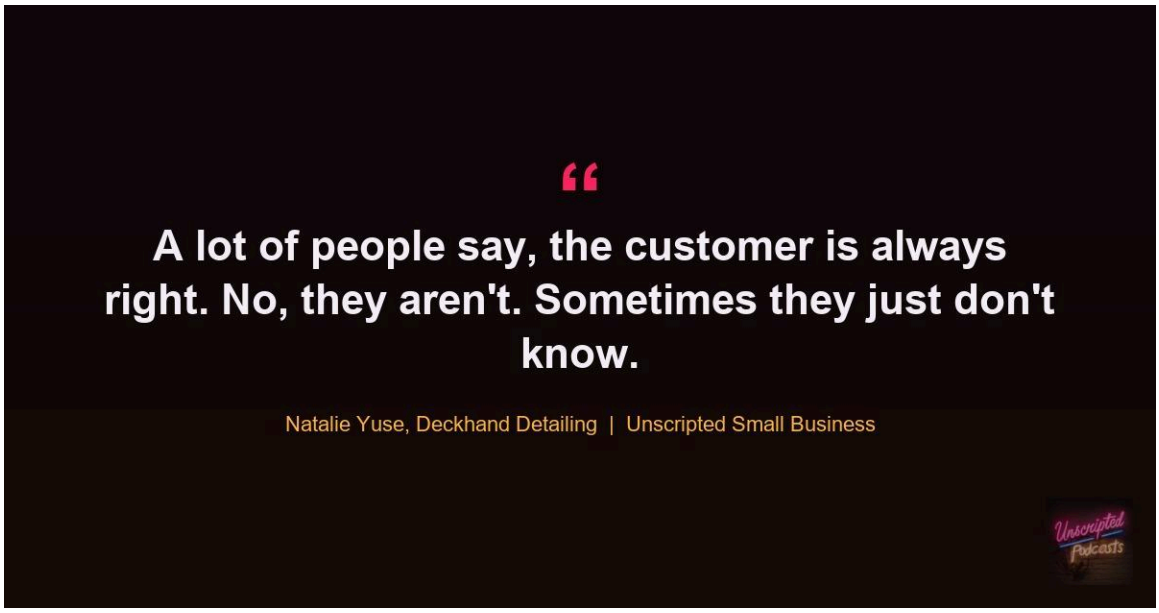
NATALIE YUSE

I think it's really all about bringing on good employees and making sure they're very well trained up front, so that when you let them go on their own, you know they can handle the job for you. The hardest part, when you start your business and you're it: when I was cleaning boats myself, I knew every single boat I walked away from was perfect. Then I had to bring on

employees to grow the business so I could focus on the business side. Letting go of that control was so hard. But as soon as you do, the business does start to grow.

Then you develop a system for when things go wrong, if there are complaints. And one of the biggest things I've done in my company that has helped immensely: when we get a new customer, I train the customer to be a good customer. I realize a lot of people say, the customer is always right. No, they aren't. Sometimes they just don't know.

We'll have a new customer every now and then who says, my gosh, you missed a spot. And I'm like, well, the boat didn't sink, did it? We'll be more than happy to get it, and from now on, if that happens again, let us know. I talk about it like it's not a big deal. And now we've got customers we've had for 10, 20 years who say, hey, can you just send someone out whenever you get a chance? No big deal. So it's no longer a pain point with us, and our customers know we'll make it happen.



Two books and a training course

JEREMY RIVERA

You mentioned a book. What's the name of the book, and what's the general direction?

NATALIE YUSE

It's actually my second book. When the recession hit around '08, I wanted to write a book, so I wrote The Insider's Guide to Boat Cleaning and Detailing. If you're having trouble sleeping at night, it's a great book. Ha, just kidding. I turned a very dry subject into an interesting book.

During the recession I started getting emails from people all over the country saying, I read your book, I want to start a boat detailing company. I live in Atlanta. I live in Florida. I just

got laid off and I want to do this. Do you offer a training course? And I was like, hold on, I'll be right back. So I created a three-day training course, and for several years I had people flying out from all over the country, Canada, even Europe. We even trained someone from Wales. Eventually, they were starting their own detailing businesses, hiring employees, getting their life back. It gave me so much joy.

Then COVID happened and people could no longer fly out, so I created an online course for what I was teaching in person. Then I wrote a second book: Fake It Till You Make It, But Don't Fake It Till You Break It: 30 Lessons Learned in Over 30 Years in Business. I think my purpose on this earth is to inspire people. The "fake it till you make it" part was me starting that business at 19 knowing nothing. The "but don't fake it till you break it" part is when I got in too deep saying yes to jobs I should have said no to. The rest of the book is the lessons I've learned in business that I think would help anyone trying to start any type of business.

JEREMY RIVERA

Specific situations give you a pool of knowledge that turns into a bigger conversation about running a business.

NATALIE YUSE

That's true. Right now so many people are focused on trying to make something big right away, and I'm not for that. I want to be a part of it. I don't want to be some absentee owner. I'm more about slow growth, but at the same time, just going for it. Don't wait until everything seems perfect. Just go for it and get started.

Seasonality, cash flow and employees

JEREMY RIVERA

I'd imagine seasons matter in Seattle. What do you teach about seasonality and business cycles that people might not know from the outset?

NATALIE YUSE

Our boat detailing company, Deckhand Detailing, is somewhat seasonal, but I've made it so that we have plenty of work year-round. In the winter the weather gets colder, but boats have interiors, so we do more interior cleaning. From March through the end of November, we're focused on exterior work, and we save the interior for the colder seasons. We also go to boat shows to fill those slower seasons.

JEREMY RIVERA

What are the nuggets you saved for the back of the book?

NATALIE YUSE

I talk a lot about cash flow, because it's extremely important when you're growing a business. No one should think a business of any size can be run on cash. You're going to have some debt and that's okay, because that debt is going to help you grow faster and further than if you

were just waiting to pay for everything with cash. Cash flow is how you keep yourself from going into a hole and never getting out.

The other thing I talk about a lot is how you manage your employees. I can't tell you how many times I've had employees come from other companies, and I gave them a $50 bonus just because they were doing a really good job, and they were floored. No one had ever given them a bonus before, let alone out of the blue.

My employees to me are everything. They are allowing me to be where I want to be at any given time, and I know how hard they work. My biggest responsibility as a business owner, because it always comes down to people, is the employees who actually do the work. So I try to create a very flexible schedule so they can have a life. I believe that's why so many of our employees have been with us for over five years, over 10 years. In boat detailing it's very high turnover, because it's hard work, but not with us, because of the way I treat my employees.



Marketing in the age of AI search

JEREMY RIVERA

You started with the Yellow Pages. Now we have AI agents you can ask to recommend three boat detailers near you. How have you adjusted your marketing?

NATALIE YUSE

It's a good thing I'm a nerd. I built my own website and learned coding because I think it's fun, and I've kept on top of AI really well. I love it. I know how search is happening now, with zero clicks and having to change your website. It's not all about keywords anymore. So on a regular basis I go into my website and blog posts and rewrite content to meet those long-tail keywords - the actual questions people type into AI - and make sure our social media posts include those phrases too. And I make sure we're listed everywhere we need to be.

When a customer fills out our estimate request form, there's a question: how did you hear about us? 99% of the time it's Google search. So I'm always doing searches to check our results, and I have applications that track it and tell me if we've slipped. These days you really have to stay on that all the time. None of my competitors do that. Ha, don't tell them I said that! I notice they don't, and they also don't have the results that I do.

JEREMY RIVERA

My friend Michael McDougald from Right Thing SEO says ChatGPT is your most popular but least trained employee, so give it the training materials it needs through your website. Matt Brooks with SEOteric was bringing this up too: write in first person. If you write in third person - the company has been on the water for so many years - you've separated yourself from your expertise. First-person, experiential, niche wisdom is what gets you cited. You are the expert, so say what you do on your website and spell out the difference between you and your competitors.

What's next: Smarter Small Biz

JEREMY RIVERA

What's on the horizon for you? More training, promoting the book?

NATALIE YUSE

My next venture, which I've already started, is helping people start their dream businesses or become entrepreneurs themselves, from a small business perspective, not VC. I developed a site called Smarter Small Biz, and my Fake It Till You Make It book mentions it.

I've created some online courses. One is how to use AI for business purposes. If you're a small business owner or manager and you're afraid of technology, I break it down so it's not scary and very easy to learn and follow. Another is called Online Marketing Demystified, because online marketing is this big, vague term that can scare people who are just starting out, or who have been running a business a while and want to make sure they're doing the right things. The third course is all about hiring and managing employees. I've been doing this for over 25 years and I have 25 employees. You name the situation, it has come up and I have dealt with it.

JEREMY RIVERA

I absolutely love it. I'll make sure to get those links from you and add them to the show notes. Thank you so much for your time.

NATALIE YUSE

Thank you for having me. This was really fun.

Key Takeaways

→ Start with what you can afford and physically do. Natalie picked boats because Seattle was full of them and nobody she asked knew who cleaned them.

→ Fake it till you make it, but don't take the job you aren't ready for. Saying yes too early set her back.

→ Train the customer to be a good customer. Treat a missed spot as no big deal and the relationship lasts 10 to 20 years.

→ Fill the off-season with a version of your service that still fits. Winter is interior season at Deckhand Detailing.

→ Debt that helps you grow is okay. Cash flow is what keeps you out of the hole.

→ Employees are everything. Flexible schedules and a surprise $50 bonus keep people for 5 and 10 years in a high-turnover trade.

→ Rewrite your own site around the questions people actually ask, and write it in first person.