

A compass is not a map

by Jason Cohen on January 29, 2013

A compass tells you which way is north, not whether you should be heading north. So what *is* the map to startup success?



An entrepreneur confided in me recently that he didn't like Lean Startup; did I think that was OK? Or is he not cut out to build a startup?

A founder uses “37signals does it” to justify every decision, even if he can't explain why, or why it applies to his situation, or whether 37signals did that when they were still his size.

A startup pitch-deck boasts about the mistakes they've made because of the lessons they've learned. But the lessons haven't resulted in forward motion. Time to hang up the towel, or does this knowledge and introspection position them for rocketship growth?

It's easy to confuse philosophy with dictum, musing with mandate.

A compass is not a map. A compass tells you **which way is north, not whether you should be heading north.**

There's no map in startups despite even me saying there might be. There are examples, but for every startup that landed 300 customers from their TechCrunch launch article there's another which got 0; for every startup that built loyalty on Twitter there's one with 20% month-over-month revenue growth that has yet to reserve their Twitter handle; for every startup ascribing their success to spectacular design, there's another successful one who has never hired a designer (and it shows).

The trouble with “rules” in startups, besides the inherent survivor bias, is that **by definition the successful ones are anomalies**. Statistics show trends, but **trends don't predict outliers**.

What *does* predict an outlier? Nothing. A successful startup looks a lot like an unsuccessful startup at the start. Statistics can't be used to determine the outcome of the individual case (not just in startups, but anywhere).

Don't confuse dogma or startup frameworks with laws. You have to find your own way, using all this startup advice for sparks of inspiration, for brainstorming, as a candy store where every item has its own merits but you must pick and choose what to put into your basket. Decide what makes you the best version of who you already are.

There's no map. That's OK. Keep moving.

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