

## Finishing Strong

By Rebecca A. Morgan  
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*You're skilled at the technical side of your business,  
but can you routinely and consistently execute better?*

Giacomo won this year's Kentucky Derby, leaving tired but highly favored horses in his dust, because of a strong finish. Danica Patrick finished fourth in the Indianapolis 500, carefully conserving fuel in the final laps. Her team knew that to have a chance to win, she would have to cross the finish line – not merely lead near the end.

So what does any of that have to do with you or your business? Simply put, a strong finish – a job well **completed** – can differentiate you from the competition, leaving a positive and lasting impression in the minds of your customers. In short, it can make you a winner.

You take your profession and your business seriously. The same can undoubtedly be said for much of your competition. But your customers **expect** you to be good at your chosen line of work. That alone is not enough.

The real question is, given that you and your competitors each are likely to be skilled at the technical side of your business, how can you routinely and consistently execute better than they? Quite often, it is as simple as putting in place operational systems that ensure a strong finish. Luckily for you (and unluckily for our economy in general), many companies seem to remember that 90% meant an A in school and believe that it must mean “excellent” in business, too. That means there is plenty of room for you to surpass them with a strong finish.

For example, in the construction industry, the frequency of field changes means that what is actually built often does not match initial drawings. In addition, permits, subcontractor work, tenant decisions, and other issues have to be tracked and administered. While many organizations employ highly skilled tradesmen, too few companies see administration, documentation, project management, and demobilization as work that demands excellence as well.

Keith Masters, vice president of Property Management Services of the Dalad Group, an Inde-

pendence, Ohio-based developer, says “We value relationships with companies that we can count on to handle the documentation, as-built drawings, final inspection items, and demobilization as skillfully as they do the construction itself.”

Okay, but what if you have a hair styling salon and fail to see what sports or construction have to do with your business? In most towns, it is not all that hard to find talented stylists with pleasant personalities. That's the “90% equals an A” starting point that allows you to be in business. It will take something more to move you ahead of the competition. Consider this question: What interaction with your business would your customer base (current and potential) value enough to create exceptional loyalty? The answer will tell you where you can create winning operational excellence to complement the technical competence the customer expects. Perhaps appointments that always start on time, privacy booths, or “at your office refreshers” in advance of that crucial meeting. You may not have to be the absolute best technician in town – just a talented one with a delivery system that allows you to provide your skill in a way that customers find extremely valuable.

Whether your business is a large construction company, a small service provider, a manufacturer, or something else, you have a system for developing and delivering something of value to your customers – you have operational systems. Too many companies focus only on delivering their technical expertise to the exclusion of other aspects of the relationship valued by the customer.

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For any business, all the money spent on sales and marketing to create a positive image and brand awareness can be undone by poor operational execution. And that means poor execution as experienced by your customers, not as defined by you. Product shipped on time but followed by an incorrect invoice, outstanding product with a rebate check that never comes, a great meal ruined by a 20-minute wait for the valet to return with the car. All lost opportunities for a strong finish.

Examine your business relationships to identify where what the customer expects is not being met by your operations. Those are, at worst, places to improve customer satisfaction, and at best, opportunities to propel your business forward.

The winner of any competition always comes from among those who finish. Not from among all those who try, or all those who mean well, but from among those who finish, and finish strong. You have to finish to win. Find out what "finish" means to your customers and then design your operations to deliver that reliably.



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