

Developing Performance Measurements for Ecotourism Companies

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Abstract: The UNWTO estimated global receipts from international tourism were approximately US\$733 billion in 2006 (UNWTO 2007:4). The ecotourism market has become a rapidly growing segment of the tourism industry, with approximately a 30 percent increase in revenues annually (Zaslow 2006). A widely accepted definition of ecotourism is provided by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES): “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES 2007). Most ecotourism businesses have limited personnel and capital (Middleton and Clark 2001). Thus, they are critically aware of the need to succeed financially; however, because of their unique focus, these organizations must also concentrate on performance in many nonmonetary realms. This paper adapts the “traditional” BSC introduced by Kaplan and Norton (1992) for an ecotourism company’s use and suggests measurements for each perspective to help assess progress toward the organizational mission.

Keywords: Balanced scorecard, Ecotourism, Environment, Measurement, Performance

1 Introduction

Depending on the article that is read, the company that is promoting the tour, or the person with whom the topic is discussed, the term *ecotourism* can have a wide variety of meanings. A widely accepted definition is provided by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES): “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES 2007).

Most ecotourism businesses have limited personnel and capital. As such, ecotourism businesses are critically aware of the need to succeed financially; however, given their unique purpose, the focus of these organizations may also be viewed as closely associated with the social responsibility objectives of not-for-profit companies that must concentrate on performance in many nonmonetary realms. The balanced scorecard introduced by Kaplan and Norton provides an appropriate platform from which to address the multiple perspectives that ecotourism businesses must embrace. This paper addresses the adaptation of the “traditional” balanced scorecard for use in an ecotourism company and suggests a variety of measurements for each perspective to help assess progress toward the organizational mission.

2 The Balanced Scorecard

Historically, management spent significant time analyzing historical financial data to assess the effectiveness of organizational strategy; however, financial measurements are considered lagging indicators in that they simply provide information on the historical results of past actions. Lagging indicators do not help management determine what specific actions will allow for continuation of past performance or, more importantly, for future improvement. Leading indicators reflect those activities or actions that will help predict positive future financial and nonfinancial outcomes and thereby help assess strategic progress and guide decision making before lagging indicators are known. For example, an ecotourism company that had been

profitable for five years (a lagging indicator) might find its profitability decline in year six because many of its previous tour guides took new jobs and the new guides were less-than-fluent in the local language; thus, the percentage of guides employed who are fluent in the native language could be considered a leading indicator of future profitability.

The balanced scorecard was introduced by Robert Kaplan and David Norton (1992) in the early 1990s. The BSC encourages firms to develop a portfolio of lagging and leading indicators of success in multiple categories so as to determine both how the organization performed in the past but also how it is likely to perform in the future. As such, the BSC is a framework that restates an organization's mission and strategy into four categories of performance indicators: financial, customers, internal business processes, and organizational learning and growth. The financial perspective addresses the profitability and organizational growth concerns of owners and other stakeholders. The customer perspective addresses how well the organization is doing relative to important customer criteria such as price, quality, and service; customers must believe that, when a product or service is purchased, the price paid was worth the value received. The internal business perspective focuses on the things, such as satisfy employees and monitor processes, that the organization needs to do well so as to ultimately meet customer needs and expectations and provide a positive price-value relationship. The learning and growth perspective focuses on adapting to changing customer needs or to influencing new customers' needs and expectations through product or service innovations; this perspective addresses whether a company can continue to progress and be seen by customers as adding value. In combination, the performance measures included in the BSC provide a means by which actual business outcomes can be evaluated against specified performance targets.

In the past two decades, the BSC has become a driving force in the arena of performance measurement. Although originally adopted by for-profit manufacturing companies, the BSC has since been accepted in not-for-profit and governmental organizations because of its value in forcing stakeholders to define and measure those performance elements that have the greatest potential to "make or break" the organization.

3 Ecotourism Companies

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimated that, for 2006, global receipts from international tourism were approximately US\$733 billion or €584 billion (UNWTO 2007:4). Additionally, the World Travel & Tourism Council estimates that the travel and tourism industry will support 250 million jobs globally by 2010 (Drumm and Moore 2005:17). In the 1970s and 1980s, ecotourism was considered a "niche" market within the tourism industry. However, after the U.N. designated 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism, the ecotourism market expanded to become an important and rapidly growing segment of the tourism industry, with approximately a 30 percent increase in revenues annually (Zaslow 2006). As of 2002, the "hundreds" of nature tourism companies operated in the United States and Canada generated "well over" \$1 billion of annual revenues (Wood 2002: 21).

Ecotourism and adventure tourism are considered subsets of the "nature tourism" industry; the subsets differ in their primary focus. Ecotourism focuses on seeing and appreciating natural beauty and related cultural assets, while adventure tourism focuses on engaging in physical, often demanding, activities in natural environments. Ecotourism has been defined by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (TIES 2007). The World Conservation Union (ICUN) defines ecotourism as "environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations" (Wood 2002:9). Another ecotourism definition is "travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights" (Honey 1999:25).

Many, if not most, of the ecotourism businesses are small in both personnel and capital (Middleton and Clark 2001). A study by the U.S. Small Business Association indicated that “only two-thirds of new small businesses survive at least two years, and just 44 percent survive at least four years” (Dickler 2007). Given such a statistic in the U.S., ecotourism businesses globally are critically aware of the need to succeed financially—especially when many of the businesses have been created using only personal savings or personal borrowings because conventional banking operations are less-than-helpful in financing ecotourism businesses (World Tourism Organization 2002). In addition to financial success, the unique focus of ecotourism companies may be viewed as closely associated with the social responsibility objectives of not-for-profit organizations that must concentrate on performance in many nonmonetary realms. Given the diversity of outcomes desired by an ecotourism company, the balanced scorecard provides a useful platform from which to delineate measures of successful performance.

4 The Ecotourism Company Balanced Scorecard Perspectives

Each organization must devise a scorecard that has, as its starting point, the organizational mission statement, goals and strategies for accomplishing that mission, and a level of detail necessary to the scorecard users. Although no scorecard is appropriate for all organizations, all reputable ecotourism companies have a similar end mission: to succeed financially through providing customers with meaningful, enjoyable, and environmentally sensitive travel experience. Thus, companies are concerned with minimizing ecological footprints, raising environmental awareness, preserving and protecting unique local and indigenous cultures and communities, and encouraging positive future environmental actions by participants.

The basic mission of ecotourism companies encompasses a multitude of stakeholders. Regardless of whether the organization is a nongovernmental or governmental enterprise, the owner or governmental unit wants to earn a reasonable rate of return on the investment. Other stakeholders include the local community and indigenous people of the tourist locale, government (if not an owner), “site participants” such as biologists, botanists, and wildlife personnel, and ecotourist customers. But there is a final category of stakeholders for an ecotourism company that could possibly be overlooked: the plants and animals of the tourist locale. Without the natural environment, the ecotourism company would have nothing to “sell” to its clients; unfortunately, regardless of the level of regulations and restrictions placed on ecotourism sites, ecotourism by its very existence impacts and changes that which is visited. For example, in 2007, Ecuador’s president “declared the Galapagos ... in imminent danger” and the site was placed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s “World Heritage in Danger” list because of the influx of ecotourists (Sesser 2008).

Thus, given the mission and social responsibility of an ecotourism company, its BSC must include host community and environmental perspectives in addition to the traditional financial and customer perspectives. The host community perspective must address performance considerations relative to cultural, governmental, and indigenous/local people aspects of the tour locales. The environmental perspective must address performance considerations relative to the flora and fauna, ecosystems, biodiversity, and conservationism aspects of the tour locales.

Larger companies may want to include an internal business perspective; smaller companies may feel it is unnecessary, especially if processes are uncomplicated or if the majority of employees are owners or members of the host community. However, regardless of whether a separate internal business perspective is established, the BSC must include measurements related to employees, their satisfaction, and the manner in which business is conducted; such measurements can be considered under one of the other perspectives if an internal business perspective is not used.

All measurements within the perspectives must be aligned with the organization’s mission as well as any applicable self-developed, governmental, or association/network membership code of conduct. Additionally, the measurements should be designed, if possible to support information in multiple categories. For example, measuring customer satisfaction should be a useful leading indicator of future profitability. Exhibit 1 provides an adapted balanced scorecard for use in an ecotourism company.

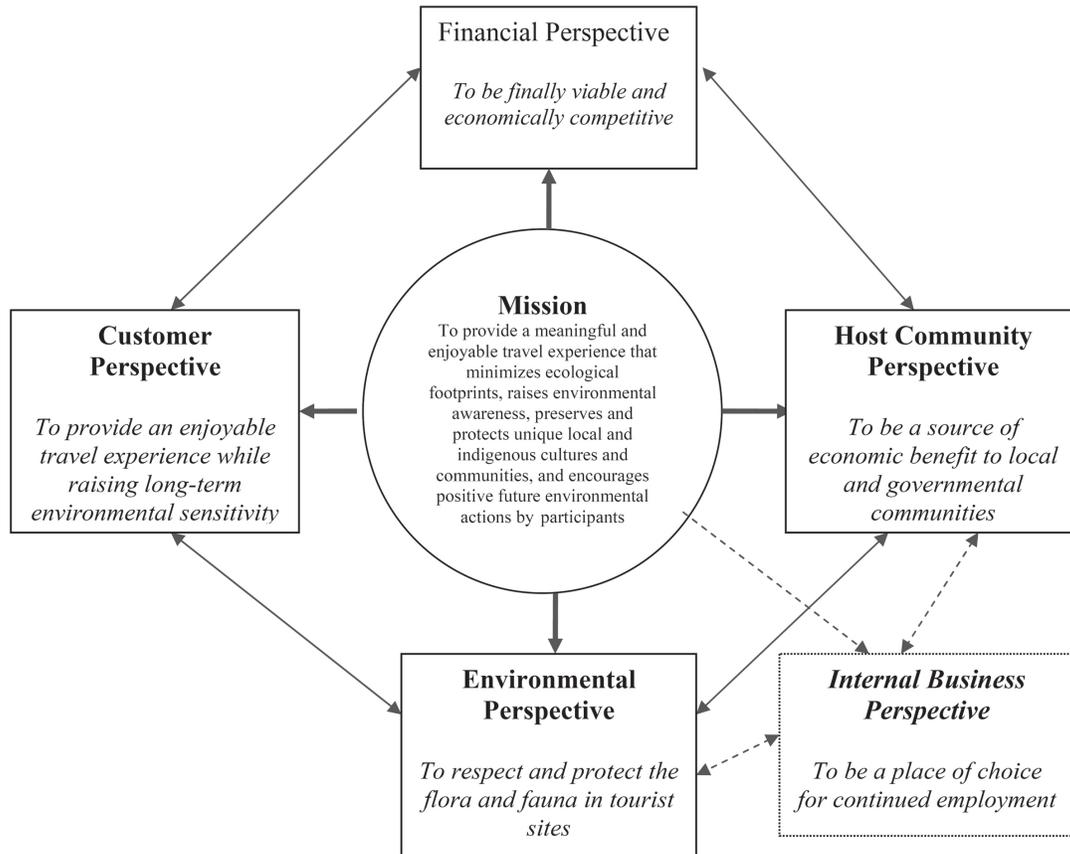


Exhibit 1 Balanced Scorecard Model

5 Measurement Selection

Measurements should be selected considering six factors (see Exhibit 2). First, there should be an underlying reason for choosing the measurement; things should not be measured simply because they can be. A measurement should be tied in some way to organizational strategy. For example, the measurement of percent of “full” tours would be important in indicating whether a tour locale should continue to be offered. Some tours might be found to be “cash cows,” while others might be “dogs” (as defined the BCG Growth-Share Matrix). However, such measurements would not be important if the company were committed to the continuation of a particular tour regardless of its ability to financially contribute to the long-term viability of the organization—as might be the case for a tour to a locale that was a favorite of the company’s owner or was being provided because of relationship with either the host community or a particular group of customers.

Second, people focus on the things by which they are measured. Thus, it is essential to determine what type of behavior any given metric will encourage. The measurements should be directly correlated with indicating actual progress toward the achievement of organizational mission, goals, and objectives. Additionally, it is important to be able to trace responsibility for accomplishment to an individual or an organizational unit, especially when fragile ecotourism sites are involved.

Third, measurements should always be shown in comparison to one or more prior years’ data to determine trends. Thus, companies should track longitudinal measurements for multiple periods to have complete information before drawing conclusions.

Fourth, as with any set of measurements, measurement terminology must be defined prior to use. This condition is especially critical when using longitudinal measurements so that true trends can be determined and

Exhibit 2 BSC Measurement Selection Considerations

In selecting measurements for the balanced scorecard, make certain that

1. There is an underlying reason related to the organization's strategy for choosing the measurement.
 2. The measurement will create behavior that is in concert with organizational goals and objectives.
 3. The measurements can be used to track performance trends.
 4. Measurement terminology is defined and consistently used.
 5. Information needed for the measurements is obtainable.
 6. Appropriate benchmarks and targets are identified.
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not distorted by changes in definitional elements. In addition, if any type of aggregation is to be performed on the data, such as for developing statistics at a national level, definitions are needed so that the aggregating entity is aware of definitional differences and can make appropriate inclusions or exclusions prior to aggregation.

Definitions are also important relative to the fifth consideration: the ecotourism company needs to determine whether the data sources of the items contained in the metrics are available. For example, if the company wants to measure customer referrals from previous clients, such information must be requested as part of the client profile. Oftentimes after developing performance metrics, companies recognize that desired information is unavailable and changes need to be made in information systems, employee response forms, or customer satisfaction surveys. Some information needs, such as funds spent by tourists in local establishments, may require querying outsiders; motivating reliable responses to such queries may necessitate some type of partnerships arrangement.

Last, measurements must be able to communicate useful information to users; thus, appropriate benchmarks are needed for comparisons to identify strengths and weaknesses. Some benchmarks may be simple internal trends or targets. However, given the numerous competitors in the tourism market, internal comparisons may not create the "stretch" goals needed to be successful over other companies vying for the same tourist dollars. Thus, an ecotourism company needs to establish a list of "aspirant" organizations and try to obtain their benchmark metrics or, at a minimum, try to determine why those organizations may be faring better than the company is. Again, this information may not be attainable from current systems and changes may be needed. For example, when a customer contacts the company about a tour but does not purchase the tour, the company may want to send a survey to that customer about the reasons for non-purchase—especially if the tour were purchased from another company. Responses such as "tour price was too high" may indicate problem areas within the company in comparison to competitors.

6 Performance Measurements

This section suggests a variety of measurements for each perspective to help assess progress toward the organizational mission. The objectives and measurements are shown in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3 Measurements by Perspective

Financial Perspective Measurements

- Objective: Financial viability
 - Measurements:
 - ✓ Annual net profitability (of company and by tour)
 - ✓ Budget-to-actual revenue variances
 - ✓ Budget-to-actual cost variances (reflects cost control)
 - ✓ Advertising effectiveness (dollars of revenue generated by dollars of advertising) (assumes use of a mechanism, such as a coupon, code number, or statement that would indicate source of advertising)
 - ✓ Annual revenue growth percentage

- ✓ Annual percentage increase in number of employees (distinguished by type; i.e., office/general staff, tour guides, etc.)*
- ✓ Annual financial assistance from governmental (or other agencies) at tourism destinations
- Objective: Economic competitiveness
 - Measurement:
 - ✓ Selling prices per tour as a percentage of average competitor selling prices for similar tours
 - ✓ Annual percent of “full” tours to total number of tours offered
 - ✓ Number of tours offered to different locations (return customers often want to go elsewhere; also measures financial viability because more tours indicates more revenue available)
 - ✓ Annual percentage of employees who are multilingual*
 - ✓ Annual percentage of continuing employees*
 - ✓ Average length of employment of employees*
 - ✓ Level of employee satisfaction indicated on survey*

Host Community Perspective Measurements

- Objective: Benefit to host country government
 - Measurement:
 - ✓ Estimated annual economic benefit from taxes, visa fees, etc.
- Objective: Benefit to host community (each can be aggregated to show benefit to host country government)
 - Measurement:
 - ✓ Annual total investment in facilities
 - ✓ Annual percent of total wages/salaries for local community employees (by tour locale)
 - ✓ Estimated annual economic benefit (other than wages/salaries) provided to local community (i.e., spending by company or tourists on lodging, food, artisan work or handicrafts, tours, etc.) (by tour locale)

Customer Perspective Measurements

- Objective: Customer satisfaction
 - Measurement:
 - ✓ Annual percent of returning customers (indicates better value for selling price for this operator over competitors; could also be an indicator of financial viability)
 - ✓ Annual percent of new customers acquired through previous customer referrals
 - ✓ Percent of customers mentioning recommended readings or lectures
 - ✓ Percentage of tour guides who have been trained in local facts and traditions*
- Objective: Increased environmental awareness and sensitivity
 - Measurement:
 - ✓ Pre-tour and post-tour questionnaire on tour locale environmental issues
 - ✓ Percentage of customers attending non-required lectures about the locale

Environmental Perspective Measurements

- Objective: Responsiveness to flora/fauna protection
 - Measurement:
 - ✓ Number of violations by ecotourists of tour restrictions
- Objective: Environmental sustainability of locale
 - Measurement:
 - ✓ Percentage of hotels used for clients that engage in water, energy, and other “green” conservation practices
 - ✓ Maximum size of ecotourist group per guide
 - ✓ Maximum number of tours allowed per “period” (the definition of “period” will generally depend on the tourist locale)

Note: Items indicated with an asterisk (*) could be included in an Internal Business Perspective.

6.1 Financial Perspective

With goals of financial viability and economic competitiveness, the financial perspective of a balanced scorecard is appropriate for any size organization. However, given the limited size and financial capital of most ecotourism businesses, there is little room for excessive spending. Thus, owners/managers of ecotourism companies should be diligent in the budgeting process. Even small overestimations of revenues or underestimations of expenses can wreak financial havoc on such organizations. In some instances, the ecotourism company may be constrained in its spending to the limits available to it from government budgetary allocations.

Spending levels will vary by type and size of company, but fiscal controls should be designed and adhered to so that the organization ensures its long-term success through fiscal responsibility rather than an on-going process of price escalation to cover gratuitous spending. Prices will naturally increase over time to compensate for inflation, asset replacements and enhancements, and changes in the normal costs (especially labor) of providing tours—but companies must continuously be aware that prices must remain affordable to the population that the organization chooses to serve.

One positive factor for ecotourism companies is that research has found that experienced nature tourists, of which ecotourists are a subset, “were willing to spend more than general tourists” (Wood 2002: 22). Thus, it is more likely that such tourists would select tours based on quality rather than price. Such a selection process means that cost control that does not reduce quality should provide direct increases to the ecotourism company’s profitability.

Many metrics related to employees can be integrated into the financial perspective. Employees are the people who interact with the customers; as such, if organizational employees are unhappy, there will likely be direct effects on both customer satisfaction and financial results. Additionally, the cost of resignations in an organization is high: the Hay Group estimated that the cost of an hourly worker resignation is about half a year salary” (Anonymous 2001). Given such a statistic, it is imperative that ecotourism companies make employee retention a high priority—if for no other reason that fiscal responsibility.

Financial considerations are, however, not the only motivation for employee retention at an ecotourism company. There are also the important aspects of organizational learning and organizational memory. Organizational learning generally refers to the ability of organizational members to acquire, understand, and process information, and then adapt behaviors based on changed or changing conditions, while organizational memory refers to the ability of organizational members to store past information for use in future circumstances. Each of these elements is critical to continuous improvement efforts—especially in companies that need their employees to know not only their customers but also their tourist locales.

6.2 Host Community Perspective

The community surrounding an ecotourism site is diverse and its members will generally have mixed reactions to the interjection of ecotourists into that community. On a local level, the ecotourism company should attempt to minimize the negative effects of the tourist group, while simultaneously promote the positive economic benefits by utilizing, to the extent possible, local labor, facilities, services, and supplies and encouraging local “talent” in the form of craftspeople and artisans. A synergistic relationship among the ecotourism company, host community members, and ecotourists should be established and promoted for the common good of all.

At the governmental level, ecotourism will generally be seen as an economic windfall to the country—through the creation of jobs and influx of tourist spending. But the windfall will not be without its drawbacks: ecotourism often creates the need for new infrastructure spending or new governmental agencies to develop policies and procedures that will preclude destruction of environmental sensitive or culturally important areas. However, such drawbacks are outside of the realm of the ecotourism company, which needs only to measure its contributions to the well-being of the host country government.

6.3 Customer Perspective

The customers of ecotourism company are a fairly unique group: one Canadian study shows ecotourists to be typically “on the younger side”, college-educated, fairly affluent, and have “relatively high annual household incomes” (Canadian Heritage 2002). These characteristics have also been noted in other studies (Honey 1999; Wearing and Neil 1999; HLA & ARA 1998). Ecotourists have been classified as “hard” and “soft”: hard ecotourists tend to be active, travel in small groups, take longer trips, require little service, and “interact with the natural environment with little intervention from a facilitating intermediary”, while soft ecotourists tend to take shorter trips and “require significant levels of service from intermediaries and travel in comfort” (Singh et. al. 2007).

Regardless of classification, ecotourists have selected trips that allow them to interact with nature in relatively less-traveled locales. For the ecotourism company to be successful, customers must be provided with value-for-price tours to environmentally or culturally distinctive locations. “Ecotourists seek rich, authentic experiences with their travel destinations, and this is largely achieved through education - not only about local ecology, but local culture, history, and people, as well” (Wood and Crouch 2001). The ecotourism company should nurture this quest for knowledge by providing customers with recommended reading lists as well as making certain that tour guides have been adequately trained in local facts, history, and traditions related to people, flora, and fauna.

Measurements related to customers can often be obtained through the use of pre- and post-travel questionnaires. Ecotourism companies should concentrate on creating an environment that allows customers to grow personally and intellectually by imbuing them with a heightened sense of environmental awareness that helps them think and act in an ethical and environmentally conscious manner. Such awareness, if properly planted and cultivated, should translate into customer return and referral business. The metrics used in the customer perspective must be designed to encourage behaviors that enhance the organizational reputation which, in turn, will augment elements of each of the other perspectives.

6.4 Environmental Perspective Measurements

It is essential that tour operators enforce local restrictions, such as removing plants or not engaging in interactions with animals, related to the environmental protection of the flora and fauna. Such restrictions should be enumerated at the beginning of, and throughout, a tour. There will, however, most likely be some tourists who do not abide by those restrictions. Although tour operators generally have no legal powers, violations of policies should be noted. Information on the violations may be useful in preventing future occurrences through more aggressive communications by tour operators or in helping host governments and communities establish and enforce appropriate and necessary legal sanctions.

7 Summary and Conclusions

After measurements have been selected, the primary company stakeholder(s) should review the measurements as a collective whole to determine if there are information redundancies among the measures (in which case, one or metrics should be eliminated) or if there is important information that has been ignored (in which case, one or more metrics should be added). However, using too many measurements is wasteful (in terms of both time and money) and, typically, unproductive; they also may give people the perception that no particular metric is very important and, thus, all become insignificant.

A secondary part of this research is to survey ecotourism companies to determine what, if any, actual measurements (other than the traditional financial indicators) are being used. The authors are currently engaged in drafting an e-mail questionnaire and in contacting companies to assess their willingness to participate. Results may allow the building of a data warehouse that could provide aggregate measurement benchmarks for companies desiring comparison information. An aggregated data warehouse would allow currently unknown information about the industry to be available and, simultaneously, protect the confidentiality of individual company data.

As interest in the environment grows, so will interest in ecotourism. Companies engaged in ecotourism can only thrive if they are aware of the multitude of factors that are integral to their short- and long-term success. Profitability can be attained quickly, but can disintegrate just as rapidly without understanding and focusing on the leading indicators of positive performance. Environmental sustainability does not occur because only one thing is done properly—neither does business success.

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