

Business of Machine Quilting
Angela Walters, Angela Walters

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Acknowledgements

A big thanks to the professional machine quilters that have agreed to be interviewed for this blog series.

Tia Curtis

Lisa Sipes

Joanna Peterson

Dodie Jacobie

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Before You Start: Introduction

It's Monday, so that means that it is time for the first post in the Business of Machine Quilting blog series. I have to admit that I am excited to be doing this. I always thought that it would be great to be a motivational speaker, and this series will let me pretend that I am!

So let me tell you what I have in store for you. This blog series is going to last the rest of the year and I plan on delving into most aspects of starting and running a Machine Quilting business. Each month, the blog posts will focus on a different subject. Here is the tentative schedule:

August: Before You Start

This month's topics will discuss machines, space, and the other things you might want to consider before deciding to start quilting for others.

September: Getting Started

Wondering if you are ready to start quilting for others? Or wondering how much you should charge? In September we will dive into those topics as well as other things about getting started.

October: Up & Running

Running a business is more than just bringing in customers, you need to have a plan. This month we will talk about setting up a plan, making the most of your time, as well as setting an making goals.

November: Staying Strong

In any creative job, burning out is almost inevitable. This month, we will talk about ways to stay motivate and keep your business moving forward!

December: Beyond Customer Quilts

The final month of this series is going to be a fun one! There is so much more to this industry than just quilting quilts. So in December I will offer suggestions and encouragement to expand in other areas, such as writing and teaching!



January: Wrapping up!

All good things must come to an end! This series will end with a recap and plenty of Q&A! As a thank you for sticking it through to the end, I will put all the blog posts into a free downloadable e-book

Each post will also feature an interview with a professional machine quilter and a giveaway! And just in case you still have questions, I have added a section to the [forum](#) especially for business-related questions.

Now, let me point out very clearly that I am not claiming to know everything about business related stuff. I can only speak from experience and hope that my trial and errors will help you in any way at all!

Ready to get started? Let's go!



Picking out the right machine.

I once heard a great quote that has always stuck with me. “A business owner only has to work half days, all day or all night”. I don’t remember who said it but it is so true. Being a business owner is the most exhilarating, frustrating, rewarding thing that you can do!

The Machine

Let’s talk equipment! Starting a machine quilting business doesn’t mean that you must have a longarm quilting machine. I know of several people who quilt customer’s quilts on their sewing machines. And, no matter which kind of machine you go with, you don’t necessarily need all the bells and whistles. The most important thing is that it fits your needs.

I purchased my machine used almost 10 years ago, and I still use it! It doesn’t have a stitch regulator or a needle up button. Basically, it only has an on/off button and a speed control, but it has served me well! If you are thinking about buying a new machine (whether a longarm, midarm, or sewing machine), carefully consider what options you need and which ones you don’t. Try out several different kinds of machines, and ask a lot of questions.

If you already have a machine, I wouldn’t necessarily encourage you to go buy a new one. If at all possible, build up your customer base and business before investing in new equipment. Buying a big, expensive machine and then trying to figure out how to make money with it can be very, very stressful.

A Different Take

During this whole series, I am going to be interviewing other professional machine quilters. There is wisdom in the multitude of counselors, and my opinions are just limited to my own experiences. Seeing what other quilters have to say on the subject will help us all learn something. This week’s featured quilter is [Tia](#)! I specifically asked Tia to join us for today’s conversation because she has quilted for customers on her sewing machine and her longarm quilting machine. I think that her



Before You Start:

Picking out the right machine.

experiences prove that you can have a quilting business no matter what kind of machine.



Painting by: [Sharon Smith](#)

Thanks so much for joining me!!! Before you got your long-arm, you did your quilting on your sewing machine, did you quilt customer's quilt tops? Or did you just use it to do your [bags](#)?



I made custom quilts before I got my long arm. I would work with a [client](#) and go from the very beginning designing a special quilt just for them. Typically I would utilize pieces of their uniforms or clothing into the quilts. I did the whole thing on one regular home machine. I didn't know the difference really between a long arm and a regular home machine. I knew that a long-arm was big...too big for me at the time. We are a military family, so we have to move frequently and I never know the size of the house I will be trying to squeeze both my family and home business into.

I would also use the same sewing machine to quilt and sew together all my bags. I do all my piecing now on my Bernina and most quilt quilting on my Long-arm. I do still use my Bernina to quilt my bags and try new quilting designs on small quilts.

Was it hard to transition from FMQ on your sewing machine to the long arm?

No way! I felt like a falcon who was in a cage for some reason...but when I got my hands on my long-arm It was like I was set free into the wild! Now I can soar above my quilts and plan the designs miles out instead of waiting until I was right up on top of the block. The only thing that was a bit tricky was tension.

How long have you been quilting customer quilts?

I have quilted for customers for about 8 years on my domestic machine, but only over the past year have I been using my [Long-arm on customers' quilts](#). It makes quilting so much easier.



Before You Start:

Picking out the right machine.



What is one thing that you wish you knew before you started?

I wish I was a bit more prepared for all the mechanical issues I would have. A long arm is not quite like a regular domestic machine. You can't easily pop it off the table and toss it in your van and zip on down to the sewing machine fix it man. You will have to become somewhat skilled at fixing the issues yourself. Especially when you have a deadline and there is no one in 400 miles who even knows what a long arm is (that was when I was in San Angelo, TX). Thank goodness for patient people on the other end of the phone. I suppose in my mind I thought that switching over to a long arm would be as effortless as sewing with my Berninas. I turn my Bernina on and it is ready for a day of sewing. When I turn my Gammill on it requires a bit more love and attention before it is ready to quilt all day.



Before You Start:

Picking out the right machine.



What is one piece of advice you would give to someone who is interested in quilting for others?

Look at second-hand long-arms. You can get great deals on them. Also, look into buying batting by the roll and thread wholesale. It is ok to start small, quilt your friends charity quilts for practice....look at Ebay and Etsy for quilt tops that need to be finished. I have acquired some great old tops that no one wants to finish. But careful going that route, you may end up with a sewing room full of old quilt tops and no time to practice on them!

Great words of advice [Tia](#), thanks for joining us! Next week, the post will be all about location, location, location.

If you have specific questions about quilting machines, or machine quilting in general, leave a comment or hop on over to the [forum](#) and ask away!

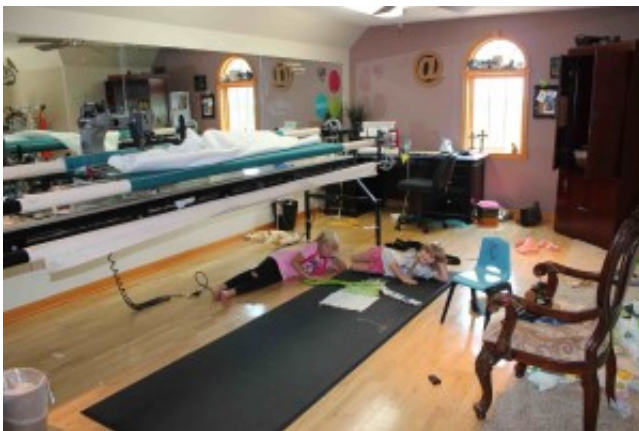
Happy Quilting!



Location, Location, Location

Hey! Welcome back for the next post in the Business of Machine Quilting series. I am so glad that you are joining me. Today we are going to talk all about location, something that is just as important as the kind of machine that you pick out. Depending on the machine that you choose, and your living situation, the question of where to quilt can be easy or difficult. The good thing is that there are a lot of different options available.....depending on how creative you want to get!

~Quilting from Home~



My studio on an average day!

This is the most obvious, and probably the easiest option. Working from home allows you to keep overhead low (which is good) and allows you to be close to your machine. When I started quilting, there was no question that I would quilt from home since I was just doing it for myself. While it is cheap and convenient, there are some drawbacks. I hate being alone in my quilting for long periods of time since I am an extroverted kind of person. I also struggle with the work/home boundaries. I always feel like I should be quilting, and when I *am* quilting, I feel guilty for not being with my kids. It's the whole mommy-guilt thing.



Even if you are fine with long periods alone and you feel confident that you can have healthy work boundaries, space may be an option. Having a Longarm quilting machine (should you go that route) takes up a lot of space obviously, but you will still need to be able to store customer quilts (as well as your own stash!). You also need to be comfortable with customers coming into your home.

If you decide to quilt out of your home, you will need to check with local ordinances and see if you need an occupational license.

~Quilting from a Quilt Shop~



Back when I quilted in The Quilt Shoppe

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to quilt out of a shop for 6 months and I loved it. Being in a public setting allowed me to please my extroverted nature. I also really loved the work/home boundaries. But, as much as I loved it, I eventually made the decision to return to quilting from home. Another big plus is the great possibility of customers. You would already be in an established business and able to take advantage of their customer flow.

Should you entertain the thought of quilting from a Quilt Shop, there are some other things to think about. First you have to find a quilt shop that is close and willing to



rent you space. That is probably the biggest hurdle. Renting a space within a shop also means that you might have a higher overhead. If you are really fortunate, you might find a shop owner that is willing to trade quilting for a rental fee.

There is also the trust factor. You would need to find someone that you would trust leaving your machine (not to mention customer quilts) with. So, if you are able to pursue this option, do it very carefully.

~Your own rental space~

Of course you don't have to quilt out of your house or another shop, you could rent a location. *Sigh* This is my dream. A lovely studio of my very own to quilt from.....then my husband reminds me that I have a nice studio at my house and snaps me back to reality. This option would be awesome, but it also the most expensive option. If you have an established customer base, this could be an option. But watch out for the maintenance fees, and long-term lease contracts. I tend to think that this makes the best sense if you are planning on adding a retail component or can find someone to split rent with. My husband is a business owner, and at one time, we toyed with the idea of splitting a space. Half for me and half for his office.

~Other ideas~

The above options are fairly basic, but they might not fit into any of your circumstances. Usually this is due to someone not having the space at home and being unable to rent another location. I have heard of some interesting scenarios. One gal that I know had her husband finish out there garage so that she could make it a quilting studio...wow, there is no way I could talk my husband into that. Tia, last week's featured quilter quilted out of her garage so we know it is possible.

Another quilter that I know, had her quilting machine at her mom's house. At first thought, I don't think that is such a bad idea. My mom could watch the kids and make me lunch all while I happily quilt away.....ok, maybe not. Maybe you have someone that you love and trust that you could store your machine at their place. It would have to be someone that really loves you though! Oh and I almost forgot, I gave a private lesson to someone who put their quilting machine in her attic! That is dedication to the dream in my opinion!



So those ideas range from practical to far-fetched, but hopefully it will help you brainstorm some possible locations. Today's interview is with [Lisa Sipes](#), longarm quilter and all-around awesome gal who knows a little bit about quilting spaces. She quilts from a quilt shop and she graciously agreed to answer some questions.



1. What made you decide to start quilting for others?

I didn't really decide to start quilting. The decision was made for me! My mom suggested that I try quilting when I was close to burnout on life. I thought she was insane. I had no idea what quilting was even about. Didn't know what a quilting machine, fat quarter or rotary cutter even was! I actually spoke the words, "A fat quarter is a half a yard cut in half? Ummm, that's just a quarter yard, though." But the first time I saw or touched a quilting machine, I loaded a quilt and started stitching in the ditch (It was a Boston Commons or Trip Around The World or something). Then I quilted some flowers in the border. And then... and then... and then... Yeah the rest is history.

2. What is something that you wished you knew when you were starting?

I wish I knew that quilting was actually an art. I wasted so much time the first year or so before I started realizing that this was what I was meant to do. All of my clients



just wanted their quilts held together with stitching. It wasn't until after that first year that I started searching online to see what other people were doing and realized that the quilting makes the quilt. After that I started doing a lot more custom quilting just to play around and it made me realize that quilting is my love!

And as much as I don't like to talk about money, I wish I'd had a better grasp on the financials. I was NOT charging enough! And I still don't. It's so hard to raise your prices!

3. Tell me about your studio?

Ummmmmm. I'm not sure what there is to say about my studio other than the fact that it is a MESS! Things are pretty insane right now and I tend to be a messy worker. When I'm working on something, I tend to throw batting and thread tails and selvages all over the place so that I can just focus on the work. I usually try to clean up once I'm done so I can start fresh with the next one but right now I have so much to do that I haven't cleaned up in weeks. I do at least pick up the thread tails laying around the machine so that they don't accidentally get picked up by a batting or backing and inadvertently stitched into the next quilt!

As far as what my studio looks like when it's presentable, it's a rainbow of threads hanging on the wall, shelves full of tops waiting to be quilted and two Gammills that are always humming. And music. Very loud -sometimes inappropriate- music!

4. What is one piece of advice that you would give to someone who is thinking about doing this for a business?

Do it. Stop worrying so much and just do it. Dive in. There are so many "what ifs" in life. The questions that I get from most people when they're thinking about buying a quilting machine and quilting for hire are things like, what if I suck at it? Can I actually make any money? Will I stay busy? Things like that. First of all, nobody sucks at quilting. Quilting is quilting and it is what you make it. Yes, you can actually make money. I don't have any other job. And you can be as busy as you want to be.

You're the boss!

Quilting for a living is one of the funnest jobs you can have. I wasn't even a sewist before I became a quilter and I love it. I love that I get to quilt every day. Granted, it's not for the faint of heart at times to quilt for others, but it is so awesome to see the smiles on the faces of customers when they pick up their quilts! Being able to



quilt for a living is a gift. DO IT!

Great advice, Lisa! Thanks so much for joining us!

What do you think? If you started quilting for customers (or if you already do), where would you quilt from? And don't forget to pop back in for next week's post. It's going to be all about the plan...the business plan! It should be an informative post for sure!!

In the meantime, Happy Quilting!!



Develop a Business Plan

Hey everyone!! It's a gorgeous Monday morning and I hope you are ready for the latest post in the Business of Machine Quilting series. Today's post is all about having a business plan and it's going to be a little different from the previous posts in this series.

Normally, I will talk about my thoughts and experiences on the topic and then interview another machine quilter to provide a different view. The problem is....this topic falls in the "should have done" category. I didn't have a plan and actually still don't (eek!).

Instead of trying to sound like I knew what I was talking about, I reached out to [Dodie Jacobi](#) for help.



Dodie is a [small business consultant](#) that also happens to be a quilter. Her main passion in life is helping business owners reach the [next level](#). She is brilliant...just brilliant! I talked to her for almost a half an hour and could easily have talked longer. Be sure to check out her [website](#) and her [blog](#), you won't be sorry.



To some, a business plan may sound like a hyped-up step in the process or even a huge undertaking. You may be tempted to skip over this step since the “business” aspect of quilting may not sound like a lot of fun. But, after talking with Dodie, I realized that it is very important and not nearly as hard as I thought it would be!

In our interview, The first question that I asked her was the most obvious,

How important is a business plan?

Dodie said that a business plan is important for two reasons. First you may need it to get financing. But secondly, and most importantly, it gives the owner clarity about what you envision your business to look like. Writing it down also allows you see if there are any “holes” in your business, or if there are any areas that you haven’t considered.

I would also add that having a business plan helps encourage you to think about it as a business and not just a hobby! Even though you love quilting, you have to think of it as a business and a business plan will help ensure that you do just that.

What should be in a business plan?

According to Dodie, a business plan should cover 3 things:

Production- In a machine quilting business, production is your quilting. How many quilts do you think you will bring in, and how much money do you think that you will make.

Administration- This includes accounting, book-keeping, supplies, etc.

Marketing- This is all about getting the word out about your business.

Each section of your business plan should include a narrative and a spreadsheet that details the financial impact of what you envision. For the narrative part, you write out how you plan on handling each section and the spreadsheet is the dollar amount that you are estimating that you are going to make and/or spend.



So let's use my quilting business as an example, and let's assume that I am working on the marketing section of my plan.

Marketing:

Narrative: I plan on marketing my business by doing 3 things:

1. Through my blog by posting 3 posts a week.
2. I will encourage my customers to refer me to their friends and family.
3. I will be active on my twitter and Facebook accounts.

Spreadsheet:

1. Blog hosting, maintenance, and design etc: \$200/yr
2. Internet service \$40/month
3. Camera \$300

You may not know the exact numbers, and that's ok. You can always change it once the details be clearer. In any business plan, you are making assumptions....otherwise known as a guess.

What is the biggest mistake people make when putting together a business plan?

Dodie pointed out to me that there are two mistakes she sees new owners make most often. The first is not planning for the time it will take for the business to build income. She suggests being realistic about when you will start making money. When you buy your machine, or decide to start taking customer quilts, chances are that you aren't going to be busy from the very beginning. (But if you are, than yay for you!)

Secondly, one of the worst things that you can do is to actually stick to your business plan. As circumstances change, respond to the changes. Don't be afraid to tweak or even completely overhaul your original plan.

Let's return to my previous example of the marketing section of my business plan. The worst thing I could do is stick to it, regardless of how it's working out. If I realize 6 months down the road that running my Facebook and twitter account weren't helping me promote my business, I would need to rethink that item. I could decide to stop doing it altogether (just hypothetically, of course, I love my [facebook](#) and [twitter](#)



accounts!) and replace it with something else that I think would work. Or I could tweak it by paying someone to do it for me. Regardless of what I choose, I need to be realistic about what is (or isn't) working.

I hope that makes sense! Dodie also mentioned something that should be a mantra for your business, *you are always moving towards your business plan or away from it*. If you are moving away from it, you have to decide if you need to change where you plan to go or change your approach to achieving your original plan.

I am so glad that Dodie took the time to let me interview her, her experience with both quilting and small businesses make her the perfect person on this subject. This is the one thing that I wish that I had done in the very beginning. When I admitted that to Dodie, she assured me that it isn't too late to start. She even recommends renewing or revising your plan every year at the least. Making a plan now is better than having no plan at all! A huge thank you to you, Dodie!!

In Conclusion:

Again, I know that you might not think that this is a fun part, but I can't stress enough that starting out on the right foot with your business will help ensure your success! If you are still hesitant, there are a number of books available on the subject, or Dodie suggests that you can try out [Bizplan](#), an interactive website that helps you put together a plan. (I am not affiliated or endorsing the website, just including it as a resource!). And of course, if you have any questions, please feel free to post them to the [forum](#) so that I can answer them!

Next week, I will still be talking about another plan. Not a business plan but a how-to-run-your-business plan. I will include tips and ideas to help you decide how you are going to handle customers quilts, work efficiently, and tackle different kinds of situations. Be sure to sign up to receive the blog posts by email so that you don't miss any of the weekly posts. Just head on over to the [blog page](#) of my website and you will see the subscribe button on the top right!

Happy Quilting!



Decide how you are going to run your business.

Last week's blog post was all about the business plan and taking care of the financial things before you start your business. This week's blog post is all about a different kind of plan, your operations plan. I would argue that it is almost as important as a business plan. If you are like me, you are probably ready to jump into actually running the business, but bear with me! Taking care of these things before you start, will really help ensure that you are successful.

Basically, you need to decide how you think you are going to run your business, before you actually start your business. Now, I know that this can be as overwhelming as putting together a financial plan. But it's not a list of hard and fast rules. All I am suggesting is that you make a list of how you are going to handle different parts of your business, think of it as an operations manual.

Putting together an operations plan doesn't have to be hard. It's as easy as making three lists. Before Quilting, While Quilting, and After Quilting (this is just a rough list to get you started).

On the "*Before Quilting*" list, write out how you plan on handling quilts before they get to the quilting stage. Here are just a few of the questions that you will want to answer:

How will you receive quilts? Will you allow them to be mailed and/or dropped off?

How will you store quilts and keep track of quilting requests?

What times of the day will you be available to talk to customers? How can they contact you?

How will you schedule customers quilts?

What will your prices be? (don't worry, I will address this in a blog post soon!)

During the Quilting Process:

How long to plan on spending on quilting each day?

What kind of supplies will you use?



Before You Start:

Decide how you are going to run your business.

After the Quilting Process:

How do you plan on returning quilts?

How will you invoice customers?

How will you plan on handling upset customers?

These are just a few things to think about, and it isn't a complete list. And I will address some of these questions in future blog posts. You may not know the answer to each and every thing that you want to do but the great thing about being your own boss is that you can change it at any time! They aren't hard and fast ruler, this is just a way to help you clarify exactly how you are wanting to run your business.

So how does this look in real life?

The first part of my operations plan might look like this:

-Customers can mail quilts to me anytime or drop off quilts on Mondays and Wednesday's 9-3pm.

-When each quilt comes in, I take a picture of the quilt for my records, and fill out an informational form to attach to quilt. Include owners name and any other important information.

-I look over the quilt top to make sure there aren't any stains and hang quilts on a clothes rack

-Email or call customer and let them know that it arrived safely (if quilt was mailed in)

Having a plan will help make sure that everything runs smoothly and you stay organized, something I still need to work on!

Today's guest quilter is [Joanna Peterson](#) and was so nice to hang out with us today and tell us a little bit about her machine quilting business.



Before You Start:

Decide how you are going to run your business.



How long have you been machine quilting professionally?

Almost 6 years.

How did you get started?

My sister-in-law taught me how to quilt the boxes of quilt tops I had made for my son when I was pregnant. She has 6 kids so she slowly turned her clients over to me, and I eventually bought the machine and took over the business.

Do you have a routine that you follow?

I have a form that I have all of my clients fill out. It has their name, phone number (and address if they are out-of-state), description of the quilt top, and then what we've discussed as far as quilting patterns and services go. I also try not to answer my phone after 5 PM – then it's family time – but I'm not too good about sticking to that rule.

What is your favorite part about quilting for others?

I love to see what other people have made. I also love to see the look on their faces



Before You Start:

Decide how you are going to run your business.

when they see their finished quilt. I've had a lot of clients who didn't feel like they should even bother finishing their tops because they weren't "good enough" but brought them in anyway just to get it out of the way. When they pick them up the look on their faces is priceless. Watching them realize that they can do it, that they do love quilting, and that it was worth it to finish their project makes my day. And it makes me so grateful that I was able to help them.

What is something you wish you had known before you started quilting for others?

Not to stress so much about it. It's taken me almost 6 years to get comfortable with the idea that my quilting is not going to be perfect, ever. There will always be slight wobbles or blips in the patterns I quilt, but that's what makes it special and unique. And I am the only person on the planet who will notice those blips or wobbles.

Thanks so much Joanna!! I appreciate you taking the time to share with us. Make sure you check out [her blog](#) to learn more about her.

Now I know that this post could lead to a lot more questions, so please feel free to ask your questions in the comment section and I will do my best to answer them as quickly as possible. That way, everyone can benefit from them! You can also jump into the conversation on the [forum](#).

And, please stop by tomorrow, because I have a fun blog post scheduled tomorrow. Whoo hoo!!!

Happy Quilting!