

Small Business Spotlight:
Chris Stephens | Founder and CEO
Twirling Umbrellas, Est. 2014

Life Story

Growing up during the 'dot com' era, Chris translated his interest in cars into developing an automotive website. As he worked his way through university, his website became more successful and he learned to code and design more complex websites. He started making websites for friends and family, and soon stumbled into the world of online marketing and started the digital marketing firm Twirling Umbrellas.

What motivated you to start your own business?

I had a job that I didn't really love, so I decided to try freelancing. It was an odd choice because I'm risk averse, but I enjoyed coding and building websites and decided to give it a shot. I didn't really think of it as a business at first, but continued to get busier and busier until I moved from my basement to an office and hiring a team became unavoidable.

How has mentorship or networking played a role in the growth of your business?

I'm a social introvert, so traditional networking has not been part of my business, but we do try to help a lot of other community-focused organizations and charities. When times get tough, it's organizations like these that look after the community. My brother has always functioned as my mentor, he realized early on that digital marketing would do well through COVID-19.

What challenges did you encounter while growing your business?

How did you overcome these? The two biggest challenges that we face are finding people with the right talents and raising financing to grow. The scale of what we are able to raise really limits how quickly we can grow. We sometimes teach at local training facilities to build connections with up and coming talent

How has your business been impacted by, and adapted to, COVID-19?

2020 was set to be Twirling Umbrella's biggest year yet; we were firing on all cylinders and recently moved into a bigger Small Business Spotlight: Chris Stephens | Founder and CEO Twirling Umbrellas, Est. 2014 office – nothing like getting a bigger office the month before COVID-19 hit. At first our business slowed down as clients had reduced cash flow, but as they started to pivot, we got busier helping them move to a more digital presence. We're seeing that businesses are more creative than they have ever been in thinking about marketing and growth.

What supports have you used during COVID-19 that you have found helpful?

We have been lucky that we haven't had to lay anybody off. I had plans to hire more staff in March, but we had to put that on hold. The federal wage subsidy has allowed us to keep our team intact and build our business. Support from Small Business BC helped us get our name out there and resulted in an uptick that helped us avoid the worst of the worst.

Based on your experience, what are the key skills needed to be a successful entrepreneur?

Good communication and quality customer service. We develop close relationships with our clients and the vast majority of clients have ongoing relationships. Perseverance is another, there are always difficult decisions and difficult times, but if you are of the mind set of moving forward – it is all possible.

The Bottom Line:

- Twirling Umbrellas employs 12 people.
- Twirling Umbrellas will be hiring two or three more staff before the end of 2020.
- In the next two to three years, Chris expects to double in size and revenue.
- They are finishing this year with a better portfolio than last year.