

**Married to my small business partner:
Stories and advice from 10 entrepreneurial couples**

By J.D. Harrison



The first favor Theresa Casiello asked Bart was a doozy.

Casiello, who was running a tax firm at the time, had accidentally dropped her keys down the elevator shaft in her office building, and Bart, then a neighboring business owner, was the only person she could find to help. Equipped with only a screwdriver and a pair of scissors, the pair jerry-rigged the elevator doors on the bottom floor, Casiello took it up one level and pressed the emergency button, and Bart jumped down into the shaft pit and dove back out, keys in hand.

“Right from the very beginning, we worked well together solving complex problems,” Casiello said, and that’s proved invaluable over the past 18 years as the couple built a relationship, then a marriage, and later a thriving dry cleaning business in western Maryland. The Casiellos now own four ZIPS Dry Cleaners locations in Prince Georges County, and Theresa has said she hopes to eventually take their business nationwide.

So how have they managed to balance marriage and business in a single relationship?

The secret, they say, is playing to their respective strengths both at home and at work.

“We are very different individuals with our own unique set of skills,” Theresa said. “We are equal partners, but from the beginning, we had a clear delineation of duties and management of employees within our departments. Still, we understood we needed to work together as a team.”

Gallery: [Meet eight of the husband-wife business teams](#)

The couple also tries to eat lunch together every day and strives to maintain a lively workplace, which they say keeps both them and their employees in a positive mood. Of course, that doesn't mean they didn't bicker along the way — but they found a solution for that, too.

“Did we fight? Sure, but that's what your second car is for,” Theresa said, noting that she and Bart used to drive to work separately whenever they needed to blow off some steam. “Everyone in the store knew when we were arguing, but we tried not to let any issues related to home interfere with work.”

The Casiellos are one of many married couples across the country who double as entrepreneurial teams. On Small Business reached out to some of them for insights into the unique challenges and benefits of running a business with a spouse, and we asked them to share their secrets to success both in marriage and in business. Here's what they had to say.

Amy and Mike Nichols , owners of Dogtopia in Tysons Corner, Va.

Married since: 2001

Co-business owners since: 2006

Employees: 66

***The secret to making it work:* “Spouses who run companies together must understand and accept that there is no such thing as a ‘work/life balance ‘ — it's all just ‘life’ when you own a company. We made a choice to be entrepreneurs and business owners and with that comes tremendous freedoms but also a higher commitment to do whatever it takes. Because we both understand that concept, we are both more understanding when it comes to the other having to work late or on the weekends. We do our best to limit business conversations in the evenings at home because that is family time, and it's about our kids, not Dogtopia. Once the kids are in bed, we are often back on our laptops, but that is by choice because we are passionate about our company.**

Something else that I think is very important is the need to be self-aware. Mike and I have different strengths; for example, I am a better people manager, but he is a better project

manager. I recognized that early on and it has helped shape our current roles in the company. As CEO I consider myself “Chief Motivation Officer,” and as VP of Development, he makes sure that construction is done on time and on budget, both of which play to our strengths.” - Amy

Kevin and Julia Hartz, founders of Eventbrite in San Francisco, Calif.

Married since: 2006

Co-business owners since: 2006

Employees: 220

The secret to making it work: “‘Divide and conquer’ is our go-to strategy and we challenge ourselves to uphold it every day. While we both operate the business on a day-to-day basis, we are diligent about not treading on each other’s turf. We have a unique history since we started Eventbrite as an engaged couple and so our relationship, marriage, and parenthood have all developed under the auspices of being co-founders. Because of that, it’s relatively easy for us to transition from work to play - they are one and the same for us.

Our lives are basically two-dimensional: Eventbrite and family. We’re both very content with those being our areas of focus right now, so our interests are aligned. You won’t find us on our weekly date night now talking about work, because our work and family lives are so intertwined, we can flow from the two different areas quite easily. We relish the fact that we can discuss an important work topic late at night or we can laugh about the kids during a break at work.” — Julia

Jim & Vania Matthews, owners of Express Employment Professionals in Stafford, Va.

Married since: 1976

Co-business owners since: May 2008

Employees: 2

The secret to making it work: “The key is having strong, open dialogue with your spouse every day. We’ve learned how to separate the workload and recognize each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Vania was a nurse her whole career and she’s more analytical than I am, while I spent 37 years working for the government before retiring and have thus become the sales guy. It’s important to know what you do well and what your spouse does better.

We were surprised by how challenging business ownership is; we thought we’d come in with so much work experience and grow our business very quickly, but it takes hard work. We’ve made it because we both wanted this and shared a common goal. We set a vision when we first started and we’re both working towards that goal.

We don't get sick of each other because we still try and carve out "me time" and have our own lives outside our relationship. Vania is a Sunday School teacher and has her own interests and activities, while I like to workout at the gym and take spinning classes, etc. One thing that has kept our relationship strong is that we still have a date night every week, even though we see each other all day. Date night is just for us, usually on Friday or Saturday, and we do not talk about work. We're also a very spiritual couple, so we start each day with a prayer and keep God first. We stay focused as a couple because of our beliefs." — *Jim*

Jennifer Wong and Casey Sackett, founders of Alt12 Apps in San Francisco, Calif.

Married since: 2009

Co-business owners since: 2009

Employees: 16

The secret to making it work: "We're a bit unusual in that everything we've done from dating to starting a company and family together has not been done with any level of convention. We met, moved in together, got married, and got pregnant within a span of one year. But I also think that's why we're so awesome together as a couple and as co-founders. We're also both nerds. We met after having seen each other at the same tech events over and over again, so from the beginning, we shared a strong common interest and I think that's important when starting a company together.

We didn't plan to be co-founders. In fact, we were both looking outside our relationship for that perfect business partnership before realizing that our experience and skillset made for the ideal startup team. My design and marketing strategy background is the perfect complement to Casey's engineering and business strategy skills. We were able to build, launch and reach millions of users without outside capital for three years. We often joke that if we weren't married, we'd be co-founders anyway.

Besides finding a realistic match of abilities, as a couple, you have to like spending 24/7 with your partner and you have to figure out how to mentally separate work from your personal lives. It's a constant exercise of setting boundaries. We've created hard and fast rules about when 'shop talk' must stop, and from the moment our kids are home, through dinner, bath time and tucking them in bed, we don't allow any work conversation. This isn't just important for us as a couple, but our kids also need us to be there wholeheartedly." — *Jennifer*

Alicia and David Cherniak, owners of Elements Therapeutic Massage in Chester, N.J.

Married since: 2010

Co-business owners since: 2012

Employees: 12

The secret to making it work: “Dave and I have known each other for more than 50 years. We were four years old when my family moved next door to the Cherniak’s and a 50+ year friendship was forged. From kindergarten through high school graduation we were friends, foes, fellow band members, fierce competitors with board games — but always allies during the neighborhood snowball fights. 5 years ago our friendship deepened and we were married on February 1, 2010 at the Graceland Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas with Elvis walking me down the aisle.

During the last four years we both lost our jobs and decided it was time to take control of our own destiny, so we looked into the world of Franchising. Working together can certainly be a challenge at times, but we have defined roles in our business that play to each other’s strengths: Dave is detail oriented and great at ensuring that the studio is clean, organized and secure. I handle the HR, marketing and finance responsibilities. We discuss every evening how the day went and what needs to be done going forward. We may not always agree, but we always end the day together.” — *Alicia*

Michael M. Clements and Anchy Wei, owners of ArtJamz LLC and Anchy Wei LLC in Washington, D.C.

Married since: 2011

Co-business owners since: 2010

Employees: 19 total

The secret to making it work: “We’re both creatives and headstrong Leos, so a 50/50 business arrangement probably wouldn’t have been the best idea. So we each play a role in the other’s business knowing that the other person has the final say and control of their entrepreneurial pursuit. We also understand that we each have different strengths and we respect and admire that. Anchy has an amazing eye for aesthetics plus strong design skills; while I come from a publishing background so content and copy are my forte. In this way, we are each other’s best cheerleader and strongest advocate, but in a setup that doesn’t allow pride or our needs for control to get in the way.

Basically, we each work for each other. For example, at ArtJamz, I’m the owner but Anchy is the creative director and has a small percentage. For Anchy Wei LLC, Anchy is the owner and designs all her jewelry pieces but I help create content and provide input on social media and back-end business processes. Although, I keep asking if she’ll let me design a jewelry line someday — she says I get to keep bringing the trash out.” — *Michael*

Hayes and Jenn Davis, owners of Union Metrics in San Francisco, Calif.

Married since: 2003

Co-business owners since: 2008

Employees: 11

The secret to making it all work: “The secret is that there is no secret. This is hard and we bust our butts every single day to make it work. We met in high school, so we’ve been together for 15 years, which is somewhat unusual in our peer group in San Francisco. So a lot of what we’ve learned about running our startup together, we’ve figured out through the often messy process of trying something, and then the next time, doing it better.

One of the best things we’ve done is hire smart, talented people we trust. That takes a lot of pressure off us and means we get to relax every now and then. We’re very lucky to have such a great team. We also try to do normal couple things outside work, like going for a run in the morning, sitting down for a cup of coffee before heading into the office, and grabbing drinks after a long day. But most of all, this is just really important to us. We love working and building our company together. There is nothing more challenging and more rewarding than running a business, and it’s pretty incredible that we get to experience it side by side.” — *Hayes and Jenn*

Don and Lani Dolifka, owners of Watermill Express, LLC in Brighton, Colo.

Married since: 1985

Co-business owners since: 1984

Employees: 340

The secret to making it work: “It is extremely challenging to simultaneously build a family and business with your spouse. We started at a young age and learned the hard way that everything is a compromise — at work, at home and in between, there is always a sense of compromise given that work is never too far away. It’s also been hard on our staff at times trying to figure out who to go to with problems.

The good news is that everything turned out okay after making every mistake possible over the last 28 years, in both family and business. At work, we know to stay out of each other’s business. Our biggest disagreements, it turned out, were over which road to take to get us to the same place. Once we realized that, we weren’t as critical of each other’s preferences for how to get there.” — *Don and Lani*

Kurt and Kerri Ritter, owners of Saxbys Coffee locations in Springboro and Centerville, Ohio

Married since: 1993

Co-business owners since: 2006

Employees: 25

The secret to making it work: “The secret is simple: Whatever the wife says is right! Seriously, similar to the way opposites attract in relationships, we have found this to hold true as we approach our business. Kerri is very detailed oriented and focuses on all the finer details, especially those little things that make our shop, products, and overall experience special and unique.

Conversely, my focus is on functionality and bottom-line dollars (for example, is it easy, and does it maximize profitability?), and the right solution is generally one that blends both those elements together. We recognize these differences in each other’s approach and leverage them accordingly (although it did take us a few years and several arguments to come to this revelation). More importantly, we share several core values; namely, that customer service must always be a priority, our employees are our greatest asset, failure is not an option, and success only comes when our efforts with the business are in balance with our family and our faith.” — *Kurt*