

# NO OTHER SUCCESS

HOW A LAWN-MOWING BUSINESS  
TRANSFORMED THOUSANDS OF LIVES



JIM PENMAN

**This is an exclusive sneak peek into *No Other Success: How a Lawn Mowing Business Transformed Thousands of Lives.***

## **Introduction: An Unlikely Success**

As CEO of the largest home-service franchise in Australia, one of my practices is to phone my franchisees on the major anniversaries of when they started their business. Quite often, I'll ask them what they were doing in their previous life. I will always remember one response in particular.

This franchisee had been a supermarket manager. He worked long hours and was highly successful, but he saw little of his children. He left home first thing in the morning and usually got back late at night. One morning as he was leaving, his four-year-old son said, "Daddy, I wish you could have breakfast with us."

The man drove to work with tears streaming down his face. He realized that no amount of money could make up for the fact that he was seeing almost nothing of his son. Not long after, he quit his job and bought a lawn-mowing business. I'd like to say that he has earned a better income since then, but he told me that in reality, his pay is very similar. But for him, the key difference is that he has been able to see his son growing up. I asked him whether he has ever thanked his son, who is now 14, for making that plea. He told me, "All the time."

## **I'm an unlikely person to build a successful business.**

For a start, I often struggle with the temptation to spend hours or even days reading, playing video games, or doing anything but productive work. Any achievement requires relentless self-discipline, and I must constantly bring purpose and meaning to my mind. I'm also a poor manager—not well-organized, not good at sticking to systems, and with very little head for accounts.

I have no formal business training and have never done a business plan or written a proper mission statement. I have never been able to create or stick to budgets. To be honest, I find most business texts difficult, if not impossible to follow.

On top of that, I'm socially inept, I hate crowds, and I have no capacity for small talk. I don't read people well and can badly offend or upset them without meaning to. I easily get angry and impatient and have to try hard to control my temper. I've been divorced three times, and I don't blame anyone for finding me impossible to live with.

I struggle to remember names, and I also have a rare condition that makes it hard to remember faces. This might not matter so much to a computer programmer or engineer, but my business is one that entirely depends on relating to people.



So, how did I come to run Australia's largest franchise system, with more than 40 divisions and 5,000 franchisees in three countries? This book is the story of that journey. It's a messy story

full of dumb mistakes, blind alleys, and family and financial crises. I hope you'll get a sense of how and why this business works, with clues for how to make any business better—and also, I hope, how to make life better.

I didn't start my company to get rich. I started it to fund a research institute based on the ideas developed in my PhD thesis that, in short, discusses the development of an innovative treatment. This treatment would help individuals overcome problems such as addiction and depression, thus helping societies become more stable and prosperous.

My life's purpose is further expressed in family.

**One of the greatest contributions anyone can make is to rear children who go on to live joyful and meaningful lives.**

I have ten children, of whom I am very proud. I have made it a key principle never to let the search for wealth crowd out the time I spend with them. Even today, I drive my youngest son to school each morning.

I also find a sense of purpose in my business. Being responsible for the welfare of more than 5,000 families is a heavy responsibility. This in turn means a never-ending drive for better customer service, which is the best way to help my franchisees succeed. Even as a lawn-mowing contractor, I aimed for a quality of work far beyond what my customers expected.

These days, though we service more than a million customers a year, I still personally engage with customer complaints on a daily basis. We receive only a fraction of the complaints we saw in pre-franchise days, but I am driven to see even fewer.

An even stronger motivation for me is to provide excellent service to my franchisees. My aim is for all of them to be not just satisfied, but delighted. It hardly needs saying that this is the goal, not the reality. I regularly deal with those who aren't happy. Sometimes they fail, and that's hard to take. But the aim is always to do better. I deliberately seek feedback by giving every franchisee my direct phone number and email address. I respond within hours, if not minutes. Each contact is an opportunity to help or to see how we can improve.

My franchisees often find our focus on customer service extreme, but I point out that great service helps the brand and keeps the leads rolling in. It's especially helpful to the individual franchisee. Those who give the best customer service are more likely to stay with the company

and to report good income. By every measure, including attrition rates and the proportion of franchisees reporting “good” income, we’ve shown continual improvement.

**I’ve made it clear that I will never sell Jim’s.**

I’ve seen what happens when a big company takes over a brand and double-crosses the franchisees in pursuit of short-term profit. I’m actively canvassing my children and their partners in search of leaders with the ability and ethics to carry it on. Having said that, I’m in perfect health and likely to live another 20 years (I’m 72 now) and unlikely to ever retire.

I love what I do—I look forward to every day and find meaning and purpose in it. I often say that business is like a vast video game with endless new levels and “bosses” (problems) to overcome. And you get paid for playing it! What could be better than that?

A key principle of my life is that success cannot be measured by money alone. Family matters, community matters, and a sense of purpose matters. One of my favorite sayings is “No other success can compensate for failure in the home.” Financial success matters, but so does success at rearing children to be decent, productive human beings.

That is why I chose this saying for the title of my book—because just making money is not enough.

I hope that as you read my story, you’ll be inspired to pursue your own dreams and that you’ll see the power in pushing forward even when things become difficult. I began with an investment of \$24.00 and a whole lot of tenacity.

It turns out that was all I needed.

## Chapter 1: Humble Beginnings

I was born David James Penman, the second of four siblings—with one older sister, one younger brother, and a younger sister. On leaving school I took a gap year, part of which was spent on a farm in Western Australia. The man I worked for had a son, also named David, so I said, “Call me Jim.” It was a break with childhood and also somehow a bit more rugged, more kindred to the outdoors, and more Australian. Jim is a man with calloused hands and dirt under his fingernails, which is still true for me today.



1953

My father was an engineer and my mother a schoolteacher. My ancestors first arrived in Australia in the 1830s. I have boring Anglo-Scottish ancestry—regrettably, no convicts or Aboriginal people in my family tree!

My mother was intensely loving and supportive, though anxious and bad-tempered at times. I was very close to her when young. She wrote and illustrated a book just for me called *David and the Dinosaurs* because I was crazy about dinosaurs. As a teenager I would come home from school and have long conversations with her in the kitchen. She was a full-time mother to my siblings and me when we were young, then she later went back to being a schoolteacher.

**She always believed in me, even when there were no obvious signs I would be successful!**

My father was strong-willed, principled, and somewhat fierce. We clashed a lot in my teenage years. At one time during that period, I didn't speak to him for six months. But I admired his principles, his focus, and his intellectual interests. He was an engineer—first a university lecturer and later a consultant for legal cases involving murder, accidents, and arson. He was an accomplished handyman, making much of our furniture, and he had an intense knowledge and love of history.

We spent a year in England when I was ten, touring historical sites including castles, churches, Roman roads, and museums. This is not as extravagant as it sounds. The university had posted Dad to an atomic research facility in Berkshire, and we toured on the weekends in an old car. Overnight accommodations were sometimes in a caravan park!



1962

As a single income family, we lived frugally. Before leaving for England and after returning, we spent holidays in a tent and could only afford to drink soft drinks during one time of the year—Christmas. They sacrificed to send us all to private schools. I am immensely grateful for this and

for the large amount of attention and intellectual stimulation they gave us. Once I reached adulthood, I was close to both of them and saw them weekly until their deaths—my father at 76 and my mother at 93.

But in some ways, I must have been a disappointment to my father.

**He expected us to have professional careers as doctors, engineers, or lawyers.**

Studying history at university was not what he wanted for me, but at least he felt I could become a successful academic. Then I dropped out, without even achieving a PhD, and went to work as a gardener. He never said anything, but I could guess at his disappointment.

In later life we became good friends and would have lunch together each week. By this time, I had about a thousand franchisees. I asked him once, “I guess it wasn’t such a bad career choice, was it?” He basically just grunted, “I guess not.” But I’m sure he was proud of me. It’s been 24 years since he died of a stroke, and I still miss him.

I learned the importance of looking after customers at a very early age. Our neighbor over the back fence was a Mr. Tapley. At the age of eight, I knocked on his door doing bob-a-job for the Cub Scouts, and he let me rake his gravel driveway. Then he offered me an ongoing job. I would rake the drive, pull weeds, and do anything else he asked. He paid me two shillings a week—just 20 cents in modern terms, but not bad for a kid. In those days, you could buy a decent block of Cadbury chocolate for two shillings. It doubled my pocket money.

I learned a lot from Mr. Tapley, particularly one summer’s day when I must have been about ten. The gravel drive didn’t need work and there wasn’t much else going on, so he asked me to carry some rubbish to the incinerator. After checking the job, he found some leaves and branches that had fallen along the way.

“If you’re not going to do it properly,” he told me, “I might as well do it myself.”

Mr. Tapley was a gentle man who never raised his voice in all the years I knew him. Perhaps that’s why I still remember my shame and my determination never to let him down again so vividly.

About this time, I began mowing the family lawn with our push mower, which wasn’t easy. The backyard had a fair slope to it, and twigs from the trees were forever jamming the blades. Later on, I also mowed for a neighbor across the road. Like Mr. Tapley, he was a gentle man who was very kind to me, an unhappy youngster with few friends, who didn’t get on well with his

father. He had been in a POW camp for Polish officers and had suffered terribly during his time there.

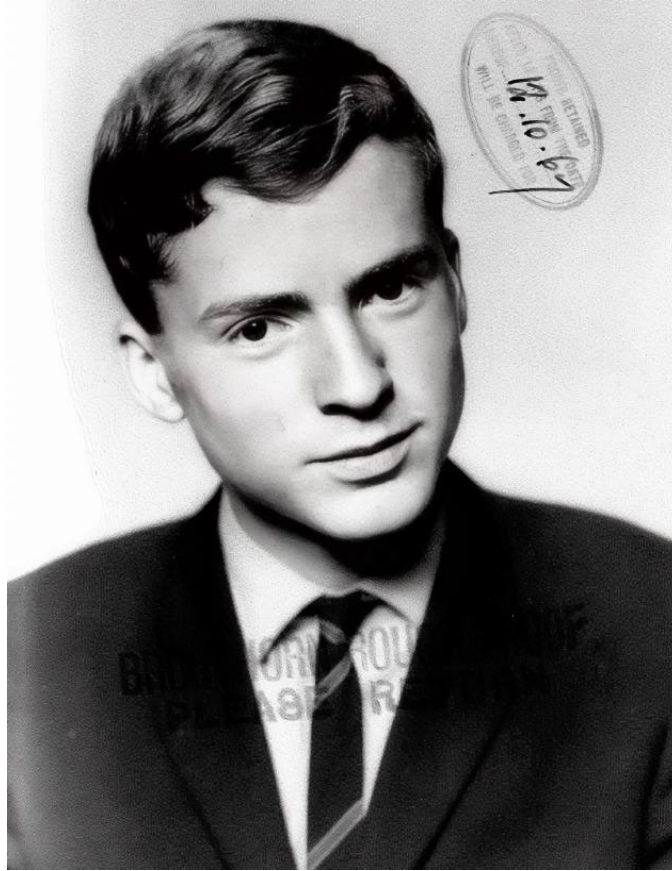
I learned everything I know about gardening from my customers, but I never learned more than I did from these two good men. Especially my passion for customer service and the upset I feel even now when one of my clients has been let down.

**Of course, this had nothing to do with my career intentions.**

An early ambition of mine was to be a doctor, then a vet—I got on better with animals than with people—and at one time, even a science fiction writer. Never at any time did I dream of being a business owner, and least of all someone who mows lawns.

My real passion as a teenager was history. That passion started at the age of 14 when a friend gave me a copy of Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*—a tragic account of the decline of Imperial Athens. I became hooked on the question of why civilizations rise and fall. I was especially intrigued by a stark difference with animal populations.

When animals have plentiful food, their numbers tend to explode. When human societies become wealthy, as in ancient Rome, they tend to decline—not only in population but in economic success and social cohesion. I decided I'd become an academic to try to find out why.



Age 15

Before starting college, I took a year off to earn money. This was the period when I worked for a few months on that farm in Western Australia. After that, I took various jobs, including selling encyclopedias—without success—and a stint in public service.

Toward the middle of that year, I decided to have another go at mowing lawns. After making \$18.00 a week on the farm (this was 1970), \$1.50 per hour seemed reasonable. I handwrote a notice with my price and the services and asked the local hardware merchant to put it in his window. It generated three clients, two of which continued after the start of college.

**They were a great training ground because, with my low rates, they didn't expect me to know too much.**

One taught me how to prune hydrangeas. Another helped me lay a new lawn.

With time, I became confident enough to raise my rate to \$2.00. One of my clients objected, but I managed to put the blame on inflation. Then, about a year later (in 1974), I heard rumors of people charging even more. I decided to go for broke and charge what seemed the incredible rate

of \$3.00 an hour. At that stage, I had done no advertising except my first sign in the shop window, but my new plans were going to require more.

I went into the university union and used the duplicator to run off small notices advertising my services, then cut these up into strips and delivered them to houses all around my family's home. The response was astounding. Many people said they had never heard of anybody working so cheaply. This got me looking at the issue of pricing.

To make better money, I had to get off hourly rates and onto fixed quotes. I figured on \$5.00 for mowing a lawn. With each lawn taking thirty minutes, this could earn me the dizzying sum of \$10.00 per hour. But no one was going to pay me \$5.00 if I was using their mower, so I would have to buy my own. This meant spending the giant sum of \$200.00, probably the scariest decision of my whole business career.

What pushed me into the purchase was the sudden urge to own a car. I had been cycling between campus and my parents' place, and some of the hills were a bit much.

**Also, I thought a car might help me with girls, but unfortunately, in this I was to be disappointed!**

Without any money for a down payment, I persuaded the bank manager to lend me \$1,600.00 for a second-hand Holden Kingswood (an Australian car), and I bought a bright orange lawn mower manufactured by Pope.

My new marketing was more serious and on a bigger scale. I distributed leaflets offering "Most lawns \$5," which were quite successful. Even working only a day or so a week, it didn't take long to pay off the Kingswood. The best thing was that I enjoyed mowing lawns. After sitting at my student desk all week, it was good to get exercise in the open air. Even now, life falls short for me if I don't have some daily contact with grass and trees.

## Chapter 2: My Great Obsession

By the time I started my postgraduate degree, I had built up enough clients to sell some off as an ongoing business. This sale netted me several thousand dollars—which, together with a legacy from my grandmother, made up the deposit on my first house. The income from my part-time business wasn't too bad.

I was also keen on learning how to do the job better. One thing about mowing that always frustrated me was edging. For lawns with a mower strip, this wasn't a problem. I ran my wheel along the edge and picked up the grass with the left-hand side of the mower—rotary mowers suck better from the left. But for the grass around trees and next to retaining walls, there was no easy solution. Cutting it with shears was simply not commercial, and it always bugged me.

One day, I was in the mower shop where, it must be confessed, I spent far too much time. Tom, the owner, said I looked after my clients better and my mowers worse than any contractor he knew!

But this day as I wandered about, waiting for him to fix my machine, I noticed a weird-looking gadget on the floor. It was a long pole with a handle in the middle, a small engine on one end, and a short piece of nylon cord sticking out the other. What was it doing in a mower shop? Tom told me it was a “brush cutter,” one of the first in the country and just out from Japan. He picked it up and showed me how it worked.

I was amazed. Did this mean I could trim around trees and clotheslines just as easily as a wheel on a mower strip? Absolutely! The price was steep, but I bought it on the spot. That is how, as a part-time student, I became one of the first contractors in Australia to own what we call a brush cutter, also known as a weed whacker.

**This immediately made a quantum leap in service possible.**

I could quickly, and neatly, do something that most homeowners could not do for themselves.

So, my business was working well, but mowing lawns was a student job, not a career. My great obsession in those days was research. I lived it, breathed it, and thought about it all the time. My interest had only grown since my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, and now I used the rise and fall of civilizations as a lens through which to understand the history subjects I was studying.

As an undergraduate at university, I pursued the question of why human societies decline after growing wealthy. I focused especially on demography. What kinds of behaviors were associated with rising and falling birth rates? This led me to study historical changes in family and personal behavior, and then on to cross-cultural anthropology. For example, more complex societies tend to restrict sexual activity and control children more tightly. What effect did that have on their children and future generations?

My reading then took me to zoology, psychology, and eventually back to biology because there seemed to be a connection between these family patterns and the way animals responded to limited food.

As I moved on to a PhD in history, my ideas gradually shifted. I eventually came to the conclusion that above all, changes in society were determined by changes in character, and that these in turn were biological in origin, driven by factors such as food shortage, population density, and sexual behavior. I saw tremendous potential in this approach, including ways to cure poverty, drug addiction, and many other ills. My findings also implied that our society was headed in a very bad direction, much as in the days of Rome.

My life became consumed by a sense of purpose to further develop and apply my research. Though I was never naturally hard-working, I set myself strict guidelines of hours and goals, and drove myself to meet them. I didn't care about money. I lived very simply and continued studying through the holidays. Part-time mowing was more than enough to live on, and I'm frugal by nature. I was content to live on a modest income, as long as I could pursue my passion.

But as a career path, this had serious problems. Historians gain jobs and tenure as experts in a highly specialized field. My approach was so broad that it could not even be described as history anymore since it was founded in biology. In fact, to describe it, I adopted the term "Biohistory."

This approach was so wildly unorthodox that my thesis examiners didn't know what to make of it. One made a comment to the effect that if it was "a magnum opus at the end of a distinguished career," it might be worth considering. In the end, they rejected it. Lest anyone be too hard on them, I should point out that my thesis claimed that virtually every explanation described by virtually every historian about every event in history was wrong!

**There was a way ahead, but it was a strange one.**

In contrast to any other theory about history or society, my theory could be tested quite rigorously in a laboratory. I'd come to the conclusion that over-abundant food, especially junk food, was contributing to ills such as drug addiction and alcoholism, as well as wider social problems. Food restriction, on the other hand, has been found to have real benefits for health and well-being. If I could work out how to reproduce the effects of limited food without the need to go hungry, it would help many people live better lives.

But this is where I came to that brick wall. First, I was not the person to conduct such tests. I was already in my late twenties, and retraining as a scientist would have taken the better part of another decade. Even then, there was no guarantee that such a large project could be funded. Furthermore, I lacked the temperament to be a research scientist. What I needed was my own research foundation, which would cost tens of millions. So, at the mature age of 28, I was forced to look for a business that could someday pay extremely well.

Clearly, mowing lawns would not fit the bill. It was a business of independent contractors, who would be impossible to supervise and maintain standards of service. Nobody had done this anywhere, on any scale. To be honest, it never occurred to me for an instant that there was any real future in it, but it was the only thing I knew how to do. So, I advertised widely for clients and brought in subcontractors. They provided their own equipment, collected from the customers, and paid me a royalty, usually 20%.

It didn't work. There were plenty of responses. Some ads in the local papers, a few leaflets dropped, and the phones were running hot.

The real problem was me.

Released from the discipline of study, I began to slacken off. I didn't even mow lawns myself but stayed home to "manage the business," which in practice meant that I did very little of anything. Part of this was the absurd attitude that I was a manager and "above" doing the manual work that my business required. I was too foolish to recognize that all work has dignity and value, and manual labor has just as much as any other kind.

It's an attitude I see too often today in people who rely on handouts rather than taking a job—any job—that's below their dignity, and thus miss out on chances to learn and grow and progress. It's an attitude that has to be overcome when a laid-off business executive considers buying a mowing or cleaning franchise, doing work they would never have dreamed of a short while earlier. With time, they might build a lifestyle beyond anything they have known, but it can

be a hard step to take. I know that attitude because I've been there, and I'm ashamed of it. It almost wiped me out.

I didn't even manage the business properly. On many days, I sat in my bean bag, reading science fiction. The lack of exercise made me even more lethargic, to the point where I could barely handle the administration of the business and had to hire people to help. To make matters even worse, I had fallen seriously in love and was even more distracted.

I started losing money and had to borrow tens of thousands of dollars to stay afloat. From a business point of view, the only positive thing arising out of this period was that my fiancée decided she liked the bushy look. Too impatient to spend time shaving in any case, I decided to grow a beard. That beard later became the basis of our well-known logo, together with the bucket hat I wore gardening.

I'm lousy with people and a poor salesman, as shown by my earlier failure to sell encyclopedias, so I hired someone who seemed to be the answer. He managed to sell the rights to my entire customer base for enough money to clear my debts and give me a fresh start, but the \$5,000 check he handed me was a dud. Then he fobbed me off with some promises and disappeared.

It was two weeks before Christmas, 1982. I was thirty years old and a failure. Not only were there no job prospects, but my thesis had been rejected. Now I had failed in academia, failed in business, and lost my house. I spent the proceeds from the house on frivolous things, instead of saving my business. Realizing my mistake, I borrowed more money to keep my business afloat. It was unbelievably ridiculous.

Behind it all was my arrogance and stupidity. True, I had been cheated, but a better man would have run his own business and not handed it over to someone else.

**And yet something had changed, and for the better. It was a change in me.**

Part of this was that I had recently become a Christian, which was a shock to everyone who knew me, not least my family. Let me explain.

You have just finished reading the Introduction and first two chapters of *No Other Success: How a Lawn Mowing Business Transformed Thousands of Lives*. Make sure to [grab your copy](#) of *No Other Success: How a Lawn Mowing Business Transformed Thousands of Lives* - the story of how Jim's \$24 investment became the largest franchise chain in the Southern Hemisphere!