8 Business Lessons From Game of Thrones

Sure, it's an unlikely source for entrepreneurial wisdom--but no less relevant. Here's what to steal from the HBO series and apply to your own company.

Game of Thrones, the fantasy series on HBO, is all about loyalty and conflict resolution. Sound familiar? The dramatic twists in the Seven Kingdoms can help guide you through the throes of your own intense battles--no pillaging of neighboring villages required.

1. Pay your debts quickly.
One of the phrases that pops up in the series is "a Lannister always pays his debts"--which refers to the richest kingdom's credo. In business, debt reduction is not just a part of your financial statement, says Heather Taylor, the Social Media Manager at MyCorporation.com. She says dry spells will come, and debt destroys any flexibility.

2. Let your competitors destroy themselves.
Plenty of start-ups enter a market that's already inhabited by others. That can be a good thing, says Chris Healey, the Web director of marketing at Inspyder Software. As the dwarf-prince Tyrion Lannister says, your enemies hate each other as much as they hate you. Letting your "combatants" fight each other through feature wars and marketing campaigns gives you a chance to build up your own storehouses--and attract more customers.

3. Freedom begets loyalty.
In Game of Thrones, allegiance is nothing short of sacred. But it's also portrayed as a privilege and, well, a little less than optional. Maree Jones, an account coordinator at KC Projects, says the best management style is one that gives employees options--treat them as allies, not slaves. "In a recent episode, the Khaleesi have purchased a number of slave warriors called the Unsullied. They are trained to do as they are told no matter what it is. She purchases these troops, and gives them a new sense of freedom and self worth," she says. "In turn, they seem to be even more loyal to her--by choice--rather than by force."

4. Be kind.
Sure, there are scenes in the HBO series that are graphic and violent--not too much to learn there. In between, there are also moments of kindness and sacrifice. Ivan Weinreb, a business consultant, says it might seem unnecessary to show kindness to a customer or business partner, but it will pay long-term dividends. As a queen tells her son in the series, "The occasional kindness will spare you all sorts of trouble down the road."

5. Cultivate your influence over time.
A spymaster-to-the-king named Varys once explained how he was a beggar but, through cunning and manipulation, rose to prominence. (Sounds a bit like my own Twitter feed.) Andrew Aversa, the co-founder and lead developer at Impact Soundworks, says that's precisely how social networking works: You build an audience one person at a time. "Each connection you make,
each new client, each review, interview, or press release, contributes to your business' profile and your own personal influence and network," he says.

6. Unity builds power.
Robert Baratheon, also known as the King of the Seven Kingdoms, once explained how the power of an army can work. He held up five fingers, and then held up one finger. Then, he asked the queen which number is greater. She guessed wrong: Power comes in one unified approach. As Nick Dujnic, the multimedia marketing manager at display ad company LiveIntent explained, a united team is more powerful than a group of zealous individuals working independently. "Choose people that are passionate and focused on a singular goal--your goal," he says. "The worst thing you can do is to surround yourself with a team that, no matter how smart or talented, does not believe in your product. A united force, one that truly believes in what you are doing and wants to see it through to the end, will do what is necessary to find success."

7. Plan your strategy... or else.
House Stark, who rule in the northern lands of the Seven Kingdoms, has a lesson that's easy to forget for any start-up: Winter is coming. This theme is a major plot-point in the series, and the opening of the latest season shows the remnants of a wintry battleground. "Strategic planning for the long term and being ready for any disasters which may come in the future are important traits for successful small business leaders," says Daniel Saynt, the chief creative director and founder of blogging network Socialyte Collective. "While entrepreneurs may feel reinvesting back into the company is the best use of profits, those who save a reserve as a rainy day fund find that their companies navigate bad times better."

8. Know who to trust.
Knowing who to trust is critical, especially when a company first launches. Elizabeth Zelman, a marketing associate at bid management company Privia, says a common theme on the show is knowing the difference between friends and enemies. "Eddard Stark chooses to trust Littlefinger and gets his head chopped off for his efforts," she says. "If he had trusted Renly instead, things would have turned out differently." Sound a little dramatic? Sure--but a good lesson for anyone trying to build a company.