

Part-time and profitable

How enterprising New Yorkers Ivan and Alicia Levine built a successful side venture by devoting just a few hours a week.

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David Neff [\[+\] Enlarge](#)

MATH TOY STORY: Ivan and Alicia Levine spent years of experimenting with pay-per-click advertising before they finally discovered what would really help sales take off: selling through Amazon.

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Math teachers Ivan Levine and his wife, Alicia, started the Wizard of Math, an online educational-toy store, to generate a little extra income. Based in their Staten Island home, the business turned out to be a great addition to their teacher pay, generating more than \$1 million in sales and about \$50,000 in profits a year. Better yet, the Levines spend as little as one hour a day keeping it running.

The Levines have built what for many New Yorkers is the holy grail: A profitable side business that doesn't take time away from their main career.

This kind of gig isn't easy to find. Ventures that fit the bill usually revolve around work that can be done outside of traditional business hours, or that can be automated using low-cost technologies or outsourced to low-cost providers. And these *4-Hour Workweek*-style businesses don't come with instruction manuals. To keep them both part-time and profitable, the owners rely on ingenuity to use their available time efficiently.

Entrepreneurs who have successfully started side businesses suggest one of the most important rules is: Be patient.

The Levines started their business in 2001. It took years of experimenting with pay-per-click advertising before they finally discovered what would really help sales take off: selling through Amazon. They didn't lose money in those years, but profits were tiny. "It doesn't happen overnight," says Mr. Levine.

Outsourcing as inexpensively as possible is another key.

David Wurtz, a product manager at Google, runs a fast-growing online store called TopTVMounts, which sells hardware for mounting televisions. He uses a service called Shipwire to store inventory around the country and make local deliveries. "I put in three to four hours a week," says Mr. Wurtz, who has two part-time employees.

The Levines took another route to managing inventory, arranging for a wholesaler to ship directly to customers. A second firm transfers orders from Amazon to the wholesaler's warehouse, and a third monitors competitors' prices and automatically lowers the Levines' price if someone undercuts them. Mr. Levine deals with complaints. "I'm customer service," he says.

Maximizing your time may be the most difficult part of running a side business. You may want to cap the number of hours you spend, so as not to damage your main career, and be as productive as possible during those hours. Rich Stambolian, for instance,

does graphic design for GovernmentAuctions.org by day but earns 35% of his income at his home-based photography business in Flushing on nights and weekends. He books multiple shoots for the same location on the same day.

“I allow enough buffer time for the next group to come in,” he says.

Of course, even low-maintenance side businesses require daily devotion. “You can't be lazy and say, ‘I'm going to cancel this meeting because I'm tired,’ ” says Mr. Stambolian.

Michael Zakkour, founder of consultancy ChinaBrightStar and an expert on global outsourcing, makes frequent trips to China to help clients navigate the marketplace there. He combines the trips with a side business: buying antiquities and selling them on eBay. He spends less than two hours a day on the antiquities, which bring in more than 20% of his income.

It's also smart to decide how much you want to invest in your side business, if anything. Zak Tanjeloff was working in an experimental education program in New York City's public schools when he came up with the idea for an iPhone application called Near to Here, which alerts users to interesting attractions near them. He spent less than \$20,000 to hire a small technology and design team. Sales have taken off.

A word to the wise, though: What you intend as a side business can grow. Mr. Tanjeloff now makes creating iPhone apps his main gig. “If our growth continues—and we have many more apps coming out—we should do over \$300,000 in income this year,” the Manhattan resident wrote by e-mail, from a vacation in Guatemala.

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