

# Business idioms



# at a premium

at a high price; at a relatively high price

Example: When flat-screen televisions first came out, they were selling **at a premium**.



## back-of-the-envelope calculations

quick calculations; estimates using approximate numbers, instead of exact numbers

Example: I don't need the exact numbers right now. Just give me some **back-of-the-envelope calculations**.

Note: This expression refers to the quick calculations one would do informally, as on the back of an envelope.



# belt-tightening

reduction of expenses

Example: When worldwide demand for software decreased, Microsoft had to do some **belt-tightening**.

## (to) bite the bullet

to make a difficult or painful decision; to take a difficult step

Example: When demand was down, U.S. automakers had to **bite the bullet** and cut jobs.

Origin: This idiom comes from the military. During the Civil War in the United States, doctors sometimes ran out of whiskey for killing the pain. A bullet would be put in the wounded soldier's mouth during surgery. He would "bite the bullet" to distract him from the pain and keep him quiet so the doctor could do his work in peace.



## bitter pill to swallow

bad news; something unpleasant to accept

Example: After Gina spent her whole summer working as an intern for American Express, failing to get a full-time job offer from the company was a **bitter pill to swallow**.

# blockbuster

a big success; a huge hit

- Example: Eli Lilly made a lot of money with the prescription drug, Prozac. It was a real **blockbuster**.
- Origin: This term comes from the blockbuster bombs used during World War Two by the British Royal Air Force. They were huge and created a large explosive force. Blockbuster ideas similarly create a big impact - and hopefully don't cause destruction like blockbuster bombs!

# brownie points

credit for doing a good deed or for giving someone a compliment (usually a boss or teacher)

- Example: Sara scored **brownie points** with her boss by volunteering to organize the company's holiday party.
- Origin: The junior branch of the Girl Scouts is called the Brownies. Brownies earn credit to then earn a badge by doing good deeds and tasks. When applied to adults, the meaning is sarcastic.





# cash cow

a product, service, or business division that generates a lot of cash for the company, without requiring much investment

Example: With strong sales every year and a great brand name, Mercedes is a **cash cow** for DaimlerChrysler.



## (to) cash in on

to make money on; to benefit financially from

Example: Jamie Oliver, star of the TV show The Naked Chef, **cashed in on** his popularity by writing cookbooks and opening restaurants.

# (to) climb the corporate ladder

advance in one's career; the process of getting promoted and making it to senior management

Example: You want to **climb the corporate ladder**? It helps to be productive and to look good in front of your boss.

# (to) compare apples to oranges

to compare two unlike things; to make an invalid comparison

- Example: Comparing a night at EconoLodge with a night at the Four Seasons is like **comparing apples to oranges**. One is a budget motel, and the other is a luxury hotel.
- Note: You will also see the related expression "compare apples to apples" which means to compare two things of the same type. This means that you are making a valid comparison, as opposed to when you're comparing apples to oranges.



## crunch time

a short period when there's high pressure to achieve a result

Example: It's **crunch time** for stem cell researchers in Korea. New government regulations may soon make their work illegal.

# dog-eat-dog world

a cruel and aggressive world in which people just look out for themselves

Example: Your company fired you shortly after you had a heart attack? Well, it's certainly a **dog-eat-dog world**!

- Origin: This expression dates back to the 1500's. Wild dogs were observed fighting aggressively over a piece of food. The connection was made that people, like dogs, often compete aggressively to get what they want.



## **(to) dot your i's and cross your t's**

to be very careful; to pay attention to details

Example: When preparing financial statements, accuracy is very important. Be sure to **dot your i's and cross your t's**.



## **(to) drum up business**

to create business; to find new customers

Example: Sales have been very slow lately. Do you have any ideas for **drumming up business**?



## (to) face the music

to admit that there's a problem; to deal with an unpleasant situation realistically

Example: Enron executives finally had to **face the music** and admit that they were involved in some illegal activities.



## (to) fast track a project

to make a project a high priority; to speed up the time frame of a project

Example: Let's **fast track this project**. We've heard rumors that our competitors are developing similar products.

## (to) generate lots of buzz

to cause many people to start talking about a product or service, usually in a positive way that increases sales

Example: Procter & Gamble **generated lots of buzz** for its new toothpaste by giving away free samples to people on the streets of New York City.

- Note: "Buzz" is a popular word for "attention."

## (to) have a lot on one's plate

to have a lot to do; to have too much to do; to have too much to cope with

- Example: Carlos turned down the project, explaining that he already **had a lot on his plate**.

Note: There is also the variation: to have too much on one's plate.

## (the) hard sell

an aggressive way of selling

Example: Car salesmen are famous for using **the hard sell** on their customers.

- Note: The opposite of "the hard sell" is "the soft sell," which is a sales technique using little or no pressure.

## (to) jump the gun

to start doing something too soon or ahead of everybody else

Example: The company **jumped the gun** by releasing a new product before the results of the consumer testing were in.

- Origin: A runner "jumps the gun" if he or she starts running before the starter's pistol has been fired.



## (to) jump through hoops

to go through a lot of difficult work for something; to face many bureaucratic obstacles

Example: We had to **jump through hoops** to get our visas to Russia, but we finally got them.

## (to) keep one's eye on the prize

to stay focused on the end result; to not let small problems get in the way of good results

Example: I know it's difficult going to class after work, but just **keep your eye on the prize**. At the end of next year, you'll have your MBA.

- Note: You will also see the variation: keep one's eyes on the prize.



## (to) keep something under wraps

to keep something secret; to not let anybody know about a new project or plan

Example: I'm sorry I can't tell you anything about the project I'm working on. My boss told me to **keep it under wraps**.

- Note: "Wraps" are things that provide cover, so if something is "under wraps" it's covered up and hidden.

# mum's the word

let's keep quiet about this; I agree not to tell anyone about this

Example: Please don't tell anybody about our new project. Remember: **mum's the word!**

- Origin: The word "mum" comes from the murmur "mmmmm," the only sound you can make when your mouth is shut firmly. Try making other sounds besides "mmmmm" with your lips and mouth shut firmly, and you will see that it's impossible!



## my gut tells me

I have a strong feeling that; my intuition tells me

Example: It's true that I don't know him well, but **my gut tells me** that James is the right person for the sales director position.

- Note: The "gut" is both the intestines and stomach and also the innermost emotional response.



## nothing ventured, nothing gained

If you don't try to do something, you'll never succeed.

- Example: It's risky to spend so much money developing a new brand, but **nothing ventured, nothing gained**.



## on top of trends

modern; aware and responding to the latest tastes

- Example: The Gap is **on top of trends**. They always have the latest styles in their stores.

## (to) pass the buck

to shift the blame; to blame somebody else

Example: It's your fault. Don't try to **pass the buck**!

- Origin: This expression comes from the world of poker. In the nineteenth century, a knife with a buckhorn handle (the "buck") was passed to the next dealer when it was his turn to give out the cards.

## (to) plug (a product)

to promote a product; to talk positively about a product

- Example: American Express often hires famous people to **plug their credit cards**. No wonder people pay attention to their ads!



## (to) pull one's weight

to do one's share of the work

- Example: Don't rely on others to get your job done. You need to **pull your own weight**.

Note: You will also hear the variation: to pull one's own weight.



## (to) pull the plug

to put a stop to a project or initiative, usually because it's not going well; to stop something from moving forward; to discontinue

- Example: After losing millions of dollars drilling for oil in Nebraska and finding nothing, the oil company finally **pulled the plug** on its exploration project.

Origin: This expression refers to removing a plug to make something stop working - when you pull the plug out of the wall, your appliance doesn't work. In the 19th century, when this term originated, the plug was for a toilet. To flush the toilet, you had to pull out a plug.

## (to) put a stake in the ground

to take the first step; to make a big move to get something started; to make a commitment

- Example: Our business in California has grown steadily over the past two years. Now is the time to **put a stake in the ground** and open a regional office there.

## (to) rally the troops

to motivate others; to get other people excited about doing something; to do something to improve the morale of the employees and get them energized about doing their work

Example: After the lay-offs and salary cuts, the airline president organized a meeting to **rally the troops** and plan for the next year.

- Note: The verb "to rally" has several definitions, but in this case means to "call together for a common goal or purpose." Troops is an informal way of describing a group of employees. The term comes from the military - a troop is a military unit.

# reality check

let's think realistically about this situation (said when you don't like something that's being suggested because you don't think the other person is thinking practically or logically)

- Example: You think we can start selling our products through our website next month? Time for a **reality check**! Nobody at our company knows anything about e-commerce.



## **(to) scale back one's hours**

to reduce the number of hours one works

Example: When Christine had a baby, she decided to **scale back her hours** and just work part-time.

Synonym: to cut back one's hours

# Shape up or ship out!

improve your behavior or leave; if you don't improve your performance, you're going to get fired

Example: Martin finally had enough of Todd's negative attitude. "**Shape up or ship out!**" he told Todd.

- Origin: This expression was first used in the U.S. military during World War Two, meaning: you'd better follow regulations and behave yourself ("shape up"), or you're going to be sent overseas to a war zone ("ship out").

## (to) step up to the plate

to take action; to do one's best; to volunteer

Example: We need somebody to be in charge of organizing the company holiday party. Who'd like to **step up to the plate** and start working on this project?

- Note: This expression comes from baseball. You step up to the plate (a plastic mat on the ground) when it's your turn to hit the ball.

## (to) throw cold water over (an idea, a plan)

to present reasons why something will not work; to discourage

Example: Pat presented her boss with a plan to expand their business into China, but he **threw cold water over** her plan and told her to just focus on developing business in the United States.

- Note: You will also hear the variation: to throw cold water on.





# through the roof

very high; higher than expected

Example: No wonder people are complaining about the cost of heating their homes. Oil prices have gone **through the roof!**

## (to) turn around one's business

to make a business profitable again; to go from not making profits to being profitable again

Example: The telecom company was able to **turn around its business** by developing a popular new line of services.

# (to) work down to the wire

to work until the last minute; to work until just before the deadline

Example: The investment bankers need to turn in their report at 9 a.m. tomorrow morning, and they've still got many hours of work left on it. They're going to be **working down to the wire**.

- Note: This expression comes from horse racing. In the 19th century, American racetracks placed wire across the track above the finish line. The wire helped determine which horse's nose crossed the line first. If a race was "down to the wire," it was a very close race, undecided until the very last second.

## (to) work out the (or some) kinks

to solve the problems with

Example: The company announced that they will delay the launch of their new product by two weeks. They still need to **work out the kinks** with their packaging process.

- Note: A "kink" is a problem or flaw in a system or plan.



# yes man

an employee who always agrees with the boss or does whatever the boss says

Example: Don't expect Larry to argue with the boss. **He's a yes man.**