

THE TICKET BOOTH: TO RIDE OR NOT TO RIDE.

In the summer of 1989, at the ripe old age of eighteen, I became an entrepreneur.

Let me be clear: This wasn't on purpose. That summer started for me the way summers start for many eighteen-year-olds. I had just finished high school and was gearing up to do exactly what was expected of me, which was to go to college.

My plan—or my father's plan, to be more accurate—was for me to spend eight years walking the historic hallways of UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), after which I'd walk out, waving a law degree or a “meal ticket for life,” as my dad put it. It was a pretty straightforward plan: I'd get a degree, get a great job with great pay, and get ahead in life. (Actually, doctor was my dad's first choice, but after watching me faint repeatedly at the sight of blood—mine or anyone else's—he settled for number two on his list.)

In truth, I'd always been attracted to doing things outside the traditional structure. I had other ideas for getting ahead in life, and working for someone else was not one of them. But my dad had been preparing me for this plan all my life, and eventually, despite my inner rebel, I fell in line. That

summer, the last thing I expected was anything... unexpected.

One warm afternoon I got a call from a good friend with an irresistible offer: “My brother has this video he keeps waving around excitedly. He says it’s amazing. He said to invite all the guys over to watch it. We’re even ordering pizza and getting a keg!” Beer, pizza, and an “amazing,” probably not-so-PG, movie? I was an eighteen-year-old male. This was my trifecta of a good time.

“Count me in!” I told my buddy.

THE MOMENT OF UH-OH!

I arrived at my friend’s house ready for “guys’ night.” As planned, there was pizza and beer. But the movie? It was nothing like what I had expected.

I was entranced, though, and for twenty minutes I couldn’t pull my eyes away from it. When it ended, I looked around the room to find my buddies staring blankly at the television screen—clearly they were expecting a different show, too. But while they appeared unaffected by what they had just witnessed, I thought it was totally rad! (Remember, it was the ’80s.)

The video came from a company that offered you the chance to buy home water filtration systems at wholesale, then sell them at retail prices and earn yourself a profit. It offered, essentially, *a chance to be in business*.

Wait a minute, I thought. *I can do that*. Heck, this was

right up my alley. Champion something worthy? Make a profit? Be in charge? Do something *different*?

The idea touched something deep inside me. Even as a kid, I had a tendency to see opportunity when others stared blankly ahead. In the summers when my friends worked McJobs, I did things differently. I took odd jobs, like mowing lawns and collecting nails at construction sites for a penny apiece. I was commissioned by a local trade school to get strangers to fill out surveys at bus and rail stations as a recruiting strategy. I worked hard, but I marched to my own beat and learned things on my own.

This idea of running your own business? Of controlling your own future and not being constrained by minimum wages and pointless rules? My inner rebel jumped out of line. It was like someone had just turned on the world's brightest light bulb. I was in!

The cost to sign up and buy your inventory was \$5,000, and I didn't even blink. I immediately wrote a check for the full amount, drawing on the savings I'd earned lawn-by-lawn, nail-by-nail, and survey-by-survey. A few short days later, my dad's garage filled up with two tall pallets worth of water filters. I had no idea what to do with them, but that didn't matter because *I was in business*.

I can still remember how psyched I was. I stood in that garage, hands on my hips, staring up at the mountain of home water filtration systems, and just kept nodding my head. *I was going to dominate filtered water*.

Then, just three hours into my new business, I received

my first rejection: My dad couldn't get his car into the garage.

"Get this crap out of here," he said.

"But... where am I supposed to put them?"

"How about you get out and sell them, Darren?"

Left with no other choice, I hit the streets 20 minutes later. I didn't normally take that long to get dressed, but suddenly I was feeling something different. *Nervousness* had set in. But I took a deep breath and began to work my way from house to house through our neighborhood.

I pushed myself to knock on every door and ring every bell. To everyone who answered, I delivered my world-dominating pitch for better water, straight from their own tap. "Right there in your kitchen!" I'd tell them. "No more lugging heavy water jugs back and forth from the store. Can you believe this option even exists?"

It was a long first day in business. With every door that opened, I tried a new angle. I scared them with facts about the disgusting water they were currently feeding their families and pets. I inspired them with visions of a world where water was clean, fresh, and limitless. I used charm (or so I thought). I used compelling statistics. I used selling techniques that had never been used before (and probably never will be again). But I was determined, and I was focused. I persevered even when things looked bleak. And at the end of the day, I had sold... *nothing*.

I couldn't believe it! How was that even possible? I had 40 water filters in my father's garage at the beginning of the

day and 40 sitting there when I got back. As the garage door shut that evening with my father's car parked outside, I knew I was in Big Trouble.

Worse still, it was the first time I thought maybe I wasn't "cut out" for being in business for myself. Maybe my dad was right. Maybe college and a good job really was the right path.

Stressed, disillusioned (and a little afraid of my father), I did what any rejected teenage businessman does when confronted with failure: I called my grandmother.

I was raised without a mom. My dad wasn't exactly the nurturing type either. He was a "stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about" kind of guy. If you remember the Stanley Kubrick movie *Full Metal Jacket*, you'll understand that growing up in my house was like being in Gunnery Sergeant Hartman's platoon.

My grandmother, however, was a calm spot in the storm. She was the woman in my life who helped me become the man I am today. She provided the warm, gushy, I-can-do-no-wrong unconditional love that I needed. She thought I was wonderful even when I wasn't. All she had to do was smile and call me "darling!" and I knew I was loved.

It was my grandmother who taught me about money. She helped me open my first bank account. She taught me to save and encouraged me to "make it grow."

All of these things made my grandmother a great inspiration. They did not, however, make her a tough customer. Which meant that on that particularly trying first

day in the water filtration business, she was just what I needed. I called her and arranged to “visit.”

During my “visit,” I gave her my well-polished, clean-water-for-pennies-a-gallon pitch. But before I could use my triple tie-down, Jack Benny close, my grandmother interrupted.

“That sounds great, dear,” she said. “I’ll take one.”

I tried not to look surprised. *Did she just say she’d take one?*

Inspired, I pressed on. I explained the silliness of the basic model and that of course she should upgrade to the Cadillac model in my arsenal: the under-the-sink water unit. No unsightly containers on the counter, no mess. Just filtered water, on demand, straight from your tap.

She asked, “But who’s going to install it? You know you don’t want me asking your grandfather to do it. We’ll never hear the end of it.”

“No problem, GramZ!” I said. “I’ll install it. It’s no sweat.”

“Okay then, dear, I’ll take whichever one you suggest,” she said.

With those nine little words, I had my first sale. And an upsell, at that!

While grandma went to get her checkbook, I started the installation. Less than an hour later, I was down one filter and up one customer.

Glowing with success, I took that natural next step of all successful salespeople: I asked for referrals.

It was too easy. My grandparents lived in a 50-plus