

The Myth of Overnight Success

Barrie Bergman

• Success!

Most of us are seduced by the idea of overnight success.

We want to believe the myth that success is easy to come by. But success in business takes time, energy and hard work—lots of all three.

Personally, I've never met an overnight success. I've met people who've done something well for a long time and were suddenly discovered. Then everyone assumed they came out of nowhere, that their fame happened overnight.

But the real truth is that it takes a long time to be an overnight success.

It took 25 years to build Record Bar into the success that made me a wealthy man. Bare Escentuals, my second company, was an overnight success after only 14 years. The one thing both of these success stories have in common? Time. The business models for the two companies were utterly different. We achieved the same level of success by hanging around for the long run, by showing up every day to do our jobs, and by focusing on doing what we did and doing it well. Small successes over time lead to big wins.

We started Record Bar with one store in Durham, North Carolina. We knew where we were headed; we were in the business for the long haul.

One year stands above the rest as being particularly tough. The economy was down and record sales had followed that downward drift. We were a small company at that point, and we were having troubles making ends meet. Retail mark-ups on records are less than generous, so we were looking for new ways to make money.

A stranger showed up at the store with a truck full of records. He had all the good stuff, and it was cheap. The tags on the records bore the name of a company I knew well. It was obvious the records were stolen and it later became obvious that someone I knew at the company was involved. You can imagine how lucrative buying records at half the price could have been at that moment. We were in a tough spot and we needed to cut costs or find a new stream of revenue to make money. And we were struggling in an industry where people are renowned for bending the rules.

I didn't even consider the offer. I wanted to be able to sleep at night. I said to my wife and business partner Arlene, "We'll get rich a few days later."

The decision paid off in the long run. We made it out of the recession without cutting corners or damaging our relationships with any distributors. At the height of Record Bar, we were managing 180 stores. We were the second largest retailer of records and tapes and running a 140 million dollar business. I had personally met some of the biggest names in the music business at that time—Frank Zappa, Harry Chapin, George Jones, Michael Jackson and many more. We were doing well.

So well that, when Jane Fonda released a series of exercise videos, Record Bar made it on the list of her stops. We had worked hard to bring Jane into the store. She was in high demand and a visit to our stores almost guaranteed a new stream of customers.

Years earlier at the the height of the Vietnam War. Many celebrities were standing up in opposition to the war, and Jane was on the frontlines. Her anti-war message was being shouted across the United States; everyone knew where Jane stood.

Macy's was one of Jane's early stops. The store was receiving the backlash of Jane's loud antiwar stance. People were boycotting her visit. Veterans' groups were protesting. Macy's was in the midst of a media blitz.

Being one of Jane's later tour stops, we at Record Bar were under similar pressure. Veterans threatened to chain themselves to our front door if we let Jane in. It was likely to be a huge demonstration and certain to be covered by the media.

I had a choice: cancel Jane's appearance or risk fueling a demonstration outside our store. I believed very strongly in Jane's right to free speech. And I understood the veterans' point of view. I wanted to be fair and considerate to both sides. But the businessman in me knew I had to cancel the visit. If people started to protest en masse, our business would have been devastated, and someone could have gotten hurt. There was no way we could take that chance.

Jane's manager was furious about our cancellation; he raged at me for 5 minutes on the phone. He called me every name in the book. In the end, we had to do what was right for our customers, our employees and our company. And Jane apologized to the media a few months later.

Personally, I've never met an overnight success. I've met people who've done something well for a long time and were suddenly discovered.

For me, business means adhering to an unyielding standard of integrity. No matter how great the temptation for financial gain or personal power, you take the higher road (even if it means canceling an appearance by Jane Fonda). I made every decision knowing that I was the one who had to get up and look myself in the face in the morning. (Never a great experience, even with my integrity intact.)

At Record Bar, I was deep in an industry with a notoriously bad record for cutting corners. In my 25 years there, I learned a lot about whom to hire, whom to surround myself with and the success that comes with hard work. I used that same knowledge to run my next venture.

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In the early 1990s, a business partner and I invested in a bankrupt cosmetics and lotions company. That company is one you may know—Bare Escentuals. They had created a powder make-up that was different from all the other offerings on the market. Women can sleep in this make-up without fear of what it might do to their skin. It was made of a combination of unique minerals, without the regular chemical preservatives, and named bareMinerals.

Seven years later and we were working on a contract with what would become a major distributor. It was a huge opportunity for us. It had the potential to make Bare Escentuals a big success and put us in households everywhere. The distributor loved our product. But there was one hurdle: our make-up didn't have preservatives.

Our products were made intentionally without preservatives; it was one of the key differentiators from all the other offerings on the market. But the distributor wanted to be able to store our products for a long period of time, so they asked for preservatives.

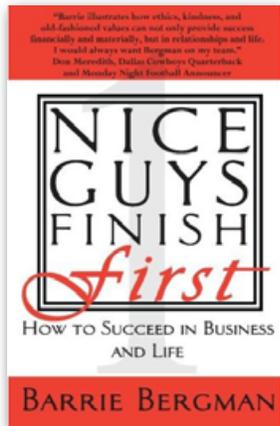
We had a choice. The easy way to a contract would have been to follow suit with our competitors and use preservatives to extend the shelf life of our products.

But chemical preservatives went against the core of our mission—to provide healthy and clean make-up. In the end, we decided against the use of preservatives to extend our shelf life. Instead, we agreed to take back any products that outlived their shelf life at no cost to the distributor.

That was a big financial bet for us, but it worked. We landed the contract with the distributor. We sold lots of makeup. And with time, we landed contracts with other distributors and started a line of stores around the country. Bare Escentuals is now the number one selling beauty brand at both Sephora and QVC. Fourteen years of hard work has built a very successful makeup company with a lot of satisfied customers.

I've never met an overnight success. I don't think there is such a thing. Success is not built overnight. Success is long process and requires hard work and dedication. It takes a view of the long-term, a reliance on core principles and a commitment to the customer above all else.

Our society is fascinated by get-rich-quick schemes, miracle weight-loss programs, the idea of instant results, instant wealth—the overnight success. Too often, integrity is sacrificed to those efforts and, even if there are temporary riches, there is no real success. **In the end, successful companies and people are those that recognize that success is built with integrity, one day at a time, and they put in the time to prove it.** 📌



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Get more details or buy a copy of Barrie Bergman's [Nice Guys Finish First](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Veteran empire-builder Barrie Bergman has never played by the rules. But, while his approach may be unconventional, Barrie has built multi-million dollar empires in two diverse businesses: in the Entertainment Industry with Record Bar, and in the Cosmetic Industry with Bare Escentuals. Now a popular speaker and advisor to fellow visionaries, Barrie calls the game on the current “license to kill” mentality and outlines a style that gets results and lets you sleep at night. While defining what works and what doesn’t work in business, he found that it takes great character strength to keep one’s integrity intact when the pressure is on. He believes that you can still kick ass while taking the high road.

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