

THE ACCIDENTAL ENTREPRENEUR

BY PAIGE ARNOF-FENN



My dad and both grandfathers were commercial bankers in the South. I was always good with math/numbers and like my dad an Economics major in college. I started my career in NYC on Wall Street in the 80s thinking I would follow the 3 of them in finance albeit a more intense path. I was good at the job and it paid very well but I didn't really enjoy it at all so I decided to return to grad school to get an MBA to figure out a better fit. There were really only 3 parts of my investment banking job I truly enjoyed, upon completing a deal/transaction/merger/sale I was responsible for planning the closing dinner, advertising it in the financial trade publications, and buying a gift for the team to commemorate/celebrate its completion. My friend pointed out to me that the parts of the job I most enjoyed were not in fact finance in nature at all they were all under the marketing function...event planning, advertising and promotions. I also got the top grade in my first year required marketing course for my MBA and a great summer internship that lead to a full-time offer in marketing post-graduation. My friend was right/very perceptive, I wasn't meant to be a banker after all but a marketer!

I worked at a series of more main stream corporate jobs for 1-3.5 years at places like Procter & Gamble and Coke then I ran marketing at 3 successful venture-backed startups that all had strong exits so if you had told me my longest job would be at a company I started I would've said that's crazy yet here I am running a global branding and digital marketing firm that I started 23 years ago right after 9/11 when the startup I ran marketing for cut their budget so I hung out a shingle and the rest as they say is history.

I joke that now I am screwed if I get sick of my boss this time, after decades of self-employment it would be really hard to work for someone else ever again. The truth is I love running my business and helping my clients find the right words and pictures to tell their stories in relevant/compelling ways. By having a portfolio of organizations I work with across a variety of categories I have more job security now than I ever would working as a hired gun for someone else. Plus I only work on things I enjoy doing with and for people I want to help succeed which is incredibly fulfilling/gratifying.

I'm very proud that my business has pivoted and survived the deaths of 7 loved ones in 6 years, the Great Recession, 2 month long holidays off the grid, Covid and the Great Resignation! We don't just live to tell the tale, we are better/stronger/more resilient because of it in fact. If I've learned anything in my career as an entrepreneur here are the lessons that have really stuck with me:

- Not getting what you want can lead you to magical outcomes and you learn a lot more from failure than success in life. When things work well you never really know why but when there are problems/mistakes/failure you have a real learning opportunity to see which assumptions were incorrect and that is knowledge you will never forget again. The hard-fought lessons that come from age and experience are gold. Being in the trenches together is where I've met some of my best friends and colleagues though, those relationships are deep.
- Looking back at what you once thought was a failure can make you realize it was in fact a blessing in disguise. Whether you were laid off, overlooked for the job or did not get the full bonus you expected as Winston Churchill said failure is not fatal and being resilient is really what matters in life, you have to keep trying again. My definition of success changed once I left corporate life to become an entrepreneur. I realized I did not need to run a Fortune 500 company to be happy, I love building a small business and growing it successfully. Entrepreneurship is scary but you can't wait for the perfect time to act; you just have to course correct as you get more feedback along the way. Learn to get comfortable making decisions without perfect information. Entrepreneurs never give up on what they believe, dreams can become reality when you pursue them with intention and courage. When you learn from every setback you make better mistakes over time, and in my experience that is where you learn the most! You learn to do by doing. Course correct and pivot along the way, it makes for a fun path in life.

I have no idea where my business will go from here but I am confident I have built a great foundation with interesting clients and colleagues who value communications and want to use marketing best practices to make a difference in the world. It has been a circuitous route to get here but as Steve Jobs said it is only looking backwards where you can make real sense connecting the dots in life *"you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future."*

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