

# Dream Merchants & HowBoys

Mavericks, Nutters and the Road  
to Business Success



BARRY J. GIBBONS



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# Dream Merchants & HowBoys

The stories of the people captured on the pages within are anything but ordinary. Like you, they had to start somewhere. But it's not what you do or where you start, but how you do it. It wasn't through maintaining the daily grind (for themselves or others) that got them to the top. It was by building their dreams and doing business in a way that no other had done before them. These Dream Merchants and Howboys live in the Business Icon Hall of Fame in the Sky (ok so maybe one day this will exist). But before they got there they lived somewhere very different. They lived in the land of complete Nutterdom. Retired CEO of Burger King and Fortune turn-around champion, Barry Gibbons, introduces you to this world.

Gibbons brings together some of the most famous names in business today. He takes us on a whirlwind tour of the careers, lives and crazy decisions of nutters – from Walt Disney and Michael Dell to Luciano Benetton and Anita Roddick. All of them made decisions that seemed odd, crazy or downright weird. But they worked. Gibbons, a distinguished madman himself, keeps you hooked with his humour and wit, but never strays from the point of it all. Which is, that we can learn from these mavericks. That we can put a little madness into our daily grind. Heck yeh, even steal their ideas! Why should they be famous and not you?

*Dream Merchants and Howboys* may just be the most unconventional business book ever written and firmly cements Gibbons reputation as the P.J. O'Rourke of business.

**BARRY J. GIBBONS** retired from big company life in 1994 after five successful years as Chairman/CEO of Burger King Corporation. Having retired from big business (his choice) he is now a successful author, speaker, consultant and entrepreneur on both sides of the Atlantic. He is the author of *If You Want to Make God Really Laugh Show Him Your Business Plan*, *Chronicles from the Planet Business*, and *Warning: May Contain Nuts*. His business interests include being co-founder of Y Arriba (a Latin themed restaurant that opened in Disneyland early 2001) and a gourmet coffee business in the US and UK.

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IN MEMORY OF MY DAD

DREAM MERCHANT EXTRAORDINARY



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# Prologue

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*Nothing is quite what it seems.*

I STARTED IN BUSINESS in the Swinging Sixties, while I was living in Manchester, in the industrial north of England, waiting for the Sexual Revolution to make its way up from London. Sadly it swerved at the last minute, and missed my suburb, so I joined Shell. From then right up until now in the Noughties, I have been constantly reminded that nothing is quite what it seems to be.

When this book was first published, as part of the hootin' and hollerin' associated with such a seismic event, I was invited to a 'Breakfast Reading' in one of London's huge bookstores. The plan was that the store would provide free coffee and pastries, while I would read a few extracts and then sign (hopefully) scores of copies

of outgoing volumes. I duly arrived, smiled at the suspicious looking throng, filled my coffee mug and started to read my chosen chapters. At a suitable moment, I paused dramatically, and looked up to make eye contact with the audience. It was only then that I realized I was addressing a substantial gaggle of London's homeless. Every mouth was crammed full of free pastry and every pair of hands were wrapped around a hot mug of free warming coffee. In all fairness to them, the faces peering out of their assorted anoraks were staring at me and trying to feign interest. I have never done a happier reading. It is a sad, sad, reflection on my life that it was the most adding-value morning I had contributed to the world for years, and it confirmed my career-long view. *Nothing is quite what it seems.*

Hey, have you tried to buy pine nuts in a supermarket recently? About 40 miles north of London is a Sainsbury's branch, and I was seeking to acquire some. I picked up a 200 gram packet. Written on this packet was the following blurb:

*Pine Nuts*

*Packed in a protective atmosphere for freshness*

*To retain freshness once opened keep in an airtight container*

*Due to the methods used in the manufacture of this product,  
it may occasionally contain nuts*

That's awfully kind of it, don't you think? *Nothing is quite what it seems.*

There are over twenty million people in the UK directly associated with work and organizations every day, and in the US that figure approaches a hundred million. It is also safe to say that the remainder of both populations are associated indirectly with the same, on the same daily basis – either by watching the machinations of a relative or friend trying to make their way in it, or just by dealing with some commercial organization. Such involvement by either group can send any one member off howling at the moon at any time. It is mind-bogglingly confusing at times: company reports

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mask reality; auditors advise the companies they audit; failure is rewarded handsomely; seemingly successful organizations treat their customers like dog-doo; customers who have been treated like dog-doo stay customers when there are clear options to do otherwise; rich countries have too many poor people while poor countries have too many rich people; non-voting, non-tax-paying companies run governments, while tax-paying voters get to suck on their government's hind nipple; we have near 'full' employment, but they aren't proper jobs anymore. *Nothing is quite what it seems.*

We need help to make sense of it all. Whether we are trying to make our way in the jungle of commerce, or holding a loved one's coat while he or she does the same, we need help. Whether we are dealing with another business from the heights of a business boardroom, or from the depths of the end point of a consumer utility supply business, we need help to try and make sense of it all. Only through a better understanding of the whole can we make our bit better.

Role models could help, of course. Studying people who have achieved great things and stealing their methods is one way of bringing structure to your own chaos – but we need to be careful. Not everything that has worked for such people in the past will work in the future. In one spectacular week in 2002, two such role models of the late twentieth century fell from their horses. One of them, Anita Roddick, is in this book, the other, Kenneth Lay of Enron, isn't. I'm not going to get into the Enron thing, either here or in the main text of the book,<sup>1</sup> but Kenneth Lay epitomized much of the Adam Smith–Gordon Gecko–Thatcher–Greed Is Good–Laissez-faire school of Enterprise Capitalism – and his, and his company's, death rattle rocked many market capitalists. Anita Roddick rode a different horse – using 'her' business as a vehicle a) to make people aware of some of the crap going on in the world and b) to do something about it. She finally lost

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<sup>1</sup> My views on Enron are simple. There are two categories of people on earth: those who admire this kind of company and those who get out of the bath to pee.

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control of Body Shop in the same week as Mr Lay was defenestrated at Enron. So what do we learn from those juxtaposed funeral pyres? *Nothing is quite what it seems.*

With economies increasingly anti-gravitational on the back of astonishing levels of consumer debt and spending, are we (at last) moving into a world where the consumer is King? Can we be inspired by modern business leaders who follow Ted Levitts' fifty-year-old creed that the only purpose of being in business is to secure and retain a customer? Can we hell. On my desk I have a letter from my UK domestic electricity suppliers, who inform me that – IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THEIR SERVICE LEVEL – they will be advancing my standing order by two weeks each month. Do they REALLY think I'm such a prat? Answer: yes. I'm still with them. Can't be bothered changing. I have an advert, torn out of one of the UK's broadsheets, where a budget airline boasts that, whereas its rivals have achieved only 50–60% on time arrivals in the UK, *they have (proudly) achieved 70%*. In other words, their market distinction is that they only piss off 30% of their customers – a classic example of what the American's call 'Our Product Sucks Less' school of marketing. If you take your suit into one of the UK's leading dry cleaning brands they ask you to pay in advance. How nice of them to use my money to clean my suit. The call centre for my bank is based in Dublin with a back up in Northern India. *Nothing is quite what it seems.*

We need help to understand it all so we can shape our own game plans. We need anchor points and structure. We need sources for plagiarism.

I remain convinced that the study of successful people is the key to finding those jewels. Even if it is a minefield of smoke, mirrors and Kenneth Lays, we must tiptoe through it and take what we can. The idea of this book is to do just that – to pick out a double-handful of successes and learn from them. Maybe we can also have a few laughs on the way – for no other reason that if you don't laugh at some of the stuff around you, you will cry.

As well as the full-mouthed mutterings from the homeless (see para 1 above), I got other feedback on the book from the first edition that indicated I should clarify a few points should I have the honour and opportunity of a second one. Here goes:

- Are the people in this book my personal inspirations? Answer: NO. They are all included for a specific reason – which is that they illustrate stuff we can steal. I have done just that during my career, and admire bits of all of them. But ‘Inspirations’ are something quite different, and I have included a new chapter to make the point.
- Can we only learn from the famous? Absolutely not – and to make the point I have included a chapter about ‘Unknowns’ that I have come across that have helped me. It may help you to recognize some that could do the same to you.
- How do I explain and/or justify the downsides of these people? The times that they failed after or before they struck their pots of gold? The times where their attitude and/or thinking and/or behaviour epitomized something we’d rather not stick on the front of our fridges thank you very much? The answer is: I don’t. I put the spotlight on them for a specific time and performance – and there is more than enough for us to learn from those highlight reels. For example, Steve Case is included for his time and performance in taking AOL from its genesis to 30 million members – and the fact that he went vaguely doolally afterwards and all but disappeared up his own fundamental orifice with Time Warner is of no interest to us. We have the luxury of being able to be picky. We don’t want biography, we want stuff we can use. We don’t want now, we want THEN.

Before we get into the team sheet, I need to tell you about where the idea came from, and why it is structured in the way it is. I need to explain why a Dream Merchant is different to a HowBoy, and why that helps us take what we need from these people. You must remember,

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