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Presenting . . . the Greatest Marketeer of All Time—*P.T. Barnum!*

I know you will not consider a few words of advice from me as impertinence, but will heed them and treasure them up as a legacy.

—P.T. Barnum, 1891, five days before he died

“**Y**ou here on business?” asked the man beside me.

I was on a late afternoon flight from Dallas to Houston, where I lived at the time. Most of the people on the crowded airplane were coming from business meetings in the cowboy city. The fellow beside me wanted to make the short flight go even faster by speaking with somebody, anybody, and I happened to be sitting in the lucky (?) seat beside him.

“I’m flying home after doing some research in Connecticut for my next book,” I said. “It’s going to be about the business secrets of P.T. Barnum.”

I said it with a certain pride. I knew this man beside me, whoever he was, was aware of Barnum’s name. Everybody knows it. I also knew nobody had ever written a book on Barnum’s business ingenuity. I was feeling smug, waiting for the applause. But it never came. The man beside me looked confused.

"It's a book about the circus guy?"

I cringed. I tried not to look insulted or impatient.

"Barnum operated a circus in the *last* part of his life," I explained, trying to point out that Barnum was far more than a "circus guy."

"Long before the circus he ran numerous businesses, made unknown people famous, started dirt poor, got rich, lost all his money, and got rich all over again," I said.

"He was the most recognized name in America and maybe in the world in the 1800s. He knew Presidents and was even considered as a Presidential nominee. He was a clever businessman and maybe the greatest marketing mind that ever existed. His techniques made his museum famous and helped make his circus something every child wants to attend today. The man was so famous you even know his name right now, yet he died more than one hundred years ago."

I caught my breath and let the businessman beside me consider the facts I expressed. Finally he spoke.

"Didn't Barnum say 'There's a sucker born every minute'?"

"No, Barnum never said that," I replied. "Barnum respected people and gave them more than their money's worth. He never said, wrote, and probably never even thought that stupid line. No researcher or historian has ever found evidence that he said it."

I counted to 10 and waited for my fellow passenger to say something else that would rile me. I didn't have long to wait.

"Barnum's methods might work for a big company or for some corporation with a huge general audience, but I don't see how I can use his ideas in my little business."

I realized here was an opportunity to expand this man's thinking. I asked him what he did for a living. He said he owned a small company that refurbished vans. When I asked him how he marketed his business, he said he went to trade shows.

"And how do you make yourself stand out at these trade shows?" I asked.

"We get a big table."

I had him now.

“How many other people get big tables?” I asked.

“I guess most of them do.”

“Do you realize that if you pretended you were P.T. Barnum, and acted more flamboyantly, more brashly, more boldly, you could have a trade show booth that would be the talk of the entire trade show?”

He still didn’t get it.

“Look,” I began. “I wrote a book for the American Marketing Association on small business advertising. I know that it is no longer enough for you to just advertise your business or attend trade shows. There’s just too much competition in today’s world. You have to stand out in the crowd. You have to do something more daring to bring attention to your business.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to be like the businessman who hung from a towel that was tied to a flying helicopter to show his towels would not tear. You have to be as bold as the publisher who threw a media event announcing his new magazine by hiring the Beach Boys to sing.

“Look at Cal Worthington, the car dealer who ran television ads featuring ‘his dog Spot.’ Every week his dog was some animal, from a dog to a goat to a pig to a giraffe. That’s Barnum-like thinking. These publicity stunts helped Worthington become the most successful auto dealer in history. And it’s that kind of thinking that made Worthington a millionaire. A hundred years ago it made Barnum a millionaire. It can also make you a millionaire today.”

I let the businessman consider my argument while I looked out the window at the Texas sky. If nothing else, the conversation made me more aware of the fact that people don’t really comprehend just how phenomenal this character called P.T. Barnum really was. Not everyone realizes that the sales and marketing methods Barnum invented can be used today. But my daydreaming was soon interrupted.

“We use promotional gimmicks like pens with our name on it and calendars with our logo,” my fellow passenger said. “We get stories done on us in the trade papers, too.”

“And how’s business?”

"It's good. We nearly went bankrupt at first, but we're moving along and growing."

"I'll be blunt with you," I announced, preparing this man for the radical honesty I was about to say. "Unless you do something with more guts, you will remain one of the little guys."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because you have competition and sooner or later that competition will rear its head and take a bite out of you. Whether you survive or not will depend on how stable you are, how smart you are, and how much outrageous marketing you do."

"Outrageous marketing?"

"Look at Robert Allen. He wrote an investment book called *Nothing Down*. Well, who cares about another money book? There are 2,000 books published every week. To separate his from the crowd, Allen issued a challenge."

"I think I remember it."

"He said, 'Take my wallet and all of my money, leave me with one hundred dollars in cash, drop me in any city, and within 72 hours I will have a piece of prime real estate.'"

"He did it, didn't he?"

"You know it. And that stunt got him front page coverage in the papers, brought him national publicity, helped make his book a bestseller, and made Allen a multimillionaire."

"Yeah, but—"

"And look at Tony Robbins. The man was so poor he used to wash his dishes in his bathtub. To make himself stand out in the crowd, he started conducting seminars on firewalking. That grabbed media attention. Now the man lives in the Fiji Islands and spends more money in one day than he used to make in a year."

"Yeah, but—"

"Or look at Ted Turner. The world thought he was nuts when he created a national cable network. Now CNN gets studied and copied by the other networks!"

"Yeah, but—"

“You can’t be an also-ran in business and expect to survive and prosper,” I continued. “You have to stick your neck out. You have to wedge your name into the minds of your prospects. Once you break into their awareness, they won’t easily forget you. That’s what Robert Allen did. And Tony Robbins. And Ted Turner. And P.T. Barnum. They forced themselves into our minds.”

“Yeah, but—”

“If you want your business to rocket to Mars and back, you have to be willing to take the next step. And the next step just might be off the top of a tall building.”

“Coffee or tea?” interrupted a smiling flight attendant.

Neither of us wanted anything.

“And let’s not forget Houdini or Ali or Stanley Arnold or Edward Bernays,” I said.

“Who?”

“I’m writing about them in my book, too,” I answered.

“Yeah, but Barnum had it easy,” my friend said. “He lived in a time when there wasn’t much competition.”

This guy was getting to me now.

“Barnum grew up with our country, that’s true, but he had competition just like everyone else. And more importantly, he took people and places that others had *tried* to promote, used his own methods, and made his enterprises known around the world. The museum he bought had already been around when Barnum made it a colossal success. He brought Jenny Lind, the famous singer, to America and made crowds flock to see her. But when Lind tried to promote herself without Barnum, she flopped and soon returned to Europe. No one thought the midget Charles Stratton was special, until Barnum renamed him General Tom Thumb and started to publicize him.”

My passenger just looked at me, his eyes blank.

“Barnum was the key,” I explained. “His methods turned otherwise passable people and shows into money making—even historic—events. And you can use his methods today. That’s why I’m writing this book. I’ve discovered his 10 Rings of Power for making any business into a

money machine. I'm writing this book to convey these techniques to people just like you. You need it."

"I need it?"

"Don't you think there's an outside chance that Barnum knew something you didn't? Isn't there a remote possibility that there are sales and marketing techniques you haven't used or heard of yet—techniques that just might make you rich?"

"I never really thought about it."

"Look. The San Antonio public library's Hertzberg Circus Museum has courses where they teach children business skills, graphic arts, and advertising principles by letting them start and run their own little circus. That's pure Barnum. And if this information helps kids learn about business, don't you think it might help you, as well?"

"They're teaching your Rings of Power to kids?"

"No," I replied, smiling. "They're teaching kids how to run a business with the circus as their metaphor. They haven't studied Barnum like I have. Besides, Barnum wasn't involved in the circus until after he was sixty years old. *I'm* teaching adults how to create empires by telling them how to use Barnum's 10 Rings of Power. I call my program *Project Phineas*."

"But I don't think my customers would enjoy seeing me do wild stunts."

"Do you think people enjoy seeing Sir Richard Branson fly around the world in a balloon?" I asked.

"Well, he's likeable."

"He's likeable because he's *daring*," I said. "Besides, people won't care as long as you *deliver* what you promise. Barnum had few complaints from his customers. Tony Robbins, Robert Allen and Ted Turner also get few complaints. Why? Because they deliver. They give legendary service. Their customers leave feeling incredible. The idea behind publicity stunts is to get attention. It's no longer enough to advertise or hand out flyers or sit at a trade show. You have to think more outrageously and act more boldly, and you have to deliver what you promise, or else."

"Or else?"

"Or else you're history."

The World-Famous Matchstick Guitar

My neighbor looked away from me. I think he had had enough of my arguments in defense of Barnum. That's good, as I had had enough of him. I picked up the guitar magazine I had brought with me to pass the time and flipped to the back. I chuckled to myself as I read about a matchstick guitar made in 1937.

Seems a certain sailor named Jack Hall collected matchsticks and made musical instruments out of them. He first created a fiddle, then two mandolins, and then a guitar made up entirely of 14,000 used matchsticks which he painstakingly glued together. This particular matchstick guitar was finally played in public in 1991 on BBC television, two years before Hall died.

What a waste, I thought to myself. Barnum would have taken that unusual guitar and its creator and put them on a world tour. He might even have rented out the guitar to be placed on display at trade shows like the one my fellow passenger attended. The guitar would have brought attention to his booth, made people talk, and helped increase his business. Visitors would walk away and talk among themselves, asking each other, "Did you see that wild matchstick guitar over at the refurbished vans table?"

Instead, the people who knew of the matchstick guitar let an opportunity for fame and fortune slip through their fingers. And the man beside me was content to sit at trade show tables and struggle along in business. As I wondered why, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what it must have been like to live in Barnum's time. . . .

How Will You Survive?

Imagine you are in business in the mid-1800s.

Four-fifths of all Americans are farmers. There are only three large cities in the country, and New York is the biggest with barely 400,000 people. Most of the wonderful tools of technology have not yet been invented. You cannot advertise on radio or television, because they don't exist. You cannot send out news releases by fax, use a computer to track

results, sign on to the Internet, call prospects on a telephone, hail a cab or drive a car to present your case to a client. You can't even take a train to many places until after the Civil War.

You don't have electricity to light a sign or send a message. Most of your customers don't have indoor bathrooms, and bathing once a week is the norm. If your customers get sick, they probably die, as surgeons during this period washed their hands *after* surgery, not before it. Indian wars are still terrifying people. Gun fights still occur. When the Civil War hits, a large percentage of your customer base gets destroyed. And then you may be restricted to conducting safe business in only the Northern states.

Talk about living in stressful times!

How will you ever survive?

American Millionaire—*Twice*

Yet these were the conditions in which P.T. Barnum lived. And he managed to amass a fortune, lose it, and then create an even greater one.

He was probably America's second millionaire (after John Jacob Astor). He was incomparably famous. A letter mailed from New Zealand to "Mr. Barnum, America" made it without a hitch. General Grant said everywhere he went around the globe, people knew of Barnum. President Garfield called him "the Kris Kringle of America."

Barnum knew every important person of his time, from presidents and queens to celebrities and inventors. He went buffalo hunting with General Custer. He was friends with Mark Twain and Abe Lincoln. He took unknowns and made them international stars. He built the most unusual mansion in the country, watched it burn to the ground, and built yet another. A total of five huge fires wiped him out—temporarily. Yet he got back on his feet almost instantly. He was a famous speaker, a best-selling author, a politician, a showman, an investor, an entrepreneur, and a marketing genius.

In his youth he sold lottery tickets and ran a newspaper. In later years he became one of the world's first prohibitionists and spent much of his time lecturing about the evils of alcohol. He invented the beauty and baby

contests. He made a large fortune in real estate, inventing a clever method of selling alternate lots, financing the purchasers so they could build homes, and then collecting profit from the enhanced value of the lots in between. He donated land to his favorite city and watched his own stock in land rise as a result.

In 1853 he started New York's first illustrated newspaper and helped it achieve a circulation of 500,000. He was a deeply religious man who was imprisoned for writing about his beliefs, and at the same time got his first taste of publicity. He was once in partnership with the tycoon Commodore Vanderbilt, acted as a bank president, and ran for Connecticut legislature, fighting to free slaves. He was on intimate terms with several U.S. Presidents, was named as a possible Presidential candidate in 1888, and was Mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut. He made a fortune, lost it with a bad investment at the age of forty-six, and then succeeded in creating a still larger fortune before his death at the age of eighty in 1891.

How I Discovered Barnum's Secrets

So who was P.T. Barnum? And what were his Rings of Power? How was he able to bring international attention to his famous museum, his singers and side-shows, his still legendary circus, and even to himself? And more importantly, how can you use Barnum's methods to promote your own business today? Is his genius translatable and are his techniques transferable?

To answer these questions I studied books about Barnum, read stacks of his letters, listened to a rare Edison recording of his voice, watched the various movies and commentaries made of his life, visited with collectors of Barnum materials, went to Bridgeport, Connecticut and San Antonio, Texas to research the Barnum materials there, and reread his lively autobiography, titled *Struggles and Triumphs*, the primary source to read if you want to know about this fascinating man's life.

Barnum's classic book was first published in 1854 and revised and enlarged numerous times. Barnum sold over a million copies of his famous autobiography (further evidence of this amazing man's marketing skills). In the

book, Barnum tells of discovering a tiny four-year-old boy by the name of Charles Stratton, how he named him Tom Thumb, taught him to sing and dance, gave him status by calling him "General," and promoted him to the world by personally introducing "General Tom Thumb" to editors of major newspapers in New York City.

Barnum also writes of discovering and presenting Joice Heth, a black slave said to be over 160 years old (Barnum said she looked much older) and alleged to have been George Washington's nurse. Other famous Barnum successes include his American Museum (the Disneyworld of the 1800s), his promotion of the famous Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, his infamous promotion of the bizarre (as Barnum spelled it) "Fejee mermaid," his creation of America's first superstar, and of course his still thriving "Greatest Show on Earth," the Barnum and Bailey Circus, which formed as a result of Barnum running into a businessman just as shrewd as himself.

While Barnum had more than his share of failures, his success rate as a marketing wizard has never been beaten. Why? What can we learn from him? How did he make people stampede to his place of business? What did he do that most of us in business today aren't doing? What were his sales and marketing secrets? That's what I will reveal in this book, the first ever written about the marketing methods of P.T. Barnum.

I don't know whatever happened to the businessman who sat beside me on my flight to Houston. I hope he's not just sitting at a big table at a trade show.

I hope he heard some of what I said to him that day in the Texas sky, and that he is now stretching his mind, lining his wallet, serving people, having fun, and seeing his business grow by starting to think just a little like the greatest marketeer of all time, P.T. Barnum.