

Steve DiAntonio

The End Is Just The Beginning

When Steve DiAntonio boarded a plane and picked up a conversation with his soon-to-be business partner, Carole Jackson, he didn't know just how much his world would change. A Navy veteran with an MBA and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, Steve was ready to take on his next big challenge, but he was looking for the right opportunity.

Now the CEO and Chairman of Color Me Beautiful, a cosmetics company applying the ground-breaking concepts of personalized color-mapping for a woman's individualized beauty needs, Steve has risen to that challenge.

"Carole Jackson wrote the New York Times #1 bestselling book, 'Color Me Beautiful' which, for the first time, took a scientific approach to helping women select their best clothing, accessories, jewelry and makeup based on their skin tone, eye color and hair color. When I met Carole on that flight, I knew that there was an opportunity. There was a buzz and good name recognition because of the book."

When Steve and Carole first started Color Me Beautiful, Inc. (CMB) in 1984, they designed a product for women to use as a shopping guide, with swatches for women to take to the stores with them. They soon realized the economic limitations as these products were just one-time purchases. Steve decided that the next step should be to branch out into cosmetics, but Carole did not want to expand into cosmetics and, in 1989, Steve took ownership of the company.

"When we first started, we didn't know the cosmetics industry. Typically, most cosmetics are sold in department stores where, in order to bring in business, they give away free gifts with a purchase."

CMB knew that they would not be able to compete in the same way as the large multi-national cosmetic companies and, during the early

years, CMB struggled to find the right marketing plan to break out of the 'old model'. That struggle continued through 1992, when the company was on its last legs and almost out of reserves.

"I remember when we finally figured out a way to be competitive with the larger cosmetic giants. We changed our model to focus on incentivizing our sales team instead of trying to draw in customers based on giveaways and ads in the newspaper. We encouraged our sales associates to get out from behind the counter (we called it proactive selling or 'aisle style') and approach customers and give them tips on how to use our products."

By 1994, CMB was having big sales gains in large retail chains such as JCPenney's, Macy's and Ulta. And, CMB had collected several Supplier of the Year awards.

By 2000, Steve began to realize that CMB had a looming problem. They had most of their

business concentrated in one particular store chain, J.C. Penney's, but business was so successful that they continued to develop new products for that chain. Suddenly and unexpectedly in 2004, Steve received a call from the president of the retail chain requesting a meeting.

"We had a lot of success but we were overly exposed to Penney's. At that point, we had 70% of our business in Penney's. I remember when I asked the president what the meeting was about, he said they had decided they were going to exit cosmetics."

Not only did they plan to exit the cosmetics market, but the chain planned to implement that exit within four months' time.

"My face went white and my hands got numb, all within seconds. I thought, 'We're done... most of our employees, many of which had done good work for years, would have to be let go'. And, I could see my family living in a tent on the



street.”

CMB went from being a \$40 million company to a \$12 million company, overnight.

Over the next two years, Steve would fight endlessly and tirelessly to save Color Me Beautiful. Despite the very real financial crisis and the realities of layoffs, downsizing, and complete corporate culture revision, Steve found a way to pull CMB through.

“We somehow survived... but during the first 6 months the only way I could sleep was to work myself to exhaustion and then collapse. I didn’t know if we would fold. But, I felt like, ‘if we can make it, then try to make it’.”

By 2006, CMB was down to \$7.5 million in revenue.

It was clear that CMB needed to re-invent itself. CMB changed its delivery method, pulling out of most department stores and focusing on its direct-selling businesses, whether through individuals who sold out of their homes or through entrepreneurs working in kiosks in shopping malls.

Today Color Me Beautiful is bringing in \$15 million in revenue and has been consistently turning a profit each year.

It can be said that Steve’s parent’s influence, his wife’s support and his ability to reinvent himself helped keep CMB afloat during those years. Born into a career military family with a father in the Air Force, Steve learned very early on the importance of hard work and perseverance.

“My father was very determined and education was important to him. He did not finish high school until he was 30. He got his GED and then went on to get his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, with five kids, by studying at night.”

Though education was stressed by his parents and he wanted to attend the Naval Academy, Steve did not reach his full potential during his early years in school.

Says Steve, “While I studied, I put too much focus on things other than academics, such as sports and friends. And, I was too caught up with my friends’ impressions of me.”

Steve soon realized that a change was needed when he received his SAT scores during his junior year of high school.

“When I received my SAT scores I got a reality check. I realized that I wasn’t going to the Naval Academy based on those results. At that point, I decided that I was going to prove to myself

that I was good enough. I picked up an SAT prep book full of academic reviews and sample tests. I stopped trying to be popular and dropped out of the social scene. I dedicated my time to studying.

I was focused on reviewing math, reading comprehension and science and taking the sample SAT tests. I studied anywhere from 4 to 8 hours a day, every day, all summer between my junior and senior years. The hard work paid off, resulting in a 4.0 my final year and top 10% SAT scores.”

Once Steve turned things around with his SAT scores and grades, he was accepted to the Naval Academy. Steve also excelled at the Naval Academy, graduating in the top 10% of his class and being selected for a MBA and PhD scholarship at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

“Looking back on the last year and a half of high school, digging in and working hard, I remember as challenging. It was also one of the most rewarding times of my life. I was progressing with my academics. As a result, I gained more confidence. The confidence built incrementally and carried over to all aspects of my life.

I felt prepared and confident about the challenges of the Naval Academy. The four years at the Naval Academy were also extremely rigorous – academically, emotionally and physically. I stayed on the same path at the Naval Academy as on my last year of high school. I worked hard and was proving myself and gaining confidence all the while.”

After graduation, Steve was a Naval Officer and found himself in an entirely different world. With sixty men reporting to him, from diverse backgrounds and cultures, Steve had to learn quickly how to become an effective leader in a completely different environment.

“I enjoyed my time as a Naval Officer. It was a great adventure and I liked being part of a greater cause. And, what better way than serving in the Navy?”

After several years, Steve decided he would leave the Navy to try something different and strike out on his own.

“But I thought, ‘when I leave the Navy, what am I going to do?’ I grew up in a military family and then spent the next number of years either training to be, or being, a Naval Officer. I was in my mid-20s with no clear sense of what would best embody my skills and interests.”

Steve decided to ‘test the waters’ by

visiting several of his former Navy colleagues who were working in private industry to see which field he would be interested in pursuing. After visiting a friend who was a lawyer and one who was a doctor, Steve quickly settled on business as his field of choice, because it allowed the most varied opportunities.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business with an MBA and a PhD, Steve was hired at McKinsey & Company where he worked in consulting, gaining skills and tools in strategy and organizational development.

"At McKinsey, I had to grasp the practical side of what business was all about. My colleagues at McKinsey were well educated, smart and very talented. Working alongside them and solving tough business problems was a great experience and exactly what I needed in order to become an entrepreneur."

"Color Me Beautiful has been a great experience. While JCPenney's exit from the cosmetic category was a big blow, I learned more during that transition period than I did at any other time running this company. We have great people and we're doing some exciting things. We've been able to rebuild.

We're offering opportunities to women to own their own businesses selling our products through retail shops in malls, as home-based entrepreneurs and through international distribution. I enjoy seeing the women, given this opportunity; make something good out of it for themselves. Many are earning six figure incomes and driving company-paid Mercedes."

One of the recent lessons Steve is learning is the importance of incorporating more fun into his everyday experiences.

"During my entire working life, I've worked hard. I've always equated working hard with success. Now that I'm well into my career and have a successful business, I'm trying to have more balance. Yet, it's a challenge to change the habits of long hours which made me successful in order to spend more time with family and friends."

Steve has been married for 23 years to his wife, Sue, and they have two grown children in college, daughter Nicole and son, Chris.

"I've learned a lot from my wife and kids. Sue was a successful business woman in technology sales and, with her great intuition, has

given me excellent marketing and sales advice. She's also been a terrific homemaker and provided a great family environment so I could put in the effort at work. Both Nicole, a media studies major, and Chris, a business major and Eagle Scout, work hard to get ahead. I'm inspired as I see their determination, how well they face new challenges, enjoy what they do and have a love for life."

Though Steve is finding a balance and enjoying more time with his wife and family, he is still dedicated to putting in the hours needed and finding the right formula to ensure his company's continued growth.

"I'm still driven to make a difference. We have a great opportunity at Color Me Beautiful, Inc. to give women the opportunity to own their own businesses and become financially independent. Once we do that really well and have an outstanding track record, I'll be content to retire and move on with the next chapter of my life."

Steve has a message to those just entering the workforce, "Working hard is what is needed to get ahead. And, enjoy being with your family, friends and co-workers. Select your friends well. Enjoy the process and adventure of your daily life. Also, be sure to take time for yourself. Do what makes you happy. Don't wake up one day and have to say that you wish you had done things differently."

Though Steve DiAntonio's life has been marked with great successes and huge trials, his focus and commitment to achieving his goals, in the midst of those trials, is what makes him the role model that he is today. A self-starter, hard-worker and dedicated executive who never gave up, Steve DiAntonio has certainly colored it beautiful and proved that, in any season, the future can look very bright.

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in

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For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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