



Chapter Five

An Entrepreneur's Dream:

The Success Story

An interview with...

Barbara Bigford

David E. Wright (Wright)

Today we're talking with Barbara Bigford. Barbara's success story is an Entrepreneur's dream. Her company Seabreeze Products, Inc. and her invention, Beach Pockets® have already exceeded \$1 million in just one year.

Inventing and marketing a product to weigh down beach umbrellas with sand so they don't blow away was not simple. No matter how practical her product looked on paper, skeptics and red tape impeded her progress. But through her tenacity, she managed to guide her invention from dream to prototype to coast-to-coast bestseller.

Barbara, welcome to *GPS for Success: Goals and Proven Strategies*.

You often hear people say they have an idea or they want to improve on an existing product, but never do anything about it because they just don't know how to get started. What was your product idea and how did you get started?

Barbara Bigford (Bigford)

My product idea was basically simple, as most ideas are. If its practical, solves a problem, and fills a consumer need, you often have a winner.

I came up with an idea to secure beach umbrellas from blowing away by using the sand, already on the beach, to weight down the umbrellas. It is environmentally respectful since you pour the sand back onto the beach when ready to leave, making the anchor weightless as the umbrella is packed away.

Wright

The process to create a product, make a prototype, research consumers' needs, attend trade shows, find a manufacturer, and secure appointments with buyers to large retailers is basically the same for any "widget."

Since you have been through this entire process, what have you learned to pass on to the millions of "wannabe" inventors and entrepreneurs?

Bigford

You must believe in yourself and the goals you have laid out. When an entrepreneur starts a business, time, money, and sweat equity is invested. Stay focused and do not allow the negative people around you try to make you feel you will not make it. That happened to me on a few occasions.

The one that is the most profound happened when I was at my second trade show. I was so excited about my product, displaying it in the most colorful booth, with all my sell sheets, and hundreds of blank order forms. My husband was at my side and I was ready to roll. On that first day, I met the vendors across the way and we started to chat. I told them the story about how the Beach Pockets Anchors were invented, and how the entire invention process was a real learning experience. I also told them how I had several smaller accounts and moderate ones too.

Then I mentioned how excited I would be to get my product into the largest retailer in the world, Wal-Mart. As soon as I said this, one of the two gentlemen

said, while pointing his finger at me, "You will never get into Wal-Mart—don't even try." I looked at him with a puzzled look and he continued, saying, "If you don't know a buyer or a distributor who is already involved with Wal-Mart, they would never take a 'mom and pop shop' like you. And let me tell you, I have been in this industry for over twenty-seven years, and I know what I am talking about!" Well, can you imagine how that made me feel? I felt sad and disappointed . . . for about two seconds. Then my own passion kicked in. I looked at this guy and said, "Well, you don't know me," and I walked away.

So how does this story end? Within two years after those negative comments, I figured out how to sell to Wal-Mart on my own. I was approved to sell to six districts first, and that year my patented beach umbrella invention did extremely well. The following year I went back to the corporate offices in Bentonville, Arkansas, and met with the buyer. I was then approved to sell to nine hundred and fifty of their beach, river, and lake stores. The rest is history.

That is a perfect example of a negative person creating an obstacle, making you think one way and at the same time crushing a desire, but why listen to people like that? They are not you. They can only talk and give comments based on their own beliefs and experiences. If you take that negative energy and turn it around toward your passion, you will outshine them all.

As for your question on the actual process of "inventing," here is what I suggest: The first thing you need to do is to draw out your idea and put in writing the day, time, and where you were when you came up with this idea. No matter what your idea is, have it notarized just to show some type of "declaration" in writing. This helps to protect you before you take your idea to a patent attorney or start engaging in the process of the business plan or creating a prototype. I did this because I realized that while I was shopping for my prototype supplies at hardware stores, I might have given the idea to a clerk who seemed way too interested, stating he'd had a "similar" idea. Even though I doubted him, the panic in my heart made me realize *do not tell* anyone until you file a patent.

I later found out from the patent attorney, that you must never discuss your invention idea with anyone (okay, maybe one trusted person). The reason is that you won't be allowed to file a patent when your attorney asks you the big question. "Did you discuss this with anyone?" Of course, your closest trusted partner is okay.

If you discussed it with several people and you disclose that you have discussed it, you may not file.

Wright

What do we need to know about the patent process? What about the cost involved?

Bigford

The first step is to file your patent with the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO). If you are going to spend money on anything, it is best spent on a very good patent attorney. The overall cost could be anywhere from \$8,500 to \$9,500, after months of various filings and writing the actual patent. Over time, you will be responsible for maintenance fees too.

You don't want to find out after you have spent thousands of hours on your project, and thousands of dollars on trade shows, packaging, marketing, and manufacturing, that your patent was not comprehensive enough or filed correctly because you "did it yourself" through one of the online do-it-yourself kits.

The next thing to do is file a trademark for the name of your product. Your patent attorney will do it for you or you can go to the Web site address and file there. I did two trademark applications on-line at: <http://www.uspto.gov/main/trademarks.htm>.

While the prototype is being developed and patent documents filed, you will need to investigate materials needed for best performance for your product (e.g., plastic or wood or whatever you need to make the product). I called plastic companies in my area and picked the brains of plastic-makers and visited plastic companies to find the best material to create the "attachment barrel" for the anchor pockets that could be attached to all size umbrella poles. I went on the internet and visited libraries and learned more and more about materials, retention screws, and cloth materials best suited for sun, salt air, wind, and water. Your time and energy should be focused on several aspects of your project—no slowing down at this point.

Wright

How can a start up business stay productive while waiting for a patent to be accepted?

Bigford

Once your professional prototypes are ready, go to a trade show that sells similar products. This step is so important—only at a trade show will you get plenty of feedback on your product. At trade shows, you will find manufacturers, buyers, and people in the same business. Most of these people are regular family people with successful businesses or just start-ups like yours. Talk to them; they will be the most helpful people you will ever meet. These trade shows are an absolute must.

Your next step is manufacturing and selling—only *if* you have received positive feedback from people at the trade shows! Make sure there is a need for the product and the buyers are interested in buying.

Years ago, I went to a trade show with a friend who had a toy business. I just went for fun, but it was there I remember meeting a man who was selling a type of a soft doll that was not doing well at the show—he hadn't sold any. He told me the mistake he made was manufacturing thousands right away. He should have waited to see if the product was something consumers wanted.

Just because some of your friends and family members think your idea is a good idea, it may not be a good idea to broader consumer demographics. The man I met thought that once he signed up for trade shows, he would need inventory in stock as the orders came in—big mistake! He took loans against his home, and other savings causing marital problems that ultimately ended in divorce. I never forgot him or his story. Years later, not realizing I would be in business, I took that advice and learned from his errors. With so much to learn, you need to listen, watch and take notes. Trade shows are by far the best “university” for acquiring practical business and entrepreneur knowledge.

Wright

What other resources did you use to help you get started?

Bigford

I found free courses through small business associations in my community. I took these courses in the evening and they were extremely helpful. I learned basic business accounting and marketing strategies, but mostly I learned a lot from just networking with those in the class.

There is also the American Society of Inventors (ASI), an association that has chapters nationwide. This is a terrific mentoring organization. I only wish I had known about them when I was starting out. They would have assisted me and I would have avoided a few mistakes. There are probably several business associations in your area, just ask around or search the Internet.

I also participated at the Wharton School in Philadelphia. I was accepted into a program that worked with MBA students. The students would present current issues that I was having to their class and find various resolutions to those issues.

There is a large network of assistance out there. You need to find which one is best depending on the type of your business and what stage you are in during the development process.

Wright

How did you find a manufacturer?

Bigford

At a tradeshow. If inventors want to find manufacturers for their products, they should attend the shows that specialize in their particular industry. Go on line and you will find a plethora of trades that fit your service or product line. Finding a manufacturer is tough when you have no idea what you are looking for. I met with several manufacturers before settling on the one I used for the first three years. One reason I decided to work with this factory was based on the fact that they had a few businesses along the seashore area where we vacationed. I knew where he worked and where his businesses were in case I had some serious issues.

Although this factory did well working with me during the early design stages, we started to have quality control problems. I learned about Import Agents while I was at another trade show and I contracted one. Import Agents work directly with you and your needs. They communicate directly to the factories while sourcing

prices for materials at various overseas locations. My import agent has offices in China and other countries. This allows communication to be current and active on a daily basis. In the past, I would stay up until after midnight if I had to communicate with the factory in China to resolve immediate issues.

Wright

Tell us about your success getting into the larger retailers. Where did you start?

Bigford

I started small, with smaller stores. I learned the ropes, and worked out the kinks, all before “playing with the big boys”—in other words, before negotiating contracts with larger nationwide retailers. The manufacturing industry can be quite demanding with product issues, delivery issues, and quality control issues. Create an active customer base where the order quantities are smaller in size for about two to three years. Grow your base and learn from the experience. Once you are up and running with the initial kinks and unexpected problems worked out, this is the time you should contact the national retail stores. Just remember that you will never be totally free of problems and quality control issues. This is an ongoing part of any manufacturing business.

In my experience, it takes about two to three years to finally get an appointment with the larger retailers. The reason is that when you are new, they will look at your e-mails, take your calls (if you are lucky), and become acquainted with you and your product. Then the next year, when you contact them, hopefully they will remember you and request more information. Give them updates on magazine or newspaper articles your product was featured in or why your product would be great for them to add to their next year’s program. Mention the stores that are your current customers.

It is not hard to submit news about your new product to your local paper. Reporters are always looking for something new. Remember what I mentioned before—get a customer base so that you can validate your sales and provide consumer response to those sales when contacting the larger stores. But remember: Walk before you run! Small stores first.

Wright

I have heard that it is difficult to get appointments with buyers at larger retailers. How did you convince them to see your product among thousands requesting appointments?

Bigford

By following my advice above—creating a list of “satisfied customers”—you will validate your company in the eyes of your future buyers, convincing them you are a proven viable vendor. In the initial phone call, you now can offer confident sales numbers, and names of those who are buying from you. If you have any media or press releases about your company, you need to incorporate this in your phone call too. Let them hear your excitement about your product.

Speaking to a buyer on the phone is a huge plus versus an e-mail. Most likely, you will correspond by e-mail first. Once the buyer is interested, he or she will request some more information. This is where you can get really excited. (I certainly did.) But don't get too excited because you have to remember that you are new and the buyer needs to be sure he or she wants this product before you are accepted as a vendor. As I mentioned before, it's usually that next year you will secure a meeting.

Wright

You and your product have been on television programs such as *The View* with Barbara Walters, *The Big Idea* with Donny Deutsch, and in gift bags at the Golden Globe Awards. Your product was highlighted on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* and in several other newspapers. What public relations firm did you use?

Bigford

Zero—zip! I tried using a public relations person my very first year in business and there was not enough return on the investment to justify it. Hiring a public relations firm is a mistake in the first year you are in business. Our product package wasn't very good. We improved on it three times in four years. I would not recommend hiring any PR firms until you have the product in your revised package with other necessary improvements and a little sales history behind you.

Once my company was up and running I thought that *I* would be the best PR person. Who had more passion or more knowledge than the person who started it all? So I started to write my own press releases initially. Then I had my summer interns assist in writing them. We called newspapers and told them about our new product that was solving the biggest problem “on beaches everywhere”! Now the reporters were writing the news articles and even had requests for follow-up stories.

A year or two later, we eventually caught the attention of many newspaper reporters who interviewed me in Huntington Beach, California; Miami, Florida; Gulf Shores, Alabama; Atlantic City, New Jersey, and the shore points in Maryland. We recently had a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* feature our product on the front cover of the business section and this was without any contact on our part.

Wright

On your own, you brought in over a million dollars in sales in just one year. To what do you attribute that kind of success?

Bigford

“Success does not arrive on one’s lap. You have to claim what you want by working through all obstacles.”

Not a single person starting a business truly knows what is ahead. You may have the fundamentals, but if you speak to anyone who started a business, you will be told that no amount of academic schooling could prepare you for the entrepreneur journey.

Prior to starting my company, I had no business experience. I never had a job in “business.” My college education was in the medical field and business accounting courses were not part of the program. I started my company not knowing what the words “net profit,” or “margin” meant. When I landed my first buyers’ meeting for a large supermarket, I was asked, “What is the margin on your product?” I couldn’t answer! Can you imagine how embarrassed I was? Well, I learned real quick.

Then there was the time, it was suggested that I work with a particular distributor because I wasn’t a vendor at one of the larger food stores. When we

contracted him to be our distributor, he never paid us for the order. This was our first big order—over \$35,000 stolen! Trust me, we did all we could to reclaim that money but couldn't since the distributor wanted to claim bankruptcy. So, what do you think I learned there? In this case, I should have done a financial background check, and called references.

I could go on and on with other mishaps I have experienced because of decisions I made, but unfortunately (and fortunately), without mistakes, this entire process wouldn't give us the wisdom that is ultimately one of your guides to success. Believe it or not, *"the mistakes you make can be the gold stars to success"*! As each obstacle presented itself, I refused to give up. If I didn't have "the answer" or was not sure of that "next step," I would keep working on the problem until I figured it out.

Wright

What kinds of obstacles and struggles are most prominent in your mind when you were starting your company?

Bigford

To be quite honest, I would say that the "next step" that needed to be taken was an obstacle. Why? Because I repeatedly found myself in uncharted waters, not having a clue directing me to that next step. I obviously figured it out, but it would take hours or days learning that specific task.

Many of us have gone through career changes. If you have made this change, then you know what it is like to venture out having to learn, discover, and accomplish a new wealth of information to move forward. We all can do this with the understanding of my favorite words: "Just figure it out." If someone else figured it out, so can you.

I learned to be resourceful. I asked questions consistently when I was at trade shows or local business groups, speaking to those already in my "new" industry. I asked about manufacturing, packaging, selling to the large stores, overseas freight logistics, warehousing, how to figure out pricing, etc. And if I didn't find it there, I went on line, found phone numbers, and asked questions.

As we all know, saying those words “just figure it out” takes all but two seconds. The actual process of accomplishing that can take days, and sometimes weeks, often setting you back, frustrating you, adding more stress, and creating more financial burdens. I want to emphasize that this is all part of the program. Unless you embrace this thought and understand the patience involved, you will have days where you will want to give up.

As for the struggles, I would have to say that the balancing act between my business life and personal life overlapped. This is normal; how can it not be? But when you are still in the office at dinner time and missing your children's basketball games week after week, refocusing priorities is a must. This is not easy. I found that leaving the office with problems not resolved or deadlines for pricing going out to a new customer not completed or designing new graphics for upcoming meetings unfinished, left me feeling bad and a bit frustrated. So what can you do about this? I started to organize my time the best I could, re-evaluating what was a real deadline and what was not, while keeping a calendar of each day's goals.

I discovered that meditation can prove to be a remarkable asset and can be practiced intermittently throughout the challenges of each day. This helped with the anxiety and frustrations that most challenges caused. I became more active understanding yoga-meditation as I saw and felt the remarkable benefits.

Achieving a goal in business is fine but not at the expense of our families. To help create a better life style for my family, I had to set limits for when I was in the office. Even if it meant I had to go back and do more computer work later at night, after the family needs were met.

Wright

You often talk about one requirement for success in any career or in everyday living, which is *to be mindful with passion and vision*. Will you explain this?

Bigford

We all know how difficult any new venture can be, but somehow during my journey, I discovered ways to overcome anxiety, frustrations, and disappointments that opened an entire new world to me. I have incorporated mindfulness and meditation in my everyday life. I am talking about a wealth of literature out there that

addresses all of this. I started to read some of the best well-known authors and coaches in the field. Books on spiritual energy, synergy, meditative wisdom, and spiritual growth are in the thousands. Years ago, I wouldn't have given this subject the time of day. Wow, was I narrow-minded!

I wish I had acquired the mental skills and practiced more patience years ago. It was my personality, so I was quite anxious often. I think it must have been all that energy I had and still have. But just in the past few years, I have been more open to the practice of allowance that patience provides. This has created more grace and positive energy for visions to soar. A simple but great quote from Robert G Allen is, *"The future you see is the future you get."* So I say, "What is your vision?"

It is fascinating to discover how much energy and vision we have when we consciously tune in to it. Often we go through life unconscious not really "tuning in." When you acknowledge this mental power of consciousness, you stay focused, and amazing accomplishments happen.

Some of the authors and spiritual coaches I started to read in the beginning of my business development were: Eckhart Tolle, Louise Hay, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Cheryl Richardson, Shakti Gawain, Ester and Jerry Hicks, Deepak Chopra, to name a few. Then came the top business and behavior coaches such as Stephen Covey, Les Brown, Dr. John Gray, and several others whom I am privileged to have with me in this remarkable book.

Seeking wisdom from others who have gone before us, and acquiring what I call "food for our mind and soul" will help us to navigate a guided path through our challenges. Though your guide may not be visible, I found the spiritual energy almost tangible.

Just think about it—for me, I had no experience manufacturing products, venturing into a new world of business. I was building a company and product from scratch while I was a parent with not enough hours in the day caring for three active kids. I was figuring out how to have my product manufactured overseas in a factory I had never seen and in a country I had never been. I was learning the entire freight forwarding system for shipping the manufactured goods from China to the United States, figuring out the duty, Harmonized Tariff Schedule code numbers, UCC bar code setup, rules, and U.S. Customs regulations. I was learning how to create U.S. Customs invoices, beneficiary statements, how to read a BOL (bill of

lading) and how to accurately complete purchase orders and invoices. I was finding warehouses across the country and securing rental agreements, and keeping track of inventory in all these locations. I was figuring out what price to charge for wholesale, what price for retail, what my retail package design should, could, and ought to look like, and building an entire filing system with hundreds of folders. I was learning how to use an accounting system such as QuickBooks on the computer, designing the fabric prints for the actual product, and securing appointments with the big retail buyers who had never heard of me or my new product—it went on and on.

What I mention above is only a small fraction of what goes into inventing a product and creating a business. Just remember the points I made. With thousands of successful men and women who have done this before, listen to the common words we are all saying: “Move Forward, Don’t Give Up, Be Mindful and Focused, Believe In Yourself, Do What You Can, With What You Have, Where You Are.” And my favorite one is: “Just figure it out.” How else are you going to *Embrace the Obstacles, and Go for the Dream*.

About the Author

Barbara Bigford's success story is an Entrepreneur's dream. Her company, Seabreeze Products, Inc., and her invention, Beach Pockets®, have already exceeded \$1 million in just one year.

Exposure for her product has ranged from presentations on QVC to a featured article in *The Wall Street Journal*. Barbara and her bright designs were also featured on CBS, NBC, ABC, FOX, and CNN News to Hollywood's 2008 Golden Globes awards, where Beach Pockets were among the swag given out to celebrities.



Barbara's success doesn't stop here. On the television show, *The View*, with Barbara Walters, the Beach Pockets Invention and Design was voted the number one favorite summer product.

Barbara graduated from Endicott College in Beverly, Massachusetts, and Columbia University studying in the medical/dental profession and the arts. During this time, Barbara ventured out in the entertainment industry auditioning and landing roles on several television commercials, and industrial films. She also participated in art shows exhibiting her water color paintings. Barbara's passion for creativity has welcomed the skills of discipline, inspiration, and vision. *"Set goals, create the plan, and remember to embrace the obstacles will often bring success."*

After years of combining success in business, a medical background, and engaging in the arts of *Mindfulness* and *Inspirational Wisdom* from various authors and coaches around the world, Barbara has set her goals to guide future entrepreneurs worldwide with her own inspirational wisdom and coaching.

Barbara Bigford

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