

Improving Her Assets

Sara Blakely's quest to become an entrepreneur started with a solution to one unattractive problem.



by Beth Douglass Silcox

Plain and simple, Sara Blakely wanted her bottom to look better in white pants. She was 27 and peddling fax machines to businesses, making cold-call after cold-call, facing way too many slamming doors. But at this moment, standing in her tiny Atlanta apartment, scissors in hand, she teetered on the verge of invention. One-size-fits-no-one pantyhose didn't do the job, so Blakely lopped off the feet with two, crisp snips.

Eight years after Blakely amputated the feet of her pantyhose, her brainchild, Spanx, exceeds \$300 million in retail sales. She has expanded into other types of shape wear to smooth other problem areas for women. Meantime, her footless hosiery invention revitalized an industry and answered the prayers of women everywhere who wanted to look better in all of their clothes.

Stepping from idea to prototype, she mustered every bit of perseverance and charm learned in her door-to-door years. "If you make someone laugh or smile in the first five to 10 seconds, you might get another 10 seconds," Blakely says. Authenticity was crucial, as she pitched her idea to hosiery mill executives.

Before Spanx, the male-dominated \$2 billion hosiery industry regarded pantyhose as cosmetic and simply accentuated the shine, color or smoothness of women's legs. "I found, as a consumer, how seriously they were all trying to take pantyhose was ridiculous," Blakely says.

By contrast, Blakely was pragmatic about her hosiery invention. Spanx would be invisible

to the observer, but do a spectacular job for the women who wear them.

Hosiery mills were less than receptive to her need for a prototype. "I came out of left field," Blakely says. "I had no previous background in this, and I only had \$5,000."

Although she had little seed money to start a business, let alone upend an industry, that's exactly what Spanx did. "I often say having no knowledge or experience can be your greatest asset if you don't let it intimidate you," the Florida-born entrepreneur says. "One of the most important things to do is to differentiate yourself, whether it's in the marketplace or in those first two seconds you meet somebody. Whatever it is, if you don't know how it's been done before, then you're almost guaranteed to do it differently."

Blakely's idea was different, crazy even, in the eyes of the hosiery mill owner who reconsidered her pitch and eventually agreed to manufacture Spanx. Why the change of heart? "I have two daughters," he told Blakely.

Two years passed. With her patented, footless pantyhose prototype, Blakely drew again on her cold-calling experience. During her "five-minute chance" with a Neiman Marcus buyer, she says, "I gave new meaning to putting your butt on the line."

Midway through her pitch, she felt she wasn't getting through and told the female buyer, "You've got to come with me to the bathroom!" Into the stall Blakely went and twice she emerged wearing her infamous white pants—once with and once without Spanx. "That instantly sold her," Blakely says.

But distribution quickly became her nemesis. "Twice a week a semitruck pulled up, and half the time I couldn't even get through my front door because they would leave these enormous boxes all over the front porch," she says. Her kitchen



disappeared for days on end, and bills of lading prompted more than one breakdown in the aisles of Office Depot.

So she lined up a new manufacturer willing to take on distribution and later hired a CEO to structure the business. "Hire your weaknesses," she advises other entrepreneurs. "That was one of the greatest decisions I made because it freed me up to do what I do best, which is to create, think of the ideas and marketing," Blakely says.

But in those early days, Blakely wore a lot of hats and a lot of Spanx. She hit the road for 18 months, meeting and greeting, lifting pant legs and "shaking my butt in front of every woman that walked by. I learned so much about consumer behavior, about what they are looking for, what they want," Blakely says. She found Spanx appealed to a multigenerational demographic, something that still confounds product and consumer behavior experts, she says.

One of her best ideas came from consumers. A less expensive, \$10 footless called Assets, available at Target, offers women much more than the industry's standard ill-fitting, pinching and rolling pantyhose.

And what did women want in lift and support for their most feminine of attributes? The name alone of Spanx newcomer, Bra-llelujah, celebrates the banishment of visible bra lines and "back fat," the most disdained of all bra side effects. "Everyone said it couldn't be done and it wouldn't be done," Blakely says. It took five years, but Spanx did it—the first-ever bra with a front of molded, underwire cups and a body made of pantyhose.

"There are a million ways to improve everything around us," Blakely says. "Take note and you'll be amazed at all the things that you see." But in this autopilot world, seldom do people step aside and silently observe themselves and their lives. One of the biggest gifts entrepreneurs can give themselves, Blakely says, is the time to think and pay attention.

Blakely cut the feet from her pantyhose just once, but that moment of clarity and opportunity was all it took. Since her teen years, inspired by motivational speaker Wayne Dyer, she visualized life as she wanted it. "I saw myself inventing



something that lots of people wanted. I saw myself... being my own boss. I visualized myself creating something that would sustain itself, whether I'm at the office all day or not," she says.

Visualize and dream in detail. "Take a mental snapshot of what success looks like for you. Are you at a table with world leaders? Are

you in a house on the beach sitting on a balcony? For me, it was being on Oprah," Blakely says.

Blakely's zest for entrepreneurialism started young, selling drawings to neighbors and custom-decorated socks to friends at swim practice. During summers between college sessions, she ran a daycare camp for children of tourists.

Blakely pursued her dream to become an entrepreneur, charting her own course in business and life. It all started by reaching that first goal: to make women's bottoms look better. She ultimately landed that interview with Oprah, and she's reached personal goals as well. She's married to entrepreneur Jesse Itzler, co-founder and vice chairman of Marquis Jet, which sells private plane airtime to individuals and businesses, and they are expecting their first child this summer. **S**

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Sara Blakely's Bottom Line

- **Be persistent.** Sara Blakely worked hard to win over manufacturers and prospective buyers who had never seen anything like Spanx.
- **First impressions mean everything.** "If you make someone laugh or smile in the first five to 10 seconds, you might get another 10 seconds."
- **Visualize your goals.** "Take a mental snapshot of what success looks like for you," she says. Keeping that vision of success in mind will help you through the tough times.
- **Pay attention to opportunities.** "There are a million ways to improve everything around us," Blakely says, and making just one improvement could result in your million-dollar idea.
- **Hire your weaknesses.** Focus on your strengths, and hire well-qualified people to handle the rest.