

Ten Questions with Polly LaBarre

Guy Kawasaki Interviews *The Mavericks at Work* Co-Author

Polly LaBarre is the co-author (with William Taylor) of the newly released book, *Mavericks at Work*. The strategies, tactics, and advice in *Mavericks at Work* grew out of in-depth access to a collection of forward-looking companies. These maverick companies are attracting millions of customers, creating thousands of jobs, and generating billions of dollars of wealth. The book covers these topics:

- Forming strategies
- Unleashing ideas
- Connecting with customers
- Enabling employees to achieve great results

Taylor and LaBarre spent almost two years writing this book. Taylor is a co-founder and founding editor of *Fast Company*. LaBarre was a senior editor at *Fast Company* for eight years (and was one of the best reporters on the topic of entrepreneurship and marketing, in my humble opinion). She has made media on Good Morning America, CNN, CNBC, and PBS's Nightly Business Report. She is also a co-author of *The Big Moo: Stop Trying to Be Perfect and Start Being Remarkable*. She is a graduate of Yale University.

1. **Question:** What's the difference between a maverick and a jerk?

Answer: Mavericks are so different, so edgy, and so independent of spirit that their personal style or message may not appeal to everyone. But that's precisely the point: mavericks are defined by the power and originality of their ideas. They stand out from the crowd because they stand for something truly unique. What's more, they take stands-against the status quo, in defiance of the industry elite-and offer compelling alternatives to business as usual.

Mavericks may be fighters, but they're not rebels without a cause and that is the critical distinction. Their sense of purpose is not only powerfully distinct (Think: Southwest Airline's quest to democratize the skies), it's provocative and disruptive (Think: HBO's declaration of originality It's not TV. It's HBO).

Don't confuse mavericks' unswerving commitment to a cause and their lack of patience for the status quo with the egotism, monomania, and

power mongering modeled by too many celebrity CEOs and moguls. Mavericks, in fact, have a sense of humility.

2. **Question:** Maverick humility? That sounds like a contradiction in terms.

Answer: Just because you have a sharp-eyed point of view, doesn't mean you need a sharp-elbowed approach to pursuing it. Sometimes the innovators with the most compelling strategic twists choose to broadcast them with a whisper rather than a shout.

One particularly vivid example of maverick humility is Craigslist's adherence to its Nerd Values. Craigslist has to be one of the most low-key organizations that ever became a worldwide sensation. Craig Newmark has become a kind of a cult figure, but spend some time with CEO Jim Buckmaster (about as soft-spoken, reserved, and minimalist a CEO as we've ever met) and you get a powerful sense of the disruptive idea at the heart of the company: to provide a no-frills public service in an industry filled with overblown claims and in-your-face marketing.

3. **Question:** What's your assessment of Steve Jobs?

Answer: Steve Jobs is without a doubt a maverick who has forever changed the way we relate to computers and animated films. Jobs was smart enough to buy Pixar for \$10 million in 1986 and then sell it to Disney this year for \$7.4 billion, but he was even smarter to enlist Ed Catmull and John Lasseter to run the place.

What's most remarkable about Pixar is that it has become the envy of Hollywood because it never went Hollywood. More than a few business pundits have modeled the corporation of the future on the Hollywood model of work: an ad-hoc collection of actors, producers, and technicians coming together around a script and financing and then disbanding when the film is finished. The problem with that model is that it allows for maximum flexibility and minimum loyalty. What's more, it's usually just when the film wraps that the people involved really figure out how to work together.

Turn that model on its head and you get Pixar's version of the right way to make movies: a tight-knit company of long-term collaborators who stick together, learn from one another, and strive to improve with every production. A key component of that model is Pixar's no-contract policy. Famous, talented directors like Brad Bird, Peter Docter, Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich all of whom could secure lucrative contracts with any studio are salaried employees of Pixar who contribute to all of the studio's projects rather than just their own pet projects.

This model tackles one of the most enduring people problems in any industry: How do you not only attract wildly talented people to work in your company, but also get those wildly talented people to continuously produce great work together? Or, as Randy Nelson, dean of Pixar University puts it, How do you do art as a team sport? That question lies

at the heart of Pixar's design for work-and the answers include turning the workplace into a canvas for the work and putting everyone in the organization in a position to learn together.

4. **Question:** Are mavericks born or made?

Answer: It's probably a little bit nature, a little bit nurture. We wrote this book to nurture the maverick in all businesspeople. What red-blooded working person wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror, and says, I think I'll stand for business as usual today?

We all want to make a mark, forge our own path, and express ourselves in the world. It's just that some of us need more of a nudge down that path than others. Hopefully the maverick individuals and ideas we present are inspiring and instructive enough to move people.

The thirty-two companies we feature have vastly different histories, cultures, and business models. We examined glamorous fields like fashion, advertising and Hollywood as well as old-line industries like construction, mining, and household products. The maverick leaders of these organizations are young, old, women, men, Americans, Europeans, charismatic and preacher-like, retiring and almost reticent. They just don't fit any one mold.

5. **Question:** How does gender play into maverick-dom?

Answer: Some of the most powerfully inspiring and effective mavericks we know are women. What's more, maverick-dom in general is mercifully free of the power-suited legions of Organization Men that have squeezed women out for too long. Mavericks connect and win on the basis of a deeply-felt and original sense of purpose-it doesn't matter what package that comes in.

For example, IBM's Jane Harper isn't an unlikely maverick because she's a woman, but because she's survived-and thrived-as a relentless challenger of the status quo at IBM for a quarter-century. She has worked all over the organization, but her real specialty is creating an entirely new position by pushing the organization in new directions. She took on the role of director of Internet technology and operations after she pushed the company to launch one of the first corporate websites in 1994. She got IBM to build a website in part by announcing to Lou Gerstner—along with her boss and collaborator John Patrick—that IBM had bought a huge chunk of floor space at InternetWorld and needed to create a respectable Internet presence, fast.

In 1999, Harper asked a question nobody else wanted to address: Why would really great people-the best technical and managerial talent in the world-want to come work at IBM? In an era when every young, gifted programmer, engineer, or entrepreneur's first instinct was to write their own business plan or head to eBay or Google, life as a foot soldier in Big Blue's 320,000-member global army was a pretty hard sell. Harper

understood that great people want to work on exciting, high-impact projects, with a small team, in a dynamic setting. So she created exactly that in a Cambridge, MA lab and launched a wholly original and powerfully effective internship program called [Extreme Blue](#).

Since that initial experiment (for which she had no permission and no budget—hallmarks of a maverick), Extreme Blue has grown to a year-long set of programs that attract 250 top interns and hundreds of IBMers as sponsors and mentors. In the six years since the program's founding, nearly 80% of the participants have accepted full-time positions at IBM (including many with competing offers from Google et al). What's more, students file 100+ patent disclosures each summer and turn nearly half of the nascent ideas they start with at the beginning of an intense twelve-week summer program into actual products and service for IBM customers.

6. **Question:** How does a maverick survive, much less thrive, inside a large, publicly traded company full of MBAs—to state the worst case?

Answer: A better question might be: How will large, publicly traded companies full of MBAs survive, much less thrive, without a healthy complement of mavericks? But, let me answer your question. We encountered a bunch of mavericks inside big traditional companies. They all seemed to have a couple of survival strategies in common:

1. They unleashed tough questions and critiques of their organization without losing their sense of loyalty to it. They're the kind of questions every CEO should be asking. For example, Jane Harper asked of IBM, Why would great people want to work here? And Larry Huston, now vice president of innovation at Procter & Gamble argued, The current business model for R&D is broken. How can P&G possibly build all of the scientific capabilities we need by ourselves?
2. Mavericks don't just ask questions, they act. We saw this again and again: they just got started—usually without a budget or formal permission—by designing an experiment around their question. Jane Harper launched an experimental Extreme Blue lab in Cambridge and spent a couple years begging and borrowing resources until the program's impact became clear.
3. Mavericks look for peers and fellow travelers outside the boundaries of their company. Not surprisingly, mavericks tend to click when they meet other mavericks. They're great networkers and learners and are always looking for kindred spirits for support and ideas.

7. **Question:** Who is the quintessential maverick in American business?

Answer: Herb Kelleher and the team at Southwest Airlines. In the midst of the financial carnage and heartaches of the airline business, there's one

company that keeps growing, keeps creating jobs, and keeps generating wealth. And that, of course, is Southwest.

Southwest didn't achieve these results because its fares were a little lower than Delta's or its service was a little friendlier than United's. It achieved those results because it re-imagined what it meant to be an airline. If you ask Herb Kelleher what business he's in, he won't say the airline business or the transportation business. He'll say Southwest is in the freedom business.

The purpose of Southwest is to democratize the skies-to make it as easy and affordable for rank-and-file Americans to travel as it is for the well-to-do. That's a pretty commonplace idea today-but largely because Southwest fought the entrenched conventions of the industry so doggedly in pursuit of that purpose. Its unrivaled success is based on its unique sense of mission rather than any breakthrough technology or unprecedented business insight.

8. **Question:** Do mavericks drive out bozos or do bozos drive out mavericks?

Answer: Both. Bozos tend to drive mavericks out of a company-but mavericks often go on to create companies that drive bozo companies out of business.

9. **Question:** What's the difference between open-source innovation and listening to the customer?

Answer: The open-source insight is simply that you don't have to be smart enough to have all the answers-you just have to be smart enough to invite other people to play in your sandbox. Eric von Hippel calls this lead user innovation and Tim O'Reilly calls it architecture of participation. What it's really about is tapping into shared passion.

If you want to create an enduring, emotional bond with customers, create a sense of shared ownership and participation among customers themselves. The more you invite people in to shape your company's personality and products and the more you enable them to share their ideas with one another, the greater their stake in what your company does. Shared ownership is much deeper than simply listening to the customer.

For example, [Jones Soda](#), is a Seattle-based company that targets the twelve to twenty-four year-old demographic with flavors like Fufu Berry, Blue Bubblegum, WhoopAss and special holiday drinks like Brussels Sprout with Prosciutto. When Peter van Stolk started the company, he realized the world didn't need another soda-but that everybody needs something to connect with. That forced the team to think very differently about the design of the company.

Everything they do is about sharing ownership of the brand with the customer. One key to the brand identity of a packaged good like soda is, well, its packaging. Jones handed that over to its customers by inviting

them to [submit photos](#) to feature on its labels. Over the years, Jones has received around four million photos from customers; people then vote for which photos go on labels.

Customers also email favorite sayings, aphorisms, and messages which are then used as under-the-cap fortunes. In 2004, Jones launched a website called Jones Independent Music, where bands post songs, images, bios, and contact information. Jones customers can download the tunes for free, rate songs and bands, and create playlists to share with one another. Every month some twenty bands appear on the bottle labels.

Why would a soda company offer a music service? Again, the message is never about selling soda, it's about making the brand connect with its customers. All this is about more than just listening to the customer. It's about sharing ownership of the brand with the customer. Jones doesn't preach to customers about the virtues of its brand, it unleashes the energy and creativity of its customers to give the brand its virtues. Jones is trying to turn soda into a platform for social interaction.

10. **Question:** What's the best idea in the book?

Answer: The best idea is that companies compete on purpose is hardly without precedent, but maverick companies exude an undeniable sense of purpose. A maverick's strategy tends to be as edgy as it is enduring, as disruptive as it is distinctive, and as timely as it is timeless. In an era of hyper-competition and nonstop innovation, the most powerful ideas in business are the ones that set forth an agenda for reform and renewal—the ones that turn a company into a cause.

We call it strategy as advocacy. Maverick leaders don't start with a business plan—they start with an original blueprint for where their business can and should be going. They offer up a set of ideas that reshape the sense of what's possible for customers, employees, and investors. For example, ING Direct is to banking what Southwest is to airlines: a direct, no-frills savings bank that thrives by challenging the status quo and offering an alternative to the worst practices of its rivals.

The declared purpose of ING Direct is to lead Americans back to savings—to serve as an antidote to a toxic financial culture that encourages individuals to save too little, spend too much, and gamble with their investments. That distinctive and disruptive purpose maps to a simple business model: no branches, no ATMS, and no checking accounts—just a simple menu of savings accounts, CDs, and mutual funds. What the bank doesn't have is minimum deposits, fees, and confusing paperwork. These differences and the bank's edgy critique of the industry really clicks with people and turns it into a cause.

11. **Question:** What did you learn by writing the book that surprised you the most?

Answer: I was struck by how unfailingly generous these mavericks were—and by how creative they were in their generosity. One of the big lessons of the book is that generosity begets prosperity. Mavericks are fierce competitors, and they're always measuring how they're doing. But they're also remarkably generous, and they're always asking how they're helping. They don't believe that for them to win, others have to lose. They do believe that spirit of generosity more often than not yields great rewards in terms of connections, opportunities, and of course, personal fulfillment.

In short, the leader who figures out a way for everybody to win is the leader who wins. The leader with a zero-sum mentality gets zero.