UNCONVENTIONAL Wisdom

by Albert Lanier

Here's the problem with most TV shows about business: They reduce the often unpredictable world in which most real companies operate into a rigid amalgam of trite, simplistic formulas.

Take a show like Bar Rescue. The host watches camera footage surveillance on a business, walks in, screams and yells at owners and staff and then ends up remodeling and rebranding the establishment. I call it PRS for Problem, Renovation, Solution. In the end, at least on these shows, all's well that ends well.

In the real world, owning a business requires solutions to problems that are not always easy or simple or even based on predictable paradigms and patterns.

For most business owners, there is no Hollywood host to guide them, only the owner's intelligence, street smarts, and fiscal pragmatism.

The dive and snorkel gear rental company, Snorkel Bob's, and its 30 years in business serve as an interesting case study of sorts on the unpredictable reality of founding and sustaining a business.

Started on Maui in the mid-1980's, Snorkel Bob's now has 11 shops on four islands, employing 56 people. In most respects, Snorkel Bob's has even been a game changer in the Hawaii gear rental market through its innovative rental pricing model and the quality snorkel gear that they build themselves.

Yet what really sets Snorkel Bob's apart as a business is its advertising. After all, the company is named Snorkel Bob's, not the Snorkel Shop or Snorkel Connection or Snorkel Depot.

Photo by: Fernando Lopez Arbarello © 2016

The Bob in Snorkel Bob's gives the business a personal touch lacking in the largely corporatized and branded business world of the 21st century.

Bob also refers to the company's founder and owner Robert Wintner. Wintner's journey from a childhood in Indiana to owning a snorkel business in Maui could easily be the basis of a novel.

The irony inherent in that statement is that Wintner himself is a novelist. His 2007 novel "In a Sweet Magnolia Time" was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. And he has at least two more novels coming out this year—in July and September—and more slated to be published in ensuing months.

Wintner grew up initially in a town near the Ohio River in Southern Indiana. As a boy he often enjoyed taking a lunch and roaming the beautiful and bucolic woods in his hometown along with his dog. "I grew up in nature," Wintner told me in a phone interview from Maui. "I spent a lot of time in the woods because I love it," he noted. Wintner also developed a "real yen for the ocean," often reading the novels of author Joseph Conrad as a child.

By the age of 12, Wintner's small-town boyhood came to an end. A divorce found Wintner and his mother moving to St. Louis, Missouri where he eventually went to high school. Wintner admitted to being a "country kid who didn't fit in" in St. Louis and hating the move to this big city.

After attending college in Missouri, Wintner began an odyssey that eventually saw him end up as the progenitor and owner of Snorkel Bob's.

This is where the unpredictability of life—a sort of X factor, if you will—comes into play. In the course of his life, Wintner has gone from being a journalist to becoming a business owner, from being a reporter for a newspaper in Hilton Head, North Carolina to selling real estate in California, and from earning $500 an article freelancing for magazines in New York City to

Photo by: Robert Wintner © 2016

operating a charter business in Maui in the 80's that would bring in $30,000 a month in revenues but end up costing $35,000 a month in expenses.

Again the unpredictability of life impacted Wintner's charter business. In 1985, Wintner's ultra-light sailing vessel, a Santa Cruz 50, ran aground on a beach as a result of a storm. It took months for Wintner and his partner to repair the craft and then finally sell the boat off to a new owner.

Wintner had about $7,000 to his name. He spent a few weeks in California but opted to come back to Maui to ponder his next move, which turned out to be starting a business.

Snorkel Bob's began not by consulting demographic data or viewing marketing trends but by recognizing an opportunity. In this case, it was the nature of the snorkel rental market in Hawaii. In mid-80's Hawaii, visitors could get snorkel masks and fins from a "dirty, musty, broken store" or from a concession on a beach where the proprietors, as Wintner wryly puts it, "always reminded me of Harvey Keitel in 'Taxi Driver.'" In fact, "snorkeling got no respect," observed Wintner. "Very few people could say snorkeling without laughing," he recalled.

Though Wintner was still "gun shy" about starting a company after his charter business ended (Wintner said the business was so far in the red, it was "glow-in-the-dark red"), he clearly saw an opening in the market.

Snorkel Bob's began modestly. Wintner bought up four boxes full of snorkel gear from a dive shop that was going out of business. These days, Snorkel Bob's designs, engineers, and manufactures its own masks and snorkel equipment, but back in 1986, Wintner began his business with 40 to 50 sets of fins and masks.

The first significant difference with Snorkel Bob's was the quality of the snorkeling gear. Wintner noted that most masks used by visitors back in the 80's were of

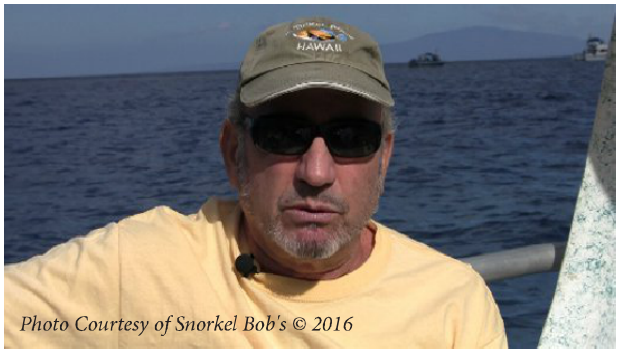

Photo Courtesy of Snorkel Bob's © 2016

the "Mike Nelson Sea Hunt'" variety, which were basically cheaply made and of poor quality. Snorkel Bob's masks were dive quality, so far better made and engineered, and more durable underwater.

Another important difference was pricing. Back then, snorkel gear was rented by the hour. Wintner came up with an unheard of weekly rate, and his initial price point was $10 per week.

Wintner also made rather pragmatic and effective business decisions. He chose to rent his space in a small business near a beach on a month-to-month lease. His first shop was simply furnished, with a small table and a few wicker chairs. Wintner also spent about $108 on a local magazine ad.

Apparently all of these decisions—buying quality snorkel gear, creating a weekly rental rate, keeping his business costs low—paid off from the start. On the first shop's opening day, Wintner said that there were people lined up outside to rent gear. Since that day 30 years ago, Wintner has cautiously expanded, opening shops on the Big Island, Kauai, and Oahu, in addition to Maui.

Snorkel Bob's success also derives from great word of mouth, repeat business, and his trademark irreverent ads in tourist magazines.

"We didn't learn so much what to do but what not to do," noted Wintner about his company's success.

In the end, it's the eagle-eyed ability to seize on opportunities and to make shrewd business moves that lead to success.

Albert Lanier is a journalist and writer with a 20 year career that includes contributing to Hawaii Magazine, Honolulu Weekly, Pacific Business News and more recently, Building Management Hawaii, Metro HNL and Civil Beat.

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