

Trust Your Entrepreneurial DNA

'Late bloomer' Susan Johnson dived into entrepreneurship at age 47, with no business background.

By: Hilary Kaye | 03/11/2010

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Susan Johnson was already 47 years old when she first entered the world of [business](#). Johnson opened Susan's [Healthy Gourmet](#), the first of her three Southern California companies, after two decades spearheading [volunteer](#) gigs in Texas. With her three companies together bringing in nearly \$10 million in revenue, she has more than a few ideas on how to get from "here" to "there."



Susan Johnson

Delivering the keynote address at the sold-out Camille Jayne Women's Business Conference on Feb. 26 in Irvine, Calif., Johnson cited five core beliefs and pointed out some early lessons from her volunteer days in Houston. She didn't start her flagship business, which delivers fresh, healthy meals to homes and [businesses](#) in California, until after the couple moved to California in 1994.

Johnson recalls that despite marrying her college sweetheart and giving birth to two [beautiful](#) children, she quickly realized that being a stay-at-home mom was not in her genetic makeup.

"That's how I found the volunteer world early on and also discovered that I was much better at leading the charge than being a follower," she says. "My volunteer years were rewarding emotionally, but they also prepared me for the business world, although I didn't realize it at the time."

Her biggest lesson? That [volunteers](#) can walk away at any time, "so you better figure out how to get their buy-in, learn what's in it for them and how to gain their trust," Johnson says.

Johnson's five core beliefs are:

1. It's never too late for a new beginning.
2. Be real and gain trust.
3. Take smart risks.
4. Pay attention to serendipity.
5. Take time to think.

Her belief that **it's never too late for a new beginning** speaks to her own middle-aged entrepreneurial awakening, without prior business experience. However, her father was a powerful and successful businessman who loved sharing his business stories with her. Probably as a result of those conversations, Johnson recalls she had no doubts and just "dove right in." She told the audience not to be afraid to "switch gears."

As far as **"being real and gaining trust,"** this goes back to her belief that you need to do what you feel passionate about. "This doesn't necessarily make things easier, but it does make you excited to wake up in the morning," Johnson says. Johnson's three companies all involve food preparation and yes, Johnson admits to being a "foodie."

Johnson explained that she has never been afraid to ask questions and reveal what she doesn't know. She prefers brainstorming over working solo and relied on help from fellow women business owners at the [Orange County chapter of the National Association for Women Business Owners](#) even before opening her doors.

A willingness to admit a mistake is also a huge part of Johnson's belief system. She revealed an incident that occurred soon after she opened her business, when a customer encountered a portion of a meal that was not cooked all the way through. Since they couldn't tell which orders included this undercooked meal, Johnson and her staff called more than 100 customers who might have received this meal to tell them not to eat it, and offer a credit and a replacement meal. "Yes, I was scared my new company was falling apart that day and we'd never have another order. But our customers were impressed we did this, and we had no repercussions."

Johnson also admits feeling grief years later, after buying two additional companies. At that point, her role had to change. "My daughter, Kerry, became president and I became CEO, but suddenly I felt I didn't have a role anymore. It was brutal for all of us. I cried almost every day," Johnson says. "But finally, I had an 'aha' moment and realized I didn't have to hire and fire people anymore--I got to be the nice guy. I began having so much fun coming up with new ideas that I can get others to implement!"

Another core belief, **taking smart risks**, has kept Johnson on course to bigger and better. Among the smart risks she cited was just starting the business. With no formal business background, in an area where she knew no one, it was risky--but it was a smart risk since there was no competition and she accurately perceived a need for her product.

A second risk was her strong belief that the business would succeed and, therefore, she built a kitchen much larger than she needed at the time. Good decision. Although the first five years were "scary" with no profits, the company turned the corner in year six and it was way ahead of the game with the larger kitchen.

Becoming, and remaining, a family business was another risk that proved wise to take. Daughter Kerry has worked in most positions at the company. She's now president, and Susan's husband, John, is CFO. Sure, there are family disputes, but they trust each other and play to each other's strengths. Susan is the visionary, Kerry runs daily operations and John crunches numbers.

The core belief that truly underlies all Johnson does is **allowing serendipity to take its course**. "Serendipity can produce life-changing opportunities--if you let it," Johnson says.

Over the years, Susan's Healthy Gourmet has grown to three synergistic enterprises. And both of the others came from serendipitous situations. Company No. 2, [LifeSpring Home Nutrition](#), which produces affordable, nutritional frozen meals for seniors living independently, came about when Johnson hired a dietician who just happened to have come from a company that was going out of business. The fact that the dietician knew that the company wanted escape from its contracts rather than an infusion of cash allowed Johnson to step in and make "the buy of the century."

Serendipity also brought about the creation of [Xan Confections](#), a company that makes artisan chocolates. Johnson hooked up with Tracey Downey, a premier chocolatier who just happened to be looking for a new place to hang her apron after closing her own company. It was a match made in heaven: Johnson loved running companies but, despite being a chocoholic, didn't know how to make chocolates. Downey loved making chocolates but hated running a company. Bingo!

Says Johnson, "My daughter Kerry listened to Tracey's story, tasted the chocolates, saw the business potential and then shook her head and said, 'Only my mom could find a way to add a chocolate company to a healthy good business!' "

In fact, Xan does make healthy chocolates. One product line is 29-calorie, low-glycemic and vegan chocolates, and another line has dairy-free caramels. "It seemed like the perfect fit for our two healthy food businesses. We just had to have vision to see it--and it's worked perfectly," Johnson says. Xan expects to have a fivefold increase in revenue in 2010, and the chocolates are being sold across the country.

Johnson's final core belief is **taking time to think**. That's not easy for most entrepreneurs. Johnson said her best ideas come when she's relaxing, whether it's bird-watching near her home, playing with her grandchildren or snuggling with her cats. "At first I felt guilt when I wasn't doing something active every minute," she says. "But the really good ideas come when you're relaxed and not trying to think of them."

Hilary Kaye is the founder and president of [HKA Public Relations](#), an award-winning public relations agency known for its ability to generate credibility and visibility via a variety of established and innovative PR approaches.