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Entrepreneurs Must See 'No' as a Point of View, Not a Closed Door

by Jack Roseman, Contributing Columnist

Last month I talked about how the skills and attitudes and values of an entrepreneur are as helpful in life as they are in building a company. One of those lessons seems to be especially hard for young entrepreneurs - sometimes even veteran entrepreneurs. I mentioned it briefly in the last column: If you are going to chart your own course, you must believe that a "no" is just a little obstacle to a "yes."

That is not something you want your kids to learn too early. Actually, I think kids know this intuitively, and a lot of parenting is devoted to convincing them that "no" means "no." The truth is that acceptance of this makes parenting easier, but if it is carried into adulthood it doesn't encourage those young people to become entrepreneurs. And once they become entrepreneurs, believing that "no" means "no" will insure their failure.

The reason is that new companies have to overcome a lot of inertia. They have to make a place for themselves in the market; they have to earn their right to exist. And to do that they have to change the thinking of a lot of people. Mostly they have to change the habits of their prospects, but as I said last month, they also have to win over investors, bankers, suppliers, vendors, and workers. If you are easily discouraged, if you take all those "no's" and "maybe's" and "interesting, but..." as facts, it will eat away at your resolve and confidence and belief and you will get discouraged and quit.

Trust me. The truth is that "no" is almost always a temporary point of view, not a fixed fact of life.

Let me give you an example. At On-Line Systems my VP of software got a call from a major account in Washington, D.C., on a Thursday. They had a problem

requiring us to be on site the next day. The only problem was they only had one seat back. He had an unbreakable commitment Friday night, and it was my anniversary. He had hit a closed door.

So I got on the phone and called what was then USAir. When they answered, I said, "It's important that I speak to your supervisor." I knew the first person couldn't do much, so I got her supervisor on the phone. I immediately asked what her name was, and let's say it was Mary Ann. I said, "Mary Ann, whether I stay married or get divorced is in your hands."

Well, she starts laughing.

She says, "Whether you get divorced is in my hands?" And I said, "Yes."

"Well, how can that be, I hardly know you?" She says. "I don't know you at all."

"Let me tell you what's happening," I said. "I have a client that I have to take to Washington tomorrow

morning, and we've got seats. No problem there. But he has to come back tomorrow afternoon and it's my anniversary.

"And if I'm not here on my anniversary, I know what my wife is going to do. She's going to divorce me. I can't tell my client that he can't come back Friday night. So whether I get divorced or stay married is in your hands, whether you like it or not."

She said, "Are you going to be at this phone for awhile?"

I said, "I'll be here as long as it takes."

She said, "I'll give you a call within half an hour."

Twenty minutes later she called back and said, "Jack, I got another seat for you."

I got her name and sent her roses, but the point is that to my VP of software, this was a closed door. But by refusing to accept that, we got what we needed.

Now how you turn a "no" into a "yes" is another column, but the point I want to leave you with is that it is possible most of the time. If you're in business for yourself, it's absolutely essential that you approach the closed doors you run into knowing that. And even if you aren't going into business for yourself, recognizing that "no" is only a point of view is what makes the difference between getting what you want out of life and getting what other people want you to have.

Jack Roseman is the Director of The Roseman Institute. He was the founder of two successful computer firms and was president of a third, On-Line Systems. Jack formerly was the associate director of the Donald H. Jones Center for Entrepreneurship at Carnegie Mellon University's Graduate School of Industrial Administration (GSIA). This column was written with Steven N. Czetli, former Executive Editor of T.E.Q.