

# Introduction

**On July 28, 2004,** I made my first blog post at [tompeters.com](http://tompeters.com). The topic was then Illinois state senator Barack Obama's speech to the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston. In an apolitical post, I said that it had been one helluva speech—take it from someone who knows a good speech when he hears one. (Me.) Since then I've made over 1,700 posts, and with the help of many friends the blog has prospered—even bagging a “Top 500” designation in 2007!

On September 18, six weeks after beginning my blogging adventure, I happened by a particularly messy chain-store branch in the Natick Mall outside of Boston. I followed the visit with a spur-of-the-moment, throwaway post that I called “100 Ways to Succeed/Make Money #1”: “THE CLEAN & NEAT TEAM! (TEAM TIDY?)”; I suggested that the store's blatant disarray screamed . . .

**“We don't care.”**

I said that stores, and even accounting offices, were judged as much or more on appearance as on “substance.” The appearance is a non-trivial part of the overall assessment of the “substance”—in fact, a part of the substance.

I promised that I'd proceed to supply 100 such "success tips"—God alone knows why!

I enjoyed the process, and by July 2009 we'd posted precisely 176 of the promised 100! Somewhere along the way, Bob Miller, first boss of the publisher Hyperion, and currently launching HarperStudio, ran (surfed) across the tips, got in touch with us, and said, in effect, "You've inadvertently written a book." He sent along a contract—and we signed, despite my prior vow, recorded in blood, that I'd never write another book. But, hey, why not, a few books sold, a little publicity—and no work!

Ha!

I have a very low "dissatisfaction threshold," and don't think a book is a book until it's been through about a dozen major redrafts—and this one has been no exception. I more or less sacrificed the full summer of 2009 on my glorious farm in Vermont to editing and editing and editing—and you'll see the product here. (For better or for worse.)

All of which is to say that in some respects this is not a "normal" book—or I guess it probably is, circa 2010. That is, it is derived from a blog—even if now the original is barely recognizable. Among other things, that means that the structure does not follow a tidy plotline. We have organized "stuff" in appropriate "pots," but what you see is what you get. It's a book of tips or notions or suggestions or actionable ideas, more or less as they arrived at *tompeters.com*. They were based on observations that flowed from my travels (mainly international these days), the news of the day, exchanges with some of the tens of thousands of people who've attended my seminars, from Bucharest to Shanghai to Tallinn, and things large and mostly "small" that have pissed me off along the way. (I argue here and elsewhere that the *only* effective source of innovation is pissed-off people! Hence, bite your tongue and cherish such misfits! I, in fact, have been tolerated—or not—along the way. Cf. "McKinsey and Me, 1974–1981"; "McKinsey and Me Part Company," circa 1981.)

Not many of these more or less “tips” are oceanic. That is, they are mostly, as the book’s title suggests . . . “little BIG things.” “Little BIG things” such as my reaction to the messy store—or, alternatively, a spectacularly clean bathroom, complete with several decades of family photos, at the Wagon Wheel Country Drive-in restaurant in Gill, Massachusetts. They *are* “little”—a “mere” restroom at a smallish restaurant in a wee town you’ve doubtless never heard of. (Applicability in Tallinn?) But they are also, indeed, BIG—including in Tallinn. That is, the restaurant’s “We care so much we can taste it” or the chain store’s “We don’t care,” “We can’t be bothered” is at the heart of the BIG idea of so-called experience marketing—which in turn is the heart of “value-added” in a crowded marketplace for damn near everything damn near everywhere that insists on such value-added for survival.

In general, I am a sucker for a little, comprehensible, compelling nugget of a life experience that is representative of a BIG and Potent Idea; I prefer such an illustration to some elaborate example in a pithy tome from the Harvard Business School Press—complete with charts and graphs! (I suppose this predilection means I’ve traveled a long way from my engineering training, my MBA, and that McKinsey stint—in all of which complex analysis rules; something that you *can* understand is considered a less-than-powerful “strategic insight.” Whoops—I think I just inadvertently explained the super-super-senior-derivates-that-defied-comprehension problem that brought you and me and the global economy to our collective knees.) But I *am*, in my passion for little stories with real people as the principal players, being consistent with my approach and fervent and guiding belief about effective enterprises first exhibited in public in 1982 in a book I cowrote with Bob Waterman called *In Search of Excellence*.

The main “takeaway” from that book, as I still see it almost three decades later, was a “simple” (“little BIG thing”) assertion that was our de facto six-word motto:

**“Hard is soft. Soft is hard.”**

*Search* was to a significant extent a response to the Japanese challenging American economic hegemony and beating the hell out of us in the auto market in the 1970s, based not on “a sophisticated analysis of the U.S. market” concocted by a brigade of MBAs, but . . . on offering up cars that worked. (Better quality.) So Bob and I slapped the regnant “strategy-first” mavens in the face and said that “the ‘hard’ numbers” were the *true* “soft stuff”—encompassing a ridiculously limited slice of reality. And such purportedly “soft” things as “quality,” “people and relationships,” “core values,” “closeness to the customer,” and, thank you Hewlett-Packard, Managing By Wandering Around, or “MBWA,” were the *true* “hard stuff”—these aspects of business were not “fluff”-“soft,” as disdainfully portrayed by the likes of McKinsey and the B-schools, including mighty Stanford, from which both Bob and I had graduated with an MBA. (We were also both engineers and both McKinsey partners.)

We tried our best—to, alas, I must ruefully admit, little avail.

The Enron fiasco, crafted by Harvard B-School- and McKinsey-trained Jeff Skilling, was a classic case, circa 2001, of the lingering “reality” of “numbers” over “good sense.” And, God knows, the megacrash of 2007++ was led by phony-“soft” numbers and delusional advanced math and a total lack of good sense.

Well, this book is another effort to right the ship!

In fact, an inbred and determined “back-to-basics” streak has engulfed me in the last couple or so years. In part, it’s in reaction to the entirely preventable financial madness that surrounds us, but it’s also, perhaps, a result of a modest pushback against the hyper-hyped-over-the-top-breathlessly-breathless “absolutely everything we know about everything has changed” air surrounding the likes of Google, iPhones, Facebook, and Twitter.

I do blog, and blog assiduously; hence, this book. And I do in fact tweet and enjoy it and find it powerful and useful as well as pleasurable—so I hardly merit a Luddite badge.

But still . . .

Oddly, the icing on the cake, the motivational engine, the final flash of re-realization about those “eternal basics” can be traced to a single, slim volume I read in 2008, at the height of the endless Vermont winter, while on vacation in New Zealand. The book, by David Stewart, is titled *The Summer of 1787*. It is a day-to-day account of the writing of the U.S. Constitution, a grand happening and a landmark in human history, which occurred during a mercilessly hot and humid summer in a hopelessly stuffy, closed-windows room in Philadelphia. (I know of what I speak when I assert that the weather was dispiriting—I grew up near neighboring Baltimore.) I underscore the heat and humidity, because it per se was one of those “little BIG things” that had an enormous impact on the final outcome.

The delegates would often break early to escape the elements, turning over the writing of some key clause to a little subcommittee that would in turn retire to a Philly pub to do their monumental (as we now see it) work. The subcommittee members rarely included grandees such as old Ben Franklin or young James Madison; instead the group likely consisted of four delegates from God knows where with God knows what qualifications (in many cases, not many qualifications) who had simply raised their hands and gotten the mostly unwanted assignment, a “little BIG” assignment, as it turned out, to shape some essential part of the workings of what has ended up becoming the most powerful nation in world history.

But it was more than the weather “basic” that shaped the outcome. Hard as it may be to swallow today, some states simply didn’t bother to send delegates, not thinking the whole exercise was of much import. And the New York delegation, for example, never had a quorum present in the hall—hence never cast a single vote. Furthermore, states that did bother to come could determine the size of their contingent, and wee (then and now) Delaware showed up big time *and* sent five representatives—*and* the five were present every damn day from the opening bell to the closing bell. *And* they voted on every-damn-thing, *and* because of their numbers—5 out of just 30 on the floor on average

that summer—ended up volunteering for many, many a crucial subcommittee assignment. Wee Delaware’s impact on the final document is stratospheric.

There’s the “little BIG thing” called “showing up,” Delaware style, and then there’s, um, “showing up”: Yet another “mundane” but potent-beyond-measure determinant of the final document came via delegates and delegations that showed up in Philadelphia with rough drafts of parts of the proposed document in hand; for lack of better guidance (Madison’s soaring rhetoric was a bit over the top for a sizable chunk of this oft ordinary gang), numerous rough drafts carried to the Convention got tidied up a bit, and became pillars of the final product.

And then there was plain-old-down-and-dirty-with-us-through-the-ages horse trading, where the toughest or most wily bargainers prevailed. To a large extent, success at *that* “eternal basic” is the reason slavery remained intact in the final document. The Northerners won the rhetoric battle—and the Southerners, South Carolinians in particular, were the tougher and more persistent and stubborn and sometimes devious horse traders.

The frequently tawdry affairs chronicled in Mr. Stewart’s book made me laugh out loud at several occasions, despite the gravity of the topic; and it reminded me of the decisive role in anything, including the drafting of the U.S. Constitution, of numerous “little BIG things”—like showing up, and showing up with a draft document in tow, and then sticking around from the opening to the closing bell. And bringing the right temperament to the party: One of the most apparently powerful delegates played an inconsequential role—because he was deemed by his peers to be a “windbag” and given to “bombast”; hence, his mates refused to accept him as a member of any subcommittee. They wanted to be done and go home—and not linger, thanks to our windy forebear, in a stuffy little room in swampy Philly in August.

Economists and strategy gurus ordinarily . . . just don’t get it. (“It” being this “mundane” “soft,” “Philadelphia-flavor” stuff.) So I have been

determined here to produce what, as subtext, emphasizes the “stuff that really matters” in getting things done—the “little BIG things.”

My colleagues and I mostly expect you to read the book while sitting on the toilet. (Literally or figuratively.) That is, we hardly imagine that you’ll breathlessly read what follows from start to finish—John le Carré or Alan Furst I am not. Instead, I imagine you’ll look at this idea or that—and I obviously hope that a few will be compelling enough to induce you to take action, to try out one of these “little BIG things,” maybe even eventually include it in your canon.

Which is hardly to suggest that because these ideas are apparently “simple”—that they are therefore “no-brainers” to incorporate in your daily affairs. For example, the day I finished off this introduction, I also presented a seminar in Manchester, England. At one point I had a lengthy exchange with a technically trained and disposed chap who ran an engineering-services company. The topic was “the power of expressed appreciation”—more specifically, saying “Thank you” with some regularity, or great regularity, which so graphically acknowledges the value of the recipient, maid or manager. Like many, many others, especially men, my engineer-leader not only doesn’t say those two words often, but actually doesn’t understand how to. His “how to” question to me was obviously from the heart—and a brave heart indeed to broach the personal and emotional subject in a public setting. The point is, he “got it,” at least intellectually, and “got” the point of the *power* of this sort of gesture, regularized. It was a fine discussion—underscoring “little BIG,” and also the fact that there is a genuine discipline, worthy of a methodical engineer’s careful consideration, associated with this flavor of apparently “mundane” activity. From one “just-the-facts” engineer to another, I wish him well, and if he does enter “appreciation” into his canon, that alone will have made my 6,000-mile round-trip across the Atlantic and back worthwhile.

There are, derivative of the anecdote about my engineer colleague just mentioned, two other essential themes I want to note before

whisking you on your way. First, I wish to be crystal clear about one essential aspect of the . . . “Hard is soft,” “Soft is hard” . . . notion that *de facto* animates the entire book. Ideas like conscientiously showing appreciation are matchless signs of humanity—and the practice thereof, in my opinion, doubtless makes you a better person, a person behaving decently in a hurried and harried world. But, to the principal point of this book, such acts also result in dramatically improved organizational effectiveness—and goals more readily achieved; whether those goals involve profitability or provision of human services by nonprofits, NGOs, or government agencies. Acts of appreciation, to stick with my theme of the moment, are masterful, even peerless, ways of enthusing staff and partner and Client alike, and, hence, greasing the way to rapid implementation of damn near anything. That is, “Soft is hard” is wholly pragmatic—and more often than not, effectively implemented, makes the bottom line blossom!

Second, obviously you learn to fly-fish or play the piano or build cabinets by working your butt off and valiantly attempting to master the craft. So, too, to do financial analysis or plan marketing campaigns. Well, in this book I argue that “the stuff that matters” is the likes of intensive and engaged listening and showing appreciation of the work and wisdom of others, any and all others. And I argue and fervently believe that you can *study* these full-blown disciplines and *practice* these full-blown disciplines and become, say, a full-fledged “*professional* listener.” I suggest, for example, that “effective strategic listening” is a key, perhaps *the* key, to lasting, “strategic” customer relationships—and top-flight “professional” “mastery” of listening *per se* beats, on the power scale, quantitative marketing analysis tools pretty much every time, from the world of that little restaurant in Gill, Massachusetts, to the world of an Airbus sale to Emirates Air, or the eradication of malaria in some part of Africa.

That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it. I hope you enjoy—and I hope you ponder and then work diligently on some of the “little BIG things” that overwhelmingly determine effective project implemen-

tation and career success and customer contentment and employee engagement and business profitability and the shape of the likes of the U.S. Constitution!

## ➤ A BLINDING FLASH OF THE OBVIOUS

Alas, I confess to having begun this introduction with a lie. (Not a very good start.) I said I'd begun the "success tips," as we initially called them, on September 18, 2004. That was true—that is, the tips—but the book actually began on about August 9, 1966. That's 44 years, 1 month, and 26 days ago as I write.

On August 9 I boarded a U.S. Air Force C-141 in San Bernardino County, California, and began the journey to Danang, Republic of Vietnam—there was a stop in Guam along the way. I was a U.S. Navy "combat engineer," or Seabee, to use our ID.

It was my first real job.

(Besides summer stuff, including waiting tables, for nine years in high school and college, and the like.)

This book is up close and personal—and it took all damned 44 years to write. There were those "incidents and accidents" (thank you, Paul Simon) that triggered many of the "tips" at the blog. But mostly, it is a reflection of the Seabees, the Pentagon, the White House and Office of Management and Budget, Stanford, McKinsey, my own company, decades of off-and-on research—and contact with some of the roughly 3,000,000 thoughtful-curious people who've attended my seminars in 67 countries since about 1980.

I've learned a lot of stuff. Well, maybe, maybe not. I've *seen* a lot of stuff—and perhaps learned a little along the way. For example, I've met great leaders—from 2-person companies and 200,000-person companies and government agencies and elementary schools; and I've met some, let's say, real beauts! (Both sorts abet the learning process. Here's to the jerks as well as the saints.)

Truth be known, engineering training and German bloodline notwithstanding, I'm not much of a linear thinker—so "my secret" is that I run into stuff I care like hell about, and make it into one of "Tom's passions,"

as my wife calls them, for a year or two or 10 or even 20. It need not fit tightly into a framework, like Michael Porter's work—it's just "stuff that's damned important that people are foolishly paying little or no attention to," according to me.

That stuff includes: Germany's *Mittelstand* (mid-sized companies) that often lead the world in exports; Design (!!); execution (I call it "doin' stuff—the 'missing last 98 percent' ") ("they" say I wrote the first ever Stanford dissertation on implementation—most of the faculty was busy creating the intellectual foundation for derivatives—whoops, it's the intro—hold the cynicism for now, Tom); women as leaders (more of, *lots* more of) and the opportunity associated with developing products and services tailored to women's abundant needs (world's biggest and most underserved market); scintillating customer service (I pretty much had that "space" all to myself in the mid-1980s, believe it or not—"everybody" was doing quality, I was doing service); patient safety (grappling with a monster in the closet);—and, always, always, always, the bedrock beneath every iota of my work, "people first, people second, people third, people ad infinitum" (still news—do you really think Ken Lewis at Bank of America gave two hoots about his staff? Well, maybe two, but sure as hell not three).

I lied again, at the beginning of *this* riff. "It" didn't start in Danang—it started in Severna Park, Maryland, in about 1946—that makes "all this" 63 years in the making. My Virginia-born mom was a stickler's stickler on the subject of manners. (You know, that Southern thing!) I bridled, naturally, but in these last 40+ years I've learned just how far a "thank you" and a "yes, sir" and a "yes, ma'am" can take you—at age 67, I still "yes, sir/ma'am" 19-year-old 7-Eleven clerks in inner cities. (You'll see a helluva lot in this book about civility and thoughtfulness and manners—it was George Washington's forte and "competitive advantage," and it's worked for me in far, far, far more humble settings.)

Manny Garcia, Burger King's top franchisee at the time, attended a Young Presidents' Organization seminar of mine in the mid-1980s. At wrap-up time, he said it was great, his best seminar ever, in fact, but he added that he'd learned nothing new. Instead he called it an all-important "blinding flash of the obvious."

I *loved* that.

I *love* that.

Well, here goes. You're going to get 63 years' worth of my experience, starting with Mom Peters' blasts from the Chesapeake past (and could she blast!), from my fourth birthday on, lessons from my bosses and sailors and U.S. Marine Corps customers during two Vietnam tours, and the insights of those three million people I've hung out with in my more or less three thousand seminars in Siberia and Estonia and India and China and Omaha and Oman and York, Pennsylvania.

Yup, here it comes—stuff I've long, long, long been itching to say.

Yup, and almost all of it is as obvious as the end of your or Manny Garcia's nose.

Enjoy the ride.