

Reflections of a Career Entrepreneur featuring Steve Stroum

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Tommy: Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next.” On today’s episode, we have Steve Stroum, the founder of Venmark International. We will discuss his co-op experience, tips for starting a business, and his new book, “Success and Self Discovery: A Business Memoir with Insightful Tips and Personal Development Advice That Will Help Any Entrepreneur.” Let’s get into it.

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Tommy: Alright, great, it looks like we are all set. Steve, hi, how are you? Welcome to the “Northeastern Next Podcast.” How are you?

Steve: I am very well, Tommy. How are you doing?

Tommy: Good, I’m doing well. I’m excited about this Boston weather finally changing a little bit. Are you in the Boston area?

Steve: I am! I am up in Framingham.

Tommy: Oh, nice! Not too far.

Steve: Yeah. Excited to be with you this morning.

Tommy: Yeah, thanks! So, Steve, I would love to hear a little bit of background on you and your Northeastern experience. Can you tell us what that’s like?

Steve: Absolutely! I was born and raised in Newton, Mass. I went to Northeastern as a freshman in 1966 and I went to the Burlington campus. This was right in the middle of the Vietnam War, and I did the brilliant thing of quitting college in November of 1966, and I lost my draft affirmant immediately, but I enlisted in the Air Force on a Tuesday, and I subsequently was drafted on a Friday but I didn’t have to go in the Army because I enlisted in the Air Force. It was one of those experiences that you make as a kid, and I knew I was screwing up when I did it, but the wheels were in motion and my classmates gave me a party and everything went on, so I ended up enlisting in the Air Force. I was only in the Air Force for a year and a half, I spent four months in hospitals, in five, six different hospitals. Fortunately, I’m a disabled veteran, fortunately at the time was skin disease, nothing more serious than that. But it did expose me to a lot of guys that were really hurting, and it was an impactful experience.

So, when I was in a hospital, the final hospital I was in was Andrew’s airport’s base and I... When I left Northeastern in ‘66, I was assured by the dean that I could return, because I left in good academic standing, and so I reapplied in the hospital, I got rejected. Yeah, it blew me away. I made an appointment with the dean at the time, Dean Kennedy, to talk with him when I got back to Boston. So, I got discharged from the Air Force on March 25, 1968, I went to meet with

Dean Kennedy in Boston, Dean of Freshmen, and I explained to him that the dean had called from the Burlington campus and told me that I could return to Northeastern because I left in good academic standing. What had Dean Kennedy's letter had said to me was that academic requirements had changed in the two years I was gone. So, I was blown away. So, I was sitting with Dean Kennedy, and he had nine pictures in this credenza of his children, and I said, "Are those your children?" He said, "Yes." And I kind of waved my hand and I said, "Well, I just spent the last four months in five different hospitals protecting your beautiful children." You know, I sold him. So, I knew I got him, I chatted for a few minutes, and I said, "All I want to do is have Northeastern honor its commitment to me and allow me to come back to school."

So, they did. A week later, I got a letter of acceptance from the dean. I went back to school in September of '68. I went to the Burlington campus, and I happened to be elected class president. Maybe because I was a little older than the other kids, that was part of the deal. So, anyway, a good first academic year, I got B's and C's. I had a wonderful experience. I went into Boston my sophomore year and I was in College of Business Administration, and I was with one of my classmates, a guy named Dave Whitman. And we are sitting on the quad in the fall, beautiful day. We were outside, kids were outside flipping frisbees and it was a good time. Dave was a straight A student, and I studied my butt off and got B's and C's. So, I said, "Dave, you don't seem all that smarter than me, but you get straight A's and I get B's and C's, what's up with that?" And he said, "Steve, I'll tell you, I am a lot smarter than you, and this is why." And he shared with me his study process. He explained that you get a syllabus from every professor, whether they published it or not, before every term and he took out his calendar, or appointment book, and he scheduled every moment of his time to studying. He said, "When you are cramming for an exam, I'm just reviewing." And he said, "That's what makes me smarter than you."

So, Tommy, I adopted that methodology, and I got straight A's for the next four years at Northeastern.

Tommy: Wow.

Steve: So, I became a big believer in processes. That study process blew me away. And then of course you had to make adjustments because when you are a B and C student, nobody really pays much attention to you. But, when you are getting straight A's, everyone wants a piece of you. So, that was an interesting adjustment for me to make at that time.

Tommy: That's really interesting. I really like the idea that...

Steve: And it worked beautifully.

Tommy: Yeah. I mean, I wish I had that advice when I was in college, I can tell you that.

Steve: I'm telling you, I asserted myself and I just said to Dave, "He's a regular guy but he is getting straight A's." And, actually, he graduated Magna Cum Laude, he never got anything less than an A.

Tommy: Wow.

Steve: Five years at Northeastern.

Tommy: Wow, that's really something because I know that some of our listeners are definitely undergraduate students who are listening to this podcast and think to themselves, "Hey, what can I do with a Northeastern degree?" That being said, I think there are some undergraduates right now who would love hearing that advice. That's not just even at Northeastern, that is just across any college campus.

Steve: Sure, sure. It was a great experience. Northeastern itself, in addition to that experience, changed my life. The co-op is a legitimate opportunity to job hunt and my job was with the Paul Revere Life Insurance Company and I became a claim examiner out in Worcester, Mass. I found it very boring, and it wasn't for me. But they wanted me to come back, and I said, "Listen, I love the company, but this work is not for me." They said, "Well, what would you like to do?" I said, "I would love to be in sales." And, they said to me, "Well, we never had a co-op student in sales before." I said, "I'm not your ordinary co-op student. I'm a veteran, I'm married, I'm old as any entry-level person in this company. I would love the opportunity to get in sales."

Long story short, they gave me the opportunity to work in sales. I went to the Boston brokerage office. I was just supposed to be an associate, a support role, and I was out in the field with a couple of the guys, and I said to myself, "I can do this better than them." So, I went to my boss, and I said, "Listen, I can do this as well if not better than the other guys, the employees." My boss said to me, "Well" and I said, "I would like to get into the field." He said, "Well, you have to get licensed." I said, "I'll gladly take the test and get licensed. I would love to be in the field selling." He said, "We've never done that before." I said, "You've never had anybody like me before."

Actually, Tommy, it turned out to be a great deal for them because the home office budget paid for me, but my sales went into his pocket. So, it was a no-brainer for him. Long story short, I got licensed, I went out into the field, I got lucky, I got a couple of cases. One of the things I am most proud of is at Paul Revere my senior year, I worked a deal where I could work...I went to school actually in Boston and I covered the territory for Paul Revere was from Newton to Framingham where I lived. So, I arranged my schedule to go in to school in the morning, it was awful because I was in a business suit most days, but I didn't care and then I worked all the way back in the afternoon. So, it was fantastic. So, I ended up, getting straight A's again in my senior finals and I led my office in sales in the same month. So, as a part time co-op student.

Long story short, I negotiated a job with Paul Revere and included five weeks' vacation in advance.

Tommy: Wow.

Steve: People say to me, “How did you do that?” Well, I asked for it! My wife and I promised each other that we would take a week off for every year of college and we took off around the country for five weeks. And then, I came back and went to work. So, my co-op experience was extraordinary. But you know what, I learned it’s what you make of it. So, that is what I can tell you at this point. And, subsequently, this David Whitney I had mentioned, he ultimately got a job with Paul Revere Insurance Company as well, but he was in New York City. He had a boss in New York City who saw the value of incentivizing him a little bit extra. So, where I was doing extremely well in Boston, Dave was doing equally as well in New York, but he was making considerably more money. So, that made me angry, and I went to my boss. My boss wasn’t willing to change so I quit. And I went to work for an insurance company. I was going to take over and make all these sales and I blew it completely, I had no clue. This is where I really overstepped, and I had no clue what I was doing, and I ended up getting fired in a month.

Then, I went to work for another insurance company. Long story short, my wife and I in 1974 went to San Francisco and we lived there for two years. That’s where I first got involved with entrepreneurship.

Tommy: Ok.

Steve: Yeah. And, again, all of this is in my memoir, I have to pitch that. I ended up going out to California. I did not want to be in the insurance business, but I ended up meeting with a headhunter and naturally the path of least resistance, I was most marketable in the insurance industry. So, I went to Firemans Fund American Life Insurance Company and took over sales and it was 49th out of 50th in the country. Within three months, I had outproduced my predecessor’s entire previous year and brought the agency up to third place in the company. So, that’s in three months. So, my boss calls me into his office and I’m thinking, “This is great, I’m going to get a promotion, get some strokes.” I go into office, and he says to me, “Steve, you know, in life, some people need steak to be happy and other people are satisfied with pork and beans. Around here, we are satisfied with pork and beans. If you get my drift.” And, Tommy, I got his drift.

I’m sharing this with you because you ultimately want to know why I became an entrepreneur. These experiences put me in a position where, you know, I always wanted to excel and I had a process, as Dave Whitney taught me, I had a process with sales, I had a process with business, I was doing very well. Anyway, I got so angry, I took the next five, six weeks and I didn’t do anything. I mean, I went to the Marina Green and jogged, and I made a few phone calls to clients but didn’t do any real work. Five weeks later, I’m in the office—the home office because it was in San Francisco—Vice President in charge of brokerage slaps me on the back and says, “Congratulations.” I said, “For what?” He said, “You are leading the company in sales!”

Tommy: Oh, wow!

Steve: I said, “I’m leading the company in sales?” By this point, I was fed up, Tommy, I was twenty-six years old. I said, “I’m leading your company in sales?”, I’m talking to the Vice President of Brokerage...

Tommy: Yeah.

Steve: I said, “Shame on you! I haven’t worked in five weeks and I’m leading your company in sales.” He said, “Come into my office. Let’s chat about this.” I said, “Ok.” Anyway, long story short, I talked myself into a position as the Assistant Director of Marketing and Sales Training Development. I was supposed to write the National Sales Training Program, which I did. They expected me to implement it, but I have already been implementing it, so I wrote it, and I didn’t know anything about the company politics. I found it very distasteful, right. So, anyway, my presentation to management was at a country club, it was fancy schmancy, I just about got booted off the roster. And I just about got booted off the roster because I hadn’t built any alliances. And my program held everybody accountable and these people at that time did not want to be held accountable. You know, they came out from the east coast, the west coast, they retired from Firemans Fund American Life Insurance Company. At that time, a fellow heard about me by name of Michael Gerber and if you Google Michael E. Gerber you will see he wrote about twenty books, many bestsellers, on business but he was my original mentor. He heard about me through somebody else, long story short, my entrepreneurial career began with a company out there called Newsmaker.

Tommy: Ok.

Steve: And that’s how I got started. Newsmaker was a publicity company, and I worked my off ass off. I went in December of ’75 and Mike Geber said, “What are you doing here?” “Well, I want to get going” and he says, “We can’t pay you.” I said, “I’m not looking for pay. I want to get started. I’m excited.” So, I started in earnest in January. So, July came, and it was 1976 and my wife and I promised each other we would come home for the Bicentennial, and we had been out there for almost two years. So, we came home for the Bicentennial, and I went back to California afterwards. My wife stayed back for two weeks, I only stayed a week. And I went home, and I went back, and my office was gone.

Tommy: Really. Wow!

Steve: My two partners at that time said to me, “Listen, we want you to start another company with us.” And I said, “Well, that wasn’t the arrangement.” Now, I’m going to give you the real thumbnail sketch of this, all the rest of this is of course in the book with all the gory details. At any rate, I decided I wasn’t going to start another company with these two guys. They were taking advantage of me. I didn’t fully understand it then because I didn’t really want to. But, nevertheless, I got a book entitled, “Where Do I Go from Here in My Life?” Sat down for five, six weeks and figured out what I wanted to do. And my wife and I moved back home in October

of '76. November '76 I started my business. In December, made my first sale. January moved, we started really in earnest. In April, I incorporated and in September I had ten full-time employees.

Tommy: Wow!

Steve: It took off like a rocket ship! Rather than becoming elated as one would think. I became depressed.

Tommy: Oh.

Steve: I told the whole story on why that happened and how I resolved those issues in my book.

Tommy: Oh, I love that!

Steve: So, anyway. Go ahead.

Tommy: Tell us a little bit about what you are doing now, Venmark International.

Steve: Yeah. Right now...Actually, I have been in business for forty-seven years. At one point early on, as I said, we had twelve full-time employees and two thousand companies who had done business with us. I ultimately decided that I wanted things to be smaller and more controllable for me and I explain that in depth in my book. But, right now, I kept twelve clients that I've had for forty-seven years.

Tommy: Ok.

Steve: Yeah, which is extraordinary.

Tommy: Yeah.

Steve: I'm working with these twelve companies. It's really a part-time job and I wrote this book at age seventy-three. It was something I always wanted to do. I made notes in my journals back in the eighties, early eighties, that I wanted to write this book. And the working title for years was "Blue-Collar Entrepreneur" because... But, when I decided to publish it, that had a connotation of plumbers, electricians, and so forth—which are noble professions, but I wanted it to be broader. So, my real story was about self-discovery, and I differentiate between blue-collar entrepreneur and the white-collar entrepreneur. The blue-collar entrepreneur being an ordinary person, working-class, who really doesn't have any contacts, wants to get in the business for him or herself but doesn't quite know how to do it. That is what a blue-collar entrepreneur does. There is usually no Plan B, you know? You jump in the ring, and you got to win the fight.

Tommy: Gotcha.

Steve: White-collar entrepreneur on the other hand maybe went to Northeastern, MIT, Babson, Stanford. Came out with an entrepreneurial plan, got investors, family, friends, whatever. And started a business. They take their salary, and they are not really at risk. They are taking a salary,

if they screw up, it doesn't work, they can start another business. And that's how it goes. So, I differentiate between a blue-collar entrepreneur and a white-collar entrepreneur. But my time spent now is talking about my book and my background. I wrote this book at age seventy-three and I am now age seventy-five and I am having a blast with it.

Tommy: Oh, I'm so glad to hear that. Yeah, I mean, I am really interested in taking a look at this book now, too. You are very...I know you said you started in sales; you are working your charm on me. I can tell you that.

Steve: I hope you do get it. I think you will enjoy it. I just got another review the other day. My 31st five-star review and it's the human side of entrepreneurship. If you really wanted to know what the book is about, the human side of entrepreneurship, when you start a business, you will run into crap you never imagined. You never imagine in a hundred years. Betrayals. Bullshit. Just things you can't believe that would happen. I'll give you a little example. I won't give you a big example, I will give you a little example. A little taste.

Tommy: Ok.

Steve: I was up in my office one day, I was on the third floor, this was back in the beginning. And one of my salespeople, I was hanging out the window and, in those days, I smoked cigarettes. I'm hanging out, having a butt and I look down and my salesman is walking down the street towards the VW dealer. I said, "Oh," I'm saying to myself his car must've been serviced today. In the meantime, the next morning, I say to him, "Hey, I noticed you walked down to the VW dealer after work last night. Did you get your car fixed?" He says to me, "I don't own a car." I said, "What? You don't own a car? You're an industrial salesman, how the hell do you think you are going to make sales." He says, "I've been taking the T." Well, Tommy, there was no doubt that he had two sales, and they were both in Boston. In those days, industrial parks were all over the place, it was before 1979 when the United States signed the agreements with China that sent everything to turmoil for the last 50 years.

Tommy: Oh.

Steve: Yeah, no free trade with China prior to 1979 so there were small businesses and there were industrial parks all over the place. Well, all that went away because labor became so cheap in China and so forth, so we lost a lot of small manufacturing. Just trying to get it back now. But, at any rate, that was a bizarre situation. So then on, I always said to my salesman when I was hiring, "Hey, just curious, what do you are driving?" So, at any rate, some bizarre stories.

Tommy: Sounds like in that book you really lived a full life and I'm excited to check that out. I did see the reviews on Amazon which I'm glad you mentioned the 31st five-star review which is insane to me that you're at a thousand right now at five-star reviews. 31 out of 31, I think.

Steve: Exactly. The book has only been out on the market since August last year so I'm excited. I'm excited, it takes a while to get traction but as I said I have had 31 five-star reviews. One of

the ones that I actually had one former client, serial entrepreneur to two magnificent companies, seventy-seven-year-old guy and he wrote me and said, “Hey, your book is a masterpiece in terms of providing details and information that’s logical.” The guy just wrote me a beautiful email about the book, and this was a serial entrepreneur so there are a lot of tips in there about sales, marketing, how to get free publicity, I lay that all out in the book in great detail. There are 22 chapters and there’s a lot of information in there. Like I said, human information, I’ve been very successful, but I’ve made some awful mistakes. One of which was hiring my brother, and I get into that in detail and that became disastrous and so forth. Overall, you’re right, I have been privileged to live a really exciting life. That was one of the things that motivated me to write the book was to chronicle things and better understand where I was at that time. Back in the late seventies, early eighties. Very exciting time in this country.

Tommy: It sounds like it. Just from what I’ve heard, what I’ve read, textbooks and everything. It sounds like it was a very, very different period from right now.

Steve: I did some funny things for promotion. I developed the crab apple anti-computer club and I took the Apple logo with a worm—there is a picture of it in my book—coming out of it. Instead of apple, it said crab apple. My goal, and I set up a separate corporation, was to get sued by Apple because if Steve Jobs came after me, what would that do? That would elevate my status as a businessman. See?

Tommy: Wow!

Steve: Yeah, I wanted to get sued. That was my goal, and I didn’t get sued but I did get a tremendous amount of attention, I was on every ABC TV, USA Today, I was in all major magazines and publications. Ink Magazine. Sales and Marketing Management Magazine. You name it. It was great for business. That’s what you do as a publicist. All that free publicity helped generate business, helped support my salespeople, it was just fantastic. Again, that whole story is in the book, why I came up with the idea, how I came up with it, and so forth.

Tommy: Yeah, I was going to say it sounds like the definition of there is no such thing as bad press. Look, I know you are a publicist so you can shoot that down any way you would like. I’m just kidding.

Steve: No, no, no. But you are absolutely right! You are absolutely right. And today it is all about cliques. So, I haven’t figured out to get that kind of attention, that went viral back in the day.

Tommy: Oh, that is so cool! So, Steve, I do want to put you on the spot here real quick if that is alright. Everything you told me about the book and everything you told me about your career, do you have three essential tips you would like to give to aspiring entrepreneurs?

Steve: Yes! The first one is follow your gut. Follow your instinct. Any time I didn’t follow my instinct, I screwed up, okay? That’s one thing. The second thing is do what you say you are going

to do. If you tell somebody you are going to deliver a certain thing on a certain day, then do it. So, do what you say you are going to do, and the third thing is always deliver a little more than what you promise.

Tommy: I think that is a great one.

Steve: And that is why I have clients for forty-seven years. And that's why I have been married for fifty-four years. My wife knows I love her, but I tell her every day. My clients I know love them but I tell them every day in some way, shape, or form. I'll send them press clippings, I'll send them notices, whatever it might be. So that's really it. Do what you say you're going to do, do a little more than that, and follow your gut. And don't be afraid. I was very fortunate in California when I was with Newsmaker, I was with Mike Gerber—as I said, read his book “The E Method”, it's a fabulous book—and he and I were writing out my sales presentation when he told me, “One day I'm going to write this book ‘The E Method’.” But our other partner was a fellow named Ace Remis and Ace was a practicing Buddhist. I would go to him with a concept, an idea, and he would say, “Don't think about, do it.” And I would say, “I went to college, you analyze things.” and he would say, “Don't think about it, do it.” In other words, trust your instinct.

Tommy: Yeah.

Steve: Don't think about it and after you are done, you can look at it and evaluate it. But don't be afraid. If you are afraid, you know, people judge things, and they are afraid to fail.

Tommy: Yeah.

Steve: The real truth is that they are afraid to succeed. I represent that in the book as well.

Tommy: Oh, wow.

Steve: Failure is easy. Anybody can do it. Succeeding takes some skill.

Tommy: Yeah.

Steve: It's a great book. “Overcoming the Fear of Success.” Now, at the back of my book, I have twenty-two books I list. “Overcoming the Fear of Success” by Martha Friedman is one of them.

Tommy: Ok.

Steve: That's one of the things I dealt with myself. So, at any rate, that's the long answer to the short question.

Tommy: Well, I appreciate that answer and I think a lot of people listening, especially here at Northeastern, where entrepreneurship and innovation and just kind of taking those risks is really encouraged. So, I think a lot of people are really going to love to hear that. So, that being said, since this is the Northeastern Next Podcast, what is next for you, Steve?

Steve: You know, I'm not sure what is next for me. I got a couple of ideas for books. One of which is...I wrote the book for a year and when I was 73 it took me a year to write the book. I had a lot of writings—40 years' worth of writings prior to that—and many, many essays. In fact, I had a couple hundred essays in my Venmark International website and clients of mine said, "Why don't you just compile them into a book." So, I had a lot of writing done. But what I witnessed was a lot of scams out there for authors. The only thing we, as authors, want is to sell our books and we are kind of naive. So, I may write a book about scams and exploitation of authors.

Tommy: Oh, interesting.

Steve: So, that is one thing I am thinking of. But, again, I got two beautiful grandchildren, and we went miniature golfing the other day so...

Tommy: That sounds lovely!

Steve: Yeah, yeah. So, all the Type-A stuff that put me in a position to succeed years ago, it's still there, it doesn't change in retirement or semi-retirement. But I'm still active with my clients and I'm a fisherman so I will be getting my boat ready on Thursday to get some bass...

Tommy: Oh, that's exciting.

Steve: Life is good.

Tommy: That's awesome.

Steve: You know, 75 years old and I am not just running as hard as I used to.

Tommy: Yeah, all that sounds really nice, too! Don't get me wrong, all that sounds very relaxing and exciting.

Steve: It is!

Tommy: Thanks so much, Steve, for taking time this morning to chat with me. I really appreciate it.

Steve: Well, it's been my pleasure, Tommy. It's been great meeting you, it's been a great deal of fun, and I probably got a little long-winded at times so, for that, I apologize. But I hope your listeners enjoy it and I just can't tell you how beneficial Northeastern has been in my life. I am totally convinced that there is absolutely no way I would've ended up as happy an entrepreneur as I have been in my life. Happiness is the main thing, and fulfillment is the main thing. And I get into that a great deal in my book.

Tommy: There you go, I love that. Thanks so much, Steve!

Music: Enters

Tommy: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of “Northeastern Next.” Are you or do you know a Northeastern alum with a great story to tell? If so, email us at alumni@northeastern.edu to be featured on a future episode of the pod. I hope you enjoyed the episode, and I will see you the week after next.

Music: Fades