

John Hellerman

The Perpetual Forward Thinker

Like a small Chess master always thinking five moves ahead, ten-year-old John Hellerman considered his options. The current exchange rate for converting American dollars to Jamaican dollars was 1.8, meaning the ten dollars his father had given him to spend at the resort would automatically turn into eighteen. However, he had just overheard that a group of men would be outside in the courtyard exchanging two Jamaican dollars for every American dollar, which would leave him with twenty. Of course the boy appeared in the courtyard, taking advantage of this stellar deal and budgeting out for his bounty of t-shirts and beads. But what about jet ski rides? John had already decided against spending his money on such frivolity, aware that his twenty bucks would have only afforded him a couple short-lived minutes of glory. Instead, he sought employment with the jet ski man for the week of his family vacation, hosing off life jackets in exchange for free rides every hour or so. The boy had it made. Or rather, he made it himself.

Now the Partner and Co-Founder of Hellerman Baretz Communications, among the top crisis litigation PR firms in the country, John's style of strategic forward thinking has served him well in the years since that Jamaican business trip of his youth. He had always exhibited the will and capacity to have a clear and discerning idea of his own path and preferences, even at age ten when he was given information about Reagan and Carter during their campaigns for presidency. In fact, John hoped to pursue a career in political campaigning himself until he realized the chances of him achieving the kind of clout and impact he hoped for were too slim to invest his whole life in. "Even in that kind of an atmosphere, money calls the shots," he observes now. "If money is calling the shots, you can either be subservient to that

money and hope it works out in the end for you, or you can be the guy with the money." It was with this success as his objective that he sought to expedite his track to success, gathering the PR and marketing skill and experience necessary to launch a business that would aim to represent professionals with a specialization in the legal field.

John then met Spencer Baretz in August of 2002 while doing some work for clients in New York City. He had gone into business on his own in September of the previous year, and the two seemed to share the same vision and focus.

Spencer was a former practicing attorney and had been doing a lot of writing for some firms in the city, while John had been working with attorneys for more than twelve years and had a wealth of marketing and PR experience as well. The two entrepreneurs assembled a business plan over the course of the fall that they then implemented in early February of 2003, thus initiating Hellerman Baretz from the realm of ideas into the realm of reality.

Since that day, Hellerman Baretz has excelled in providing competitive and compelling promotional resources and assistance to professional service firms. They perform a host of duties for their partners—primarily lawyers—to promote their expertise within a given niche, be it healthcare, insurance, new government regulations, etcetera. Thirty percent of their business comes through referrals for litigation consulting from lawyers; hence, their work tends to cluster around litigation PR and crisis management.

Hellerman Baretz is truly a product of changing times, as the litigation scene has come a long way from the days of tight-lipped silence in which clients were advised not to talk to the press. In the last decade or two, the industry now knows that companies must maintain their reputation



regardless of what happens in the court room. "The realization was that, in these exceptionally charged and public situations, the interest of the company, its shareholders, and its employees has to be represented and advocated for—not only in the court, but in the court of public opinion as well," John explains.

John's experience in the industry draws from an extensive history that first commenced soon after he began college at Tulane University, where he worked on several political campaigns and then served as the Director of Marketing for a small timeshare hotel in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Eager to develop relationships with his professors, he also founded a talk show airing on a local cable and closed circuit channel called *Point of View* in which he would invite his future professors to appear as guests to discuss a political topic of the day. "I liked being able to ask the questions and offer my own insight," John explains, "and it was a great way to get to know my professors before having class with them and to set myself apart in some way."

Though he had been working toward a political science major, it was shortly through his time at Tulane that John first thought he wanted to be a political consultant, running and marketing campaigns. He had acquired a strong political science background from his classes and had read a lot about Columbia College in Chicago, which was known for its media and communications expertise. What's more, the school's instructors were primarily business owners and professionals who were actually out in the community practicing the subject matter of their courses. "I was very conscious of the fact that transferring was a big risk, but I felt like Columbia was a place where I could meet people who could later hire me," John explains. "I knew I needed to make it work." He did, in fact, make it work, graduating and winning a position as the primary writer for a political campaign. Although John's candidate eventually lost, John wrote many ads and fundraising letters and was noticed by a lawyer, who extended an job offer for somewhat of a legal writing position. John tried his hand at that for a while before accepted employment at a small PR firm in Chicago that serviced a wide variety of clients, from restaurant chefs to hospitality entities to lawyers.

This experience served as an excellent entry point into Jaffe Associates, the PR firm based

in Washington, DC that had done the first real display advertisement for a defense firm. "I've still never seen a better campaign than that one," John reminisces of the spread that first earned Jaffe a name for itself in the legal world. John chose to transition over to Jaffe because he had enjoyed working with lawyers previously, and doing so enabled him to witness the incredible ballooning that transformed the industry soon thereafter. "It had only been legal to market for lawyers since the late 70's, and nobody actually did it until the mid 80's. I got into it around 1993, and I feel lucky that I got to watch the industry develop," he reports.

John eventually left Jaffe along with one other employee and helped him found a crisis communications litigation firm called Levick Strategic Communications. "I was a cocky kid who thought I was leaving Jaffe to be a founder," he laughs. "The problem was, I was a founder and not an owner." Being so close yet somehow far away from implementing his vision actually helped to cement that vision in John's mind. "I would think to myself what I would and wouldn't do the same if I was in charge," he recalls, creating a firmer framework for Hellerman Baretz Communications once it came into existence several years later.

The company currently draws the majority of its clients from the American Lawyer-200, a list of the two hundred largest law firms in the country. Of that list, John has worked for about eighty firms, or 60% of the top 100, earning him a solid reputation amongst the community. The company currently has ten employees and has been on the Inc 5000 list for three consecutive years now. They've also maintained a growth rate of 28 percent over the past decade, with employee growth trailing that at ten percent. John's task force thus consists of several senior people and a team of primarily younger employees, whom he enjoys mentoring and who pick up their skills exceptionally quickly through the company's strong protocols and service checklists.

But what exactly makes John's vision so unique and Hellerman Baretz Communications, in turn, so successful? The singularity of his design draws in large part from the surprisingly fresh and sincere perspective on his industry he's cultivated over the years. "Networking never appealed to me," says John. "I don't want to represent people based on who they know. For me, marketing is more substantive—it's about relationship building.

I help my client enrich a relationship by generating content they can share when they're talking to someone so they don't come up empty handed." Furthermore, for Hellerman Baretz Communications, it's about advocacy. "We help our clients influence a discussion, promoting ideas and solutions instead of just their expertise." Finally, John believes in the importance of lending a creative element to his products despite a certain lack of emphasis on creativity in the legal field. Though this personal touch may go unnoticed by his clients, it is likely that the clients of his clients don't miss it.

The consistent theme permeating John's story, then, is strategy. Much of his success stems from maintaining a strategic mindset as a default way of thinking rather than a tool utilized only in obvious situations. Consider, for example, his utilization of a team retreat he participated in just after being hired at Jaffe. Essentially his first experience in a real corporate environment, John identified five of his 20 colleagues to be real movers and shakers. "I then made myself a mental note that if one of those five ever came looking for something from me, I would drop everything and make sure it got done," John explains. "They had influence. They had an air about them. And it's this kind of person you want giving high recommendations about you."

Consequently, John's primary piece of advice to a young entrepreneur entering the business world today revolves around the importance of setting one's self apart. "Don't be average," he instructs. "It doesn't take much to be above average. There's a difference between book smart and business smart, so figure out which one will take you farther and focus on that." John himself looks more for individuals who exhibit real world, applicable reasoning skills coupled with curiosity, brightness, and a willingness to trust, absorb, and grow. "Once you've got the job," says John, "make yourself invaluable—just dazzle. When you're invaluable, you call the shots." And of course, each of these tenets is only leant more value through the ability to operate with the end goal in mind, allowing one to proactively adjust their gait to the bold yet rational strides it takes to get there.

– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).