

SABRINA HORN

MAKE IT, DON'T



FAKE IT

LEADING WITH
AUTHENTICITY FOR REAL
BUSINESS SUCCESS

Foreword by Geoffrey A. Moore
Bestselling Author of *Crossing The Chasm*

More Praise for *Make It, Don't Fake It*

“Sabrina shares her insights and wisdom gleaned from years of working with tech executives, venture capitalists, and influencers about how doing the right thing results in the right thing to do. In *Make It, Don't Fake It*, Sabrina shows us that faking it is for losers. Learn how to make it with ethics, passion, confidence, pride, and resilience.”

—**Andy Cunningham, Steve Jobs's publicist, bestselling author of *Get to Aha!*, and CEO, Cunningham Collective**

“In the 1990s, Sabrina became a valued extension of the PeopleSoft team at a time when core values and beliefs were a novel concept. She kept pace with us as we adapted our core values to navigate PeopleSoft through high growth, bringing a new technology (client/server) to market, and an initial public offering. We could always count on her honesty, candor, and creativity, and, quite simply, we liked and trusted her. This book shows why. She approaches business and life from an integrity-first perspective and ‘keeps things real’—a strategy that I believe is fundamental to building successful and enduring products and companies.”

—**Dave Duffield, founder of PeopleSoft, Workday, and Ridgeline**

“Whether you are a first-time entrepreneur or a seasoned executive, *Make It, Don't Fake It* is an essential guide for leading with purpose and integrity. There are no ‘growth hacks’ or shortcuts to success. Sabrina delivers a compelling message at a critical time.”

—**Jay Fulcher, Chairman and CEO, Zenefits**

“This is a no-nonsense, straightforward guide to succeeding in business as well as life. Sabrina's insightful, commonsense approach to success has led her to it time and time again. Her book is a road map from which all can learn and apply to their lives!”

—**David J. Moore, founder, 24/7 Real Media; former President, WPP Digital; Chairman, IAB; and cofounder and CEO, BritePool**

“Sabrina Horn's *Make It, Don't Fake It*, loaded with gems of leadership and stories of her personal growth as founder and CEO, is a *required and meaningful primer* for both budding and experienced leaders. Her emphasis on transparency, values, and culture is interwoven throughout. The impact this emphasis had on her decisions when the chips were down or up is as clear a lesson as any leader

or CEO should think about and implement. Refreshing to me were the stories of failure, what they meant, and how she rebounded. Her practical advice is first rate and should be taught in business schools everywhere. I've known Sabrina for thirty years, and this book is a marvelous testament to her mission and to her life as a successful businesswoman."

—Ray Rothrock, venture capitalist, board member, CEO, and philanthropist

"Sabrina Horn offers up a pragmatic real-world approach for today's business leaders, which will increase their probability of success in navigating the complex labyrinth that will be required to achieve one's goals."

—Peter Sobiloff, Managing Director, Insight Partners

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BK

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

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For Grace and Christina

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FOREWORD

In 1991, **Sabrina Horn** and I both left well-established high-tech PR firms to hang out our own shingles, and we both had enough success to establish full-fledged consulting firms—The Horn Group and The Chasm Group, respectively. We also spent most of that decade interoperating and supporting each other during a major expansion of the high-tech sector, driven largely by the enterprises we were both targeting as customers. At the same time, Horn Group was instrumental in helping me launch a series of business books that drove business to our firm, while I was helpful to Sabrina in working through the strategy, positioning, and organizational challenges that come with scaling a fast-growing business. All this to say I am deeply familiar with the person, the events, and the challenges that are at the heart of the book you are about to read.

It is an important book for our times. Faking it is a loser's game. It may take a while to catch up with you, but when it does, the reckoning is brutal. Making it is a winner's game. It takes grit, it takes commitment, and yes, it takes some luck too, but most of all, win or lose, it is a game you can walk away from with your head held high. Life is not a dress rehearsal. There are no do-overs. It is important for us to be our best selves, to

bring our best to our endeavors, to serve the ones we care about as best we can. This is especially true for anyone who wants to found a company.

Peter Drucker famously said, “The purpose of a business is to create a customer.” How hard can that be? As you will see, it is not only hard, it is hard in different ways, depending on how big your company is, what opportunities are in play, and what headwinds or tailwinds are blowing at the time. Sabrina has been through the gamut, from start-up to exit into a large enterprise, from navigating the evolution of the PR industry to multiple cycles of the tech industry, and from counseling her clients into positions of market leadership, through crises, and finally to their own exits.

At every stage in this journey, there were good times and bad, but it is especially illuminating to learn how she faced up to the tough times, what they had to teach her, and what she had to be humble enough to learn from. If you are an entrepreneur, her journey is your journey, and you will have much to learn from it.

Entrepreneurship, through a series of highly visible success stories, has become a popular identity theme for a whole generation. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, the idea crossed the line between reality and fantasy. It became a pose, where anyone with a half-baked idea fancied themselves achieving instant success, pockets filled with easy money. This is “faking it,” pure and simple.

Fake it till you make it is a little more complicated. Entrepreneurs often do not know if they are making the right choices, and they do make commitments well before they have all the facts. But as Sabrina makes clear, that is not faking it, that is *risking it*. Faking it is when you shrink from risk and shirk responsibility from commitments if they don't work out. Entrepreneurs don't say, “It wasn't my fault”—not because they are nobler than the rest of us but because they want to learn

from their mistakes, and the only way to do that is to take responsibility for them.

At the end of the day, this is a book about integrity, not as a pose or a positioning statement but as a platform for creating customers and delivering value to them. It is about the intellectual and emotional challenges of leadership. Sabrina is particularly good at communicating her personal experience with these challenges, dealing squarely with both the highs and the lows. Her insights are worth taking to heart, and her courage is worth emulating.

Geoffrey Moore

Author of Crossing the Chasm and Zone to Win

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INTRODUCTION

“Making it” is at the heart of what drives every entrepreneur, executive, CEO, and founder. We strive to achieve success. For sure, none of us decides to start or lead a company with the intent to fail. Yet, in the course of running our companies, we may sabotage potential success by taking shortcuts, setting ourselves and our businesses back. Or worse, falling prey to a lapse of confidence, a lack of information, or a loss of stamina, we may stray from the trail we are blazing. Either way, we think maybe it’s easier to fake it, maybe just this once or maybe some more.

Of all the business and career memes to gain popularity, few have compromised integrity in business, leadership, and personal success more than the expression “Fake it till you make it.” With roots in well-intentioned early twentieth-century psychotherapy, this phrase has degenerated into a mantra that has encouraged and even normalized lying for the purpose of getting ahead. Now a product of modern American culture that rolls all too easily off the tongue, its mere existence tells you it’s okay to lie, from twisting the truth just a little to flagrantly deceiving others for personal gain.

Gender neutral, tempting both the young and the experienced, faking it has been baked into our society. This is unfortunately all too often apparent at the leadership level in business, where the fake it ethos can permeate entire corporations, putting millions of people and billions of dollars at risk.

Ponzi king Bernie Madoff and disgraced former Theranos CEO and tech queen Elizabeth Holmes are spectacular cases in point, but most fakery occurs in more routine and less egregious scenarios. Rising executives may feign their educational pedigree to snag a top job, entrepreneurs may exaggerate product capabilities to raise capital, salespeople overpromise to win their deals, and even seasoned CEOs sometimes look the other way when their backs are to the wall.

Let's face it, we've all probably faked it in some way, at some time, in the name of getting something we want to have or dodging something we want to avoid.

My mission in this book is to help people achieve business success with integrity by dismantling the fake it till you make it ethos, which only serves to corrupt integrity and hinder long-term success. While I wrote it for anyone who is or wants to be in a position of leadership, it will resonate most with entrepreneurs, founders, rising executives, and occupants of the C-suites of privately held companies. This group includes the ecosystem of investors, board members, advisors, and mentors who surround a business. It is also for the generation of career-ascending millennials and Gen Zers who have been so inculcated with the whole fake it mantra.

My motive and license are the unique double perspective I have as a founder and CEO of my own communications firm in the tech industry *and* as a strategic advisor to more than a thousand tech executives, venture capitalists, and influencers. I bring to the table twenty-five years of painful mistakes, gratifying successes, and useful lessons from running my company, as well as the insights from helping, typically from

behind the curtain, so many other leaders through their own, often dicey “situations.”

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

This is a book about ethics, passion, confidence, pride, resilience, commitment, and survival in a business context. It is about doing the right thing, which requires doing the right *things* the right *way*. This almost always means doing them the *hard* way. It is about becoming a leader, building a company culture and brand based on strong core values, managing both growth and decline, dealing with loneliness and with losing, facing a plethora of crises, and profitably selling your business.

It is about doing all this while staying grounded in reality, with integrity and some modicum of grace.

In this book, I present practical strategies, tools, ideas, and straight-up advice to protect you, as a leader, from faking it. I share how to recognize and avoid the damaging consequences of a range of opportunities to fake it that can arise in certain business situations. I offer frameworks and mental maps born out of decades of spinning a million plates to help you navigate complex business decisions and lead with greater confidence and resilience. Indeed, I have been careful not to confuse faking it with being efficient and pragmatic. Not every decision needs to turn into some deep internal moral debate.

This book is about achieving success—about “making it”—and knowing that you don’t need to fake it at all. The truth is, real leadership and business success cannot be faked, not in the long run, anyway. Faking it is never sustainable. After a while—in a few minutes, weeks, or decades—the fraud falls apart. The employer will uncover the lies in the résumé, the investor will discover that the entrepreneur’s technology doesn’t perform as specified, the customer will find out that the salesperson’s product doesn’t deliver as promised. What was meant to be a triumph becomes a defeat.

A QUICK HISTORY

If faking it is so futile, why did it gain such popular acceptance?

The closest thing to a birth certificate for the fake it mantra/meme is a February 1, 1973, document from the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit denying an appeal of a Securities and Exchange Commission injunction against Glenn W. Turner Enterprises. The specific Turner company, called Dare to Be Great, was operating an illegal pyramid scheme in which prospects were persuaded to buy phony self-improvement classes called “Adventures.” Once they became customers, these same people were instructed to sell to others the very same classes they had bought, thereby perpetuating the scheme. They were told to say that Dare to Be Great had made them rich. Of course, it had done no such thing, and they were instructed to lie—that is, to just “fake it till you make it.”¹ The phrase is cited, word for word, in the appellate court’s decision, probably being its first appearance in print.

There also are aspects of fake it till you make it—but not the phrase itself—rooted in psychology. During the 1920s, Austrian physician and psychotherapist Alfred Adler introduced a technique he called “acting as if” to speed up the process of psychotherapy. Adler encouraged patients to simply practice alternatives to their dysfunctional behaviors, telling them to “act as if” they were the person they wanted to be by imagining and then practicing those behaviors. His insights have been incorporated into modern cognitive behavioral therapy, which uses a similar approach and helps people suffering from depression and anxiety.

Science supports faking it till you make it, but only to a point. For Adler, “acting as if” was not proposed as a cure for mental illness. It was just a sort of therapeutic kick-start *toward* a cure. The same is true of today’s cognitive behavioral therapy. Finding alternatives to dysfunctional behavior and practicing them are steps *toward* changing thoughts and feelings. They are a means, not an end.

You don't have to look far to find current pop psychology versions of Adler's "as if." Take Amy Cuddy, a former Harvard social psychologist who became a minor pop culture sensation with a 2012 TED talk that promoted her theory (developed with fellow psychologist Dana R. Carney) of "power posing."² The idea is that if you assume a body posture you associate with being powerful, you quite literally position yourself to think, feel, and behave in more assertive ways. As she said in her talk, "Fake it till you *become* it." In 2016, Carney abandoned the theory, although Cuddy (as of this writing) continues to assert that "posture feed-back" can at least make people feel more powerful.³

To give Cuddy her due, she is by no means suggesting that we fake it at someone else's expense, as in perpetrating a fraud. Her aim is to use posture as a way to heighten personal feelings of self-confidence. While the theory may be questionable, the motive is blameless. After all, building self-confidence is both therapeutic and liberating.

Yet the phrase "Fake it till you make it" has become irretrievably tainted, having been mindlessly propagated and supercharged through social media and then further mutated with overuse. In 2008, *Faking It: How to Seem Like a Better Person Without Actually Improving Yourself* was published as a parody by authors billed as "the writers of CollegeHumor.com." There was even a TV series in 2010 called *Fake It Til You Make It*, which made it through eight episodes of people faking each other out before it was canceled.

As a meme, the concept has crossed the bright red line. "Acting as if" to innocently build one's confidence has turned into faking it by exaggerating, minimizing, or otherwise fabricating the truth at the expense of others. It is so commonplace, in both our personal and our professional lives, that we've become numb to it. It has become acceptable advice as a means to make it—to achieve success—and most unfortunately, as a really bad excuse for bad leadership.

WHY SHOULD YOU LISTEN TO ME?

I wrote this book from a unique dual perspective, as a woman who learned how to be a leader of her own company *and* as someone who has helped thousands of other leaders manage through the good, the bad, and the sticky. For a quarter century, I was the founder and CEO of Horn Group, a public relations and marketing communications agency in the tech industry.

Whoa. I can see those eyebrows rising. *Isn't PR all about the art of spin? And if spin isn't fakery, it certainly is a second cousin.*

I get it. You may think that the idea of a PR person dispensing advice on integrity seems, to put it politely, unconventional, unexpected, and more frankly, unreal. But the truth is that being a PR pro means being a crusader *against* faking it. It has put me here to tell you that the only way to make it is not to fake it at all.

Done right, public relations has nothing to do with spin, a proverbial four-letter word in the biz. Indeed, there is a big difference in intent between misleading people by making something look better than it really is and simply bringing to life what is most compelling about it for the purpose of earning attention, interest, and trust. The best PR works to get to the truth, sets and resets expectations based on the truth, and communicates vital truths at the right time, in the right way, and to the right audiences. It helps CEOs and their companies behave and communicate more responsibly. The best PR *people* make themselves indispensable by becoming business experts who have communications expertise.

As my mentor Dr. Otto Lerbinger, professor emeritus of public relations at Boston University, taught in his classes, “Public relations seeks to understand what all the stakeholders of an organization want, need, and believe. In turn, it informs corporate leadership on how to move forward, guiding strategic change or prompting further diligence. PR professionals should strive to be evangelists for understanding reality, finding the truth, and practicing ethical leadership.”

It is fair to say that this quest is also my personal mission, and one which I try to achieve through expert communications. Great communications makes relationships work, simplifies the complex, clarifies the obtuse, and stands for what is right. We certainly have all experienced what happens when there is a failure to communicate.

Being a communications professional and the CEO of a PR company was a heady responsibility, and one I took quite seriously. Our clients depended on us to help shape and tell their stories about technologies that had the power to change how people live and work. The media, with whom we forged confident, trusting relationships, relied on us for viable ideas and accurate information about our clients. The power of a single word often was the difference between creating clarity and adding to confusion—a lesson I have relearned in the writing of this book.

As a PR pro, I saw a lot. My company helped tech CEOs navigate the perils of board-level fraud and shady executive behavior, acquisitions canceled at the eleventh hour, security breaches, and products that failed in mission-critical environments. We kept *them* from faking it by getting to the truth and by facing the harsh realities that had to be confronted to find a path forward. Sometimes we turned prospective clients away or rejected what they proposed because what they stood for or what they wanted us to do was untrue, unethical, unrealistic, or simply crazy. *We* did not want to be complicit in *their* fakery.

My firm also facilitated much positive transformation in the tech industry, bringing breakthrough technologies to market, creating new product categories, and shaping the industry. We were change agents. We made technology understandable, acceptable, and even embraceable.

As a CEO of my own company, I managed through periods of warp-speed growth and devastating market contraction. I learned on the job how to become a leader by navigating almost