



Book How Did I Get Here?

The Ascent of an Unlikely CEO

Tony Hawk and Pat Hawk
Wiley, 2010

Recommendation

Trust famous professional skateboarder Tony Hawk to take you on a zooming journey in this autobiographical spin that whirls from his first wheels to his chief executive desk. He discusses his background through colorful personal experiences and offers business advice on “how to sell celebrity...without selling out.” Hawk peppers his book with amusing short stories and email snippets from both ardent enthusiasts and ranting critics. His casual, honest, good-humored personality spills onto the page, but expect to be inspired rather than educated. Although some of his career advice seems far off or irrelevant for the typical entrepreneur, his book certainly contains useful marketing advice. *BooksInShort* applauds Hawk’s energized spirit and recommends his saga to advertising managers, marketing directors, individuals with avant-garde dreams of reaching the top, and, of course, adrenaline junkies – because it’s not just a read, it’s a ride.

Take-Aways

- Take what you love to do, master it and bring it to a new level.
- Champion skateboarder Tony Hawk formed his first companies – Birdhouse Projects and Blitz Distribution – with fellow rider Per Welinder.
- Later, Hawk founded Hawk Clothing. In 1995, when its production team couldn’t keep up with demand, he licensed the brand to Quiksilver.
- Video game developer and publisher Activision released nine editions of Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater, “the best selling action-sports franchise of all time.”
- Hawk joins only marketing efforts where he helps set the direction and OKs the graphics.
- The Tony Hawk Brand Summit is an annual convention that brings his licensees and sponsors together to interact and improve Hawk promotions.
- Blitz Distribution’s financial woes ended Hawk and Welinder’s 15-year partnership.
- Twitter offered free promotion, boosted public response and expanded Hawk’s fan base.
- The Tony Hawk Foundation has built skateparks in poor neighborhoods in 49 US states.
- Hawk tells entrepreneurs: Follow your passion, hone your craft, keep improving, listen to both sides, stay humble, persist and, when you succeed, give to others.

Summary

Boarding First Class: A Skateboarder Amid the Suits

Tony Hawk has defined and refined professional skateboarding. Yet, despite his celebrity status, he still gets demeaning frowns from suits in first class when he boards a flight holding a skateboard. Just how did Hawk succeed as an extreme athlete and businessman? He had a strong support network: His parents had little money, but they made sure he could grasp any opportunities. His siblings helped propel his career and joined his entrepreneurial team. For those who dream of going pro in unconventional fields, Hawk offers some advice:

- **Let passion guide you** – Ignore naysayers. “Don’t rebel for rebellion’s sake,” but also don’t let authority figures prescribe your future.
- **Hone your craft** – Put in sweat and overtime. “Take pride in being defined as obsessive.”
- **One-up yourself** – Once you’re an expert, become an inventor. Create something others marvel at and try to imitate. Don’t become satisfied; that leads to stagnation.
- **Stay humble** – Salute the other prodigies in your field; “learn to admire rather than resent.” Listen to people from the new generation who are studying your craft.

- **Coach others** – “Find the kids who are doing what you did at that age...let them tell you what’s going on.” Mentor them since they’ll probably replace you one day.
- **Listen to both sides of every business deal** – To build profits while “staying true to your art...clear your mind and trust your gut.” Have lawyers ready when you take risks.
- **Donate** – “If you get some extra money in your pocket, give back.”
- **Persist** – Always keep exercising your passion.

Starting a Brand and “Borrowing” Logos

During Tony Hawk’s career, he often was “in the right place at the right time.” He entered the skateboarding scene at age nine. There was a good skatepark close to his neighborhood where he could practice, and his parents supported his passion. The fad exploded in the early 1980s, just as he turned pro at 14. By 16, he was earning more than his high school teachers. Over the next few years, money rolled in from royalty checks and contest prizes, but the skateboarding craze was dwindling. In 1991, to boost the trend, Hawk and skateboarder Per Welinder established the Birdhouse Projects brand and gathered an entourage of accomplished skaters. The start-up didn’t thrive until the 1995 debut of ESPN’s X Games (an extreme sports showdown).

“Never get cocky about your professional success, because the good luck that got you there can run out fast.”

Hawk became well known when he won the X Games skateboarding championship. Birdhouse’s sales skyrocketed, and the partners launched other brands, including Blitz, their distribution arm. They started the Hawk Clothing line for kids in 1998. Hawk’s children grew up in the surf-skate culture and he wanted to dress them “to look like mini-rippers,” but at the time, no market existed for skater-themed toddler clothes. Established companies feared compromising their “hypercool teenage customers” by catering to “munchkins whose favorite thing to do with a skateboard was turn it upside down and spin the wheels.” But then, Hawk often broke the rules. His company put “repurposed” corporate logos on its merchandise and “received a lot of terse cease-and-desist letters,” mostly after the firm had “already ceased and desisted.” He ran into similar legal issues when he used unlicensed music and video on his skate tapes, some of which he shipped and had to recall. If you could be sued, advises Hawk, “Spend what it takes to hire the best lawyers.”

Virtual Skateboarding

Hawk proposed a video game depicting an authentic skater lifestyle, with real tricks, players, clothing and punk rock music. Producers turned it down, believing that skateboarding wasn’t popular enough, but video game developer and publisher Activision took the bait and offered a one-time buyout for the use of Hawk’s name and image on the game. He declined the hefty sum and opted for royalty payments. This was, he says, “the best financial decision I’ve ever made.” Activision released *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater* in 1999, and, Hawk says, “within two years, I’d made 10 times their initial offer.” Activision released a new edition of the game annually for nine years. It became one of the highest-grossing video game series ever, selling seven million copies.

“I now make a very good living doing something I would gladly do for free.”

In 1999, Hawk landed his first 900 trick on the half pipe (a risky two and a half turns, high in mid-air). This helped turn the Tony Hawk brand into a mainstream name. Amid all the publicity, Hawk Clothing gained so much momentum that its staff couldn’t keep up with demand. Hawk licensed his name and brand to a larger firm, Quicksilver, which maintained the line and remained true to skateboarding’s image. The deal has served Hawk’s firm well, though he now asserts that you should never, under any circumstances, sell the rights to your name. Another nugget of advice about joining a licensing partnership: Go with the firm that “respects your expertise and will make judgments based on your suggestions.”

“The Million-Dollar Napkin”

Hawk had his most elaborate idea in 2001, when he sketched a plan for an ornate, arena-sized ramp system on a napkin. He wanted to create a show where fans could see top skateboarders outside the stress of athletic competition. The Boom Boom HuckJam tour was the product of that “million-dollar napkin” – the amount Hawk and his investors paid for the ramp’s construction. The US tour featured many famous skateboarders, and BMX and Motocross riders. The start-up was financially rough, but by tweaking the program and the marketing, Hawk and his backers recovered their funding, and HuckJam became profitable. When you have ideas, Hawk advises, write them down, evaluate what your vision entails, then seek backing and a trustworthy team.

“I wouldn’t have minded the financial stress – in fact, part of me embraced the way the skate recession had weeded out the wannabes.”

HuckJam’s athletes endured all sorts of sporting accidents, some with substantial injuries. Sponsors’ embarrassing demands made audiences and crewmembers cringe. A different kind of slam hit the team on its second tour, leaving Hawk infuriated: BMX star Dave Mirra completed the season practice, collected rehearsal wages and bailed out the day before the tour opened to host an MTV reality show. Furious, Hawk replaced him with Dennis McCoy, who learned the routines from videos on the flight over and had one day to practice on the real ramps. McCoy, who integrated seamlessly, is still one of HuckJam’s central athletes.

Stick to What You Know

Hawk became a pioneer at selling skateboarding culture. Although he has an immense talent for manifesting ideas, he’s also had a string of ventures that ended in the trashcan and lightened his wallet. The prime example was the dissolution of his 15-year business partnership with Per Welinder and the end of Blitz Distribution. They had business under control in 2002, so they entered the upscale denim market with surfer and designer Jade Howe. The high-end product line required handcrafted production and custom pattern designers as opposed to Hawk’s simple, ready-made T-shirts with silkscreen graphics. The idea was good and it sold, but the income never covered the costs. Hawk and Welinder had invested in a business sector they didn’t know during a plummeting economy. The venture ruined Blitz’s profits and reserves. Hawk sold his half of Blitz to Welinder and bought full ownership of their other company, Birdhouse.

“When I’m torn between business deals, I always seem to pick the one that offers the best chance for me and my friends to skate.”

On the flip side, Hawk took a blind leap into the BMX bike business with the HuckJam brand. He was opposed to the idea at first because he didn't want his extreme sports comrades to think he was just capitalizing on his name. From past experience, he knew that when you don't know the business, you should ask the experts. HuckJam hired BMX pro Mike "Rooflop" Escamilla as the primary consultant for design and production. The HuckJam bike's sales soared.

Twitter Me This, Twitter Me That

Originally, skateboarders released videos of their rides to increase their popularity with their fans. Nowadays, free videos are ubiquitous on the Internet. Thus, celebrity home pages have lost their appeal, and visitor counts have fallen. Instead, celebrities tweet to garner attention and connect with fans. The microblogging site, Twitter, revolutionized the way people communicate. Celebrities now can link directly to their fans in an ongoing conversation.

"I've lost teeth, endured concussions, fractured my pelvis and flayed the skin off my shins so many times that doctors think I'm a burn victim. But I still try to skate everyday."

In 2009, curious about Twitter's viral capabilities, Hawk conjured up a hide-and-seek scenario for a free skateboard. He hid a skateboard and tweeted its location to the public. In just 20 minutes, he received a thank-you message and photo of a girl holding the board. His Twitter following surged by the thousands as a result, which inspired him to undertake a second Twitter experiment – a national Easter Hunt. Hawk shipped Birdhouse Skateboards to contacts across the US who secretly stashed them in their cities. Tweets went out, the hunt was on and eager followers quickly found the boards. The hunt garnered major news coverage, proving how fast Twitter buzz spreads. Subsequently, the hunt went global, this time infused with sequential riddles leading to multiple locations and, finally, the prize; it was a sensation. After 11 months, Hawk's following jumped to more than two million. Twitter may be an easy path to great promotion, but, Hawk advises, "Don't abuse it, use it to entertain and engage your followers."

"Once you find your passion, run with it."

Not all Internet followers are fans. In 2009, after Hawk met with President Barack Obama for a Father's Day event, a photo appeared on Twitter of Hawk skateboarding in a suit down a White House hallway, instantly igniting a media frenzy. Conservatives lividly lambasted him for despoiling a sacred monument. Hawk highlighted that workers push heavy metal carts down the halls daily, and he reminded his opponents that President George W. Bush liked bowling there, too. Whether you use Twitter to defend yourself or to amuse your fans, it has considerable power.

If You Build It, They Will Skate

Once Hawk established a financially stable career, he donated to many children's causes, including the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Andre Agassi's Grand Slam for Children, Sport for a Good Foundation, and Right to Play. He and his siblings created the Tony Hawk Foundation in 2001 to "help build skateparks in low-income areas." Hawk received donations from his sponsors and did TV appearances, game shows and fundraisers to support the project, which has helped fund 350 new parks in 49 states ("time to step up, Connecticut"), given thousands in grants, and provided information "to anyone grappling with the painful logistics of getting a skatepark built." Hawk wants kids to see that when they work with city officials, make reasonable requests, offer valid arguments and earn community support, they can make a skatepark happen.

Marketing Ingredients

A lot goes into "getting the buzz out." Consider these Hawk-tested marketing ideas:

- **Creative control** – As the endorser, make sure you and your style team contribute to the advertising campaign so that your image remains genuine and not "cheesy." Guide advertising directors in the right direction. To maintain authenticity, participate only in campaigns that recognize your expertise and respect your involvement. Hawk learned this lesson when he agreed to promote a popular candy in a commercial. He arrived on a set full of extras dressed in ridiculous costumes matching the candy design. He immediately asked to bring in his own stylist to fit them out with bona fide skate gear. The directors agreed, the ad was a hit, and Hawk saved himself and the advertiser from embarrassment. Directors must seek their endorser's advice. The public easily detects phony pretense.
- **The signature stamp** – If you sell your name or image, require everyone to use your single distinct graphic to represent you or your company. Too many renditions of a name seem second rate. Various vendors featured the HuckJam logo on a range of unrelated merchandise such as backpacks, T-shirts, school supplies and kids' bedding. McDonald's sold 22 million Happy Meals in 2005 by promoting HuckJam inspired toys. Standardizing a logo across markets benefits every merchandiser.
- **"The Tony Hawk Brand Summit"** – Hawk holds an annual event at the Hawk headquarters in California for representatives from all his partnerships – local, national and international. He gives a skate demo and displays their work to show how each one uses him as an endorser. Occasionally this leads to co-marketing campaigns where two independent sponsors use the Hawk brand as a link; for example, Jeep partnered with Sirius Radio, and *Rolling Stone* magazine printed Quiksilver ads. Hawk initiates this convention for his sponsors so each industry can benefit, including his own.

About the Authors

Famous skateboarder **Tony Hawk** founded and leads Tony Hawk, Inc. and the Tony Hawk Foundation.
