

What's to Lose? Just Ask

Leave Your Comfort Zone
for Bold Requests

BY BOB REISS



I truly believe that people must periodically step outside of their comfort zone to grow as a company and a person. In fact, once you start to do it, you will discover that your comfort zone expands. Doing this will empower you to request bold things that may elicit comments from your peers and associates like “outrageous, overreach, impossible.” You can overcome these naysayers and your own inclination of fearing failure by your preparation for this bold request, which I like to call *Just Ask*. Acquiring intense knowledge of the person you are asking and their company, industry, and needs are what I mean by preparation. This knowledge will allow you to offer something of value to induce the granting of your bold request.



Be aware that many people won't Just Ask because they fear the answer will be no.

Just asking is a mental attribute that costs nothing and is thus a big Bootstrapping tip. I realize it is a difficult thing for many to do. However, it can be of great value for those starting a business, managing a business, including a home-grown one, and growing a business. It should be included in every entrepreneur's tool kit regardless of the size of their business venture.

A lot of this preparation can be done through using technology like Google, social media, trade publications, annual reports, and other sources of information related to the subject. Another major approach to achieving your Just Ask is through trusting relationships, or third parties who know your target subject. (As an aside, my observation is more and more people rely on technology today at the expense of building relationships. You will see, as I offer examples of successful Just Ask, many were achieved through human relationships.)

The combination of relationships and technology can be awesome. Also, Just Ask can be classified as a Bootstrapping tool as it costs nothing. Be aware that many people won't Just Ask because they fear the answer will be no. This is not a failure but a blow to their ego. They need to get over this as the no prepares you for the next ask plus the giver of the no respects the asker for their courage and preparation. There are times when Just Asking someone you have a good relationship with for something bold without offering anything of value or doing any preparation will get your ask granted. The Book of the Month story illustrates this. Last, *nothing is lost* — certainly not money.

I believe ideas are best remembered and understood with a related story to enforce them. Here are some personal real life stories of mine where much was accomplished by simply *Just Asking*.

TV Guide

✓ **THE ASK:** A license for a TV Guide Trivia Game and free full-page ads in *TV Guide* worth \$85,000 each to compete against Trivial Pursuit. No guarantee of royalties or advance payments.

✓ **Circumstance:** R&R was a two-person company unknown to *TV Guide*, which was a household name in the magazine industry with the second highest circulation of all magazines. No prior connections to them.

✓ The Knowledge:

- Magazines don't sell all their ad space and they can't make up the unsold ads.
- They never did any royalty agreements before.
- They were not very successful in selling upscale retailers.
- They were a private company.

✓ **The Offer:** Increased royalties for free ads to help build their brand in all retail outlets. In the ads, list the names of upscale retailers to whom they were trying unsuccessfully to sell advertising. No royalty guarantee or up front payment.

✓ **The Result:** The game was a success with everything being outsourced. More than 580,000 games were sold at \$12.50 each, generating a \$3,000,000 profit on \$7,500,000 in sales. The company ceased operations after nine months as 80 different Trivia games hit the market, and Trivial Pursuit figured out how to produce to their high demand. They asked R&R to draw up the royalty agreement. They gave us five free full-page ads. We closed the company in less than one year because of the oversaturation of product in the market — over 80 trivia games existed at year-end.

Magic Kits

✓ **THE ASK:** Magicians to demonstrate for one week in J.C. Penney stores around the country for free.

✓ **Circumstance:** Reiss Games Magic Line had been successfully introduced to J.C. Penney the year before. Live demos in stores were in response to aggressive requests by Penney buyer. Approached the president of the Society of American Magicians (10,000 members) to have members demo magic in Penney stores free of charge during National Magic Week in October when magicians perform in hospitals, nursing homes, etc. to perpetuate the art of magic. He suggested I put my proposal to the magicians at their national conference in Miami Beach in February.

✓ The Knowledge:

- Very few magicians made a good living at it.
- Magicians love applause and recognition.
- National Magic Week was important to the Society of American Magicians, but the public was unaware of its existence.

✓ **The Offer:** Expose magic to bigger audiences during

National Magic Week. Penney stores would run local newspaper ads with the magician's name and picture in the ad.

✓ **The Result:** After speaking to the Society of American Magicians, we had magicians queuing up to sign on to demo magic free of charge. The promotion was very successful for all parties, and we cemented our relationship with the Penney buyer and their management while building a strong relationship with magicians in the country.

Rubiks Cube Solution Books

✓ **THE ASK:** Publisher to sell me their best-selling book for sale to the toy industry at less than half the price they sell their biggest customers. Also to drop ship under my label to my customers.

✓ **Circumstance:** Discovered from the Macy buyer, who bought for the toy and book departments, that for every three Rubik Cubes sold, they sold two solution books when the books were displayed in the toy department adjacent to the Cubes.

✓ **The Knowledge:**

- Books are sold to retailers on a guaranteed sale, and a high percentage are returned.
- Publishers have no relationships with toy retailers.
- Cost of printing books greatly diminishes with volume.

✓ **The Offer:** Bought all books on final sale in contrast

to book buyers who buy for their stores on consignment. No returns on my part. Helped bring their cost of books down as they combined their print runs with ours. Introduced their books to a new channel of distribution — Toys. We would place minimum orders for 1,000 books for them to drop ship to our customers.

✓ **The Result:** We were successful in selling more than 600,000 books in a six-month period. Further, publishers began to approach us to sell their game and puzzle books to the toy department on a similar arrangement. We never touched the books. We found a distributor to whom we passed on all orders of under 1000 books.

Valdawn Watches

✓ **THE ASK:** Met with mail order customer for brainstorming session to explore new ideas and their needs. Out of this came fact that 20 percent of the items they sell are cat-related and they would like us to develop cat items for mail order selling.

✓ **Circumstance:** These one-day brainstorming sessions, which include buyers, management, and creative people, are great to enhance customer relationships, understand customer needs and develop products they can sell successfully. Other industry suppliers rarely asked for these sessions.

✓ **The Knowledge:**

- Key customers welcome suppliers asking for a brainstorming session.





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These one-day brainstorming sessions ... are great to enhance customer relationships, understand customer needs and develop products they can sell successfully.

- Human nature tells you if you deliver on a customer's idea, they are very likely to buy your product that stems from their idea.

- ✓ **The Offer:** A new cat watch, which had a rotating disk with a mouse on it, and initially was only available to them.

- ✓ **The Result:** The watch was the best seller in the catalog at a high profit margin. Eventually, we sold the watch to other catalog customers with similar results, which led to the start of a watch company featuring rotating disk watches, which we built up to more than \$7,500,000 at high profits and sold after four years.

Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey License for Needlecraft

- ✓ **THE ASK:** 200 free tickets for their circus performances in major cities plus provide a clown make-up artist to apply make-up in retail store of my choice. A license to use their logo and art on needlework kits with no royalty guarantee.

- ✓ **Circumstance:** In studying the needlework industry after selling my sales rep company to a major needlework company, discovered that circus scenes were very good sellers. The industry was staid with no event promotions. Ringling performed in over 90 cities each year. The Ringling's marketing department's mission was to "put rear-ends in seats."

- ✓ **The Knowledge:**

- The circus culture is very different. Working for Ringling is not a job, but a fulltime family membership.
- They have two tours that work 11 months a year and perform in more than 90 U.S. cities a year.
- A very promotionally minded company focused on maximizing attendance.
- They do very little licensing.

- ✓ **The offer:** A major department store in each city would run an ad at their expense, advertising our circus needlework kits and prominently announcing the dates and place the circus would perform. They also would offer two free tickets to the first 100 people who bought a kit. They also invited customers to bring their kids to get clown face make up by one of Ringling's make-up artists.

- ✓ **The Result:** A very successful promotion in an industry devoid of them that built our reputation as an industry leader.

Magazine Picture Frames

- ✓ **THE ASK:** A license from *Time* magazine to sell picture frames titled Man of the Year, Woman of the Year, and Baby of the Year so that when the consumer put a picture in the frame, it would appear that the person was on the cover of *Time* with one of the three above designations. As part of the license agreement, *Time* would provide us with free ads where we could list retailers that were selling the frames. There would be no royalty guarantees or advances.

- ✓ **Circumstance:** I noticed that *Time* had been selling these frames in small black and white ads as a mail order item as filler ads when they were closing an edition and had unsold space. I had a prior relationship with the circulation manager of *Time* who told me these ads did well.

- ✓ **The Knowledge:**

- When thinking of potential customers, magazines think of impressions.
- They do very little licensing.
- Most often they do not sell all the available space in an issue of their magazine.

- ✓ **The Offer:** A license to sell these frames in major retailers in the US. The frames would then be prominently and permanently displayed in the home of the consumer

who bought them—a major brand builder for *Time*. It would also offer them incremental income. No minimum guarantee or advance on royalty. As part of the contract, the magazine gave us free ads where we listed prominent retailers who were buying the frames.

✓ **The Result:** The trade in every channel of distribution loved the idea and bought in. This led us to get other magazine frame licenses on the same basis with leaders in their genre like *Golf*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Field & Stream*, *Modern Bride*, *Bon Appetit*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Life*, and *Playboy*. I partnered with a frame company, and we sold around \$2,000,000 in initial orders with absolutely no reorders on an item that generated great trade enthusiasm but was a failure. We're not sure why but think it was because consumers thought the process was too complicated.

Getting a Watch Order From Wal-Mart

✓ **THE ASK:** An order from the Wal-Mart watch buyer for our cat and mouse watch, which was the first watch we marketed. Due to its phenomenal success, we started a watch company.

✓ **Circumstance:** I try to periodically visit stores that sell our products to talk with the sales clerks who are selling our wares. I ask them all kinds of questions like how can we get better display, their customer's comments about our watches, how can we improve our products re design, quality, etc., because our watch is so unique with its second hand being artwork tied into the picture on the face. On one particular day, I was doing this about 10:30 a.m. when the store is very quiet, and I asked if customers requested any of our specific watches—there were 200 unique designs at that moment. This clerk told me yes, that a few people asked for our cat and mouse watch. With this answer I visited four other Wal-Marts with the same question: are you getting any requests for our cat and mouse watch? The answer was yes in all cases. I then forwarded this information to the head Wal-Mart watch buyer, who I'm sure did her due diligence to see if my information was correct.

✓ **The Offer:** In spite of her state-of-the-art computer records, I was giving key information that the buyer could not get on her own for a proven product that she could sell.

✓ **The Result:** We received an order on our cat and mouse watch for all the Wal-Mart stores that sold well. We also reinforced our good reputation with Wal-Mart on our diligence and follow-through. Our service to them did not stop after we shipped their order. The final result: We sold our watch company after four years, and I moved to Florida. The United States is a great country.

Book of the Month Club

✓ **THE ASK:** Prepay the large opening order placed with us every year by five months. Our business was very seasonal. This helped our cash flow when we most needed it.

✓ **Circumstance:** Our company, Reiss Games, was a major U.S. player, marketing and selling adult games to department, specialty, gift stores, and the direct response industry. We had exceptional success in large bookstores in major cities. As a result, I approached Book of the Month Club in an effort to get them to test our games. A cold phone call to their executive vice president resulted in an appointment, which led to a mailing test that was wildly successful. This led to an ever-increasing business and strong relationships with their management team.

✓ **The Knowledge:**

- BOMC was a private company that dominated the book industry and had a small management team.
- Our games were the first non-book items they were successfully selling.
- In their normal business, they paid large money advance for books they wanted to introduce to consumers as their Book-of-the-Month selections, which were heavily promoted and ordered by users before publication.

✓ **The Offer:** At a dinner with three of their executives, I jokingly asked if they could help our cash flow by paying for their large initial fall games order when they initiated the order, which was usually five months in advance. We all chuckled and then proceeded to go watch our great Knick team win another game at Madison Square Garden. (Their greatness gradually declined to this day.)

✓ **The Result:** I received a phone call the next day from one of their vice presidents who said they discussed my ask of last night and would happily advance the money I requested. I think I hid my shock and casually asked when could I get it? Their answer was any time you want.

I jokingly asked if they could help our cash flow by paying for their large initial fall games order when they initiated the order....

My answer was how about now? When they said sure, I immediately left the office to grab a cab to their office. (Usually I walked there.)

✓ **The Result:** I gratefully accepted a check for over \$250,000, made my thank you's, stopped off at our bank next to the office for a happy deposit, and returned to work. We also continued to give them an exclusive on our games in the book club market.

Designers

✓ **THE ASK:** How to determine how designers got their ideas to better manage 25 of them who worked full-time for our company.

✓ **Circumstance:** Two years prior, my partner and I sold our sales rep company of 14 years, specializing in selling games to all channels of distribution nationally, to an American Stock Exchange Company manufacturing needlework products. The parent company, with a dominant brand name, got into financial trouble, and I was asked to be president of that division. One of our biggest expenses was the 25 designers who created three lines a year. I interviewed each designer separately and came away with two overriding facts:

- They had zero parameters for direction in the subjects of their designs, which resulted in major overlap of designs.
- Almost all of them got their ideas from visiting retail stores and studying their assortments of greeting cards.

✓ **The Knowledge:**

- Designers work better with direction and transparency but with freedom to create and execute without being micromanaged.

- How greeting card companies work and a strong relationship with one of the biggest ones through successfully licensing one of their major characters.

✓ **The Offer:** Specific instructions of design subjects for every designer with freedom to create their own designs. All appreciated this direction as they now knew their creations had a much higher chance of making it into production and onto retailers' shelves.

✓ **The Result:** We became much more design efficient and were able to cut design costs in half—with more creativity—and cut designer payroll by more than 50 percent. We also went to a major greeting card company to learn about their best selling cards by category and licensed their best selling designs at a very low royalty with no guarantees.

MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at mana@manaonline.org.

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