

With a little luck

Successful entrepreneurs share how they capitalised on lucky breaks



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BY RACHEL HALLIWELL

IT'S EASY to see people get a lucky break and assume that good fortune simply fell into their lap. But according to Dr David Holmes, senior psychologist at Manchester Metropolitan University, "it's all about how you approach life. Lucky people tend to be open to new ideas and seize opportunities as soon as they come their way, refusing to give up when things get tough." A big part of being able to make good on a lucky break is being prepared to act when the opportunity presents itself.

The following stories of how five successful entrepreneurs made good luck work for them offer lots of clues on how to make good on your next lucky break.

My lucky break came five years ago, when an agent had my debut novel, *Poppy Day* (Head of Zeus, 2012), put into her hand by someone I didn't even know. I'd sent this book out to 80 agents and publishers, and every one of them rejected it.

Instead of giving up, I self-published, determined to at least get it out there. Somehow, the agent ended up having drinks with someone who had bought my book and thought it was great. He had it on him and urged her to read it.



AMANDA PROWSE
International best-selling author (amandaprowse.org)

She did. She loved it. And then she tracked me down to a bookshop signing event, where she queued up with customers, asking me if she could represent me when she reached the front of the line.

Three days later she had secured me a publishing deal with an enormous advance.

Poppy Day has since sold 2.5 million copies, and the 17 titles I've written since earn me more than a million pounds a year. I was lucky, yes, but my determination to get my book out there is what made that luck happen in the first place.

In the late 1990s, I swapped my 9-to-5 job as a transport manager for the freedom of life selling rugs at a market stall.

My lucky break came almost a couple of years later when a fellow stallholder mentioned a new website that acted like an online marketplace, called eBay. I was sceptical—it was hard to imagine people paying for something they hadn't touched or seen with their own eyes. But I didn't want to dismiss it out of hand. I put up details of one rug, which sold within five minutes, setting me off on a business journey that



DANIEL PRENDERGAST
Manchester businessman and founder of *The Rug Seller* (therugseller.co.uk), a company specialising in selling rugs online.

today sees my company turning over around £3 million a year.

This was the early 2000s and online selling was in its infancy, but the speed at which that first carpet sold helped me see that the world was changing quickly. People's lives were getting busier, and being able to shop online would make life that bit easier.

I soon had my whole business online, making me a big player in what was then a relatively small marketplace very quickly. It's a move that has paid off ever since.

It was my open-mindedness to a suggestion that might just, no matter how far-fetched it seemed, help my business to grow that allowed me to turn that conversation into good fortune.

I've always been a big fan of the BBC show *Dragons' Den*, where entrepreneurs pitch for financial support and expertise from five of the country's most successful business minds. Getting invited on the show myself—via an initial email that looked on the face of it to be spam—provided the luckiest break of my business career.

A BBC researcher had tried one of our products—a natural coconut water drink—



JACOB THUNDILL
Founder of organic food brand *Cocofina* (cocofina.com).

and was impressed, so [he] got in touch via the email address printed on the packaging. I wasn't convinced this was a genuine approach, but I phoned the researcher and arranged a meeting to discuss things further at the broadcaster's offices. This ultimately led to me appearing on the show last August, immediately exposing my brand to 4 million TV viewers.

Since then our turnover has doubled—we expect it to approach £4 million by the end of this financial year.

It's all very well being on the receiving end of good luck, but to make it work you have to grab it with both hands. I was sent an email that I could so easily have ignored, but I knew that if it wasn't a scam then it could pay dividends.

I investigated, discovered I wasn't being conned and made the opportunity work for me. Luck is just half the equation—the rest is knowing what to do with it.

In 1993 I was on a work placement in a hotel while I studied for a hospitality qualification. Obsessed with providing high standards of customer care, I applied the concept of under-promising and over-delivering to great effect.

One guest, over from America, was so impressed he later sent me an enormous box of goodies to say thank-you for looking after him.

In it were CDs, concert tickets, American sports paraphernalia—as well as what on the face of it was a bizarre gift for a 19-year-old: a set of the first 10 Beanie Babies. He told me to put them away somewhere safe, insisting “one day these will be the biggest toy in the world.”

I did just that and got on with my life—progressing to become manager of a successful hotel. In 1995 he got back in touch and told me to buy every Beanie toy I could get my hands on; they were becoming huge in America and were about to explode onto the British market.

Just a few months later his prediction came true, and I was in a position to make a small fortune dealing in these highly collectable toys. In one incredible transaction, I was paid £5,000 for something I'd bought for £3.50.

That lucky break—which came as a direct result of doing my job to exacting standards—lit an entrepreneurial flame that inspired me to go out on my own and



GRAHAM SCOTT

ANDREW SCOTT

Founder of Victus Consultancy (victusconsultancy.co.uk), a hospitality and catering company that gives guidance and support to new and established businesses in the hospitality industry.

become a businessman. Today I own a restaurant, a coffee shop and an outdoor catering firm, as well as being a business consultant for the hospitality industry.



It was devastating to be made redundant, but losing my job in senior management at a multinational firm after I had my son nine years ago ended up being my luckiest break. The solid reputation I'd built up served me well: an old client recommended me on a freelance basis to a company that needed help delivering a project.

This led to me attending a trade exhibition, where I was invited to run the public relations for a stationery industry trade show. It was there that one lucky break seemed to follow another, as various company bosses, impressed by my work at this event, asked me to help their businesses to grow.

I got chatting to the CEO of [iconic pen manufacturer] Sheaffer Pen, and after a lengthy conversation won that account too, all thanks to being in the right place at the right time. On my journey home from London, back to my kitchen-table business, I marvelled how, in just one day, I'd drummed up so much business that I needed to recruit staff and rent an office.

If I'd been less resilient I might have crumbled after losing my job; instead, I brushed myself down and carried on doing the job I knew I was good at and great luck came my way. My company now does the public relations for some of the world's leading manufacturers, and I've yet to look back. **■**



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HELPFUL WEBSITES

- **Smallbusiness.co.uk**, a portal for business-led articles offering advice and information to businesses.
- **Greatbusiness.gov.uk**, an HM Government website offering support, advice and inspiration.
- **Fsb.org.uk**, the Federation of Small Businesses, a not-for-profit organisation offering advice, financial expertise and support.—RH

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