A Day in the Whirlwind Life of Doris Drucker

By Donna J. Abernathy

She speaks three languages, has a master's degree in physics, and has worked as a technical market researcher, an inventor, and a patent agent. She has raised four children, penned articles for business magazines, and hiked to the 15,000-foot base camp of Mount Everest.

Well, Mount Everest was at age 69. And, at 80-plus, she's the founder and CEO of a two-year-old company, RSQ, LLC. Doris Drucker means business.

This modern-day senior doesn't waste much time pondering gender and age stereotypes. But when she does encounter that sort of negativity, she just brushes it off. What she *does* think about is growing her business.

Drucker says that starting a business at 80 is no different from starting one at any other age. Her advice for would-be entrepreneurs: "Every new enterprise costs three times as much and takes three times longer to build up than you projected. You need financial support to pay for your living costs while you wait for the profit to materialize, and emotional support to help you over the rejections and the discouragement that are part and parcel of a new venture. Besides, you need good health, a lot of energy, persistence, and an optimistic outlook." Drucker knows firsthand how important a supportive family can be. Her husband—Peter Drucker, the fountainhead of modern management—is one of her biggest fans.

We all almost had a Drucker gadget in our kitchens. Drucker's first invention was a device similar to a microwave, but another inventor beat her to the patent office.

Nevertheless, life and inventions go on. Drucker and retired engineer Obie O'Brien started RSQ in 1996 to design and build a device that measures and displays voice-level changes. (RSQ is named after O'Brien's hometown of Rescue, California.) Their business plan consisted of three things: projected production costs, a selling price, and the number of monitors they'd have to sell to make a profit. Rather informal? Yes. Did it work for them? Yes again.

Seventy-five-year-old O'Brien built the prototypes, and he and Drucker showed the models to prospective buyers for their input. The duo incorporated changes until they had the product they envisioned. Then came the real product samples and countless trips to electronics shops and home improvement centers for parts. That took months—and deep pockets. Drucker and O'Brien had to locate an assembler, a circuit-board builder, and a layout designer to pitch in—all before they could place that first order for 100 units and get on with business.

Drucker wrestled with the trademark and patent applications, marketing brochures, product photos, and mailing permits. And she continues to handle all of the "administrivia." She says, "I'm the chief cook and bottle washer." But when there are hot

Have you ever wondered how an octogenarian entrepreneur spends her time? Buckle up.

production or marketing decisions, she consults with O'Brien, who lives about 500 miles away. Other than the two of them, the only other people directly involved in the business are a Webmaster who manages the product Website and occasional experts who help plan market strategy.

Drucker markets the voice monitor, called the Visivox, by herself. It's a 10-pound portable box that signals with multicolored lights when your voice volume changes. It helps trainers and speakers stay on track during presentations, and can be used for speaking in such places as churches, colleges, rehabilitation facilities, forums, and seminars. Drucker says it's also valuable for therapists of stroke patients, hearing-impaired people, and head trauma victims. "People who need to work on vocal projection can train themselves at their own pace. There's no need for someone to keep shouting, 'Louder, louder,'" she says.



And that's just how Drucker got the idea for the Visivox. She used to sit in the back row at her husband's speeches and prompt him by shouting, "Louder, louder."

Doris's day

Drucker says the secret to her time management skills is that she needs only seven or eight hours of sleep a night. She rises at 6, makes a pot of coffee, then starts dialing for business. She takes advantage of the U.S. time zones and telephones East Coast business contacts first. As she explains, "If I call much later than 9 a.m. their time, they are 'in a meeting.'" After those calls, she starts on the Midwest.

After all of the cross-country phone work, Drucker makes breakfast and dawdles over the *Los Angeles Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*. If there's no urgent business, she may bounce over to the tennis courts for a couple of hours. Says Drucker, "There are lots of opportunities for drop-in games." But if there *is* other business, that comes first.

On this day, Drucker has an 8 a.m. appointment with her electronic-boards designer to discuss some equipment changes. As she leaves the house, her gardener stops her to discuss a malfunctioning sprinkler system. That makes her 20 minutes late for the 8 o'clocker. Before she and the designer get down to business, Drucker listens to the designer's recap of her latest knee surgery. Another delay, but it's all in a day's work.

Back home again, Drucker tends to her email and snail mail, cleans the kitchen and living room, and rewrites some manuscript pages. At lunchtime, she whips up salads and sandwiches for her husband and herself. Then, she dives back into the manuscript for a while, makes her West Coast phone calls, takes a quick dip in the pool, and prepares for a colleague's retirement reception.

After the reception, it's a stop at the grocery store, then home to make dinner. Following dinner, she's back at the computer to add the finishing touches to another writing project. She faxes it. It's 10 p.m. Her day is done.

Drucker comments, "It's the usual mix of professional and domestic work that working women have to juggle day after day. I don't have young children, soccer games, scout meetings, and that sort of thing. That was in the past. But I have taken on a certain amount of community work and my husband's work; his circle of clients demands some attention on my part. So, there's no letup on the need to subtract some time from my professional work."

But a subtraction here is an addition there. Drucker delivers food for a local Meals-on-Wheels program and serves on the board of a home for retired and disabled clergy.

She doesn't watch much television, unless it's the Wimbledon tennis matches. She'll take in a good movie, maybe once a month. She reads magazines while waiting in lines and before falling asleep. And forget the typewriter—it's the computer for her, thank you. She emails notes to her children and surfs the Net for information on suppliers and potential customers. Her thoughts on the Net: "I don't know what I'd do without it." Yeah, Drucker is wired.

But this crackerjack knows when it's time to shift

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Top: Doris (on right) with daughter and granddaughter

Bottom: Doris (second from right) with tennis pals

gears. She's a self-confessed, physical-fitness freak who exercises at a local gym whenever she can. Says Drucker, "If my energy is really low, say at three in the afternoon, I go for a workout." And, of course, there's the tennis thing; it works like a charm. She also relishes vacationing in Colorado with her husband every year. That means hiking.

What bothers her? Well, she can't rent a car in her native Europe because she's older than 75. Other than that, life is good. So good, in fact, that she won a 1998 California Governor's Older Worker Award. The California Task Force for Employment of Older Workers chairperson Janet Irwin sums it up well: "Ability is ageless." Eighty-four-year-old Art Linkletter presented the award to Drucker in May, and she got to visit with long-distance partner Obie O'Brien—both thrills for her.

Reflecting on his partner, O'Brien says, "It has been refreshing to work with Doris. Having worked with many would-be inventors and a few real ones, it has become easy for me to discern the difference. Doris is the real thing."

For Drucker, one of the greatest perks of running a business has been meeting and working with new people of all ages. And when she talks shop with suppliers, she's regarded as just another businessperson who knows her stuff.

Would Drucker still start a business, knowing what she knows now? "Yes," she says emphatically. What would she have done differently? "Nothing."

So, what's ahead for Doris Drucker? "Selling the business and on to the next," she says.

Stay tuned—this dynamo has plenty more ideas in the works. ❑

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Connecting Points

- ❑ California Task Force for Employment of Older Workers, P.O. Box 826880, Sacramento, CA 94280-0001; **www.sjtcc.cahwnet.gov/olderworker**
- ❑ RSQ, LLC, 636 Wellesley Drive, Claremont, CA 91711-3427; 909.626.3172; email RSQ@earthlink.net
- ❑ Visivox Website, **www.visivox.com**