



# SUPERSTAR INVESTORS SHARE THEIR SECRETS

BY

**JOHN LIVESAY**  
FUNDING STRATEGIST

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# 1

# JUDY ROBINETT

## Background

With more than 30 years experience in entrepreneurship and now the author of *How to Be a Power Connector*, Judy Robinett has been described as the woman with the ‘titanium digital rolodex’. Stressing the importance of who knows you rather than who you know, Judy is certainly someone who knows how to make connections, and make them work for growing a business. She has a host of impressive notches on her resume, including management roles for Fortune 500 companies, venture capitals employment, as well as profiling in Huffington Post, Forbes, and Bloomberg Business week to name but a few. A busy lady, you could say.



**“Some angels  
are devils  
just like some  
ventures are  
vultures”**

- Judy Robinett

## The Setback

If there is anyone who knows the importance of networking, it is definitely Judy. ‘Your network is your net worth,’ she likes to say, which she knows from experience. Having been working away at Fortune 500 companies, she didn’t seem to be making any progress or getting anyone’s attention. She realized that it was her networking skills – or lack thereof – which were holding her back.

From having her son teach her how to use Twitter, she became more au fait with both Twitter and LinkedIn where she could network with millions of other entrepreneurs. Yet even when she moved up to the position of CEO of a public company where she was doing incredibly well, she still had nowhere else to go from there. Her networking needed to be bigger, better, and farther-reaching.

## The Takeaway

Judy credits a lot of her successes to random connections with people; “there’s no lack of money, there’s no lack of opportunities...we all have problems, we all have opportunities.” Taking work such as a finance advisor for a local governor, she met her first two billionaires, proving that opportunity certainly does knock.

From her success in networking and putting her name out there, Judy came into a small start-up company called SkullCandy, which is where her career in start-ups has since blossomed. She has worked her way up in angel investing to Managing Director of Golden Seeds Angel Network and is a goldmine of information and tips on pitching and connecting.

Judy has been an advisory board member of venture capital firms such as Illuminate Ventures based in California and Pereg Ventures based in New York, as well as Springboard Enterprises and Women Innovate Mobile in Washington DC and New York respectively. Now working on her new webinar Crack the Funding Code, Judy is successfully spreading her message and knowledge everywhere. She often gives speeches about her knowledge and experience at venues such as MIT and AT&T. Her top tips for pitching a new start-up are: be honest, be generous, be succinct. And of course, network, network, network.

# 2 CHARLES SMITH



**“The internet has enabled trust over distance at scale for the first time in human history.”**

- Charles Smith

## Background

**Y**ou’d be hard pushed to find a more genuine and authentic investor than Charles Smith. Named one of the top 25 investors in New York to know, he has a legitimate interest in changing the world, no matter how slowly and minutely. Having invested in dozens of companies such as Le Tote, Beacon Reader and Union Station, as well as having sat on the boards of Etsy, RealMedia, and Tacoda, he has also been VC of the latter three, all of which is no mean feat.

Charles has been an investor since the mid-90s, investing in roughly 8 start-ups a year and is now a Venture Partner at Social Starts, where he invests in seed and series A start-ups.

## The Setback

At the very beginning of his career, Charles was actually starting out as an owner, not an investor. Working at Macy's and coming from a family who owned a company called Calkins Media, he always 'thought like an owner' which could often be frustrating when starting out as an investor. He stayed in that position for five years before realizing that to be able to grow and to be valued as his own entity, he had to take risks. He had to break out. Luckily, the timing for Charles was just right, as this was the mid-90s, and the internet was just coming into its own. Opportunities were arising left, right, and center, and not to mention he was in New York City - a hub of potentials and opportunities. Timing is everything.

## The Takeaway

Celebrating the way that "the internet has enabled trust over distance at scale for the first time in human history", Charles often invests in entrepreneurs who show they want to change the world. Style Lend, an investment under Social Starts, is a company which allows people – mostly women – to rent out a particularly expensive piece of clothing. Even small changes like this show an ability and willingness to 'change the world' one step at a time, and has a huge impact on women's lives in particular.

Style Lend also reflects the 'trust over distance' ideology which Charles loves; with the internet almost anything is possible and accessible. His previous employment at Etsy and a recent investment of Boxed – the 'mobile Costco' – are also great examples of this principle, and certainly showcase a direction towards which the future is moving. Maybe Charles will change the world.

# 3

# BEN NARASIN

## Background

Starting as an entrepreneur at the astonishing age of 12, Ben Narasin is a powerhouse in the investing industry. With 25 years' entrepreneurial experience under his belt, Ben certainly knows his stuff. Re-selling comic books back in Atlanta as a pre-teen, he started out with a mere \$50 from his father, which he then into \$1500 in a single trade show, thereby starting his calling as an entrepreneur. In 1993, he started Fashionmall.com, one of the very first e-commerce sites which he made public in 1999.

After Fashionmall.com, Ben turned his hand to seed investing, where he worked at Triple Point for 8 years, backing companies such as Dropcam, Kabbage, and Zenefits. Now a partner at Canvas Venture, Ben invests in early-stage ventures, focusing on finance technology and e-commerce.



**“I need five things to make an investment: people, people, people, the great idea, and a huge market, if it works.”**

- Ben Narasin

## The Setback

Not everything comes easily, and often you have to spend a lot of time practicing something before you get it right. Ben's practice came in his eight years as a seed investor at Triple Point. "My number one agenda as an investor is that I can help other entrepreneurs avoid hitting the rocks that I've hit." Here is where he built up his knowledge and experience to guide others through a difficult process. As a perfectionist, Ben always pushed for the best in his investments: "it takes me about four hours to get through a deck with somebody, because what I've found is that a lot of first-time entrepreneurs will build a very nice B- deck, and I want them to have an A+ deck."

## The Takeaway

Ben has most definitely had a lot of experience in spotting a good investment when he sees one, or spotting something with lots of potential. When it comes to investing, he says there are five things he needs to see to make an investment: people, people, people, the great idea, and a huge market.

On top of that, he has also discovered that timing is everything. Even if everything else about the pitch, the person, and the idea is right, if the market isn't ready for something, or is past being ready for something, then it just won't work. His motto is "if it's hot for them, it's cold for you."

This wisdom he takes into his new journey at Canvas Venture where he is one of four partners at the company. He certainly couldn't have got where he is now without his impressive portfolio and invaluable knowledge and experience. Additionally, Ben likes to keep up his other interests, and when he isn't investing in start-ups, likes to contribute to food websites such as Gayot.com and FoodWineLife. He certainly has a lot on his plate!

# 4 GERI STENGEL



**“Use an analogy to make your pitch strong.”**

- Geri Stengel

## Background

**G**eri Stengel is one of those people who will be making an impact for many years to come. Often described as a ‘serial entrepreneur’, she is also a teacher, author, and general advocate for women in the business world. Having previously worked at Dow Jones and the Wall Street Journal, she has also sat on the board of National Association of Women Business Owners and is a regular contributor to Forbes, Quickbooks, and Turnstone. Now the President of Ventureneer, she is all about breaking the barriers for women in the business world, which she outlines in her book *Forget the Glass Ceiling: Build Your Business Without One*. She is without doubt a woman with her finger in many pies.

## The Setback

As a woman in business in the 80s and 90s, Geri didn't have it easy. She thoroughly enjoyed her time at Dow Jones, although admits "it was not one of the most women-friendly companies". Often having twice the responsibility, and at around 60% of the pay, it was clear that men and women were just not treated in the same way. "I started hearing all of the stories of women raising money and that they were experiencing similar and different things that I experienced, and I really wanted to make a difference."

## The Takeaway

Four years ago, Geri became highly aware that women entrepreneurs were rarely featured in the media, with the exception of high-profile superstars like Sara Blakely or Tory Burch. Geri decided to profile women entrepreneurs who were still climbing the ladder, in a bid not only to provide these women with visibility in the business world, but to encourage and inspire others who were also making the climb.

Geri started with her contribution in Forbes magazine. It wasn't about showing that women make better leaders or entrepreneurs than men, it was about showing that it's diversity which is key: "a women-led company is going to be more likely to have a diverse management team and diversity takes all shapes and sizes, so that could be race, ethnicity, [or] gender".

Geri's takeaway was about the qualities an entrepreneur – male or female – should have, mainly curiosity, integrity, grit, agility, passion, and emotional quotient (EQ). "those are the things that are really critical to being a successful leader and I don't really think that there's a difference between men and women". In her book, *Forget the Glass Ceiling: Build Your Business Without One*, she profiles and interviews 10 strong female business entrepreneurs, including Paula Long, Erika Bliss, and Nina Vaca. Outlining and solving the problems facing women in business today, it is proving highly successful in making the social impact she intended.

It's no wonder she was named in Silicon Republic's 2016 list of People Spear-Heading Change in Tech Investment, as well as winning National Minority Business Council's Madam C.J. Walker Business Leadership Award in 2015. As President at Ventureneer, it seems that Geri will only go on to create even bigger and better things in her calling as a 'serial entrepreneur'.

# 5 LEX DEAK

## Background

At an incredibly young age, Lex Deak has achieved a tremendous amount. With a portfolio that includes being a founder of Sell It Shack, QVentures and OFF3R, it seems like the only way is up for this young entrepreneur. He is well known for his great socializing and networking abilities, which is also linked in to his role as Ambassador for The Supper Club, an invitation-only organization which facilitates networking for entrepreneurs. He has heaps of tips and tricks of the trade, and is still learning.



**“Listen five times more than you talk when you are in a room with people smarter than you.”**

- Lex Deak

## The Setback

As the old adage goes, money makes the world go round. While many of us would like to believe it's not true, money certainly does help. When it comes to starting businesses and investing in them, unfortunately money is key. The hardest part of Lex's journey was raising enough money to get his ventures off the ground. It's not fun, it's not easy, and it's not swift, but it's necessary.

On top of that is finding the right team and building at the right time. "So far we've enjoyed a relatively smooth ride with Tendr, although the hard work has only just begun". Although only young, Lex recognizes the importance of patience when it comes to building a business, and the loyalty and longevity to look for in members of his team.

## The Takeaway

Lex's advice is particularly applicable to young and new entrepreneurs, as it wasn't long ago that he was one. "Listen five times more than you talk when you are in a room with people smarter than you" is something he regularly tells young businessmen, certainly a humbling motto.

He also likes to keep himself abreast of the latest upcoming trends, ideas, and investors, no matter what angle they might have.

"I disagree with a lot of what I read," he says, "but I think you just need to soak it up, diversity is the key", another incredibly wise morsel he likes to scatter around. For Lex, diversity and knowledge are essential in this career path.

Lex is all about networking and knowledge. His highly successful app OFF3R, a Tinder-style application which allows people to swipe through potential start-ups, thus cutting down on 'inbox fatigue', has been hugely successful, plummeting him to the big leagues in his new journey at QVentures.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



## John Livesay

As a funding strategist, John Livesay helps CEOs craft a compelling pitch that engages investors in a way that inspires them to join a startup's team. He hosts The Successful Pitch podcast with investors from around the world. He is the Pitch Mentor at Startfast.net, the number one accelerator in Upstate New York. After a successful 20 year career in media sales with Conde Nast where he worked across all 22 brands in their corporate division [GQ, Vanity Fair, Wired, W and Vogue] and created integrated programs for clients such as Lexus, Hyundai and Guess, John won salesperson of the year in 2012 across the entire company. John's book, The 7 Most Powerful Selling Secrets and has been translated into Spanish and Russian. John has a B.S in Advertising from the University of Illinois.

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