



Make Your Own Rules

A Renegade Guide to Unconventional Success

by Wayne Rogers and Josh Young

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214 pages

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Take-Aways

- Actor Wayne Rogers succeeds by studying the business system and working outside it.
- Rogers's lack of experience led him to "take a creative approach rather than an administrative one."
- Acting taught Rogers the value of collaboration.
- In business – including in the entertainment business – bigger doesn't mean better.
- Well-researched information is the foundation of business success.
- Be creative, exploit opportunities and focus on customer service.
- Success depends on the people you work with, so choose your partners well.
- Challenging convention and keeping an open mind encourage innovation.
- Creativity applies to financing as well as to acting and business innovations.
- To remain open to original alternatives, ask questions that challenge convention. Never accept the answer, "We've always done things this way."

Rating (10 is best)

Overall
7

Applicability
6

Innovation
6

Style
7

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How actor Wayne Rogers succeeded by working outside the usual business system, 2) How to apply creativity to certain business challenges and 3) How an unconventional approach can help you get ahead.

Recommendation

Fans of the hit television show *M*A*S*H* know Wayne Rogers as the actor who played Captain “Trapper” John McIntyre. They may not know that, offscreen, Rogers has a long record of business success. He reveals how he studied the usual business systems and then worked around them to come out ahead. Rogers hopes that readers will extrapolate lessons from his experiences: Work with people you trust, seek innovative solutions and provide excellent customer service – common sense tenets you’ll find in almost any business book. However, remember that taking off into a field of business about which you know nothing is a lot like boarding an army helicopter at a wartime mobile field hospital and chopper-riding into the wild blue yonder. You have to bring the right doctor’s bag of skills along to get away with it. *getAbstract* considers this breezy hodge-podge of business philosophy, political views and personal experiences an engaging page-turner for any business student or fan of *M*A*S*H*.

Abstract

Rogers’s Mish-M*A*S*H Career

Wayne Rogers discovered his love for acting when a friend invited him to watch a rehearsal for a play. Over the course of his career, he’s acted and produced plays, movies and television programs. His roles include Gambler in *Cool Hand Luke* with Paul Newman, a child molester in the TV movie *One Terrific Guy* and the starring role in the sitcom *House Calls*. His experience in show business taught him valuable lessons about working with other people.

Rogers realized that, as an actor, he had chosen a feast-or-famine profession, so he began to save and invest at the beginning of his career. Aside from starring in the early years of the TV version of *M*A*S*H*, Rogers has been a movie and Broadway play producer, a partner in residential and commercial real estate deals, and the co-owner of a vineyard, a restaurant, a few hotels and a convenience store chain. He even became involved in reviving several distressed businesses, including the bridal chain Kleinfeld, now featured on the reality TV show, *Say Yes to the Dress*.

Rogers explains his varied business career easily: “Learning to be creative, challenging convention and seizing unexpected opportunities not only are liberating but also can make all the difference in whether you are successful.” Tackling challenges in fields where he had no prior experience enabled him to consider problems without preconceptions. Rogers believes that inexperience forced him to be imaginative and to avoid the pitfalls of excessive organization.

Bigger Is Not Always Better

Industries such as banking and oil claim they must be bigger to be more efficient and to compete globally. Their size and monopolies give them power to control production, pricing and financing. Conversely, an increase in regulations makes business expensive

“Sometimes the best opportunities in business are the most unexpected.”

“If you do not understand the system, you cannot make it work for you.”

“It pays to know your competition. It pays even more to know yourself.”

“You don’t have to be ‘against the system’ to succeed; you just don’t want the system to systematize you.”

“Size stifles innovation – and therefore stifles anybody who is an iconoclast.”

“In a true free-market economy, competition is the regulator.”

“Business can be like art, and it should be just as creative.”

for small companies and entrepreneurs. For example, when Rogers and his partners attempted to build a condominium project in southern California, they needed approval from 27 different regulating agencies. In the end, they hired a lobbyist to walk the project through the process. How can small businesses succeed in a system that thwarts them at every turn? They must adopt an unconventional approach, know the government’s rules and regulations, and be devoted to customer service.

Free Thinking

When Rogers spotted an ad in *The Wall Street Journal* offering land in central California for \$325 an acre, he knew it was a good deal. He formed an investment group and bought the land. After stumbling upon the idea of starting a vineyard on the property, Rogers did his research and got the ball rolling. Unfortunately, after he purchased almost \$250,000 worth of vine cuttings, he was unable to install a frost protection system in time to plant. Facing failure and unhampered by convention, Rogers felt free to pursue innovative solutions.

The answer came from a viticulture expert who recommended planting the cuttings in small cartons to get them started. Then, once the frost system was ready, Rogers’s workers could replant the growing cuttings on the land. The unproven process cost slightly more, but it was so successful that it soon became standard in the wine industry.

To open your mind to original alternatives, ask questions that challenge convention. Never accept the answer, “We’ve always done things this way.” Assess the risks, do your research and evaluate every project on its merits. Always consider the market and the competition. Becoming a successful entrepreneur requires a creative mind-set. Often, the best innovations stem from untenable situations. When problems arise, search for creative opportunities. For example, the current debate over climate change has opened the door to many newer energy solutions such as solar and wind power, and even repurposing animal waste for energy. In the words of Rogers’s *M*A*S*H* co-star Alan Alda, “The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition.”

A Natural Partnership

Much of your success depends on the people around you at your work. Follow your instincts, your gut feelings, when choosing partners. Weigh your work colleagues’ behavior rather than their rhetoric, and observe the outcomes of their actions. When Rogers was working on *M*A*S*H*, he met Lew Wolff, who was running the real estate division of the then-struggling Fox studio. During the slow periods in Rogers’s shooting schedule, the two discussed real estate, business philosophy and life in general. When Rogers decided to leave *M*A*S*H* before its third season due to a contract dispute, his departure coincided with Wolff leaving Fox to return to his real estate business. Rogers and Wolff soon became partners.

Wolff and Rogers shared a think-outside-the-box mind-set. When they learned they could buy into the Oakland Athletics baseball franchise, they were excited about the opportunity to work with another creative thinker, the Athletics’ general manager, Billy Beane, the first manager to apply baseball statistics in a forward-thinking analytical manner. Eschewing traditional methods, Beane fashioned a winning team on a low budget by hiring athletes other teams had overlooked. Michael Lewis chronicled Beane’s success in the bestseller *Money Ball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, which became a hit movie starring Brad Pitt.

“There is nothing more liberating than betting on yourself.”

“If reading people is important, understanding them and relating to them is even more important.”

“As you journey in business, pick your traveling companions well.”

“If the rule for the banker is ‘know your customer’, then the rule for...the borrower, is ‘know your banker’.”

Having good relationships with your partners is crucial, and it’s important that every partner in a deal should have something at risk – that is, everyone should have a pony in the race. When all participants have a stake, they behave in the group’s best interests.

Apply Creativity to Business

Creativity applies to financing and business innovations. Often you have several options regarding how to structure a deal, borrow money and pay taxes. Know the tax code and factor what you know into your decision making. Rogers excels at applying creative thinking to real estate deals. For example, when he considers buying a hotel, he looks into financing the garage as a separate entity. Granting public access to the garage generates additional revenue and provides extra parking to the community. Rogers and Wolff worked this kind of deal when Pasadena, California, redeveloped its downtown. They built a parking structure for a new shopping center as well as a townhouse development. Such win-win situations open the door to a variety of financing options.

A private company that purchases the “shell” of a failed company can go public without incurring the expense of an initial public offering (IPO). When the bankrupt shell no longer has assets, investors buy its shares cheaply and merger it (in a “reverse merger”) with an ongoing company in order to trade that company publicly. An investment group Rogers founded followed this course when it took over an underperforming company, Lazarus Medical. Rogers’s group merged Lazarus with the renamed American Dairy, a Chinese company that produced powdered milk. The shell company traded at 19 cents a share in 2003 and at \$25 a share when the New York Stock Exchange listed it in 2009. Such creative transactions enable entrepreneurs to navigate an overregulated system and come out ahead.

Knowledge Is Power

The foundation for every smart deal is research. Today, all the information you need is available within a mouse click. Yet, few people take advantage of the wealth of data they could access about their business. For example, convenience stores succeed by following a couple of guiding principles. They must be in accessible locations. Store layout plays a strong role because most of the items these stores sell are impulse buys. To find out which items move off the shelves most quickly, read the trade publication, *Convenience Store News*. It reports useful inside information, like which areas of the US sell more doughnuts than muffins, and what kinds of doughnuts sell best. Many people in the convenience store business don’t do even this small amount of research.

Rogers and his partners got the jump on a real estate development by doing their homework. They learned via the *Armed Forces News* that a Special Forces Group was moving to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. They understood that the 5,000 members of the military coming in would need places to live in, making a housing development a great idea. Rogers learned the price point he could charge by looking up the soldiers’ pay scale in public data published by the Army. He also learned that the troops qualified for Federal Housing and Veterans Administration financing.

Rogers and his investment group did their research and then asked the opinions of potential customers. They sat down with soldiers and their families and asked what they pictured in their dream house. Rogers discovered that most wanted a three-car garage, and he had the homes designed accordingly. Customer service is a niche that small operators can fill more effectively than big corporations. Rogers believes that, “The best place to go for advice is to the consumer.”

“Armies of people marching to the same ideology are destructive to the creative process.”

“The only way for the individual entrepreneur to navigate the system we have in this country is not to be conventional.”

“To survive outside the mainstream in the business world, you must be creative.”

“I have found that if I ask questions and keep my yap shut, I will learn a hell of a lot from the consumer.”

No Business Like Show Business

As the entertainment business became more corporate, Rogers found ways to continue to forge an independent path. Today, five major companies dominate the entertainment business, another industry wherein bigger is not necessarily better. The number of people involved in a production often works against bringing creative ideas to fruition. The more hands in the mix, the more diluted it becomes. For example, Rogers collaborated with writer Bob Klane on a TV script. At the first meeting, a network executive requested rewrites to make the lead character more aggressive. Klane and Rogers made the changes and attended a second meeting. The head of development asked for more changes, as did the head of marketing in the next meeting. After several more meetings and edits, the writing duo decided to quit doing more and more drafts and to turn in their original script instead. The network loved it.

Don’t Bank on It

Due to his business activities, Rogers worked frequently with banks. In the 1980s, he testified before Congress objecting to the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, thus allowing banks to diversify into businesses such as securities and insurance. In his testimony, Rogers predicted that repealing Glass-Steagall would create a situation in which banks would become “too big to fail.” In the late ’90s, Congress did replace Glass-Steagall, effectively exempting banks from antitrust laws. Today, four US banks hold more than 50% of the country’s assets. If one of them were to fail, it would jeopardize the health of the current financial system.

Big banks discarded the direct borrower-lender relationship. Instead, they created exotic financial instruments that sliced and diced people’s mortgage loans, selling them in pieces to various investors until they are no longer recognizable in their original form. Today’s major players are transaction oriented and rely on high volume. Yet small businesses and entrepreneurs need financing. The best way to do this is by developing a relationship with a trustworthy banker, usually at a smaller, locally oriented institution.

Trusting Your Instincts

In 1999, the husband-and-wife team of Ronnie Rothstein and Mara Urshel approached Rogers about putting together an investor group to purchase Kleinfeld Bridal. The bridal company enjoyed a strong brand reputation, but the retailer had been going downhill for several years. Although Rogers knew nothing about wedding dresses, he trusted Rothstein and Urshel, and his research showed that bridalwear could be a great investment. Rogers and his group bought the suffering company for the right price, and they recouped most of their initial investment by collecting outstanding credit card receivables. They found a new location in Manhattan’s Chelsea district. There they focused on exceptional customer service, updated the inventory and branched into the ancillary businesses of booking honeymoons and offering men’s formal wear. By 2009, the company Rogers’s group purchased for \$6 million was making more than \$25 million a year. Kleinfeld’s is now famous as the location of the reality show *Say Yes to the Dress*.

About the Authors

Actor **Wayne Rogers**, who wrote this book with journalist **Josh Young**, starred in the hit television show *M*A*S*H*. He is a successful entrepreneur, Broadway producer as well as a business co-owner. He is also a board member of Vishay Intertechnology.