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Smart Answers

By Karen E. Klein

## "The Science of Opportunity"

**That's entrepreneur Howard Melamed's phrase for the necessity of exploring the business openings that unexpectedly present themselves**

There's a lot to be said for careful planning and cautious review when starting a small business. But there's another side to the story, say some entrepreneurs, and that's following up on a good opportunity and seizing it.

Howard Melamed calls it "the science of opportunity." In 2002, he and his wife Barbara took a long-time electronics hobby and turned it into a business -- [CellAntenna](#). Today, their company boasts offices in Florida and London, and expects to do \$6 million in revenue this year. Smart Answers columnist [Karen E. Klein](#) recently spoke with Howard about the importance of carpe diem in business. Edited excerpts of their conversation follow:

**You attribute a lot of your business acumen to this philosophy about never failing to pursue an opportunity. What do you mean?**

I believe that when opportunity comes your way, you have to explore it. I don't discount anything, especially things that look improbable. There are chance happenings and unlikely events in your life all the time. Your responsibility is to make the most of them.

**How has following up on opportunities played into your success?**

I moved to Florida in 1992 from Montreal, where I had grown up and gotten an engineering degree. I wanted to build condos, and I wound up getting my contractor's license the day before Hurricane Andrew hit. Obviously, there was a big opportunity there for established local construction companies.

By 2000, I had developed a townhouse project, and I was putting more time into my hobby, personal electronics. I built a building for a company that sold digital antennas for marine applications, and when I noticed that they didn't have a Web site, I saw the opportunity. They said they didn't have time to go online, so with their permission I set up a Web site and an 800 number and started selling their products.

**Did it become a second business at that point?**

No, it was more an extension of my hobby. I was getting calls at construction sites and solving people's TV and radio frequency reception problems over the phone. After September 11, 2001, the Coast Guard found out about my site and purchased cell phone-boosting solutions so they could operate from 40 to 60 miles offshore.

**Then I noticed another opportunity: Customers were asking about getting better reception not only on their boats, but also for their land-based cell phones. I remember getting a call from a remote area in the Shenandoah Mountains where there wasn't any reception, for instance.**

**So, in January, 2002, I decided to jump into a new area and start selling communications products like repeaters and antennas for land-based cell phones.**

**Did you have to make a significant capital investment?**

**No, nothing other than buying the Web-site domain name and spending \$70 to buy an antenna as a test, just to see if the Web ordering and shipping program worked.**

**I hadn't really done any marketing, but by that April, the site was getting really hot. We offered a lot of free technical support, so people were buying from us and telling their friends. I would rush back from construction job sites at 4 in the afternoon to start packing parts to ship out to my cell-phone customers. I'd work until 2 or 3 a.m., then wake up at 6 a.m. to get back to my construction sites.**

**When did you make the transition out of construction and into full-time Internet entrepreneur?**

**In July, 2002, my wife and I were going out to dinner and I got a telephone call from somebody in California. I answered a tech-support question, and he asked to be transferred to my sales department. I didn't have a sales staff, but I didn't want to tell him that, so I passed the phone to Barbara, and she wrote a huge order on a McDonald's napkin. After she hung up, she looked at me and said, "We've got to do this full-time. This is fun!"**

**By November of that year, I had retired from the construction industry in South Florida, and we had a new company. We sold \$450,000 that first year and \$3.5 million last year. I divide my time between our local office and one that we opened last year in London. All because I saw opportunities that no one else was pursuing and decided to go for them.**

**What's the next opportunity for you?**

**We've got 15 U.S.-based employees now and we would like to see that double. Our U.K. office has five employees, and we're bidding on a job involving extending cell-phone service into the London Underground, so there's a lot of potential for growth there too.**

**We've always funded the company ourselves, but we may look into a private-placement offer to raise capital for research and development. My engineer, our first employee, and I have come up with patents for some new technology, including cell-phone jamming products, and we would like to develop them.**

**Anytime I see a way to redefine myself as a business person, I explore that avenue. I'm doing things today I would never have had a chance to do if I hadn't been open to the possibilities, and I'm so much happier as a result.**