

From
RECEPTIONIST
to
BOSS

Real-Life Advice for
Getting Ahead at Work

Nicole Smartt

Advantage[®]

Copyright © 2016 by Nicole Smartt.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without prior written consent of the author, except as provided by the United States of America copyright law.

Published by Advantage, Charleston, South Carolina.
Member of Advantage Media Group.

ADVANTAGE is a registered trademark and the Advantage colophon is a trademark of Advantage Media Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-59932-691-7

LCCN: 2016932264

Book design by George Stevens & Katie Biondo.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional services. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought.



Advantage Media Group is proud to be a part of the Tree Neutral® program. Tree Neutral offsets the number of trees consumed in the production and printing of this book by taking proactive steps such as planting trees in direct proportion to the number of trees used to print books. To learn more about Tree Neutral, please visit www.treeneutral.com.

Advantage Media Group is a publisher of business, self-improvement, and professional development books and online learning. We help entrepreneurs, business leaders, and professionals share their Stories, Passion, and Knowledge to help others Learn & Grow. Do you have a manuscript or book idea that you would like us to consider for publishing? Please visit advantagefamily.com or call **1.866.775.1696**.

To my mom, the most inspirational woman in my life, for teaching me to set my goals high and never stop until I reach them. To my dad, for showing me how to work hard and that just being good at something is not enough. Thank you both for your constant love, support, and encouragement to be the woman I am today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
STEP ONE	7
Get Excited about What You Do	
STEP TWO	19
Make the Most of Your Twenty-Four Hours	
STEP THREE	29
Adopt a Positive Attitude to Achieve Positive Results	
STEP FOUR.....	45
Become an Information Junkie	
STEP FIVE	57
Cultivate and Nurture Your Network	
STEP SIX.....	69
Become a Master of Social Media	
STEP SEVEN	81
Lead by Example	
STEP EIGHT.....	91
Hustle, Always Hustle	
STEP NINE.....	101
Remain True to Yourself: Embrace Authenticity	
STEP TEN	109
Collaborate, Collaborate, Collaborate	
CONCLUSION	117
Putting on My Shades	
NOTES.....	119

INTRODUCTION

I may have been born Smartt (that's my last name), but I wasn't born lucky or rich. My parents were not wealthy or famous. As a family, we were comfortable. I took horseback-riding lessons every Saturday, and one year, my dad invested in my sports career by sending me to basketball camp. After horseback-riding lessons, I would go to work with my dad, helping him in the warehouse by cleaning or stocking items while he worked.

Like many other kids, I knew that attending a traditional university right out of high school was a pipe dream. My family couldn't afford the cost, and besides, I didn't have clear professional goals that would merit such an investment. Investing thousands of dollars when I didn't even know what I wanted to do just seemed foolish.

My First Step

So I started where millions of kids start: at the local mall. At age sixteen, I began working two jobs, one at a Claire's jewelry and accessories store and the other at Saks Boutique, which sold high-end purses. I certainly didn't see either as the beginning of a career path, but they were. I learned almost immediately the value of helping customers, being a good employee, doing what was expected, and most of all, of being loyal to the people who worked alongside me. So when my manager recruited me to go with her when she left Saks to manage a store on the other side of the mall, I said yes and became her assistant store manager.

FROM RECEPTIONIST TO BOSS

I was eighteen. I had graduated from high school, but like most eighteen-year-olds, I didn't know what I wanted to do next. High school didn't exactly provide me with much of a calling—but Saks and Claire's did! I learned the basic rules of success: show up, work hard, be friendly, help others, and make every task count.

Not exactly a college education, but a start. Since I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and I couldn't afford to invest four years in an expensive university without a clear goal, I did the next most logical thing: I began exploring new opportunities by taking classes at Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC).

Life beyond the Mall

After I began taking classes at SRJC, I started looking for a professional life outside the mall. The SRJC Career Center helped place me in a part-time receptionist role at Remedy Staffing, a company that matches people with the employers who want to hire them. It was a step away from retail, meeting the immediate needs of young consumers and doing something more abstract and meaningful. Helping match people with jobs meant having the opportunity to play an important role in the lives of everyone I met. I was on the bottom rung of an industry devoted to helping people who wanted to help themselves.

The Power of a Mentor

I made an immediate connection with Cathy, the office manager, whose son was a schoolmate of mine. Cathy not only helped me get the job, she continued to be a mentor and advocate for me even after the company closed its branch in San Rafael, California. By the time that happened, I'd learned the business and was going above and

beyond my role as receptionist, trying to help clients and colleagues however I could. When they asked Cathy to run a branch in Santa Rosa, she asked me to come along. Now, instead of following my boss across the mall to a better job, I was working in the real world, where the stakes were higher. Through this transition, I thrived and grew in confidence and capability. Cathy saw this transformation and took me away from the receptionist's desk by convincing the owners—and me—that I would be successful as a recruiter, a key job in the staffing business.

When Destiny Got in the Way

I discovered something else: a job was more than just a place to put in time for money. It was a way to grow, personally. As a recruiter, I did just that: I worked long hours voluntarily and kept striving to do my work better and improve processes as I went. By age twenty-one, I was asked if I wanted to buy the company.

I said no.

I felt I was too young to own a company, and I wasn't prepared to take on that risk. I've tried not to spend a ton of energy on regretting that decision.

Meanwhile, Remedy was sold to a larger company, Select Staffing, and when the new owners took over, I became a sales representative. I stayed for two more years and then left, planning to start my own company. It didn't happen quite that way. As fortune would have it, another staffing firm, Star Staffing, had been interested in hiring me since my days as a sales rep because I had made such an impact on my industry and community. When they approached me and asked if I wanted to become a sales representative, I told them I had no interest in doing sales—that I had a vision for what I saw

as an employee-centric, fast-growing company that would dominate the market.

When they heard my interest in becoming an owner, they confided in me that the president of Star was in the process of exiting the industry. The timing was amazing. I initially joined the company in August 2009 as a regional sales manager. I had to prove myself with Star and show that I would fit the company's culture, add stability to the company during a time of transition, and bring significant revenue with me. I accomplished this in the first three months, and the negotiations started with the legal team. In October 2010, after proving my promised success, I became vice president and co-owner. I had become an owner by age twenty-five.

We make our own fortunes, despite our occasional reliance on timing and "luck." Star's management team recognized my potential, and as we discussed more deeply my ideas and vision, they became certain of my fit, and we joined forces. Luck happens to disciplined, hard-working people who are paying attention and who know their own limits (and when to push them).

What This Book Will Give You

What you are reading is the story of how I got to where I am today and the things that worked for me and made my success possible. Take advantage of my experiences. If you do, you will see that they will guide and inspire you to overcome the odds you face, help you become the extraordinary person you can be, and propel your career forward, in whatever job or industry that may be. The chapters in this book are a blueprint of how I went from receptionist to business owner in less than seven years and how you can too. Read it. Own it. Take action.

Smartt Steps

THE FIVE SMARTT RULES OF SUCCESS

1. Show up.
2. Work hard.
3. Be friendly.
4. Help others.
5. Make every task count.

Merriam-Webster *defines passion as*
“a strong feeling of enthusiasm or excitement for something
or about doing something.”

STEP ONE

Get Excited about What You Do

I did not become a receptionist at Remedy Staffing because I was passionate about recruitment or job placement or about being a receptionist. It wasn't until later that I realized the larger importance of helping people find work and helping employers find good team members. At the time, I took the job because I needed one, and experience working in an office can't ever hurt. In my role, I was given a multitude of tasks, many of which were tedious and repetitive. I could have done the job without enthusiasm or excitement. But instead, I took every chance I could to ask for *more* work, even the tedious kind. I worked hard, and I was given more and more assignments.

Passion as a Prize

Because I had generated real enthusiasm for what I was doing, I didn't let all that work get me down. My heart was in it to win it, and I knew that what I was doing was making my manager's job a little easier and mine a little more valuable, just by being reliable and doing my best. So I continued to take on payroll tasks and then sales and recruiting tasks, and within a year, I moved from receptionist

to recruiter. Success is not easy, but when you are enthusiastic about what you do, the stress, challenges, and bumps in the road are easier to overcome. Passion serves as a driver, the thing that sustains you when things get tough.

When I took the job as receptionist, I committed to being the best receptionist I could be. Find the good in your job. Maybe it's the simple fact you're not working weekends or the fact that you're making an impact on other people's lives, or maybe it's that your job is a stepping stone to a very prosperous career. Remember that and channel the positive. You create your own destiny.

Five Ways to Know You've Found Your Calling

There's a lot of talk in today's work world about finding your calling. Before you can fulfill your calling, you've got to identify what it is. But no matter which of the countless schools of thought you embrace, there doesn't seem to be much out there about how you can tell when you've found it. Here are five ways to know when you've arrived on the right road.

1. **Your ambition is alive and well.** If you find yourself voluntarily researching and learning new skills that support what you're working on and if you're networking on your off hours—work just comes up in social conversations and your excitement is infectious—then you're probably on the right track.
2. **You're content.** The feeling that there's something “better” out there for you—something you might enjoy doing more than what you're doing now—is gone. Yes, it's possible! There's a moment when the question of whether or not you're spending your energy doing the right thing,

regardless of the financial compensation, sort of stops mattering. You wake in the morning knowing that you're putting your effort to good use. This could also be a sign of burnout, which we will touch on in Step Four.

3. **You've found your people.** You'll realize you're increasingly surrounded by like-minded people. Your excitement, determination, and great ideas will feed others. A side note: if you feel as if you're far more deeply committed to what you're doing than those around you, you're probably partway there; you may have found your calling but not your people yet. Stick it out.
4. **Your work doesn't feel like work anymore.** This is true at least most of the time. You'll be glad to put on your proverbial work gloves and put your best efforts into it.
5. **You are aligned with your core values.** I saved this one for last because it may be the most important, but it can also be very difficult to identify. If your values aren't compromised, your ideas will flow freely. This is, in part, because you trust yourself, the group you're working with, and the goals for which you're striving.

If you're on the fence about whether or not you've found your calling, wait it out awhile. Give yourself as much time to think as you need, but don't jump ship just yet. It's a process, but keep faith. You'll get there.

Listen for a Calling

When I was a receptionist at Remedy Staffing, people would come in and tell me their stories, thinking that I was the recruiter and that I was going to be the one placing them. I had given them the paperwork, after all, and then they sat directly across from me, so it was a natural assumption. They would ask a lot of questions about the application, and I would answer them, and then they would start telling me about themselves. The people skills I demonstrated indicated I might make a good recruiter. I just had to pay attention to the signs.

The Man on the Bike

One day, a man rode his old bike to our office. That was an odd thing to do in Marin County, California, one of the most expensive places to live in the San Francisco Bay Area. He started doing his paperwork, and during that process, he confided that although he had held quite a few great jobs in the past, recent circumstances had resulted in his seeking refuge at a homeless shelter. We were able to get him back on track by connecting him to a job. The last time I checked, he was still there, and he had first come to our office in 2004. He was able to get his feet back under him, and I was excited that I'd helped him achieve that.

I was a receptionist, and I enjoyed talking to people and finding out their histories, talking to clients—the people looking to employ our applicants for specific jobs—to find out what they were looking for in a candidate, and then making that match. Helping people get in the door of these large companies was fulfilling. I was making an impact.

Although I was passionate about my work at Remedy, I still did not know it was my calling. Sometimes, you know what you want, and you're ahead of others in that journey. But oftentimes, you land in a position and only after that begin to understand your purpose. This is what happened to me. I enjoyed the challenges and positive outcomes and began to see this as a real career path. The same could happen for you. You never know where your current position will lead, so always perform at your best.

Find Your Passion through Your Strengths

When considering your strengths, make sure they're practical. Strengths aren't necessarily what you want to do or even things you like doing. They're what you are good at. When I first started out, my list of strengths didn't include staffing expertise. Instead, it included these qualities: creativity, competitiveness, and determination. I knew I also liked to be rewarded, so I needed to be in a position in which I was appreciated and valued because that gave me even more drive. What didn't make it on my list, until I discovered I was already doing it successfully, was that I happen to possess the kind of outgoing personality that makes a person good at sales and at speaking in a boardroom. And that was a surprise, since I was the kid who hated speaking in front of the class!

Taking on the sales role was a huge challenge for me, but I knew if I didn't try, I would regret it. Plus, when they asked me to move to sales, they promised that if I didn't like that position or didn't perform well, I could go back to recruiting. In my industry, and in most others, sales is, ultimately, about building relationships, and I had a strong track record of that, mostly through phone calls and e-mails, which are all varieties of *inside* sales. But since *outside* sales in that environment were conducted on a person-to-person basis, I was

nervous. For the first year, walking into corporate offices and trying to speak to the hiring manager was nerve-wracking, but through practice and making my target (twenty-five calls a day!), I got better and better.

Fast-forward, and now I am running a company of forty employees, holding town-hall meetings where we all get together to discuss how we are doing, and presenting to CEOs, CFOs, and executive teams in boardrooms, pitching our services. Recently, I spoke in front of fifteen members of an executive and management team to pitch my company's services for a multimillion-dollar account.

My list of strengths has changed over the years and yours may change too. With practice, determination, follow-through, creativity, and staying true to your word you will discover hidden strengths you never knew you had—skills that will help propel you into a successful career.

Learn Something from Everyone

I quickly realized that if I was going to learn, I'd need to learn from the best. Nadine and Carl, the owners of Remedy Staffing, were those people. In my eyes, they were the epitome of success.

Carl and Nadine allowed me to see, firsthand, how they managed their business. If you have the opportunity to work with owners at any level, take it. The wealth of knowledge you will gain is priceless. Carl and Nadine were very hands-on in their business. As a husband-and-wife duo, Nadine handled client relations while Carl handled management and finances.

Find little things about your job that you really enjoy, and do them very, very well.

When you have two managers, you have to remember that while they may have similar goals, they don't necessarily have similar personalities. I got to know two different people, and I got to take what I wanted from each of them to become what I felt was the perfect fit for the business. I learned to look at everybody as a mentor. And why not? After all, you can learn from everybody. So ask questions, listen carefully, and discover passion for what you're doing. Your mind is a powerful tool. Find little things about your job that you really enjoy, and do them very, very well. Make sure you bring all of your skills to your work. You'll find you enjoy it because you're good at it.

Preparation Is Essential

As kids in school, we were always studying for tests and quizzes. That doesn't actually stop when we move to the business world. The more prepared you are, the more likely you are to succeed. Even as a receptionist, I came to every meeting with my notepad and pen and wrote down every single significant comment that was made. It may have been a bit much, but I was able to study that notepad and understand more about how meetings are run, the way the agenda flowed, and how people showed up to the meeting. When I had Cathy's (the office manager), Nadine's, or Carl's time, I came prepared with questions ready to go. I was efficient and to the point. It showed respect and leadership characteristics.

One of the things that really got people's attention back in my receptionist days wasn't just the eagerness of my note taking. It was that I became more useful to others when I used the information I had gathered, especially when analyzing situations and my role in them. The other thing that seemed to attract supportive attention was putting things in motion. Meetings are part of most jobs. People attend, talk a lot, and go back to their desks. I realized that what

sets high achievers apart from all the others is what they do *after* the meeting. When you stay true to your word and can be counted on for accomplishing action items, people will take notice.

Make Yourself Matter

Be a person who shows up early, is prepared, asks questions, and leaves a meeting committed to accomplishing those action items. You'll be seen as a person who can be counted on. That's an A-player in my book.

Friday Night Meetings

After I became a recruiter, I started observing the times of the day when Nadine and Carl would come in. Carl would arrive first thing in the morning, and Nadine would arrive after lunch. They would stay late almost every day but particularly on Friday nights. Nadine would come into my office around ten 'til five on Friday evening to discuss day-to-day things. When she walked in, just before quitting time, I could have said I had to go, but I realized those end-of-day visits were great opportunities. It was during those after-five, one-on-one meetings that I learned the most about the business. My obvious interest gave me a chance to demonstrate how *truly* dedicated I was. When everyone else was leaving at the end of the workweek, I was in my glory and getting all the attention—and the approval—of my bosses.

Five Lessons I Will Never Forget

1. **Become a sponge.** Absorb as much information as you can.
2. **If you're going to fail, fail fast.** Learn from it, grow, and correct it. Don't let the same mistake happen again, and don't carry it with you once it's behind you.
3. **Hard work beats traditional education.** I don't mean to suggest that there's no point in a traditional education, but if you have little formal education, hard work will always pay off. Don't limit your options based on schooling alone; if you want something, fight for it.
4. **No job is too insignificant.** From the start of my career, I wanted to learn every set of skills I could. Even though I didn't always get paid for taking on tasks that fell outside my job description, I advanced more quickly as a result of my effort to learn.
5. **Never get too far away from customers.** This didn't resonate as much until I became a recruiter and really understood the power of the customer. Nadine was running a business, yet she always was involved with clients. Every week, she had a planned lunch with a top client.

Be the Best You Can

You think you're "just" a receptionist or an administrative assistant. You're not. *You're the best receptionist that company has ever seen.* Don't downplay the work you do. You are the face and voice of the company! Take your job seriously. We all start somewhere, and I

wouldn't be where I am without that exceptional front-desk experience. Be it. Show it. Embrace it. You've taken the first step.

Smart Steps

EXERCISE: GET TO KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS

1. Know your strengths. I personally like *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, a book by Tom Rath. It contains a twenty-minute assessment test and outlines your five greatest strengths. I like it because it reveals that what you may think are your strengths are actually not. It can be good to have a second set of eyes, so to speak, to help you understand your strengths from a new perspective. There are other strength assessments available for free on the web.
2. Preparation is key. Sit down and do a detailed self-analysis. Come to your review with a comprehensive understanding of how you see your performance, what roadblocks you have been encountering, and your steps to remove those roadblocks. Be prepared with solutions that show you care. That extra step will convince others that you are an essential team member.
3. Find meaning in what you do. By doing your best at whatever you do, you'll discover your passion. It's easier to find a perfect attitude than it is to find a perfect job. Once you embrace your passion, you can put it to work! Let your engagement and happiness show in all you do.

**It's easier to find a perfect attitude
than it is to find a perfect job.**

EXERCISE: SPARK YOUR PASSION

1. List your common tasks.
2. Find at least one reason that makes each task important.
3. Visualize what your tasks mean. How many people do they impact? What would happen if nobody was doing these tasks?
4. List the strengths that make you the right person to do these tasks.
5. Envision how this new knowledge might help you feel more passionate about your work.

