

All Rise for The Muffin

Steve Marks has left a trail of tasty breadcrumbs on the path of his celebrated career -- and eager entrepreneurs will want to read every morsel.

Co-founder of wildly-successful, Akron, Ohio-based [Main Street Gourmet](http://mainstreetgourmet.com) (mainstreetgourmet.com), Marks mixes a recipe of banter, batter and background in his just-released book, *The Muffin Man Chronicles*.

"It took me 34 years to write it," laughs Marks, Akron born and bred. "I wrote 75 percent of it as the experiences occurred. Along the way, I kept a journal and wrote some magazine articles patterned after some of my stories and lessons learned; with all that, I pasted together the rest



Steve Marks

Steve Marks took a small retail hometown business with a \$5K investment and transformed it into 68,000- square-foot a multi-million-dollar operation that led to a book, a partnership with McDonalds and introductions to Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, Henry Kissinger, astronaut John Glenn and Steve Forbes, the Editor-in-Chief of Forbes Magazine.

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The *Muffin Man's* tale (muffinmanchronicles.com) is one worthy of telling. Alongside boyhood pal and college roommate Harvey Nelson, Marks grew a small retail hometown business from a \$5K investment (via a sheriff's sale) in an 1,800 square foot downtown Akron shop, into 68,000-square-foot facility and national wholesale distributor

of custom batter and brands.

"As I was putting the final touches on the book, I realized that, yeah, I made a lot of mistakes along the journey of my career. But those mistakes taught me so many lessons," he says. "What resonates most with me, is that things never turn out the way you expect them to and that and you're constantly pivoting."

Along the journey, Marks and Nelson

sold the burgeoning business three times, partnered with national brands the likes of McDonald's and led to meetings with John Glenn, Steve Forbes, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush and Henry Kissinger.

The success of Main Street found itself making back-to-back appearances on the *Inc. 500* list of fastest-growing companies in the early '90s. Not that the returns ever found Marks' coasting.

"You think you're gonna' get to 'Easy Street' as some point, but you never really do," he says. "There's always some problem to address. No matter how successful you are, it took me awhile to realize that the problems flow to those who are successful. When people came into my office, it was usually because of a problem. And it was hard to learn how to embrace that, but at some point I did learn that lesson."

Business start-ups and dreamers will find in *Chronicles* a blueprint for success. Among the advice: Patience does not always a business virtue make.

"I speak with about 15 entrepreneurs a year, or at least those who want to be entrepreneurs," Marks says. "Most of the time they're reluctant to pull the trigger on something. For whatever reason, they just haven't gone down the path. And, yeah, sometimes that's a legitimate choice and they really shouldn't be doing it, whether it's a family situa-



tion or maybe their idea just isn't that good."

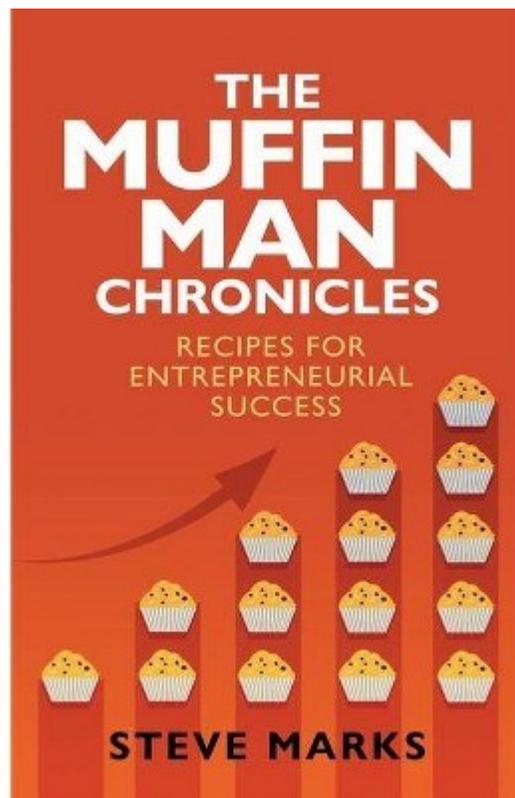
More often than not, a fear of failure proves an encumbrance to accomplishment.

"Sometimes people who make an urgent decision turn out to be the better entrepreneurs, versus ones who hesitate. Maybe it's a mentality, perhaps even an arrogance that sets them apart. Those who are hesitant, this life may not be for them because they're just simply not risk-takers."

Along with the perils of pause,

Marks' shares his recipe of decision-making.

"One of the things I always look back on as a smart move, was that we hired a



Board of Advisors. They were people who were more experienced than us, smarter than us. They were our mediators, and these were people in our community who had respective expertises that we didn't even fully grasp."

Watershed moments – namely the decision to leave retail for wholesale – further denote the narrative.



"We knew we couldn't compete against the Pillsbury's of the world," Marks says, "so there was a shift to a customization concept of our business, which allowed us to be more nimble."

His recollections are a mix of business knowledge, marketing savvy, humor and personal catharsis – and the book further explains the author's grasp of dealing with success and national acclaim.

"I remember waking up and really wanting to go to work; how exciting it was, and every night when I went to sleep and every day when I woke up – all I did was think about the business," he says.

"Maybe there was a sort of naiveté about it, not knowing what to expect and working with a blank slate. When you get entrenched several years down the road, yeah, that joy can go away a little bit. But if you don't have that enthusiasm in the

beginning, this path isn't the right one for you."

Though he's stepped away from Main Street since its most recent sale, the semi-retired Marks remains readily involved in the company, as well as various boards, and continues his work with the Akron Marathon, which he founded in 2003 (a race that began with 3,000 entrants, and now has 20,000 runners annually).

A passion for Akron, where Marks has lived his entire life, is a *Chronicles'* undercurrent throughout. "We have a true sense of community here, along with a great work force and a great work ethic," he says. "I just feel fortunate to be from this blue-collar, hard-working, inspiring part of the country."

Throughout the Muffin Man's rise, Marks' found continual merit in one key ingredient: Never losing his sense-of-humor.

"My favorite personal quote that I put in the book is: 'It's okay to enjoy your success, just don't quite believe it,'" he concludes. "Our entire culture at Main Street was to never take ourselves too seriously." — By Judd Spicer, Senior Writer, California Business Journal

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