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A Formula For Success

By Abdulkadir N. Said

Not very long ago, there was a man born in poverty in the Deep South but he had big dreams and the determination to succeed in business. He never took no for an answer, nor did he allow temporary setbacks to conquer his drive at a time when many doors were closed to him. He challenged the system and he won.

That man came to the campus of Howard University recently to share his formula for success and the obstacles he had to overcome on his way up. His secret: Persistence in the pursuit of a goal.

Today, few are those who are untouched in one way or another by the publishing empire of John H. Johnson and its spinoff ventures. His magazines, *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Jet Jr.*, for example, reach millions of readers in this country and overseas—entertaining, informing and educating the public. On the flip side, *Ebony* Fashion Fair and Fashion Fair Cosmetics continue to lift the spirits of those who attend these shows and use these products. He also owns radio stations and is looking into cable television.

For Johnson, it has indeed been a life of rags to riches, the American way, his own daring way.

"Young people somehow do not believe that I did what I did," he told a group of communications students when he keynoted the 14th Annual Communications Conference at Howard University. "I did it," he emphasized, "I can do it again. If I can do it, you too can do it." He cautioned though: "Be prepared."

He said that when he was starting out in Chicago (in the '30s and '40s), he had to



John H. Johnson



... with Professor Sam Yette at the conference



... with Dean Lionel Barrow (right) and Professor Lawrence Still

maneuver through innumerable obstacle courses, the foremost of these being getting seed money. Nevertheless, he said, he was convinced that someday success would come his way. Hence the persistent drive, the force that even today — at the height of many successes — continues to thrust him forward onto new ground.

"Never take no for an answer," he told the audience. "You will be surprised by what you can get by just asking." He said, "The name of the game is people. You must learn how to deal with them and how to persuade them."

For Johnson, today, persuasion is the operative word, just as it was more than four decades ago when a penniless John Johnson was struggling to make it in the world with the guidance of his mother.

In high school (and afterwards), he stayed "one step ahead of the crowd" and even won a scholarship to the University of Chicago. But he did not attend college because, as he explained, overwhelming circumstances forced him to seek employment and support his mother. That was an important decision for him, a decision he hardly regrets today.

He found a job with an insurance company in Chicago. It was while selling insurance that he began to toy with the idea of starting a mass circulation journal for Black readers. Hence the birth in 1942 of *Negro Digest*, Johnson's first modest publishing venture. His maiden publication, the forerunner of his current popular magazines, later went through a name change and became *Black World*, only to be discontinued in the '70s.

His initial investment, Johnson said, was a mere \$500 that he borrowed from a lending institution by placing his mother's furniture as collateral for the loan.

In the beginning, he said, he ran against major problems — problems that are usual to the publishing field. He had to publicize

his product, get newsstands to carry it, establish a line of credit, attract ads, develop a loyal core of subscribers and, above all, win public confidence. It was difficult, but in time Johnson overcame some of these major obstacles by sheer persistence and smart business practice.

Even after he was successful convincing a Chicago periodicals distributor to handle *Negro Digest*, he still had to resort to unconventional methods to push his publication. Example: He bought up almost all of the magazine's first press run with the help of his friends in order to impress the distributor, who of course had no idea what was going on. The plan worked: The distributor hurriedly asked Johnson to supply him with more copies because the magazine was selling out fast.

Johnson, who says he always went to the people for his market research, was ahead of the game. He knew that by creating an artificial scarcity, he would be able to enhance his publication by arousing the curiosity of the reading public.

The turning point for his publication came when, after several tries, he was able to convince then-First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to write a column for *Negro Digest*, Johnson said. After Roosevelt's column appeared in 1943, circulation shot up and so did the publication's stature.

As Johnson was relating his story, seated in the audience was Professor Sam Yette of the School of Communications, while at the head table sat Professor Lawrence Still. Both men worked for Johnson in the early days of their journalism careers, as did many others whose tales of that experience are quite interesting. And, somewhere in the Howard Inn was the Rev. Jesse Jackson, who owes his first job in Chicago (when he was a seminary student) to Johnson. That job, as Johnson told it, involved selling magazines.

Johnson's keynote speech was part sermon, part exhortation, part advice. Above all, it was useful practical information that can withstand the tests of time. And his audience, no doubt, appreciated his candor and the freshness of his message — a message full of substance and short on rhetorical jargon.

Indeed, Johnson's practical advice on how to succeed, in whatever field, was a fitting message of inspiration, especially for a conference that aims to advance career opportunities for minorities in all phases of the media. The fact is, once students leave the halls of academe, far away from their understanding professors, the rules of the external world require discipline and the type of dedication and persistence that Johnson talked about and so exemplifies.

As he succinctly put it: "You are responsible for your own success. You have to do it," on your own with a helping hand from others. That, of course, would call for one "to try every possible thing... play by the rules. If you don't like the rules, try to change them..." Johnson advised.

The Communications Conference was sponsored by the School of Communications (February 14-17). It attracted approximately 1200 participants, the majority of whom were students from Howard and other academic institutions throughout the country.

Also, 50 recruiters from well-established media outlets, both in broadcast and print journalism, were on hand looking for new talent. There were seminars, panel discussions, exhibits and a benefit concert featuring recording artist Phyllis Hyman.

Johnson set the tone for it all. □