

Super Producer and Tribeca Film Festival Co-Founder Jane Rosenthal Shares Why You Can Never Take No for an Answer

The CEO says that what seems like a setback now could turn into something great later – you just have to keep at it.

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A Note From The Editor

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In this series, Open Every Door, Entrepreneur staff writer Nina Zipkin shares her conversations with leaders about understanding what you have to offer, navigating the obstacles that will block your path, identifying opportunity and creating it for yourself and for others.

The Tribeca Film Festival is seen as a quintessential New York event, equal parts grit and glamour, and a proving ground for independent filmmakers. But co-founder and CEO Jane Rosenthal says that when she and Robert De Niro first came up with the idea, it had nothing to do with movies, and everything to do with making their city feel like home again.

In the wake of 9/11, they wanted to do something to restore some vibrancy to downtown Manhattan, particularly to help

those businesses who were hit hard by the attack. It began with dinners among friends in local restaurants and grew from there.

“By the time we announced [the festival] until when we started it, it was 120 days,” Rosenthal recalls to *Entrepreneur*. “If you had to think of it in terms of trying to do any real business plan, you would never have started the film festival from a straight business perspective.”

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But they persevered. The first festival in 2002 was put aloft thanks to the work of many volunteers and had less than 150 screenings. Sixteen years later, the 2018 Tribeca Film Festival will showcase more than 8,000 submissions from 46 countries. And attendees have have their pick of events, ranging from film premieres, talks and retrospectives to television screenings, video games and virtual reality.

In addition to overseeing the festival, Rosenthal is a fixture in Hollywood with more than 50 producing credits to her name, including for *A Bronx Tale*, *Meet the Parents* and *About a Boy*. She explained that her goal with the festival has always been to encourage creativity and innovation – and to support new voices.

“The festival this year has 46 percent women filmmakers. Our company is 60 percent women. And we have always supported women’s voices,” she says. “It’s something we’ve always done.”

Rosenthal shared her insights with *Entrepreneur* about leading with your strengths, looking for the good in everyone and trusting your gut.

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This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Can you tell me about a time that you needed to create an opportunity for yourself or others? How did you approach it?

I go back and look at the very beginning of the film festival and what had happened to New York City in September 2001. I looked around in terms of what we could do as filmmakers and producers to bring people back downtown. No one was coming into tourist areas at all. We had started with what we call these dinner downtowns, and it was have a meal, save the job.

I originally thought that I was asking 10 friends to invite 10 friends and we would have about 100 people. That grew to a 1,000 people. Every time we did, it grew. By November of 2001 we ended up deciding to do a film festival to try to bring even more people back downtown. It was one of those situations of doing something that I never would have put myself in had I really thought about it in any concrete business terms.

What was at stake for you in this moment? What were some of the biggest challenges?

Everything was a challenge, but “no” was not an option. I had the good fortune that a lot of my girlfriends at the time had been [let go as] news producers at CNN, and they were all available and able to jump in and go to work. They were used to doing something fast and on the fly. The biggest challenge of the time was getting the right kind of sponsorship that we needed that first year. At the last minute, American Express came in because they were they were reopening their building after 9/11. It was a way to thank and welcome their employees back to the neighborhood.

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What personal traits or strategies do you rely on to create opportunity for yourself and others?

For me, it is to trust my own instincts and to not give in to the doubting voices that are always on my shoulder. It's looking at pros, cons and intangibles. Then you have to just make a decision and go.

When you experience a setback, what do you do to keep going? How do you get unstuck?

The business that I'm in, I'm not curing cancer, I'm in the entertainment business. If I have a setback it can be personally upsetting and disappointing, but I always just turn around and there's another project. I might put something aside for a little bit, and then I'll go back to it.

This past year we just completed shooting *The Irishman* for Netflix. That is a project I was trying to get done for 10 years or so. At one point five years ago we had a reading of it and we had all our actors in a room and I thought, *I'm going to tape this reading, because it's going to be the only thing I'll have*. At that time, that was good enough for me. But in my line of work, it's about never giving up on something that you really believe in.

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Was there a blind spot you had about leadership and opportunity you worked to change within yourself?

To believe everybody when they tell me something. I'd like to say that would be an attribute that I believe people – but I have been burned more than once. Without question [I try to look for the best in people]. I do find that I've been extremely disappointed. I probably need to be tougher than I am at times.

People who want to advocate for themselves, what are actionable steps they can take to make themselves heard? What steps do you take?

When you have to advocate for yourself personally, it is believing in your skills and your ability to get something done. Being able to present it in a logical and cogent manner and to be persistent about it. That is the best way to get your point of view across.

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