

Bobbi Brown Created a Beauty Juggernaut. Then She Made Another One.

The pioneer of “no-makeup” cosmetics and founder of her eponymous brand and Jones Road on why overthinking ruins a simple trust-your-gut approach.



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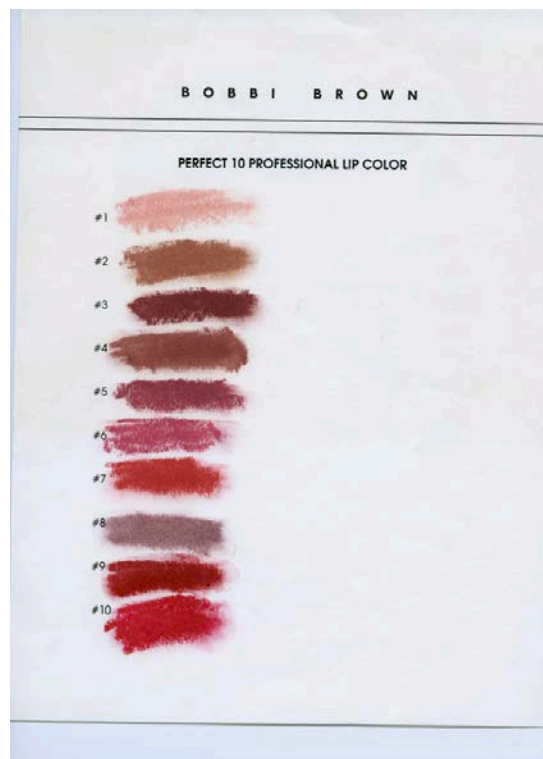
Success, they say, is inspiration plus perspiration. But what of sheer universe-vibration? We ask the most successful people we know to tell us what role luck plays in one's career.

What's luck got to do with it? Not much, says mega-beauty-brand creator Bobbi Brown. So how does she explain her rise from makeup artist to founder of two juggernaut companies, first Bobbi Brown and now Jones Road? She calls it the “duh” factor.

In the early 1990s, while most competitors were turning out flashy colors for supermodels, Brown chose not to follow the pack or listen to the so-called experts. Instead, she and her husband, Steven Plofker, emptied their savings accounts of \$10,000 to create lipsticks sold out of their kitchen. Her eponymous brand sold colors “that matched my lips, foundation that matched my skin and blush that made me look like I’d just worked out. It was all ‘duh.’ I’m not good with being someone I’m not.”

The makeup line she went on to produce reminded her mentor Leonard Lauder of products his mother, Estée Lauder, had created with her uncle in his kitchen before launching her namesake brand. So in 1995 he bought Bobbi Brown Cosmetics for a reported \$74.5 million, keeping her on as chief creative officer.

After announcing in 2016 that she was stepping down, Brown bided the remaining time of her 25-year noncompete with Estée Lauder by launching a small inn with her husband. The very day her noncompete expired, in October of 2020, [she launched Jones Road](#), updating and modernizing products in natural colors. By year four, Jones Road was reeling in north of \$155 million, according to a source close to the company. And these days, the youthful 68-year-old is having more fun than ever. Brown recently launched a YouTube series about women and empowerment. And she dubbed one of her top-selling products What The Foundation, or WTF.



The first brochure of Bobbi Brown’s original 10 lipsticks, which would go on to become the first products in the Bobbi Brown Cosmetics brand. Photo: Bobbi Brown Personal Archives

How much of your eighth-grade self is still front and center now?

When I see some old friends, they say, “Oh, my God, you’re exactly the same.” Growing up in Chicago, we had our feet firmly in the dirt. Though I’m more confident, I’m the same person I always was.

You tell people you have to find your “superpower.” My own business-minded father said, “Figure out your comparative advantage and do that.” What’s yours?

I’m a doer. I don’t want to hear too much talk. Nothing is ever going to get done if you’re overthinking it. I’ve hired some of the best and the brightest with multiple M.B.A.s, and I’m so bored in these meetings that I actually just leave.

Do you often disagree with the “best and the brightest” around you?

I don’t even know what they’re saying enough to agree with them. I’m just not interested in their strategies. As an entrepreneur, I know you experiment, realize that it doesn’t always work, and it doesn’t frigging matter.

You started with \$10,000 and created lipsticks. You tested them where?

I’d bring the lipstick to work. I’d show it to models. I’d show it to editors. I showed it to my friends in the park. I was a DTC brand at first online. There was an 800 number. And my husband would mail out the lip glosses from my kitchen. I always had them on me, and I was always showing people, because I loved what it was. And then they’d say, “Oh, my God, this is so good. This is so different. How do I get them?” And I’d say, “Here’s a brochure.”



Brown, holding her son Dylan Plofker, the day her first lipsticks launched at Bergdorf Goodman.
Photo: Bobbi Brown Personal Archives

Your vision is clear and simple. Most leaders zig and zag, but you don't seem to hesitate or equivocate.

Growing up watching my grandfather, Papa Sam, who came to America as a young boy and ended up being a car dealer, he just did it right. He built his way up not knowing a soul, selling one car that was left behind and turning it into a car dealership. He had the mindset, "OK, just get on with it." I just do it.

What one person stands out for boosting your career?

Number one is Leonard Lauder, the most powerful person I ever met. He allowed me to be myself. I didn't have to pretend. He saw something in me that he thought he wanted to be part of. I could ask him any question. He never looked at me and thought, *My God, she doesn't know that?* All the years I worked with him, when I had an issue, I would call him, and he would talk me through it and help me figure out the right thing to do. And he invited me into his mother's original archive, where I literally opened up jars and bottles that they had clearly said to me, "Don't touch." Of course I put my fingers in.

Was he a mentor in decisiveness? Did he open your mind to the more strategic M.B.A. mentality you still find boring?

He was all things to me. Once the corporates wanted me to use a different lab to re-create the original lipsticks. I called him up because I didn't like what I was seeing. And he said, "No, you have to use the same lab. Women will know the difference. Absolutely not." He basically told them to bug off.



Brown working as a makeup artist in the 1980s before she launched Bobbi Brown Cosmetics.
Photo: Bobbi Brown Personal Archives

You once said your mother was so glamorous in a way you couldn't possibly match. Is this the psychological root to your natural-color products?

My mother was like a movie star. She would wear the tightest clothes and the highest shoes and black eyeliner. I was a little chunky, couldn't fit into her jeans, and I looked ridiculous when I tried to copy her. I just looked silly. And I remember she brought me to her hairdresser, and he said, Ah, I could do this. I could, like, you know, change her. And he tried, and I looked like the biggest idiot. I knew it just wasn't me. When I saw "Love Story" for the first time, I said, "Wow, I could look like Ali MacGraw, I see myself in that." And that gave me permission to be natural and create that for others.

You work with a lot of women who have these vulnerable feelings about the way they look. Does that ever frustrate you?

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My job is to help people look better. I remember when I was turning 30 and started to see little crow's-feet here and there. And there was a Rolling Stone with Debra Winger, and she was laughing, smiling. Her head was back, and she had all these deep lines around her eyes. And I thought, Wow, she looks great. OK, I could do that, too. And I started to appreciate aging. I actually think my lines are cute. I'm turning 68, and I'm happily aging. I'm OK with it.



Brown and her husband, Steven Plofker, in 2024. Photo: Dia Dipasupil/Getty Images

What leadership tactics helped you take the company to where it is now?

It's a combination of taking pride in my emotional intelligence and being very communicative. I am not afraid to say exactly what I want. I'm not afraid to say what I'm struggling with. I know what is not important to me, even though it's important that it happens. The COO deals with all the operational things. I don't want to be in any of it. I only care when it doesn't work. I want to make sure that every woman who goes to the customer-experience team gets an answer right away. And it's not just some stupid answer. I want a real answer.

How much does emotional intelligence matter as an employee trait?

If people that don't understand me are afraid to say, *I don't understand you*, they are probably not right for my team. I'm not a corporate citizen. I need people who can handle when I say, "I just don't like it. This is crappy. Look at this, it's junky." I want people who don't freak out. I don't need to say it in corporate speak. My head of product tried something, and she goes, "This is waxy, gooky." And I respond, "Yeah, you're right. I'm not sure I like it either." I want people I trust to give me their opinions, not the opinion they think I want to hear.

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The elusive search for perfect color is over...

Leading New York makeup artist Bobbi Brown, has developed a unique line of skintone perfect lipsticks that take the guesswork out of color. Bobbi Brown Essentials Lip Color is an exclusive collection of ten creamy matte lipsticks designed to complement and enhance the complexion. A modern alternative to brights, Bobbi Brown lip colors are designed to make a natural statement. Finally, ten perfect lip colors that work with, not against, skintone... these are the new beauty essentials that today's stylish woman must have!

In her twelve years as a professional makeup artist, Bobbi's work with top models and actresses has regularly graced the covers and pages of the leading fashion and beauty magazines. She is well known for her natural approach to beauty and her color expertise. She believes that a particular shade of brown is fundamental to complexion-correct color and has refined color options down to ten essential shades that can work with any skintone. Used alone or mixed together, these brown-based shades provide a beautiful, wearable spectrum of lip colors that are perfect for day or evening wear.

Bobbi Brown Essentials Lip Color offers sophisticated, modern color with which the 90's woman can express her individual style...beautifully.

Perfect for blondes or those who favor just a touch of subtle color. Ideal for day or relaxed weekend wear.

A beautiful, natural color to wear alone. Use also to blend and tone down lip color that's too intense.

Bobbi's personal favorite. This sophisticated shade lends itself beautifully to day or evening wear...let your style dictate.

A very natural skintone color, this is a perfect complement to all complexions. Its subtle sophistication is ideal for day or for night.

A hint of brown makes this a perfect rose for all skintones.

Pink becomes sophisticated with a hint of brown. A very 90's way to wear pink.

A truly wearable, toned down orange that brings distinctive style to the lips.

SOFT SALMON PINK 1

LIGHT BEIGE 2

DEEP RAISIN 3

ROSY BROWN 4

BROWNISH ROSE 5

THE NEW CLASSIC PINK 6

THE NEW ORANGE 7

A great favorite with models, this dark stain color looks especially good on those with darker complexions. A very modern, stylish color that makes a strong statement.

A great look for all skintones, it's a sensational color for red-heads and brunettes.

A modern, 90's way to wear red. The right red!

BLACK BERRY 8

BURNT ORANGE 9

THE NEW CLASSIC RED 10



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In the early 1990s, Brown and Plofker emptied their savings accounts of \$10,000 to create lipsticks sold out of their kitchen. Photo: Bobbi Brown Personal Archives

What's the difference between drive and confidence?

As I've gotten older, I realize that where everyone else is seeing roadblocks, I see opportunity. I might say I'm naive; my husband says I'm fearless. Confidence means that I'm comfortable with

who I am. But growing up, I was always thinking everyone was smarter, better, taller. And it took me a while to realize that I don't have to be like everyone else.

Are you fearless in most situations?

I mean, I don't jump out of airplanes.

Why don't you know how to type?

My mother let me drop out of typing class because I thought it was boring. She said, You'll probably never be a secretary. I voice my memos. I speak them first. I have a creative director who could literally almost look at me and take it out of my brain. I just have to come in and say a few words, and it shows up on paper. I print things out, take a Sharpie and write how I want to see things done and hand it back.

Are you a creative type or a business type? Pick one.

I can't. I am a very visual, creative type who happens to also be very practical and business minded.



From left: Leonard Lauder, Maureen Case, Brown, Lynne Greene and Ronald Lauder at a 2009 Bloomingdale's event. Photo: CLINT SPAULDING/Patrick McMullan/Getty Images

Do you work with intellect or instinct?

I wish 100 percent this wasn't the answer—I wish it was intellect, but I am all instinct. I don't think first much. I'm not afraid for something not to work.

Were you lucky to have figured out that natural skin and lip colors are prettier before everyone else caught on?

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I was told by people in the industry who I admired that if I didn't do this other kind of flashy makeup, I wasn't going to get work. I don't do well when I walk into a situation and try to conform to something I'm not.

But is it luck that you knew that, or just instinct?

I think I've been incredibly lucky in many areas of my life, like meeting my husband, but that also borders on gratitude.



Brown and Gloria Steinem promoting Jones Road, the brand Brown launched in October 2020.
Photo: Ben Ritter

What's the difference between gratitude and luck?

Gratitude is to appreciate the goodness around you. I'm an optimistic person by nature. I think entrepreneurs need to be optimistic. You want good things to happen to you? You have to be the person that sees the good things.

A lot of people don't see that as luck at all. It's you, it's your personality, it's your drive.

If you're always in your head, you don't see anything. But if you are someone who's open, you never know who you're going to meet. I met someone else in an elevator and asked them what they did, and she said she worked at a cosmetics company. I said, "Oh, I need to find a lab." She gave me her card. Is that luck? Or is it me being present enough to seize what's happening in front of me?

Name one innate quality of yours that led to your success.

No question, it's common sense. Choose a foundation that matches the skin. Find a lipstick that looks like your lips, blush that looks like your cheek when you exercise. Just common sense. *Duh.* It all felt obvious.

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