



September 20, 2009

<http://www.businessmanagementdaily.com/articles/19602/1/SPANX-Beyond-the-practical/Page1.html#>

SPANX: Beyond the Practical By Executive Leadership

By almost any standard, Sara Blakely was living an ordinary life.

She had tried but failed to get into law school and now had spent five years selling fax machines for a small company out of the back of her aging Honda.

She wasn't doing badly, but she wanted more.

One day, Blakely needed underwear that wouldn't show through her new white pants. Nothing worked. In desperation, she took a pair of control-top pantyhose and cut off the feet. *Voilà.*

"I can even remember getting angry that women had become slaves of uncomfortable fashion accessories. And that's when it hit me. We didn't have to be, and I could make it happen."

Blakely had never taken a business course and was clueless on patent law. But doggedly, without quitting her day job, she did the research and took time off to get her invention manufactured and sold.

She named it SPANX.

Blakely drove all over North Carolina looking for a mill that would "help make my crazy idea." All turned her down until one mill owner called her back. His daughters didn't think the idea was crazy at all.

Blakely used her cold-calling skills to find a buyer at Neiman Marcus who agreed to give her 15 minutes. She flew to Texas and dragged the buyer into a bathroom, ordering her to "Look at my backside." The woman stared, speechless, then said, "Wow. I get it."

Long story short: SPANX hit the shelves at Neiman Marcus within months. Blakely got everyone she knew to buy them and talk them up. Target also bought in, rebranding her hose ASSETS.

Lessons: To become a leader, you don't have to change who you are. You don't have to go it alone. And you don't have to take a great risk. You just need to give it your best shot.

— Adapted from *The Leap*, Rick Smith, Portfolio.