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BOOK MARKETING:

How to Learn from Failure to Optimize Success

Interview with John Saunders

Susan Friedmann: Welcome to Book Marketing Mentors, the weekly podcast where you learn proven strategies, tools, ideas, and tips from the masters. Every week, I introduce you to a marketing master who will share their expertise to help you market and sell more books. Today, my special guest is an author, a coach, and a lifelong learner. John Saunders spent more than two decades as a Wall Street senior vice president, sales team leader, and award-winning sales executive.

He followed his passion by helping others grow, and founded a coaching and consulting company, Forward Advisory Solutions. John is also a member of the Georgetown McDonough's MBA Alumni Advisory Council, an active angel investor, as well as a formal executive MBA mentor. He believes change is necessary in today's world. You must empower those who work with you to make it a reality. Building trust is key.

And in his latest book, *The Optimizer*, John states that we should celebrate and learn from failure instead of condemning them. John, what a pleasure it is to welcome you to the show. Thank you for being this week's guest expert and mentor.

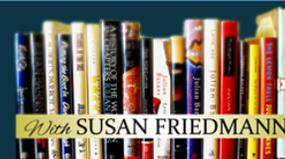
John Saunders: Susan, it's great to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

Susan Friedmann: John, I just love this idea of celebrating and learning from failure instead of condemning them. If anybody's like me listening, I beat myself up when I fail at something. Talk to us about this whole idea of celebrating and learning from failure.

John Saunders: It's such an interesting concept. And I think with any change or innovation, there's a risk. And there's oftentimes emotional elements attached to that, fear, loss, uncertainty. Sometimes even shame. And my feeling is, and I

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certainly I had this, and after interviewing a number of people for the book learned that if you can really flip this whole concept on its head and think about it as a learning experience, as part of your journey, there's so much that can be derived from it.

And thinking about it as a way, "All right, do we better understand our customer now, or who we're trying to help, or who we're trying to serve, or what we're trying to learn," as opposed to, "Oh, I tried this, it didn't work and now I have to beat myself up?" I have found there's great power in really flipping this concept on its head, celebrating mistakes, as opposed to condemning them, if you will.

Susan Friedmann: That whole idea of, "Well, I tried that and it didn't work. Therefore, I have to look for the next shiny object that is going to be the solution to my problem or challenge."

John Saunders: There's so many times we want the silver bullet, and I don't think it exists. I think everything is a process and building a system and continuing to try new things to make it work until it does and then moving on.

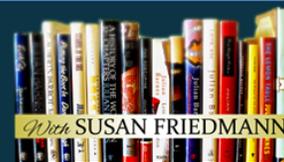
Susan Friedmann: Oh, you tell me there's not a silver bullet out there that's going to work? That's disappointing. Your book, *The Optimizer*, talk to us more about the whole concept that you took with this book. Why did you write it in the first place? And what's come as a result of you writing it?

John Saunders: After spending over two decades on Wall Street, I really found that so many folks, as in peers and then when I was a leader in the firm I worked for for a number of years, they have such great gifts to give to the world and they never get unleashed. And really it ties back to this emotional element I mentioned a minute or two ago. And so I found as a leader, if you can create this safe space. I don't think it matters if your firm has two or three employees, or if you have 200 or 2000 employees. I think creating that safe place for people to take risk instead of question what's going on and let them share with you what they think is happening I think it's so important.

And so why did I write this book? I wanted to figure out a way and to find a way, a solution, a process for others to create this environment so they can help grow as well and help their team unleash those gifts or themselves.

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- Susan Friedmann: Knowing that our audience is primarily entrepreneurs, solopreneurs, authorepreneurs, how do the lessons from your book apply to them?
- John Saunders: Really what this book is about when you get down to it is finding ways to consistently allocate time to taking on a new risk, to getting out of your comfort zone, to trying to innovate. And I think as an entrepreneur, as a solopreneur, it's even more important, because it's just. You don't have a marketing department, you don't have a public relations department, right? That's all you.
- And so finding ways to continuously get outside of your comfort zone. It can't be the only thing to do, but allocating time, and that's really what the story's about, is finding time to consistently allocate 10, 15% of your time to try new ways to get things done. And then taking a step back and saying, "Gosh, did that work? Was it efficient, what I did? Was it effective? Was it impactful?" And then growing from there. That's really what the story is about.
- Susan Friedmann: In and of itself, that whole idea of getting outside of your comfort zone. For some people, that's easier than others. For others, it's like, "Oh my goodness, this is scary. I don't want to try anything new." And that whole idea of change. You just want to keep doing things the same old way. Even if they're not getting you the results that you want, you still keep doing them.
- John Saunders: Right. What's that old saying? The definition of insanity, doing the same thing and expecting a different result.
- Susan Friedmann: Exactly.
- John Saunders: I'll tell you, one of my favorite turning points in my career was, I had a bit of a stall. I had been passed over for a promotion or two. And I went to a mentor and said, "Gosh, how do I grow from here?" And essentially he gave me that advice. He said, "Why don't you find something outside of the organization? Volunteer, join maybe a charity or something like this and see what skills you can develop there?"
- And in fact, I didn't leave Wall Street, but I added to my time a volunteer work with a independent film festival. And talk about a completely different universe than Wall Street, working with folks that create independent film.

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And I did fundraising for them. Fast forward through that year, and I developed a number of new skill sets. I basically doubled their budget, which was a really fun win. Helped them throw a bunch of parties for thousands of folks.

And I took those skills back to my job, and that was when my career really finally took off. But it was taking that moment to get out of my comfort zone. I can promise you, being in that world was very different for me, but boy, it couldn't have been more impactful to my career.

Susan Friedmann: And I've heard that before. So the whole idea of doing something completely different, or even just reading something. For instance, in marketing, as you know, marketing is marketing, but in different industries they do it in different ways. I'm not into golf, but if I see a golf magazine, for instance, in a doctor's office, I might pick it up just to see how they're positioning different things or what are challenges, what are issues in that industry, and how I could take those and adapt them into a completely different environment, which might be author marketing. It sounds as if you've done something similar with this.

John Saunders: Very much so. Just having conversations with people that were so far out of my universe, just to your point, it really helped me think differently about what I was trying to solve for, and truly the value of, how do I create a message that resonates with my audience? And I really learned that working with those folks, because I had to figure out how to frame a message for an independent film festival, which I hadn't done before. Just going through that process of thinking about that really helped me refresh my message for my clients back in Wall street, and that was a big change for me. A big evolution.

Susan Friedmann: I know that in your book you talk about innovation. Let's go down that avenue, and talk to us more about this whole concept of innovation, and how, again, our audience might be able to embrace the idea of innovation.

John Saunders: Well, I'll first say that innovation ... One of the reasons I landed on the word optimizer or optimization was when I originally set out to write this book, my title was going to be something related to innovation. And as I researched it more and more and interviewed, gosh, several dozen people, I really realized that ... In fact, someone said this to me, an executive of

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Microsoft I interviewed for the book. He said, "Innovation is optimization." And I said, "What are you talking about?"

And I actually debated him for a minute about it. It was funny. And after we talked about it a bit, I realized, oh my gosh, this has been my mindset all along. Is this constant incremental improvement of what I'm trying to do and allocating part of my business plan, part of my mindset to that constant improvement space. You have to manage your business, whatever it is, from a day to day, but finding that time to carve out, to try something new.

The other benefit to that is you're never taking this big leap. A lot of people see innovation as this enormous leap. Like that Tesla was invented overnight. Couldn't be further from the truth. They spent years developing it. And I believe any business has a corollary there. And that if you work at constant improvement, you find things that work, you incorporate them into your process, into your business and continue to grow from there. That is why I see innovation is really truly optimization, and that's what the book's about.

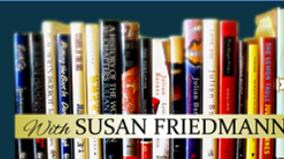
Susan Friedmann: We don't have this overnight success from one minute to the next. I had a mentor who said, "It's going to take 15 years to become an overnight success." And I suppose the same thing applies to any innovation. And that whole idea of just increasing, just improving. And I believe the Japanese have a great word for it, "kaizen." This whole idea of constant improvement. Is that what you're implying here?

John Saunders: Very much. And in fact, Toyota was one of the early embracers of this concept, and built the behemoth that they've become over the years. But this constant marginal improvement. One of my favorite stories and one of the hardest chapters to write in the book was the history of this, because when I started to go down the direction of, gosh, where have there been examples of this in history where there was what appears to be an overnight success to maybe if you read just the headlines and drilling in and saying, "Oh my gosh, this took years to get here."

The hardest part about that chapter, Susan, was figuring out which stories to select, because there were so many. Just a side note. I went with the tractor, the light bulb and Tesla to try to span the decades or centuries, if you will. And they all have the same story. Person that invented it was not the person that you and I probably think about as a creator of it.

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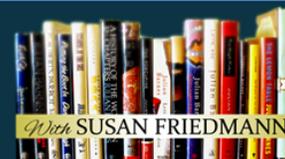
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- Susan Friedmann: Definitely. And the stories of the light bulb. Edison, he just worked and worked. And how many times did he try it? How many hundreds of times before he found something that really worked?
- John Saunders: He was doing a press conference and somebody asked him, "How did it feel to fail 10,000 times to making the light bulb?" And he said, "I didn't fail 10,000 times. The light bulb was a invention with 10,000 steps." That was his quip back. I thought that was brilliant. But he actually invented the light bulb 77 years after the British scientist, Humphry Davy created the electric lamp. He made it viable and made it highly accessible and useful for all of us. That was the difference.
- Elon Musk joined Tesla a year after they came out. John Deere, the largest tractor manufacturer in the world bought the Waterloo tractor company and made it famous. There's many, many, many of these stories.
- Susan Friedmann: I love those stories. I really do. I love things like 3M with their post-it notes and how things were discovered or even Ivory Soap. They've all got their stories. They're fascinating. In your interviews, you find out somebody like, obviously Edison who's just famous, that he never believed it was failure. But how about the people you interviewed, did they admit to mistakes they made? And what mistakes did they make?
- John Saunders: One of the fascinating things about a number of the folks I was able to interview were one, being able to admit that they made mistakes. And that takes an enormous amount of vulnerability, because you're really putting yourself out there and saying, "Hey, I tried something. It didn't work." Boy, if that isn't one of the biggest triggers for shame. I did a fair amount of research on this in writing the book about shame, and that is, there's a bunch of research out there that essentially says, we are so afraid of shame that we will essentially do anything to avoid it, including just sitting still and not trying to take risks, because we don't want to have to go admit that we tried something and failed and have to expose to people that we're not perfect.
- I was able to interview the co-founder of The Motley Fool. They started out as two brothers. I don't know if you've ever heard The Motley Fool. It's a financial services, subscription service. It's quite a large company now. It started out with two brothers, basically doing a chat room on AOL. If anyone

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remembers the AOL chat rooms from the early '90s. But it was two guys sitting around. And one of the mistakes they learned early on was who exactly their customers were.

Early on, they gave away their advice for free and then the way they made money was they would have advertisements from discount brokerage companies. As time went on, they realized ... When the first recession rolled or the first big recession of their time rolled around and the dot-com bubble until 2002, they learned a very hard lesson. Because when that recession rolled around, their advertisers walked away, which were a handful of companies and their thousands of customers still wanted their service. But they learned those people weren't really our customers, because they're not paying us. And that was a pretty fascinating eye-opening moment for them.

And in fact, that was when they started to think about switching to a subscription service, and they've been immensely successful from them. But basically two guys started that company out of a basement.

Susan Friedmann:

I love The Motley Fool. And in copywriting, I would suggest you go and look at the headlines that The Motley Fool users for the different newsletters or whatever they put out, because they're famous for using incredible eye-catching headlines. So anybody out there who's looking for some fun ideas for copywriting headlines, go and look at The Motley Fool. It's fabulous. This whole idea of being ashamed, of shame, of failure. I think you're right.

And I've experienced this too. You come to a standstill. You're like, "Oh my goodness. I don't know which direction to go because I'm frightened to make another mistake and look stupid."

John Saunders:

It can it be paralyzing. One other interesting story on that front that started out as a individual small business owner that really taking on this vulnerable approach turned her business into a behemoth. This woman I interviewed, Patti Brennan. She's one of the top financial advisors in the country. But if you go back and look at her resume from 30 years ago, she was a nurse. Back to our conversation earlier about this comfort zone idea, she realized she had this gift for financial planning and she was taking some classes around it, but she really liked nursing.

She finally had the courage to jump over and make the switch, joined a financial planning firm and figured out it wasn't a good cultural fit. Started

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their own firm, completely on her own. Three or four years removed from nursing, and took this very vulnerable approach to, "Hey everyone, how are we going to grow this thing together? And, oh my gosh, she now runs one of the largest financial advisory practices in the country.

And again, much like Motley Fool, she started this thing out of her basement. Just her, working way late at night trying to get this business built. To this day, every single year, she takes her business plan, puts it in front of all 25 of her employees and says, "Hey, what's working with this business plan? What do we need to change to make it better?" Even though today she has 25 people, this was a company that was just her pounding away late at night, trying to build this business in her basement. And vulnerability continues to be a key part of how she operates.

Susan Friedmann: And there are a number of stories that are like that, but I love those stories because where do we start? We start in a basement, in the little room in our house, in the kitchen, and we grow it from there. And sometimes you don't even know what you're doing, but you're willing to make the mistakes just to keep going. And I think that's a very important message for our listeners. Wouldn't you agree?

John Saunders: 100%. Every single person I interview ... I forget who said it. This might've been Brene Brown now that I think about it, who said she was at a Ted talk conference and she said, "They should call this the conference of mistake makers or people that screw up all the time, because everyone on this stage talked about all these mess ups they've made over the years, and yet here they are." This gets back to this idea of celebrating mistakes and thinking about how do I learn from this rather than beating yourself up over it.

Susan Friedmann: The environment that we live in now is more conducive to admitting that you're not perfect. I think for many years I would never let people see that I've made mistakes or I was unsure of myself in some areas. But now I think there's this ability that people admit that they're vulnerable, and that they do make mistakes, and that they're not perfect. And I don't know if social media has something to do with this, but I think there's more acceptance of, "Hey, we're real people. We all make mistakes, however good we are."

John Saunders: And I think that it humanizes us, right? I feel like for decades we've had this ... One of the stories I dig into in the book is about this command and control leadership that has existed in the U.S. for many decades. And if you

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dig into it, you realize it really was a very probable outcome. After World War II, all these soldiers come home and what do they do? They become leaders of the U.S. businesses and institutions. The economy takes off for many decades. And what leadership style did they know? They just came from the military, and this command and control leadership of, I'm your commander, I'm your lieutenant. Do what I say. And I'm with you. In the last, probably five or 10 years that started to change, but I think we've got a long way to go.

Susan Friedmann: A long way to go. But hey, we start, and every journey starts with one step. John, if our listeners wanted to find out more about you, about the book, how could they do that?

John Saunders: Sure. My website, johncsaunders.com. You could find me on social media, jcs_optimizer is a good place to find me on social media as well. The book will be on Amazon in just a few days.

Susan Friedmann: That's very exciting. And I hope the book does really well for you. It's a great title, The Optimizer. I love that title. There's just something extraordinarily powerful about that. If you were to leave our listeners with a golden nugget, what would that be?

John Saunders: I think in any business that you're trying to build, and particularly as it relates to trying to grow whatever it is you're trying to do is don't be afraid to ask people for help. If there is anything I've learned over the years, one of the greatest things I've ever figured out ... Excuse me. I didn't figure it out, I learned this from someone else, which is, don't be afraid to put yourself out there and ask for help. And here's a easy framing of this question, and I found it so powerful in getting my book launched, in my old company, in my consulting business, asking people, "Hey, I think you're really smart, and I appreciate what you do and how you've thought about it. I'd love to get your advice on how I could improve."

That question right there has probably been one of the greatest things I've been taught or learned over the years. You're being vulnerable, you're putting yourself out there, but people want to help. And those conversations have been just so powerful to my career.

Susan Friedmann: That is a true golden nugget because it took me years to be able to ask other people for help, because I thought I had to know everything. And now it's

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like, "Oh yes, people love to help." You're absolutely right. I was just discussing that in my author marketing mastery course the other day where I said, the best line that are ever used on an email is, I need your help. People respond to that. They're very generous, because people do want to help. There's some instinct that we just want to be of help and service to others. Fabulous point. I love it, John. Thank you.

I thank you for sharing your wisdom so generously. This has been an absolute delight, and I know that our listeners have gotten a lot of great information from that. And remember listeners to go out and get a copy of John's latest book, *The Optimizer*. And thank you all for taking time out of your precious day to listen to this interview. And I sincerely hope that it sparks some ideas you can use to sell more books. Here's wishing you much book marketing success.