

Famous Founders



Madam C.J. Walker

An Unexpected and Unbelievable Success

By Rick Bowers

Becoming the First Female Self-Made Millionaire in the U.S., Despite a Humble Beginning

Born in 1867 to former slaves in Louisiana.

Orphaned when she was 7 after her parents died of yellow fever.

Raised in a time of enormous prejudice and discrimination against black people and women.

Faced with many challenges from birth with seemingly no prospects for a better life.

That's how the woman who was born Sarah Breedlove and who would later rebrand herself as Madam C.J. Walker started out.

And, yet despite all of the difficulties, she would go on to unprecedented success with the business she founded, The Walker Manufacturing Co., which produced hair-care products and cosmetics targeted toward black women. As a result of her efforts, she would become the first female self-made millionaire in the U.S.

But how? How can someone overcome so much and reach such a high level of success?

"I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South," she said. "From there, I was promoted to the washtub. From there, I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there, I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations."

We can assume that she had a strong work ethic, unbelievable determination, persistence, a mind for business, a commitment to excellence, and grit. Perhaps one of the most important reasons, however, was her ability to recognize a need for a product and produce it.

When she was in her 30s, she began losing her hair, perhaps due to the use of the harmful hair-care products of the time. Importantly, she realized that this was a common problem for black women and needed a solution. After trying various products to solve the problem, none proved successful. Then, she started experimenting to find the solution herself.

Once she developed a solution that worked in 1905, she began making the product at home in her tub. She sold the product by giving free demonstrations, selling it to neighbors and friends, and then by traveling and going door-to-door. After some success, she built a factory to produce her products and hired other black women to sell the products around the country before later expanding to selling them in other countries. (Yes, before email marketing, social media ads, lead magnets, inbound marketing, blogging, funnels and advanced copywriting techniques, that was one of the ways people made sales.)

She also used a now tried and true way to develop superior products: testing. Although at first, she tested her products on her daughter and herself, today we would use more sophisticated testing methods. Still her testing was important to her success. Not much could ruin the demand for products faster than perhaps causing women to lose their hair or worse.



Madam C.J. Walker in her automobile, c. 1911.

More Important Tips Based on Walker's Mammoth Success

1 Find a niche, focus on it, and become the go-to business for that market. When many black women thought of hair-care products, you can bet they thought of Madam C.J. Walker.

2 Know and understand your market, and fill the needs that aren't being properly served. Walker certainly knew and understood hers.

3 Be willing to invest in yourself, using your own money when necessary. "I got my start by giving myself a start," Walker said. She supported her business by borrowing money and then reinvested her profits in her business.

4 Be willing to take risks.

5 Persist against challenges and setbacks.

6 Adapt as needed.

7 Stubbornly pursue your dream.

8 Know when to grow and get help. While Walker started out selling her products door-to-door herself, she later recruited and trained other black women to sell the products. These women became known as "Walker agents" and opened the door for faster growth.

9 Focus on customer service, and build relationships with your customer base.

10 Seek out advisers, mentors and employees to help guide you. Because of her lack of education, Walker identified others who could help her and also hired people who could strengthen the areas in her business where she was weak.

11 Constantly improve yourself and your products or services. Walker continuously strove to improve her grammar, writing and speaking, as well as her products and processes.

12 Promote your business and yourself. In addition to selling her products door-to-door herself, Walker developed a mail-order business and advertised in black newspapers.

13 Believe in yourself and your abilities.

14 Help others. Walker wanted to help other black woman as well as herself. She hired thousands to sell her products, providing them a business opportunity at a time when it was rare for women to have more than low-level jobs, especially black women. Just as importantly, she paid these women very well compared to what they would have been making in other jobs.

While these tips don't mention any of the high-tech, megamarketing trends and capabilities we see today, the principles of business are still largely the same. By taking advantage of these important tips for success, we too may be able to take our businesses and organizations to greater success.

And one last word from one of the greatest business successes ever: "My advice to everyone expecting to go into business is to hit often and hit hard," Walker said. "In other words, strike with all your might."