

## Man Perms, Famous Authors and the Importance of Being Heard

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was in eighth grade, my parents decided to transfer me to a very exclusive private school.

They were not just alarmed that some of the kids in the public school I was attending were already smoking and having sex - but that some of the boys in my class were already getting perms.

The deal was sealed when one of my friends (a 13 year old) got a perm (this was the 1980s) and his mother showed up drunk at my house and beat him up in our foyer.

He had a single mother who liked to smoke pot, drink a lot, lived with a black man (I lived in suburb of Detroit that was 100% white back then) and worked as a waitress in the bowling alley at the corner serving pitchers of beer to men who were not averse to slapping her ass.

One day after school, wearing "Members only" jackets, my friend and I went to play some video games at the pizza parlor and then decided to get haircuts at the beauty salon next door.

While there, my friend decided to dye his hair half blonde and get a perm. Honestly, it was not for me, but he seemed to do just fine sitting there with tin foil and so forth in his hair. It took him quite a while and I read several issues of magazines like *Cosmopolitan* while they worked on his hairdo.

I got home around 6:30, made some SpaghettiOs and settled in to watch some re-runs of *Threes Company* and play some ColecoVision Donkey Kong.

Around 8:30 pm that night I heard some screaming and commotion outside my front door. I could hear that it was my friend because he was screaming. But I heard another scream as well.

I opened the door and my friend's mother was holding him by the ear and I could tell he had been crying.

"SHUT UP!" his mother screamed at him. She then whacked him on the side of the head with her free hand.

"Get your mother!" she ordered me. I remember the strong smell of liquor.

"I got home from the bowling alley and find my son looks like a woman!" I heard his mother say. "I can't have him in my house looking like this. My boyfriend will probably stop talking to me if he thinks I have a son like this!"

My mother was in shock.

"You want to see what happens to SISSIES!" my friend's mother screamed. She started slapping him on the face in front of my mother and me. He raised his hands to block his face and fell down to the ground. Tears were streaming down his face.

"Get up Sissy!" his mother screamed, grabbing him by the ear again.

I do not remember everything that occurred that night, but I do remember that my friend was extremely embarrassed. I also remember my mother putting down a pack of cigarettes in front of the phone after the mother left and calling my father.

"We need to get him out of this public school," she told my father as she took a long drag on a cigarette. "Things are out of control here."

From my room I heard her talking to my father on the phone about this for some time until I fell asleep. I heard matches lighting and ice hitting a glass. I assumed she was also making herself some Manhattans to calm her nerves.

The next day my friend showed up at school with a shaved head. It looked like it had been shaved with a dull razor and he had a few "pinkie" band aids on various parts of his head that were cut more than the others. His mom apparently shaved his head.

I had to take a battery of tests to get into the private school and even some remedial grammar lessons for several weeks with a 75-year old woman who smelled like rotten eggs.

Most of the kids at this private school had been going there since kindergarten and were very close knit, spent time after school at country clubs and so forth. Moreover, many were from pretty important families around Detroit that had been important for a long time (like the Fords of Ford Motor Company, for example). The school had about 40 kids in my grade and I remember that I was the only one from a single parent household.

Looking back, this was a pretty amazing school and most of the kids I met from there ended up going to really outstanding colleges. The only foreign language the school offered was Latin – which was required from sixth to eighth grade.

I had come to the private school from a public school near Detroit in a not very affluent area. In the public school I attended, it was fashionable to wear tight designer jeans, have sex and grow your hair long, swear a lot and fight if you needed to in order to stick up for yourself. There was even an area of the middle school designated for smoking!

In the private school, all of this was virtually unknown and everyone was shielded from this. Instead, there was a dress code of a coat and tie, kids got their clothes dry cleaned for school and even spoke much differently. On weekends, the kids wore clothes from places like Brooks Brothers, turtlenecks with V-neck sweaters and so forth. There were many, many differences between the private school I attended and the public one.

When I arrived at the private school the kids there were not exactly welcoming. The first week I was there the school had a weekend field trip. I wore some of my tight, fashionable designer jeans on the field trip and a bunch of kids on the bus started laughing at me and calling me a "fag" very loudly. We went on a canoeing trip and the only one who would sit next to me was an overweight child prodigy – known for his outstanding ability to play the flute. Even as I write this, it is hard to keep a straight face when I think about the faces the kids in the school used to make when forced to watch this kid play solo flute melodies in class assemblies.

For the first few months at this school I sat at a lunch table with the flute player, some guy who picked his nose all the time and another new kid who came to the school. Gradually, I started understanding the different value of the two backgrounds I had been exposed to and made changes. When I made changes I started making friends.

When people started being nice to me, the thing I remember the most is that kids I hardly knew started calling me at night just to talk about nothing.

I remember that when this started happening I realized that I had been accepted into whatever was important there. Everyone who had avoided me, called me names and so forth now suddenly were being nice to me. No one ever apologized to me; they just started calling me and chatting on the phone.

When I started my career as a recruiter, I used to call people in charge of hiring my candidates, candidates and others for no reason at all. This was something I enjoyed immensely. I would call them and talk about nothing just like kids did to me when I suddenly became popular by adapting to a new environment.

When I did this all sorts of stuff started opening up to me.

- People in charge of hiring my candidates would tell me about openings no one knew about.

- On at least one occasion, I got a job for someone I wanted to hire for one of my candidates.

- On another occasion, a recruiting coordinator told me she would lose money in a budget if she did not pay a placement fee in two weeks and told me to send her anyone I could. She paid me the same day the guy accepted the offer (he was not a great candidate).

Realizing the power of this technique, I started calling people in charge of hiring all the time. This was one of my favorite ways to spend my time. It was also one of the most productive.

One day I spent at least three hours on the phone with a woman who told me nothing other than a long story about how her husband built a deck.

I then started doing this with my existing candidates as well. Because I was their friend, they let me send them to all sorts of firms and never used other recruiters.

When you are someone's friend and do not just try and be "transactional" in nature, you will do much better.

How much more could you accomplish by reaching out to people, opening up – instead of just acting serious all the time?

People like when others show an interest in them and enjoy meeting new people on the phone, in person or in any other way. After being ostracized at my new school, it made me feel really good when people started calling me to talk about nothing -- and I took that message with me when I started recruiting. Everyone craves connection with other people. People like when others show interest in them and want to connect with them.

A few months ago I was invited to spend a day with a small group of well-known executives and business authors. There were a couple of very famous people there – whom I am sure you have heard of because they are practically household names. I jumped at the chance to go. It was quite enlightening, really, because here was a group of people whose books I had read and whom I had known about for years gathered in a small conference room at a resort asking each other for help with their problems.

These people had the sorts of problems most of us would like to have:

"Well, I've invested over \$50-million of my own money in this venture and another \$100-million of investor money and we are just not getting the traction we need on this software product. I had hoped to partner with Microsoft on this and had several meetings with Steve Ballmer but it just has not gotten anywhere."

After an executive would describe their challenges, I jumped in and told people every single thing I believed they could do to solve every problem they had. I offered all sorts of advice and had a really good time doing so.

Not once did I talk about any issues concerning my businesses (nor did anyone ask). I was much more interested in the businesses of others and what they were facing. I just sat there and talked.

I knew that there were people much smarter than I was in the room, but they were not really going "all out" with the advice they were giving. I went all out because other peoples' issues were interesting to me. After the meeting there was a dinner and everyone seemed really interested in speaking with me. The idea of a few famous business people lining up to hear my advice seemed really unusual.

One of the famous authors told me he would like to have lunch with me and wanted to "pick my brain".

A few weeks later I was sitting at lunch with this author and he started telling me his life story. He spoke for at least two hours and I am not sure he asked me a single question about myself. He described being "bored" and not being able to do anything more significant than make \$5-million a year writing books and speaking about his books. He said he was in a "rut".

After the lunch he told me he would like to start meeting me for lunch every week or so and that "maybe next time" we could talk about me. He then asked me to tell him if I had any ideas about any businesses we could do together.

Will anything come of this? I do not know. If anything, though, I got to meet and know another famous person and this adds value to my life. Also, watching and observing people like these helps me add value to others like you (based on what I learn from them).

When you let people talk about themselves, give advice and chat about nothing, you are establishing a relationship. Your business, life and career are all about relationships and listening to and helping other people. People start to feel good about themselves and are happy when they can be heard.