



WAKE UP AND FIGHT!

ONE COMPANY'S PIVOT TO TAKE CARE OF PEOPLE AND BUSINESS DURING A PANDEMIC Ellen Bennett

My business, Hedley & Bennett, was literally born in a restaurant kitchen, and its first goal and deeper purpose was always to serve restaurant cooks—to give them dignity and pride in their role.

Like most entrepreneurs, I started small—but with a big dream. Unlike most, my company began in a restaurant in Los Angeles, making high-quality aprons for a kitchen staff that I was a part of as a line cook. It has exploded way out beyond the cooking line in the past eight years, but restaurants and those who cook food in them will forever be part of our business, and one close to my heart.

In March 2020, as I began to notice more and more of my favorite restaurants close up shop around the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was paralyzed by fear and uncertainty. We'd already seen a dip in our sales numbers. I knew this situation was not looking good for H&B, and I was worried about our team members and how we would take care of them.

But amidst everything that was happening, and feeling scared for my company, I was also trying to absorb the scale of suffering and loss in the greater world.

On March 20, the stay-at-home order in California went into effect. I slipped into the H&B HQ that day, a Friday, with the idea that I'd be grabbing anything I'd need, for a good long time. No one had any inkling how long that would be. It could be months, maybe longer, before I'd be back at my drawing board. We'd launched a last-minute sale, in the hopes of drumming up whatever business we could, to keep us afloat for as long as it would take. And we knew that we still had to pack up and ship out any and all orders that came in that day by 5 p.m., before we shuttered HQ indefinitely.

While I was standing in my office, feeling weird about how quiet the normally cacophonous space was, and overwhelmed by how hard it was to know what I'd need, I stopped and checked my phone. As I was scrolling through Instagram, a post by the New York City-based fashion designer Christian Siriano caught my eye. The Governor of New York had announced a critical shortage of face masks and personal protective equipment for healthcare and other frontline workers, and the designer had mobilized his sewers to make masks.

I glanced over at our sewing floor, where row after row of sewing machines stood. We had everything we'd need, including racks of cotton and chambray, and a newly nimble product development arm that could pivot with the best of them. Here was something we could DO, not just for H&B as a business, but for doctors and nurses (like my mom), and for regular people and for the greater good!

We were in the midst of an international crisis. Lives were being lost. There was a clear need, and we could fill it—everything else would follow from there. I started Googling masks and making a few quick sketches on a big roll of white paper on my desk. I went to talk to my team about what I was thinking—masks!—as many of them as we could make, and as soon as we could possibly make them—and I asked them to help me figure it out. It was soon clear that we had what it would take to make the masks, but I wanted to be absolutely sure our design was actually worth making. I wanted it to have the same above-and-beyond quality and care as my aprons.

So I called my best friend's husband, Bob Cho, a pediatric surgeon and chief of staff at Shriners' Children's Hospital and asked him what a mask would require to keep people safe.

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“We need to do this,” I said. “I want to do this. Tell me what you need in a mask. I want to show you what I’ve got. I’m going to bring it by your house.”

He was used to my leaps of urgency by now, but this was a really serious matter.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” he said. “But I’m super busy right now. I have to take a bunch of calls right now . Let’s connect later in the afternoon.”

I hung up the phone and got back to work. I was already mid-leap, and there was no grounding me now. By the time Dr. Bob, as I call him, reconnected with me later in the day, I already had six possible patterns to show him. And he had some disturbing news from the front lines: he’d just learned that his entire hospital was running low on supplies, and they needed masks right away now, too.

We both realized: *This actually needed to work.*

It was now Friday afternoon, the same day in which the mask idea had dawned on me. I posted a photo of me in one of our in-progress masks on Instagram, with a note about how we were working on a prototype. It quickly got seven thousand likes and a flurry of positive comments.

Over several FaceTime sessions, Dr. Bob and I worked out the plan for what would become our basic mask, which I named for one of our favorite mottos: Wake Up and Fight. For those people on the front lines, who needed serious protection, the masks could be fitted with a filter.

No, they would not replace the N95, surgical, or procedural masks mandated by hospitals and healthcare facilities. But those masks weren't available in sufficient numbers for everyone who desperately needed them. And our Wake Up and Fight masks could at least be an alternative to offer them. For regular citizens of the world, they would be a great option to wear out in public. With help from the sewing team, by the end of the day, we had our first prototypes. We got in touch with our vendors, to make sure we could really do this. *We could* do this. Were we doing this?! YES, we were already doing it!

Around nine o'clock that night, we'd gone from preparing to close up the factory when we walked in that morning, to preparing to launch a whole new product line. After the production team turned off the factory lights and rolled down the big garage-like door before the weekend, my husband Casey and I were the last people left in the HQ. We knew we needed to photograph the mask, so we could get it up online. Instead of a typical photo shoot, which takes weeks of planning, emails, and getting several teams involved, we went and grabbed the giant seamless backdrop, which is about eight feet by eight feet, out of our photo studio area. We lugged it through the showroom, around the coffee bar, past the slide, and directly into the kitchen, because that's where there was the best light in the building at night. Casey got down on his hands and knees and used some rolls of toilet paper to fill out the masks, so he could shoot them on his phone. Then, he had me put one on. The photo lights were shining brightly on me. He looked me up and down.

"Maybe smile a little?" he said, in his sweet way.

I just looked at him while raising my eyebrows, but I got his point. I was emotionally exhausted. But I knew he was right. I smiled, but first I ran off, grabbed a tube of mascara, and slashed some on in the dark. As I was jetting from my office back to the kitchen, my eye latched onto a pop of yellow on the product development wall—a bandana we were working on. For good measure, I tied it around my neck. Snap. We got our photo.

Forty-five minutes later, we sent it to our senior marketing manager to edit. Using FaceTime we communicated back and forth until we'd gotten all of the details just right. He worked on revamping the photos, taken under pretty subpar conditions, so they looked bright and shiny, like they'd been professionally shot. We drafted some copy with the help of our team and specs from Dr. Bob.

Exhausted, we collapsed into bed at the end of a very long, eventful day. But around four thirty in the morning, I popped back up. Everything was ready. All we had to do was pull the trigger. I was filled with doubt. *Are we seriously about to do this? Should we be doing this? This is insane.*

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But, somewhere deep inside, just like with the aprons, I knew it was right. I knew it was my deeper why as a human. I texted our new, soon-to-be director of ops and asked: “Are you up?” He was in the process of moving from Texas to LA, and I figured he might be. It turned out he wasn’t, so I texted my friend Gillian next. As I sat there in the pitch dark, worrying about the outcome, and what if it didn’t work, she talked me off the ledge. We were taking on a pandemic. This wasn’t something simple. This was people’s health. But we had to do something. We had to try. I leaped off the dock of my known life and plunged into the unknown, and by Saturday afternoon we’d launched the mask on the H&B website, with a buy-one, donate-one model. For every mask we sold, we would make another and donate it to a frontline worker in need.

By the end of the weekend, we’d revamped our sewing floor, not just to make masks instead of aprons, but to make sure our sewers were safe while doing their work. We onboarded extra support for customer service, and a third-party warehouse to help us ship masks faster. We tracked down elastic, bought pallets of material, made calls, worked around the clock, with no reference to what day of the week it was, let alone what time of day. The test kitchen that had once welcomed so many chefs and guests, and which had hosted so many sardine-packed events, was transformed into a secondary shipping station, where masks would be sorted, counted, and prepared for mailing. All done by employees wearing masks, of course—the new normal, at least for this season.

The silver lining is that this pivot allowed us to immediately create and save jobs for our workers, partners, and vendors—one hundred and fifty across LA alone. In a matter of two months, we produced over half a million masks, and donated two hundred thousand.

It felt incredible to be doing something tangible, something helpful to our community, in the face of such overwhelming devastation, and with the knowledge that the restaurant industry may never fully recover to where it once was.

That's the happy, inspiring part of the story.

But the truth is, it's been almost exactly the same journey as the one I took when I started making aprons, all those years ago. Yes, my resources and systems and team are more robust than they've ever been. But I've still taken just as many hockey sticks to the face as I did in the early days of H&B. We've made mistakes, and there were just as many people yelling at me from the sidelines. And the stakes are even higher. Some days, I just have to remind myself that we could have said let's just wait this out. But instead we jumped into the ocean and started swimming for our lives, and we are now also helping thousands of people to be safer, to be a part of this Wake Up and Fight movement.

It's never just about the product. It's about the why behind whatever it is you do.

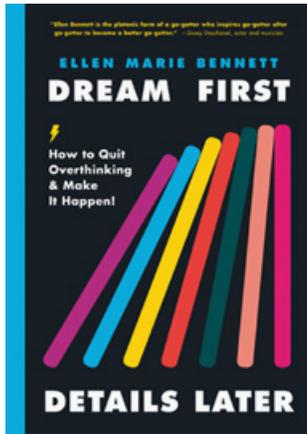
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There's no magic formula to make the difficulties go away, even with experience and perspective. The hard truth is that you will never think of every scenario that's going to go wrong. You want to achieve something? Every success has its failures attached to it. You can't do one without the other, and that's OK. I don't say this to scare you. This is your job as an entrepreneur. This is your job as a human. No matter what happens, you fucking tried. For that you should be proud. Success lies in how bravely you deal with the uncomfortable circumstances as they come up, and how transparent and helpful and quick you can be to make it right as you possibly can.

The pandemic is a global tragedy. And a micro-tragedy just within the restaurant world itself. Nothing I can do or say here can change that. **But I've got my arsenal of not-so-secret weapons to guide me: the motto of Wake Up and Fight, and the knowledge that a powerful way to make stuff happen is to dream first and figure out the details later.** 📖



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellen Bennett is the founder and CEO of Hedley & Bennett, an apron and kitchen gear brand that outfits many of the best chefs in the world. Since starting the business in her L.A. home, Ellen has grown H&B into a multi-million dollar business. They have collaborated with Vans, Madewell, Chrissy Tiegen, and artist Takashi Murakami, among others and create uniforms for 4,000 restaurants and coffee shops all over the U.S.

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