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Conquering the Seven Summits

High Achievement, From Mount Everest to
Every Business | Susan Ershler & John Waechter

On May 25, 2001, at 3:00 a.m., we slowly approached the “Balcony” on the southeast ridge of Mt. Everest.

Human bodies begin to break down at extreme altitudes. Above 24,600 feet, it’s difficult to sleep, digesting food is almost impossible, and climbers face an increased risk of fatal altitude sickness. We were now at 26,000 feet—the “death zone”—with only one day remaining in our quest to reach the summit.

Exhausted, we climbed onto the Balcony’s narrow ledge with our guides and huddled together to assess our readiness to continue. “Why,” we asked ourselves, “are we risking our lives to climb this 29,035-foot mountain?” In the end, one of us would reach the summit in a matter of hours while the other was forced to turn back, only to return a year later to stand triumphantly atop the world’s highest peak.

Since then, we've pondered this question—and others like it—again and again. Why do some of us feel compelled to put everything on the line to achieve our personal vision of success while others are satisfied with the status quo? Why do some business professionals rise to lead companies while others are content to follow?

Ultimately, we concluded that high achievement isn't a gift bestowed on the lucky few. It's a carefully honed skill; a strategic approach to problem solving that anyone can learn to cultivate with practice and dedication. As longtime friends, fellow climbers and business professionals, we shared a unique perspective on the parallels between success in business and success on the mountain. Now, more than a decade after reaching Everest's summit, we've been inspired to share these insights as co-authors of a new book that examines the habits of success we believe anyone can master to achieve peak performance in selling and leadership.

In *Conquering the Seven Summits of Sales*, we illustrate the principles that lead to high achievement with anecdotes drawn from our business and climbing careers. Many of the business examples in the book reflect our careers as sales executives and entrepreneurs. But the mission of sales is no longer confined to just one department only. Today, every employee is expected to develop client relationships, produce revenue opportunities, and help their company compete. Savvy leaders will quickly recognize that the principles of high achievement we describe can be applied by every professional regardless of their business role or responsibilities.

Preparation Begins with a Process of Frank Self-Assessment

No one aspires to mediocrity. Most of us dream of achieving something important and meaningful in our lives. But top performers are different. We create detailed action plans designed to propel us from where we are now to where we want to be. And then we proceed with single-minded determination to put those plans into action.

First, however, we must evaluate our readiness to succeed through a process of frank self-assessment. We must assess our previous performance based on metrics that are objective and—ideally—quantifiable. Are there gaps in our understanding of the market forces driving our industry? Do our leadership skills need polishing? Have we met the performance goals we set for ourselves in prior years? We cannot achieve excellence unless we are willing to acknowledge our deficiencies and then address them in a disciplined way.

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Self-assessment can be a tricky business. We discovered this during the early stages of planning a particularly difficult climb, when Phil Ershler—Susan’s husband and our mountain guide—turned to us and said, “You don’t even know if you can physically go that high.” We’d already climbed several challenging mountains and were training hard to tune our bodies to peak condition. We were bound and determined to succeed. Of course we could go high!

Then Phil explained that some people’s bodies simply cannot accommodate the low oxygen and harsh conditions typically found at the world’s highest peaks. No matter how hard they work, they will never survive such a climb. As it turned out, we were among the lucky ones. Our bodies were able to tolerate extreme altitudes.

In business, the failure to “go high” professionally is seldom caused by our innate limitations, but rather by the false beliefs we may hold about our capabilities. Some of us create insurmountable obstacles in our minds to rationalize our fear of committing unreservedly to an ambitious goal. Others are unable to motivate themselves sufficiently to do the work necessary to achieve at elite levels. Fortunately, with time and effort, most of us can develop the attitude and skills that lead to high achievement. It’s only then that we discover, often to our amazement, that we are much more capable than we ever imagined ourselves to be.

Vision Drives Activity

Every great achievement begins with a vision and a set of clearly defined goals that are so specific and quantifiable they can be easily written down. In 2001, Susan's goals were 29,035 ft. and \$300M, the height of Everest and her sales teams' seemingly impossible revenue objective respectively. She placed post-it notes with these goals at home and at work as a constant reminder to commit to her dual vision of climbing Everest and blowing the numbers away.

Susan's next challenge was one of balance and time management. To climb Everest, she would need to complete an arduous, year-long training regimen while leading her sales team to achieve a seemingly impossible revenue goal. Like other executives, Susan was constantly on the hot seat, with never-ending demands on her time. How could she possibly balance the two?

John too was facing a defining moment in his career. Four years earlier, he and his fellow climber and friend Andy Lufkin had founded Waechter Lufkin, LLC, a boutique investment banking firm that specialized in funding startup technology companies. The company grew rapidly until the late 1990s, when the internet bubble collapsed and the economy nose-dived into recession. John knew the firm was at a crossroads. The partners needed a fresh vision and strategy that reflected the sobering new business reality. With Everest looming only weeks away, John resolved to meet the challenge when he returned triumphant from having reached the summit.

The Power of Teams

Very few climbers reach the summit of Everest alone. Almost without fail, they rely on the Sherpa, an ethnic group from Nepal known for their unique ability to accommodate high altitudes and their consummate skills as climbers, porters and guides. The same is true with running a business, where our prospects for success rest on our ability to build and lead cross-functional teams.

On the mountain, the need for teamwork is no more evident than at the Khumbu Icefall, a slow-moving river of “seracs,” towering blocks of ice split by deep crevasses. Climbers must cross the Icefall to reach Camp I, the first major milestone on the route to the summit. Here as elsewhere, Sherpas play a critical role, lashing together long chains of aluminum ladders to form bridges that span the crevasses and provide safe passage across the treacherous and constantly changing terrain.

In business too, teams are essential to success. Successful CEOs are consummate team builders, recruiting talented executives who complement their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses. They forge productive alliances with influential members of their civic and business communities. Then, they supply the drive and leadership needed to leverage these relationships and attain their goals.

When the Going Gets Tough...

Perseverance is the singular quality that Everest summiteers and the business elite have in common. We don't believe that perseverance is an intrinsic quality possessed by the fortunate few. On the contrary, we're convinced that anyone can accomplish great feats if they summon the will required to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Successful individuals know how to motivate themselves to achieve peak performance. They know what internal levers to pull when their engines of determination start to flag.

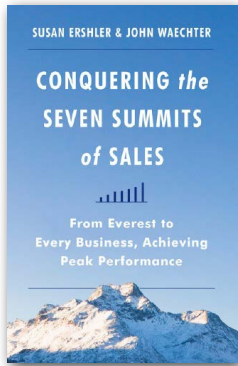
For more than eight years, we fully committed ourselves to achieving our vision of climbing the Seven Summits, the highest peaks on each of the seven continents. We trained year-round and spent our annual vacations pursuing our goal with single-minded determination. Along the way, our climbing experiences proved to be a rich source of inspiration, providing us with new skills and perspectives that we could leverage to achieve success in every aspect of our lives.

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The crowning achievement for John came in May 2001 when he finally fulfilled his Everest vision, reaching the summit and then returning home safely. Susan and Phil would face bitter disappointment; forced to turn back because Phil's vision was compromised when his eyes were frozen by the frigid wind. One year later, however, they would return and complete their ten-year journey to become the first couple in history to successfully climb the Seven Summits.

In the years that followed, we've drawn upon our Seven Summits experiences to lead sales organizations and to launch and grow businesses. We've shared the lessons we learned on the mountains with thousands of professionals, conducting sales keynotes and presentations for major corporations in every industry. **Our mission has been to inspire business leaders across the world to overcome their perceived limitations and achieve their most cherished visions of professional and personal success.** 🏔️

Info



BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of [Conquering the Seven Summits of Sales](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Susan Ershler has served in leadership positions for Fortune 500 companies for more than two decades. Susan is the author of *Together on Top of the World*. She speaks professionally about pushing past perceived boundaries to achieve your greatest dreams and helps corporations transform their organizations into dynamic forces for revenue growth. **John Waechter** serves as managing director and partner at Delafield Hambrecht, an investment firm in Seattle. He began his career in sales with the Xerox Corporation and GTE (Verizon). He has held senior management positions at Northland Communications and was CEO of Saltmine.

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