



Byron Smith
Technology Broadband

Byron began his career in Brand Management for Proctor & Gamble and also worked as Vice President, Consumer Long Distance for AT&T. He received his BS in Economics and Political Science from Middle Tennessee State University and his MBA in Marketing and Strategic Planning from the University of Chicago. In his spare time Byron enjoys playing tennis, and hiking with his wife, Beth, and his dog, Dooney.

professional

What are top 3 principles for success in your industry?

In my industry, the top three principles for success are probably not different than a lot of other industries. I'm not sure that as I've moved from industry to industry it changes that much. I think the first is creativity, being able to create a business and a business model that's different and has a pointed difference in the market place. The second principle is to really focus on what reality is, not what you wish that it was. That's one of the things that a lot of people make a mistake about and it's really forcing yourself to focus on the day and make database decisions. And the final thing is just an incredible amount of energy. It takes an enormous amount of energy today to be successful in any business. It's tough out there. As we speak today the whole Internet economy has been through its toughest year ever but frankly the whole economy right now is suffering a little bit at the beginning of April 2001. We're at a time where it takes an enormous amount of energy and optimism, waking up every day and really putting everything you have into it to be successful.

What character qualities do you look for when hiring?

When it comes to character qualities for business, it's really important to have a couple of things. First, you've got to have an incredibly high sense of integrity and honesty. If people can't trust you ... and when I say people, I mean your partners outside, your employees, the people that you work for, your board of directors ... if they can't trust you and know that 100 percent of the time that you're being honest, open and really ... shooting straight with them, then you don't have anything to build off of. The second thing is to really care about people. I can tell you that I've seen a lot of people try to get great results from people by using the stick. I'm not a use-the-stick guy. Certainly there are times when you have to be hard on your employees, but I'm far more the kind of person who believes that you get great results from people by showing that you care for them, both professionally and personally. That you do a lot to make sure that they're rewarded and cared for and that you nurture them. I think that those are the kinds of character qualities that really make for a successful manager. The way that I demonstrate care comes out in a couple of ways. One is, you have to always be looking for the subtle signs. And the subtle signs are, does somebody look tired, did they say something that lets you know that in their personal life something's going on that may have them distracted or concerned? As little as it is, sending the fruit basket to somebody who's really been doing a lot of hard work when they're on vacation. I always find that in some ways, doing something for you, not just recognize the employee, but recognize the family. You send a fruit basket to the home or to the vacation site and say to the family, "You're spouse has been working really hard. We know that he's had to sacrifice from you. Thank you for that." I also find that the single most rewarding thing for folks sometimes is just telling them, "Take a day off. Don't charge it against vacation, don't worry about that. This Friday, take a day off and go spend time with your family." That little gesture, especially in an Internet economy where people work incredible hours, pays huge dividends, not just to the employee. You have to remember, you're also caring about the employee's family and that's important.

What makes a great leader?

A great leader is a combination of things. First and foremost, it's somebody that leads from the front.

It's somebody that's willing to really get out there and work with the employees, to lead by example, to do all the things that they want their employees to do. An example would be, not just working long hours, potentially, and hard, but the example is getting them there and trying to help tackle the tough problems and not just delegating those. The second thing is there's always the sense of optimism. If you don't have a sense of optimism and a real passion that you are going to succeed and the company is going to succeed and the project's going to succeed, it's very hard to lead people. There are a lot of setbacks in every major endeavor and if you can't focus on the end goal and stay focused on driving to that future, you can't be a great leader. The final thing is going back to really caring about the people and having the people that follow you know that you don't just care about the goal, but you care about them. And it's that combination of things that I think really drives the team to the future.

Who are your heroes and why?

My heroes and why are pretty diverse, actually. The first person I think of in the short run and somebody that's a personal mentor of mine is a guy named Don Powell, a veterinarian in Washington D.C. Don is an older, mature Christian who has proven you can have a successful business, built on integrity, that becomes very large and grows, but at the same time balance the personal and all other priorities in your Christian life. There aren't many people that you can look to that can help you with that. He's someone that I call quite often and I really appreciate him helping me. Another hero, this will probably speak to the time when I was growing up in high school and college and continue to be a huge, is Ronald Reagan fan. A guy that very clearly had a set of initiatives, and a vision for the future based on optimism, but really focused on what was a dramatic change. And a guy that didn't decide what he believed based on what the polls said. A guy that decided what he believed based on his convictions and character and tried to win people over to that point of view rather than having a constantly changing view of the world. And then the final person, from a Biblical standpoint, is Noah. And throughout my career I've actually been given "Noah's arcs" by people in the work place. I use the quote quite often, "Noah didn't build the arc after it started raining." Noah had a lot of trust in the Lord, but Noah also was ahead of the task. He did all the work ahead of time to be ready for what was coming. And he's not unlike the Boy Scouts. I was a Boy Scout and an Eagle Scout and the Boy Scout motto was, "Be prepared". Noah proved that with the right preparation, based on God's leading, you can do anything. If you listen to the Lord and prepare the way He wants you to prepare, then you're always going to be ready for the things that the Lord has in front of you.

What are the 2-3 most valuable lessons you learned in your career?

The two to three most valuable lessons I've learned in my career are really first and foremost to face reality. I can't tell you how often business leaders find themselves really managing to a world as they wished that it were or trying to manage what they hope will happen. Rather than being data driven, focus on the reality of the situation as it is. It's very easy to deceive yourself into believing the situation is one thing when it's really something else because you get so focused. So really focusing on the data is one thing. The second big lesson that I've learned is that motivation is something you've got to do every day with your employees. There is always the F U D, fear, uncertainty and doubt creeping into an organization. It's always there. And they look to the leader to keep that out of the organization. It's not unlike when you're flying an airplane. I always tell my wife when we hit turbulence, (she gets a little nervous sometimes) "You know what? If the flight attendants aren't nervous, don't be nervous". The fact is that every day they'll look at you as the pilot or the flight attendant and every employee wants to look in your eyes and feel like it's going to be okay and we're going to succeed. Keep people focused and motivated, even when there are set backs, and there are going to be set backs, it's one of the great things about being a Christian. When you really have studied the Bible, you know things are going to happen, there are going to be set backs in your life. You know that. The Bible tells us that. The Bible doesn't promise everything's going to be great. Same is true in business and having that perspective that bad things are going to happen, difficulties are going to arise and knowing that you can work through it. At the end there's going to be something better. It's not unlike the perspective we have as Christians, having that same sort of perspective as a business leader I think is really an important thing that I've learned.



What was your worst career decision or mistake?

My worst career decision was when I took a job for the promotion and the financial part of the job and not for the job content, the challenge and what it I did for my resume. Frankly I think that was one time when I wasn't really listening to what the Lord wanted me to do. I was focusing on just the career itself. As a Christian, you obviously need to listen to what the Lord wants you to do. But beyond that, also, thinking about the long-term and what the specific content of the job is. How that fits in with both your personal and your professional life and those two as a balance. If you chase the title and the money, it's almost always a mistake rather than trying to build on the right foundation and build the right long-term. This is something where I've learned from the mistake and don't plan on replicating it.

Success has its cost: The biggest one is your "time" that can be stolen from your loved ones. How does one pay that back or balance that? Do you have to lose something to win something or can you have it all and how?

It is very difficult to balance your personal life and your professional life. I will tell you that it's not just the business and the business life, but it's the characteristics of individuals. It's not unlike a lot of successful people to pour themselves into whatever they do. It is hard to focus. I think the two or three things you have to do are, number one, you have to listen to your spouse and your family and your friends. You have to give them permission and have them know that you're always willing to listen to them and have them keep you humble, keep you focused and bring you back to reality. Because the business world will take everything that you will give. And it's important to know that in the kinds of jobs that most junior and senior executives have ... and just people in business in general ... the job is never done. There is always something more you can do. And at some point you have to be willing to say, "No, I'm going to recharge, sharpen the saw, spend some time with my family and loved ones." I think it's important to carve that out on a proactive basis. It's the only way to do it. It's not unlike saving money, it's not unlike tithing. If you don't put those things away first, they won't be there at the end. Time is no different. You have to say, "I'm going to set aside time for a quiet time. I'm going to go on a date with my wife, I'm going to schedule a vacation." If you don't do those things on a proactive base on the front end, they will never be available for you on the back end. It just won't happen because there's always something else to do.

p e r s o n a l

How do you define success? How has your definition evolved?

I define success by keeping everything moving forward. By everything I mean, my business priorities, my family priorities and my spiritual growth. If any of those things are getting out of line, it's hard for me to think that I'm being successful at the time. Now, unfortunately, I will say that that means that most of the time I'm not being successful ... which sounds strange. But I would say that most of the time something's out of line and I'm constantly having to rebalance. I'm spending too much time at work and not enough time with my family. I'm spending a lot of time with my family and that's going well and then I've got a couple of work things that are fallen by the way side and I've got to catch up. It seems like it's a constant, week to week activity to force myself to rebalance. I think it's true for everyone. The one thing that I can tell you that for me fell by the wayside in the last year is physical exercise. I've gained 15 or 20 pounds and I'm not exercising. It's one of those things that just in the last two or three weeks I've said, "I've got to get this part back into balance because I don't have the energy for the other things, for my family, for work, for church, for all the other things that are happening". It's something that again, forced me to reevaluate. I think of success largely in terms of keeping everything moving forward in a reasonable way, understanding that it's a constant effort to rebalance.

What is the difference between success and significance?

Success and significance are different in that success is a short-term mentality. In the short-term, are things moving ahead, in the short-term am I reaching X or Y goal? Significance to me is what is in the long run, what is lasting, not just this year, but 20 years and after I'm gone? Significance is what happens with the witnessing that I've done, what happens with the way that I've been able to impact



others for the Lord or the things that I've built that stay behind. That's what significance is really about to me.

What does balance mean to you? How important is balance to success?

Balance is incredibly important to my success and significance, but it's also incredibly difficult. It is the single hardest thing that I wrestle with on an ongoing basis. Finding the right balance at any given time, given the circumstances that you're facing and understanding that something has to drop. The guy that spins the plates at the carnival, I've sort of determined for me I've quite trying to keep everything in the air. I try to manage which ones are going to break. And understanding that some of the plates have to fall and saying, "I am not going to do these four things. These things have to go by the wayside. Instead, I'm going to focus on these five, six, two, three, whatever it is." That is something you learn over time. I've actually learned that it's okay to let more things break in order to focus on the things that are most important and picking the four, five things at any given time that give you a balanced life and the things that you need to be working on. When you're younger I think it's hard to have the wisdom to know that it's okay to let some things break.

How do you prioritize your time/values? What are your priorities?

I think that really setting priorities really relates to two things. One is, making sure you understand what's important to you and what's important to you at any given time. And you've got to make sure that's across the spectrum. It's got to be about your Christian walk, your time with the Lord, your family, your friends, your work, your outside civic activities and understanding how all of those fit together is the first step. The second step is taking not a look at today, but a look at a week or a month at a time and a year at a time. The more you can lift your head up and look ahead so that you can set the calendar and manage the calendar rather than let it manage you. If you get into the day to day, you're letting the calendar manage you rather than looking out a week, a month, a year. If you do that, then you can proactively manage on a much better scale.

How do you deal with stress? How did you used to deal with stress?

Dealing with stress is something that you have to do more and more of in your career. The higher you get in the company, the more stress you're going to hit. It's not less. I think there are really two or three things that I do to deal with stress. One is that you have someone that you can bounce things off of. Having the people that you can go to that can mentor you, be your guide. For me it's people that have a little more experience than I have, people that I trust, that's a really important piece for me. The second thing is, always knowing that you've got to spend time to get rest and exercise. There's a certain physical part of managing stress that's really important. And then for me, personally, finding time to spend with the family as well as with my church. That is really important because it gives me a perspective that the problem that is probably stressing me the most is in some ways, not as important in the long run. I typically put too much importance on small things and having a perspective that's a little broader always helps you deal with stress.

Have you ever had a wakeup call in your life?

I'll tell you that since I've been in Silicon Valley and the whole market has been absolutely cratering, the business models have all been changing. What we thought was the case and all the trends and run rates and everything else has really changed dramatically in the last year. That has caused a lot of what I would call short-term crisis. I had a couple wake up calls in the last year, one that happened around the holidays. And I think what it forced me to do is step back and focus on the things that are important and are significant. The things that are long-term in nature, not the short-term goals quite so much. By focusing more on the long-term is what matters for success in the long run. It enables you to step back a little bit from the short-term crisis and make sure that you really are focusing on a more balanced view of your life. I can tell you that I had gotten really focused on a couple of very specific things that were causing a lot of stress in my life. One of the few times I'd ever lost sleep over things and really being able to cope with that and having a mentor and some friends that I could call and say, "Help me through this." I was going through a really tough time around the holidays. My wife called my mentor, I didn't. My wife did and said, "You need to talk to Byron". Sure enough, in the Chicago airport, flying back from the holidays, my phone rings and it's the guy that I consider to be

my mentor. And 30 minutes on the phone with him, while waiting for the flight, made an enormous amount of difference. And I think it's good to have wake up calls. Those are good things. I can say that now in hindsight. It never feels like a good thing at the time.

How do you define yourself?

I define myself first and foremost as someone who cares about people and cares about family, friends. I define myself as someone who is a Christian and a believer. I define myself as someone who is driven, but not at the expense of others. And I guess I finally ... my wife laughs a lot and says, "You know, you took all that Boy Scout stuff really seriously." I still try to think of myself as a Boy Scout. Someone that is prepared and has all those attributes that you learn that sound really corny in today's world, but really are valuable in the long run.

What was your best investment?

My best investments really have a couple of different dimensions. The first is when I decided to go to business school, taking the time to really investment in myself at that point. I went to the University of Chicago which is a pretty well known business school, fairly rigorous academically, had a lot of the same beliefs I did as far as how to view economics and the business environment and it was really something that has paid off throughout my career. I can tell you that it's always good to invest in family and friends, it always pays back dividends. The final thing, I would say thinking about best investment from a purely investment sense, how most people think of investing today. I found that having balance in a portfolio just like you have balance in everything else. When I first moved to Silicon Valley, I had a lot of people say, "I'm 100 percent invested in technology." It's easy to think sometimes, "Boy, I'm stupid. I'm not 100 percent invested in technology. I had small cap stocks, mid cap stocks, large cap international, value growth. In hindsight, I think it proves that having a balanced view of your investments, a balanced view of how you're investing your career, your family, financially, balances are really an important thing. The final thing is that the investment of time you spend with the Lord both in Bible study, prayer, fellowship with the body pays back the highest dividends of all. The one thing that you can count on is always a God investment. Some of the others, they go in and out.

s p i r i t u a l

How has God changed your life? How has your choice of faith in God changed your life?

God changed my life completely when He took a hold of it. I became a Christian when I was 12 and I can tell you that the more I've let Jesus be Lord of my life, not just a visitor in my life, not just somebody that I call on occasionally when I'm having a hard time, rather someone that guides day to day. I can tell you it's made an enormous difference. For the most part, people talk about knowing the will of the Lord and how there was a lot of confusion around that. I'd say only half kiddingly that God knows that I'm not very bright and so He opens doors the size of barn doors for me. He makes it very clear. I think that if you listen and if you really take the time to seek God's will, He'll lead you in the right direction and that is life changing. It's also liberating. It enables you to say, "I don't have to make the right decision." The burden's not on you. Turning the day over to the Lord every day is really liberating. It's incredibly invigorating. It means that all the pressure's not on you. I don't know how people do it. People that have incredible pressure filled lives and don't rely on the Lord to lead, I can't imagine how they make it through.

Can you follow Christ and still have a successful career, family and such?

You can absolutely follow Christ and still have a successful career. I would even put it another way. How I could I not follow Christ and still have a successful career? And it goes back to the fact that having foundational truths, things that you know are unchanging, things that you know are absolutely right, that give you a lens to view the world through, help you know right from wrong. It helps you sort out those so-called gray areas and really keep you focused on the right way to treat people, the right way to have balance in your life, the right way to really make decisions. It's absolutely critical and I don't know how you do it without Him.



How does your faith help you in your professional life?

My faith helps me in my professional life in that there are so many times where, at least from a business perspective, there seems to be a gray area. And I find that when you're looking at gray areas and you're looking at things that you're unsure on what to do, going back to your faith to help you find which way to go is really important. And when you look at it through the lens of eternity and look at it through the lens of those foundational truths that don't change, you typically find that it's not a gray area, it's either black or white. And being able to have that clarity in your decision-making is really very valuable.

How has God /faith changed your perspective on fulfillment, significance and success

God has changed my outlook on significance, fulfillment and success in so many ways. There is an old phrase, "Youth is wasted on the young". I thought that was a really silly phrase when I was young. It's really getting to be a lot more true today. I can tell you that the higher I've gone in my career, the less important it is. I can tell you that the more money that I've made, the less important it is. I've really learned that the things that are significant and long-term, the things that really matter are what you leave behind as a legacy. I don't mean a financial legacy, but I mean the lives that you touch, your family, your friends, the witnessing that you do, the things that you do that relate to how you change people's character and the way they see the future and the way that they understand not just this world, but the future after this world I think have become more and more important to me over time.

Is faith critical to leadership or character?

Faith is very important to me in character and leadership. I can tell you that for me, drawing on those timeless truths is a really important bedrock that I've had to build from. For me those come from the Bible and they are always useful in many ways. They've never led me astray, but they give me the foundation to build from. In a world where it seems like values change, a lot of politicians decide what they're going to do based on polling data, clearly the business environment changes constantly, having something that you can go back to and put your faith in that grounds you and is solid as a rock is really important. It's the thing that enables you to be optimistic, to really set a true north course and stay moving forward.

When you talk about faith, do you mean faith in oneself or faith in an external power? How has God changed your perspective on fulfillment, significance and success?

For me it's certainly not faith in one's self that is important when I talk about faith. Because I'm changing all the time. The people around me are changing all the time. Not only just the absolute individuals, but individuals change because of the things they're going through. If you can lock into a set of timeless truths, for me those are Biblical in nature, they're based on the leadings of Jesus Christ in the Lord. Being able to really ground yourself in those is what's really important because that keeps you consistent. People know what you stand for, you're not whip sawed by what's going on in your personal and professional life. When you wake up in the morning and look at your stock portfolio and everything's in red and down, it doesn't effect you in the same way if you're grounded in something that is eternal and really based on the principles of history.

What is the hardest thing about being a believer in your line of work?

The hardest thing about being a believer in my line of work is that there are often really difficult decisions that have to be made. I'll give you a very concrete one. Part of the company that I run is an Internet media business. It's a portal, Excite.com. It's like Yahoo.com, it's like AOL, it's like Lycos. It's a media company. As such, we are the world that people go through to get to the Internet. There are a lot of very bad things on the Internet. There are a lot of terrific things and the Internet is mostly good. But I can tell you things like pornography and handling how to help protect families with their children and how to do it in a way that's not censoring, but gives parents tools. These are really important and tough decisions that have to be made every day in our business. There are times when I have to stand up and say, "We're going to do this to give parents the ability to protect their children. We're going to put a road sign here that says, "Dangerous, careful."" And I can tell you that it's not



something that every Internet company does. It's not necessarily even the way the libertarian view of Silicon Valley was built. But it's an important thing to have to stand up and help manage and make sure that you're constantly keeping out there for people. But it does make you different than what most people do. It puts you in a situation where you're calling yourself out as someone who has a different perspective and that happens to be in my business, but I can tell you it's happened other places along my career. Potential pitfalls are everywhere. Early in my career I had something happen that completely surprised me. Fortune 50 company, well-respected, well-known, we're in Dallas, Texas, it's a bunch of the senior leaders of the company with a lot of the young up and coming junior leaders and after dinner we get on the bus and there are two busses. One is going back to the hotel and the one bus with literally almost every single leader in the company, that had anything to do with my career, is going to a strip bar. A place where women are going to take their clothes off. All the women got on the bus to go back to the hotel. And virtually all of the men got on the bus to go to the club. And the guy that had his hand on my career said, "Come on, Byron, let's go." And I had to say, "You guys go ahead. I don't think that's right for me." I went back to the hotel and called my wife immediately. Two hard things about that: one is not going, but the other thing is also saying the words, "That's not right for me" rather than "I've got a head ache, I don't feel good, I'm tired." That would have been an excuse to get out of it rather than saying, "That's not right for me." At the time it was an incredibly pressure-filled decision. It didn't hurt my career. In fact, I'm confident now with years behind me that those people trusted me and respected me more for making that decision. I'm sure that there are some people that went that didn't want to go. I think it was the right thing to do, but I can tell you at the time it was a very difficult decision and really stressful at the time. It's the right decision to make, but those surprising things that happen out of the blue and you have to decide in a split second. I think it's important that you think ahead of time, when you're in those situations. You have to decide, "I'm going to do what's right and I'm not going to make an excuse for doing what's right".