Be a Change Agent: The Founder of Home Depot Turns to Integrative Health

*An Interview with
Bernie Marcus¹*

Stephen K. Klasko^{2*}

Spend your time looking forward,” **Bernard “Bernie” Marcus** tells us. The co-founder of one of America’s fastest-growing major companies, HOME DEPOT, Bernie has brought a lifelong love of medicine to his philanthropic mission. He has created centers for autism, stroke, trauma, heart disease, and cellular therapy, among others, and now he’s looking at integrative medicine.

Through it all, he is applying what he did at HOME DEPOT: listen and react, find the truth, and trust the customer’s instinct for DIY—“do it yourself.” Each of those values makes fantastic guides to the future of health-care. Here’s **Bernie Marcus**:

Mr. Marcus: Can I start it off? I think it is very interesting that you would talk to a businessman. But I think you should understand in advance that I do have some foothold in the medical world.

I started out as a premed student, and wanted to be a doctor from the time I was 12. I am 86-years-old, so we are talking about the 1940s and 1950s. After two years of premed, I could not get into medical school because I was Jewish, and they had a quota system. But I always wanted to be a doctor.

Dr. Klasko: I understand. Now, tell me about one of the great success stories in America. HOME DEPOT is the fastest-growing retailer in the history of this country.

Mr. Marcus: I can start by talking about how HOME DEPOT came to be, and how this might reflect on medicine. You know, we opened a business, a new approach to business in a very old business model. I suppose that for probably a couple of hundred years, our type of products had been sold in the world through lumber stores, paint stores, electrical stores, plumbing stores. We looked at what our customers wanted, and we developed the answer to their needs.

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What did they want? They wanted one-stop shopping, which was critical. They did not want to go to the plumbing store and then the hardware store and then the lumber store—put it all under one roof. They wanted to be able to have access to the top brands. They wanted to have value prices, low prices, and reasonable prices. And the most important thing of all, they wanted qualified people who could help them pick their products.

Dr. Klasko: Were those trends obvious at the time?

Mr. Marcus: I will tell you, when we opened this business, we had great difficulty in raising the financing for it. Nobody believed that this new model that we were talking about would have a chance.

And I think that one of the ways we became successful was that, when we opened stores, I spent my time in the parking lots talking to customers who left our store to find out why they did not buy anything, or if they bought something, why they did not buy something else that may be important to them to have to do the job—you are buying paint, why not buy a paintbrush?

The growth of HOME DEPOT did not happen by magic. It happened by very hard work and listening very carefully to what our customers had to say and what our associates had to say.

My way of running the company as CEO was to wander around and ask questions and speak to all of the people under the bureaucracy. In other words, I never spent a lot of time with the people that were right under me. I spent most of the time with the people on the floor of the store, people who were in the warehouses, people who were in the delivery service, and the cashiers. And I spoke to the manufacturers to find out what we were doing right and what we were doing wrong.

So our success came about from listening to customers—and I think this is a good lesson for the world of medicine.

And it is very important that you understand that the success of HOME DEPOT was based on our premise: listening and reacting, which are two critical actions that I do not believe happen in the world of medicine today.

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Dr. Stephen Klasko (left)
with Bernie Marcus

Dr. Klasko: You've helped many people, and have been a patient yourself. Is that what you've seen?

Mr. Marcus: I know it does not happen. As a patient, I have spoken to a lot of nurses and doctors and I never ask the question, "How is it going?" I ask, "Why are they preventing you from doing what you have to do?" Asking the right questions is a key to success.

Dr. Klasko: Bernie, let me just follow up with one question. Given that you have gotten yourself so involved in healthcare, starting from the outside looking in, and since a lot of the folks who read this are both patient advocates and CEOs, what are three or four things you have heard or seen from patients, doctors, and nurses that really jump out at you and say, "Gosh, this is what is making it harder for me to be healthy as a patient," or, "This is what is making it harder for me to do my job"?

Mr. Marcus: Well, let us start with the doctors. You know, when you go in to see your doctor, and they start asking you questions—it's not their questions, but the questions on the computer. And that takes x number of minutes to do. They never look at you and ask you the really important questions. And I will give you a perfect example of this. I had a situation, a urology situation. And I had a doctor who was one of the top doctors from one of the best universities. And I had a problem, a really serious problem. I got exactly seven minutes with him. Now, remember, I was an executive. I was a well-known person. I got seven minutes. During that seven minutes, I would say that three and a half minutes was spent on nonsense, on things that were not important, and the truth is, he had very little time to listen to me on what my real issues were.

Because of that situation, I happened to go to a small-town urologist, who actually spent an hour listening to me and discovered, by asking the right questions, that I had a very serious problem, which we attended to. And if I had not, it would have been a really serious thing for me.

So there is a perfect example of not looking in the patient's eyes and not being able to ask the kind of questions that they have to ask.

I have also spoken to a lot of nurses, and—when you get them to open up—they tell me that the system is no good. The system does not work. They apologize for delays. They apologize for the lack of attention, for all of those things that make the system so bad for patients.

Bernie Marcus speaks at the newly opened Brind-Marcus Center of Integrative Medicine at Jefferson.

Dr. Klasko: So let me take that to the next step, because everybody knows what you and your partners were able to do in bringing do-it-yourself and home improvement together, but a lot of people do not know what your foundation's philanthropy and resolve have done to broaden the minds of many of us healthcare providers and have us engage with a better understanding of the value of integrative medicine to the wellness of patients. You mentioned a few that you have done down at Atlanta, and obviously what you have done along with our Myrna Brind at our INTERGRATIVE MEDICAL CENTER in Jefferson is key. These are not small investments, and obviously your foundation continues to make them.

So could you share with us and the readers the reasons you are so passionate about integrative health and where you see the role of integrative medicine progressing in healthcare over the next decade?

Mr. Marcus: Yes. I have a particular doctor who is an integrative medicine doctor. He has used herbs. He has used massage. He has used chiropractic, and he has taken care of my family for well over 20 years. And I have watched the things that he does, and I have watched the fact that he could give us herbs instead of medicines—medicines where we always had a serious reaction, medicines that in fact could be dangerous in some situations. And instead of that, he gave us simple remedies that worked for us.

And I can tell you that some of them were exotic. Some of them were like umbilical cord stem cells, heavy doses of vitamin C, which he uses for cancer patients, that we know anecdotally alleviates some of the side effects of chemotherapy—losing the hair, the energy, the appetite, et cetera, et cetera. And it has been used by holistic medicine/integrative doctors for the last 15–20 years. And medicine turns its nose up at it, even though it is a vitamin and it goes in and out of the body, it is very, very hard to sell to anybody.

Fortunately, we now have some rigorous clinical trials going on at leading institutions, hopefully to prove this effect, and have the data available for others to use. That is what integrative medicine is. It is trying different, non-traditional ways of dealing with ailments that people have—you might call it different strokes for different folks.

Integrative medicine is an all-around thing. In my own case, where I once had a very serious parasite in me that they were having great, great difficulty getting rid of, I can also tell you that I was on the verge of losing my life because we had gone through several treatments. I weighed about 170 pounds, lost almost 20 pounds in a very short period of time, and I was slowly but surely dehydrating. And this particular doctor brought a root from the Amazon, and it accomplished what all these major drugs did not do, and it did it in a very short amount of time, like two or three days.

“ Integrative medicine is an all-around thing.”

So I have experienced the value of integrative medicine myself, and I am a great believer in it. We helped open this clinic at Jefferson, and hopefully we are going to prove this. I think the other thing that will

happen is that medical students are going to be exposed to it, which I think is very important—that they do not have blinders on their eyes that most medical doctors have when it comes to these kinds of nutrients. For most doctors, if it is not taught in medical school, it is not kosher. So I think it is going to have a very, very important effect on medicine in the future.

Dr. Klasko: I have learned this from talking to folks such as Fred Sanfilippo in your foundation and George Zabrecky. But for so long, we called anything “alternative medicine” that was not us just giving a drug or doing surgery. But this is how people in two-thirds of the world actually get their care, as you said, often with better results for chronic diseases as well as cost. In some respects, healthcare is the only thing that is not global. So some of this, Bernie, is really about globalizing medicine, is it not?

Mr. Marcus: Well, I think so. But the medical profession has these, as I said, these blinders on, and does not want to use it.

But, okay. We are doing the research now, and with the papers that are being published, maybe we can change one way that cancer patients are treated and alleviate some of the pain and suffering that these people go through.

Dr. Klasko: Let me just get back to HOME DEPOT for a second. As you said, when you started, not everybody thought this was a brilliant idea. “Why would anybody want to work on their own home and do it themselves? Are there not professionals?”

So when you think about the do-it-yourself concept, do you see parallels with healthcare? I am not sure we are going to get to do-it-yourself healthcare, but are there ways that we could look at do-it-yourself healthcare as the same kind of focus on wellness and self-ownership of personal health?

Mr. Marcus: I think we are seeing it now, with all of these sites on the Internet. When my friends or I go to a doctor and he tells us we have a certain condition and what the symptoms are, we go back and Google it. And when you walk into the doctor’s office, you are not ignorant. You basically have some knowledge of it.

Bernie Marcus speaking about his support of integrative medicine at the Brind-Marcus Center.

“ I have experienced the value of integrative medicine myself, and I am a great believer in it. ”

I think in the future, more and more people will do that. There will be easier sites to access. And all of a sudden, when a doctor says to you, “Well, you have such-and-such a condition. This is the medicine I am going to give you,” you are going to say, “Hey, wait a second. That has a lot of side effects.” Or, “I understand there is a medicine that is better.” That is like the do-it-yourself.

You know, Steve, if you go back years ago when you were practicing medicine and you told a patient something, they just looked at you; whatever you said, they agreed with. Today, patients walk into a doctor’s office and say, “I have read about this, and why are you not giving me such-and-such? Why are you not treating this way?” Whether you know it or not, that is do-it-yourself medicine. To what extent, I do not know, but in many cases, an intelligent patient is going to be a safer patient because they are going to have the ability to question the practitioner.

I have talked to old-time doctors. They say they could not handle what is happening today because the patients know too much.

“Today, patients walk into a doctor’s office and say, ‘I have read about this, and why are you not giving me such-and-such?’”

Dr. Klasko: So let us move from the patient to the nation’s healthcare system.

Since the whole issue gets down to cost, access, and quality, it also seems that some of the things you brought up earlier—that if we were able to embrace some of the principles of integrative health and wellness—then in some cases, that may reduce the cost enough to increase access. Is that a fair statement?

Mr. Marcus: I think it is fair. I have an old theory about this, my own personal theory. We did it with our associates. If people do not have skin in the game, they really do not care. When you get just something that you think is free and you do not have to pay for anything, you do not question it.

I think the fact that people are dealing with deductibles today makes them more apt to question the treatment that they are getting. Unfortunately, the way the system works now with deductibles, many people are just not getting treatment because they just cannot afford the deductibles. But there is an intelligent way to do it. The way it should have been done originally was one simple thing: to let the insurance companies go cross-state. That would have cut out a great deal of the problem.

The other thing, which is the big bear in the room, is the cost of litigation, both for hospitals and for drug companies. Nobody has attacked that issue. And if you would look at your hospital, Steve, and you try to figure out what the actual cost of defensive medicine is in your establishment, you would probably find out it is 25–30%.

Dr. Klasko: Yeah, it is \$25 million just for the insurance. Right.

Mr. Marcus: Somebody is going to have to pay for it. So rather than going to the root of the problem, which would have been an intelligent way to do it, there are politicians who are really selling emotion. It is unfortunate, but I just think that we are heading in the wrong direction.

And you look at this country. This country has such wonderful, wonderful systems right now. I had a very dear friend—and I think it is important to tell you this story—he is a Canadian. He is a very philanthropic guy. He had given money to his local hospital—I am talking about millions of dollars. He was desperate for an MRI. He called me on the phone and told me he was in severe pain, he had a back problem, and he said he needed an MRI, but he had to wait three weeks. I begged him to come down to Atlanta, and he would have one in the morning, one in the afternoon, one in the evening, if necessary. In Canada, you cannot get it.

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Dr. Klasko: Let me ask you, if you were not Jewish (because of the quotas for entering medical school), you would be a doctor. In a *Back to the Future* type way, what do you think you would be doing now, or would have been doing for your career? We would not have HOME DEPOT.

Mr. Marcus: I think I would be in management. I am an entrepreneur. I probably could have been a very good doctor. I always say, “I could’ve been somebody.” But the truth is, I would probably be heading an institute, because I am a change artist, and I do not believe in the status quo. I am constantly looking for new ways to do things, and I am very aggressive about that, Steve. It sounds like somebody you know. Namely, you.

Dr. Klasko: That is why we MATCH.COM so well.

Mr. Marcus: But I think that unfortunately, very unfortunately, the medical world does not have change artists. You have people going from one institution to another. They do the same thing from place to place, and nobody wants to upset the equilibrium that they think they have. And meanwhile, the patients and the physicians themselves suffer with it. Well, the other issue is that I probably would not last long.

Dr. Klasko: Well, no. You would last long. I mean, I have lasted long. You just get aggravated a lot. Let’s ask the flip question: What makes you happy?

Mr. Marcus: I love to have people around me who are happy. I am very happy when people are successful around me and achieve the goals that they want to achieve, because the business ends up being better when you have really qualified, happy people working for you.

At HOME DEPOT, we had one other element that was involved, and that was doing things for our customers. We are one of the few companies in America that I am aware of that, even today, spends enormous amounts of money helping people in need. Any time there is a tornado, a hurricane, any severe weather conditions, HOME DEPOT stores are open to people. It is almost a universal thing in every single one of our stores.

We call it the Jewish word *tzedakah*, which is giving back. And this company lives and breathes it. And we never, ever advertise it, but all of our people know that if something happens where somebody has to step forward and help our customers or help ourselves, our associates, they do it, and that makes them happy. It is a concept that is called the HOME DEPOT culture that I have never seen anywhere else.

And because of that, when you go into a HOME DEPOT store, generally when somebody says, “I would like to help you find what you want,” they really mean it. It is just not perfunctory. It is just not a greeting that they have. That is what made me happy then.

I will tell you that what makes me happy today is my involvement in the medical world and other areas, such as education and medical research and science. I cannot tell you how many people we have affected in autism. It goes into the thousands, literally, how many people have been helped.

I hear this constantly, and it makes you feel as though you are really doing something for somebody. It is meaningful to me, much more meaningful now than what the quarterly reports did for me when I was running a business.

Dr. Klasko: Let’s take this forward. How do you see yourself further impacting the lives of people in the future?

Mr. Marcus: Listen, I hope I live a long life. I have my integrative doctor taking care of me, and at 86 years of age, I think I still have the energy level I have had before. And I know that we have about 35 major programs out there that will have an impact. I cannot say that all of them will be successful. If a small portion of

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them are successful, they are going to save a lot of lives in addition to many of the other things we are doing.

In education, I am trying to teach people that socialism is not the answer, that capitalism or the free enterprise system is the answer. It is why I have had the success in my life, starting out with Russian immigrant parents, having no money, living in a fourth-story tenement in Newark, New Jersey, absolutely broke. It only happened because of the free enterprise system. It could not have happened in Russia.

So there are a lot of things I want to do in my life, and hopefully, medicine is going to keep me alive to do it.

Dr. Klasko: And you're still playing golf. So, one last question. People are interested in you personally. So what would the 80-some-year-old Bernie Marcus tell the 30-some- or 40-some-year-old Bernie Marcus? Is there anything that you did that you would have done differently if you had the advantage of looking at it through the eyes you have now?

Mr. Marcus: No, no. I have to tell you something, Steve. I really do not look back. Looking back is very negative, and being a backseat quarterback of what you could have done and what you didn't do. My life has turned out pretty well, and believe me, I have made mistakes. And my attitude, who I am is that I am very outspoken. I say what I want to say, and I have always been that way all my life.

I think that people who look backwards go backwards.

I am more concerned about where I am going to be in the next 10 years and whether I am going to be productive rather than what I could have done 15 or 20 years ago.

So why look back? I mean, spend your time looking forward.

Dr. Klasko: I think that is a great, great ending. Bernie, really, thank you so much for your time. ■■■

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