Disney Exec Builds Career Around the Magic of Storytelling

Andrew Sugerman, ’97

Meeting the Challenge

Andrew Sugerman, ’97, loves a challenge. That’s part of the reason for his participation in Chicago Booth’s Meet Us at a Million Challenge. Sugerman is one of ten alumni who agreed to pledge $100,000 each to fund a $1 million pool to match all gifts to the Annual Fund through June 1.

“To be honest, it is one of the bigger gifts I have given to a single organization,” Sugerman said of his gift to the school. “But it was the right thing at the right time—and the right angle, from a marketing standpoint—to engage a broader audience. I was challenged!”

As Disney’s executive vice president of publishing and digital media, Sugerman has faced many challenges—including developing a successful career that combines business and art, an unlikely mix.

“I’ve always enjoyed math and the creative process, and majored in fine arts and accounting at the College of William & Mary,” he said. “But when I graduated and was looking to start my career, I couldn’t find a job that blended the two. I ended up going down the accounting path and quickly decided that did not bring the right level of creativity to my working life.”

After a couple of years working at Arthur Andersen, Sugerman decided to pursue an MBA. As he looked into various schools, Chicago Booth emerged as the leader.

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“I chose Booth because I’ve always loved data-driven decision making, which might sound at odds with the creative process, but I feel it’s the marriage of art and science,” he said. “I was comfortable with where I was regarding art and thought Booth could really help me with the science. So I enrolled for the quantitative aspects of the school, which was rooted in economics, since I thought that would be the right counterbalance for my creative side.”

Sugerman had taken many courses in finance and accounting as an undergraduate, so at Booth, he focused on classes involving organizational behavior and leadership. Three of his favorite teachers were Austin Goolsbee, Marvin Zonis, and Merton Miller.

“The degree helped my skill development, which ranged from what I learned in the classroom to just being part of the program,” he said. “The confidence you get from being around amazingly smart people raises your game. And I think who you are when you leave Booth, compared with who you are when you arrive at Booth, is definitely a transformational journey.”
Upon receiving his MBA, Sugerman went into consulting for a couple of years. He focused on smaller consulting firms because he was seeking a broader, well-rounded experience. During that time, he was exposed to early internet publishing and said that is when the creative and business aspects of his career started coming together.

He then worked for EF Education First’s start-up, English Live, where he built a global online distance learning subscription service which led to “click-and-mortar” schools which combined online learning with local learning centers in mainland China and Eastern Europe.

He joined the Walt Disney Company in 2007 as senior vice president and general manager. Prior to his role as publisher, he headed Disney English, which he built into a brick-and-mortar business in China, with 30 learning centers in six cities.

“I did not speak Chinese and not many people in Shanghai spoke English at the time. I had to be comfortable being uncomfortable, have a really good sense of humor, and had to be willing to put myself out there,” he said. “Starting that business from scratch was very difficult. It was a lot of work, seven days a week. But there were many benefits, including what it did for my family. My children are fluent in Chinese and have been to more than 30 countries. It was a unique experience, and it made our family extremely close.”

He then went on to lead Disney Publishing Worldwide, the world’s largest publisher of children’s books, magazines, and apps, with more than $3 billion in sales per year. Recently, he added oversight for Disney’s digital media business to his responsibilities, managing the company’s social, web, and digital influencer efforts—including the recent acquisition of Maker Studios. In addition to overseeing the business side, Sugerman’s fine arts background allows him to use a creative lens in the review and approval of written and visual storytelling across all media and distribution platforms.

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His demanding job abroad removed Sugerman from much of what was happening in the United States, including family, friends, and his schools. But when returned to the States, he decided to attend his 20-year reunion and participated in a Booth 20/20 event.

At his reunion, Sugerman said he was ‘blown away’ by the changes to the campus and the curiosity and intelligence of today’s students. He made an investment in the school because he wanted to be a part of that. He also hopes to return to campus to talk with students who were fascinated by his work with such a beloved company.

“I have a career that’s been built around the magic of storytelling,” he said. “When I participated in the 20/20 program at the school, people afterward asked me about how I navigated the blend of creative and business. There were so many people interested in those opportunities, which would use more of their left brain.”

For those who are considering a gift to the school, Sugerman had this advice.

“It’s important to remember the role every person and institution had on your journey,” he said. “Take a moment to think back about the time you had in Chicago. By going there, you have a responsibility to ensure that Booth is the best experience it can be for those students who come after you.”

Sugerman credits some of his current success to Chicago Booth.

“Publishing is not known for being a high-growth industry, maybe one to two percent a year,” he said. “At Disney, we’ve had a growth rate for the past seven years that’s dramatically higher than that, and it’s because we are constantly challenging the status quo to reinvent publishing and do things differently than other publishing houses. It’s all tied to the ability to think strategically, analytically, and beyond—and much of that goes back to my time at Chicago Booth.”