



Nice Finishes First: Why Cutthroat Management is Over - and Collaboration Is In

Ellen Rohr and [Peter Shankman](#)

Ellen: Greetings, it's Ellen Rohr, The Plumber's Wife, turned business makeover expert. Welcome to Business Makeover 2014, it's a bonus interview today, with one of my favorite people, Peter Shankman; I am a big fan. Saddle up, listen in and be present. Today is your opportunity, right now, our opportunity, to think about what we really want out of life and be inspired.

Springboard into aligned action and make 2014 your best year yet. I love spending time with our experts and I'm completely star struck today with Peter Shankman. We have never visited officially in person before, but because you are so good at sharing who you are, what you believe in and why you do what you do I feel like I know you so I'm really excited to meet you in person for the first time ever.

Before I bring you on the line I would like to share a little of your bio, which is so impressive. You have a new book coming out which aligns with our topic today, *Nice Companies Finish First; Why Cutthroat Management is Over and Collaboration Is In*. The air of authoritarian cowboy CEOs like Jack Welch and Lee Iacocca is over, which is one of the reviews of your book. In an age of increasing transparency and access it just doesn't pay to be a jerk, to employees, customers, competitors or anyone else.

You've been described as crazy but effective. I love that. You're an author, entrepreneur, speaker, worldwide connector and you're globally recognized for radical new ways of thinking about marketing, customer service, advertising and PR. Your new company is Shankman\Honig, a consultancy designed to help corporations, businesses, and retail operations create stellar customer service that resonates in our new "conversation economy," driving revenue, repeat business, and new customers.

You're best known, which is how I found out about you, through Help A Reporter Out (HARO). In 2008, you started this business in your apartment and then it was acquired in 2010 by Vocus, Inc., a huge entrepreneurial success story. I met you through HARO where I would submit things to them and they help you by quoting you in your articles, it's such a rockin' awesome concept. You also work with American Express, Sprint, the Department of Defense, Real Bank of Canada, Snapple... and the rest of the list seems to be nearly a half a page long.

You can share some of your experiences as we visit, but I don't want to go too much longer without introducing you. Hi Peter.

Peter: Hi there, how are you? I was wondering if we were ever going to get to me.

Ellen: I cut out 16 pages of accomplishments, you have so much. You know what really struck me with you? I knew who you were and what HARO was, I was playing with that and loving it and then I read your blog about the Morton's employee who brought you your steak at the airport. That blew my mind. That's when I fell in love with you.

Peter: Crazy events.

Ellen: The theme of our program is about makeover, breakthroughs and quantum leaps. **Can you look at your past and find a moment where you said this has to change, and share that with us? How does that resonate with you?**

Peter: In 1998, I was consulting for a company that was my last gig and the owner of the company was miserable and wasn't a nice person. He would go out of his way to try and screw over employees and it wasn't a good place. I had very little money in the bank and I would go to work everyday and be miserable. I knew this wasn't how I wanted to spend my life. I woke up one day and said 'this has to change.' I quit my job. I told my parents I was quitting. They said I was crazy; I didn't have any money and didn't know how I was going to survive. I walked out and felt 30 pounds lighter instantly.

The next morning I asked myself what I was going to do. I knew I wanted to start a PR firm. I knew that's what I could do, but it was the summer of 98' and an independent film that didn't do well at the box office 'Titanic' was coming out on video. I had around \$1800 in the bank which was my rent money, but I took it and said there had to be people out there who hated this movie as much as I did. On a whim I took my rent money and had 500 t-shirts printed up that read '*it sank, get over it*'.

I went into Time Square and figured if I could sell 180 shirts at \$10 I'd make my rent money back and if I didn't do that then I was homeless. I figured it would take a week, but I sold 500 shirts in six hours in Time Square in one night and made \$5000. I came home and threw it up in the air. I rolled around in it naked.

Ellen: You know what we do that, my husband 'Hotrod' and me do that when we get paid in cash. I'm so glad we're not the only ones, throw it up in the air and clothes are optional.

Peter: I did that and the next morning I called a reporter and said, 'I did something I thought was funny. I thought you'd get a kick out of it.' The reporter said, 'that's hysterical, are you selling the shirts online now?' I said, 'of course I am, as I built the worlds worst website on the fly.' I didn't think anything of it.

A couple days later I got a phone call at 5:30 in the morning to my hosting provider about my website and they said, 'so sorry to bother you, normally you get about 100 visitors a day to your website, most of them are you.' I said, 'thanks that makes me feel great.' He said, 'you've had almost 37k unique visitors in the past two hours. You're about to crash our first, second and third primary servers. You're going to take down our fourth, fifth and sixth and we only have seven.'

The story ran on the front page of the Life Section of USA Today. I hung up the phone. It rang again and it was the Today Show. I hung up again and it was Good Morning America.

Ellen: My jaw is hanging open. This is such a fun story.

Peter: I sold 10k shirts on the web and in just under two months cleared about \$100k and that's how I started my first company.

Ellen: So HARO came, oh these guys are looking for stories... if they're going to gobble this up then they're going to gobble something else up?

Peter: Well, HARO actually came about several years later and the logic behind it was that I always talk to everyone. I'm a big believer that you should never miss a chance to meet someone. Never miss a chance to say hello to someone and figure out how you can help them. The difference is that a lot of people do that and they figure out, how can they help me whereas, my logic has always been how can I help you?

My goal then is to meet everyone I can, talk to them and see what they're doing. So, over time, I had this database of people I knew, people who did the weirdest things, like ferry operators, airline pilots and Navy Seals and a guy who makes 60% of the world's shoe laces. Random people I meet on planes around the world, so I would be talking to reporters and I'd be like yeah I have a lot of people I know, if you need anyone and they started calling.

Over time it became this daily thing that at least one or two reporters would call a day and ask for sources. So I thought there has to be a better way to do this than spending my entire day finding the right source. I built a Facebook group. We added to that over a couple weeks and the next thing that happened was that I moved it to the web and HARO was born, and here we are.

Ellen: Was there an aha moment or lesson in all of that, that you were at this moment of desperation, you had to make some money? It's no fun when your parents say really, what are you doing with your life? Then it spring-boarded into this kind of imposed moment where you had to get created or you'd be out in the street. **Did that dawn on you at the time or did you just look back on it and go oh, that's pretty serendipitous that that happened that way?**

Peter: I love movie quotes and there's a quote, *'the difference of living and the difference of dying'*. So many people that you encounter, spend so much energy griping about the situation, if they took one-eighth of that energy and used it to solve their situation, can you imagine how amazing this whole world would be?

Ellen: I was working with a client once and he said, 'why do I like you?' I'm always busting his chops, but I said, 'because I don't complain.' I think that's the number one reason why I'm popular is that I just don't and it really does free up a lot of time doesn't it. As you share... I came to know you through social media. This is the first time you and I have ever talked and I love you. I saw in your TED talk that you talk about good sharing and bad sharing. You really strike the balance.

I've learned something about you personally. I know you're a skydiver. I'm a marathon runner too. I love that about you, but I also know what you're doing with business and how you connect people. Talk a little about if you do this consciously or do you have guidelines you follow. Help us with that.

Peter: It's funny, before I got married and had a kid. I'd be giving a speech and people would be like oh, we know everything about you, we can't share as much as you do, you're just so popular. I'm like no I'm not. They're like yes you are, we know everything and I'd look at them and go okay, and I'd say to them in front of hundreds of people at a conference I'd say am I straight or gay? They'd stop and go, we don't know. I'm like right.

Ellen: That's something your friends know.

Peter: You know exactly what I want to post and what I want you to know. I said the closest you'll ever come to knowing that is that I posted that I went to a George Michael concert and even that's ambiguous, so you don't know. I said, 'you can share as much or as little as you want in

your life and still have an entire world to yourself.' I try deliberately to keep my wife out of a lot of my posts, because she doesn't need that drama. Plus, I think she secretly hates people. She doesn't need that, so why give that to her so I deliberately try to keep her out of that.

Ellen: What makes someone a good sharer? I know there are people, Allison talking about you when I'm scrolling through my Facebook, if I see Allison I always stop. Eric Oni, I love what he posts, he's a great Twitter person and I really don't know why. **How do you define a good sharer?**

Peter: For me, a good sharer is someone who knows his/her audience and gives information that makes people want to see what they have to say. It could be that it makes them laugh, it makes them learn something. Whatever it is you want to give people something that makes their day somehow better, in whatever that is. For me, that's humor, inspiration and giving out things that I hope will brighten someone's day.

Ellen: You also write as if you're talking to one person, which is charming. It sounds like you're talking to just me when I read and if you haven't met Peter Shankman yet, Google him and find his TED talk on YouTube. Once you get to his blog you'll want to definitely subscribe to it and see how he does this. You'll take your experiences... in the TED talk you talked about being on United Airlines on an inaugural flight and you show one picture which really captures the moment.

I think you are particularly gifted at identifying a moment where the ordinary has been elevated, that someone else might not notice.

Peter: That's a good point. I just think life is too short. Everyone says I'm in a bad relationship. Then get out of it! I'm at a bad job. Get out. Life is too short. I know skydivers who wake up in the morning, go for a jump and they never come home because they die. I know people who walk down the street and get hit by a drunk driver and they're dead, that's it, you're life is over, that's it. Why waste your time complaining saying everything is so boring.

Look at the world we live in, you're not allowed to be bored! It's sacrilege to be bored.

Ellen: Your latest book is all about being nice and I've worked for a jerk and made a commitment now that I'm not doing that again and no one at my company can be a jerk, I'm just not interested. Tell me how you went in this direction. **What made you focus on nice?**

Peter: A couple things. When I was running HARO, everyday the emails came from me, from peter@shankman.com. Whenever anyone had a question they would simply ask me and I would respond. So, when I sold HARO it actually sold at a premium because I had this incredible loyal audience of people who just liked me because I did normal things, like respond.

It was this amazing world when I had this moment of clarity and thought, holy crap, most people expect to be treated like crap. Treat people one level above crap and they'll like you. Treat them well and they'll go out of their way to be loyal.

Ellen: Let me go back to a moment. You were doing it all yourself, as you sold it and there are a couple things I want to mention here. First, I work with a lot of dirty jobs guys; I'm the plumber's wife. My people are plumbing, heating, cooling, electrical, chimney sweeps and I love them, but they're often in a position in their company where they're the guy. They're getting the call and they're going to do the work. If they want to grow their company though they have to entrust someone else.

How did you get that to happen where you're not the one answering every email?

How did you communicate that?

What were some of the things you did to make sure that someone who was trying to protect your or be professional didn't come off as not nice?

How did you communicate that to the next group of people who were going to be representing?

Peter: I learned a few interesting lessons. You want to be aware, if your audience knows who you are, that they're the ones who want to matter, the ones we need to care about. The people you hire are going to be representative of that and the first rule is that they have to be just as nice. They're never going to have the same passion and drive you do, because it's your project. However, they can be just as nice and they can understand the value of good customer service. That's huge!

Ellen: Do you have a nice test?

Peter: Every new employee gets a lunch and I see how they deal with the wait staff.

Ellen: I love that.

Peter: That's a given. I see how they interact with people and it's easy to do in Manhattan, when you walk down the street you're always being assaulted by 4000 people on either side of you, do you bump into them, let them pass and there's a fine line between letting them pass and being taken advantage of.

Ellen: I love that. There's transition happening perhaps, that the previously highly respected CEO who ruled with an iron fist, and I have worked for a guy like that, that your premise is that that's changing or it should change. If I have been one of those guys, suppose I'm kind of old school and that's how I've been managing. **What could I learn and how could I make the change from being a my way or highway kind of guy?**

Peter: It does. Here's what it comes down to. At the end of the day and you can run it the way you want. There's nothing wrong with having a set of rules for your company and making sure people follow them. However, you can do it without being a hard ass, the difference is you need to be flexible and you need to allow and be able to say hey, things aren't working this way so let's try to change it. Being able to grow that mentality is huge.

To me, I think a lot of people have a problem where they think if they start being nice people will lose respect for them. People confuse nice with weakness. Because you're nice doesn't mean you're weak. Al Capone had this great quote, *'don't confuse my being nice for weakness, being nice is what you see the first time I see you. If you cross me I guarantee you the last thing you're going to see is weakness.'* It's a brilliant quote and it's so true. I can be the nicest person in the world, but screw me once it's on.

I have the sharpest lawyer you never ever want to meet and I've had to use him a couple times. That's a lesson. You have the ability to be nice. I will be nice to you as long as you're nice to me and I will go out of my way to do it. The day you stop forget it, we're on.

Ellen: It reminds me I had a client who said, 'I'm really a type a personality. It drives me crazy when someone walks over a piece of dust on the floor and doesn't stop to pick it up and I realized I just have to lower my standards, because I'm making myself nuts. I'm going to have a heart attack about this.' My thought was, instead of lowering your standards why don't you just not take it quite so hard? Like a reaction to being an enforcer can be friendly and doesn't have to make us heart attack prone.

If you decide in 2014 you're going to become collaborative with your team, your employees, **what are some suggestions you have?** I love taking a new hire to lunch to see how they treat people who they aren't trying to impress, that's great. **What are other things I could do to reshape my relationships with my teams and customers?**

Peter: The best thing you can do is to learn to leave your comfort zone and take risks, things that aren't necessarily considered normal. I reach out to customers and clients once a month and I show up at their offices randomly without telling them and I take them pizza. Sometimes they're there and sometimes they aren't but it's great and I get to learn from people. It's a wonderful way to leave my comfort zone and challenge myself. See, the problem with a comfort zone is it's a beautiful place but nothing good ever happens there.

Ellen: Could it be as simple as moving your desk around and making changes?

Peter: Yes, I work from different places. I'll fly to Dubai on a whim just for the hell of it since I've never been.

Ellen: And you jump out of airplanes. **Do you do those things in part when you feel stale?** I remember a few years ago I thought I'm too young to say I'm too old to run another marathon, so I ran one. It was something I had to do to remind myself that I could do something like that.

Peter: I'm doing my second Iron Man this August.

Ellen: Have you always done it? What drives you? When you're between things, what makes you want to do another one?

Peter: Mostly I like losing weight because I consider myself fat. I workout to lose weight. Primarily, for me it's a great way to challenge myself.

Ellen: You jump out of planes.

Peter: I do.

Ellen: What was that first one like?

Peter: The first one was a publicity stunt from when I ran my PR agency. I took 150 CEOs skydiving and had to do it myself. Most people were able to walk away. I got addicted.

Ellen: How fun, so you just thought I'm going to do something they've never done before and it will stretch me. That's what you mean by getting about your comfort zone.

Peter: Exactly.

Ellen: Tell me a story... The Morton story was great and maybe for those who don't know it do you want to recap that or do you have another customer service story? You pay attention. **What has caught your attention to give an example?** It's elevating the ordinary and I love that. People are delivering food all day everyday across this great country, but sometimes it's that little bit more that makes it extraordinary and that company, Morton, has a ton of publicity from you bragging on them. What a nice way to help someone. Share that with our audience or another.

Peter: Morton is a fun one. I eat at Morton's a lot so they know who I am. I was flying home from Florida after a business trip on a one day trip, I was starving and it was like 5:00 o'clock. I jokingly

said I tweeted, hey Morton's why don't you meet me at Newark Airport with a Porterhouse when I land in two hours. Ha-Ha. The same way you'd jokingly say...

Ellen: Like Ryan Gosling, why don't you pick me up at the airport?

Peter: Right, hey winter, please stop snowing. I woke up from the plane, we landed and I got downstairs and I was greeted by my driver and next to him is a guy in a tuxedo who is holding a Morton's bag with a steak and everything. It was crazy. It was one of those things that was mind blowing to me. I wrote about it and it turned into great PR for them. They got a million dollars of press and I got a free steak. It was voted one of the top 10 tweets of 2011 by Twitter.

Ellen: I want to underline this. A top 10 tweet where you were reaching out to see what happens. It wasn't even like you had an intention behind it you just put something fun out there and someone responded to it. Then the magic happened because you noticed, paid attention and you wrote this fun snappy blog. Then people like me shared it and it went everywhere. **What was the total number of impressions on that, do you know?**

Peter: I know that their sales went into double digits that year from that one event. I also know that the following weekend their reservations climbed to 150% storewide. It was crazy.

Ellen: How cool, your motivation on the blog was simply that you wanted to brag on them and let people know.

Peter: It was significant. It was a great thing so I thought hey, let's share it.

Ellen: Look at what this can mean. I like the concept, when someone is nice to you it doesn't always have to be about you when you're posting and in fact, the very best ones are collaborative, they're fun, bragging on someone else or highlighting something that someone is doing. **As you look to the future, you've done some amazing things, so what are you doing to put yourself in an uncomfortable position?**

Peter: I have a seven month old daughter, that's about as uncomfortable it gets.

Ellen: **Is this your first child?**

Peter: Prior to this I had a cat.

Ellen: Congratulations, it's certainly an adventure.

Peter: It is indeed. She's a beautiful girl, I love her tremendously. She's amazing.

Ellen: May I share some unsolicited parenting advice?

Peter: Sure.

Ellen: So many people will tell you that the teenage years are tough and all this other stuff. I have one, who's 28 and everyday has been better than the day before. We never had a bad patch at all. I don't think that gets shared enough, how cool a seven month old is? Eight months is better and 28 is better, it just gets better, so embrace the adventure and you're hearing it from at least one that the teenage years are a blast.

Peter: I can't wait it'll be fun.

Ellen: You are a great man and you continue to inspire me daily. Thank you so much for being part of the program. I have a link to share that will take our audience to your new book. Go to BusinessMakeover2014.com/shankman. **Would you like to share a little about the book?**

Peter: Sure. It's *Nice Companies Finish First; Why Cutthroat Management is Over and Collaboration Is In*. It is awesome. It's my first bestseller and it talks about why at the end of the day you make more money and generate more revenue by being nice.

Ellen: Why not, what's not to love? Then you don't have a heart attack and more fun, it's all good. You are a sweetheart and I send you lots of love and joy. Let me know if I can ever do anything for you. I'm a dirty jobs expert and wife of a plumber. I don't really get dirty but I ride along often and I know tons of contractors, so let me know any time you need something, I'll send them along.

Peter: Awesome, looking forward to it.

Ellen: Thanks so much. Goodbye.

Peter: Bye everyone. Thanks.

Ellen: Thanks everyone for joining us for Business Makeover 2014.