

Radical Sabbaticals

Can you afford to take time off? Can you afford not to?

by PAMELA MARGOSHES



Ben Cohen did it. For six months in 1992, the CEO of Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc., inventor of Chunky Monkey and other assorted ice creams, took a sabbatical. Cohen left the Burlington, Vt.-based company during a major growth spurt he calls "the chocolate-cookie-dough period." No hanging from cliffs in Borneo for Cohen, though. He had more earth-bound plans for his time off. "I wanted to learn how to weld," Ben says, "so I could make a mailbox for Jerry."

He's glad he did. He returned to work "happy and refreshed," and his absence didn't put a dent in company revenues, which topped a sweet \$237 million last year. Ben & Jerry's is now a part of Unilever, in a deal worth \$326 million.

Yvon Chouinard did it, too.

The owner and founder of Patagonia Inc., the outdoor-equipment and clothing company, decided to travel with his family to France and Costa Rica in 1990. Patagonia, which started in the early 1970s in a tin shack in Ventura, Calif., had experienced explosive growth—some 40 percent to 50 percent annually. But in the ill-fated year of 1990, revenues increased only 20 percent. "We started having cash-flow problems," he recalls. "I had to cut my trip short to make management changes, to cut the product line down."

Although Patagonia rebounded—sales last year were \$182

million—Chouinard wasn't happy with the results of his sabbatical.

"I didn't leave the company in good hands when I left," he says. "I blew it."

What will happen to the company if I take time off? It's the number one concern among chief executives considering a vacation.

The reasons for taking a sabbatical are as varied as those who go on them, and fall into categories, including avoidance of probable burnout, family time, and reassessment of personal and professional goals. Regardless of the reason, the most important thing to do while away from work is to play.

That's a radical concept for most CEOs, according to Nella Barkley, president of Crystal-Barkley Corp., in New York City. "It's so important to let loose so new ideas can flow." The best sabbaticals encourage inner growth, discovery of interpersonal and business skills, and the opportunity for CEOs to marry their talents to personal interests.

Here are some tips to ensure the rewards outweigh the risks while on sabbatical.

1. Leave the company in good hands.

"Have faith in management before you leave," Chouinard advises. "If you think you're hiring the messiah—and you go on a sabbatical," he says, "forget it."

2. Leave when times are good—not during crises.

"I left when we weren't making sales goals and our management hadn't been that long with the company," Chouinard reflects. Cohen, on the other hand, left when sales were on the upswing and management had been in place for years.



MANAGING



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"I wanted to learn how to weld," says Ben Cohen (r) co-founder of Ben & Jerry's, "so I could make a mailbox for Jerry (l)."

"Don't do the 'if it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium thing.' Don't go to too many places," says Mike Phillips, CEO and president of Frank Russell Company. Phillips is pictured with his son, Michael, on sabbatical in Sienna, Italy.



3. Put systems into place to safeguard both your sabbatical and your company.

Mike Phillips, CEO and president of Frank Russell Company, in Tacoma, Wash., "left when the market was iffy," he says. However, before taking off for the U.K. and Italy, he put into place a task force to oversee expenses at the international financial services company.

For Tony Coretto, taking time off to be "Mr. Mom" to his then 2-year-old son nearly did in PNT Marketing Services Inc., the company he founded in Valhalla, N.Y. "For the first two weeks, I stayed in constant touch with the office, then I stopped

calling," he says. "I thought, well, I'd taken care of the office by making sure my partner and I were on the same page—projects mapped out, etc. But upon my return, disaster!" His partner in the marketing firm hadn't invoiced clients in more than two months and had hired more expensive contractors rather than use employees to handle new projects.

"We've since put in place a real invoicing system, hired someone to do our accounts receivable, and also firmed up our hiring policy after firing all those high-priced contractors!"

4. Take enough time off to get the full benefit.

Barkley helps design individualized work-life plans, including sabbaticals, for upper-level executives. Her best advice to CEOs leaning towards the lure of the open road is to commit to a block of time, don't overplan, and don't cut short your time.

"Don't do the 'if it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium thing.' Don't go to too many places," says Phillips, who stayed for a month in a Sienna, Italy, farmhouse and unwound completely. "It even relaxed the lines on my face," he says.

5. Go radical.

Barkley has counseled many CEOs who've "gone radical"—quit their jobs—and in the case of one client, "traveled the world in a sailboat." Radical sabbaticals are a time to wipe the work slate clean, to reinvent oneself. While more than 60 percent of her clients plan to return to their jobs, 40 percent expect to retire or move on to other careers when they get back. Either way, the idea of a sabbatical is to come home with brand-new enthusiasm and perspective.

6. Gain insight.

Barkley's sailboat-around-the-world client had an ultra-stressful job. He was in charge of transferring payments to various countries for a major U.S. bank. While on sabbatical, he began to explore and rethink unrealized passions. He came to terms with the fact that he loved frogs. He's now doing asset management for marine biology firms—and loving it. (Lots of frogs!) "While on sabbatical, he made the bridge between a long-discounted childhood interest and his more recent work experience," Barkley says.

Coretto spent three weeks of his sabbatical at the Shelter Institute in Bath, Maine, living out his childhood fantasy of learning to build houses. This could one day become a second occupation or avocation.

7. Break the work addiction.

Chris Evans, of Raleigh, N.C., started his first high-tech company as a college freshman in 1985. DaVinci Systems Corp. developed the first Windows-based email product. He quickly fell into a workaholic pattern that lasted until 1994 when he sold the company. "I needed the company to need me too much," he reflects. "A lot of the time I spent at the office was to help me feel I was important to the company."

In 1996, Evans started Accipiter Inc., a company that manages banner-ad rotation on websites, records the number of hits, and lets customers know how their ads perform. In 1998, he sold the company for \$55 million to Engage Technologies, a subsidiary of CMGI Inc., Andover, Mass. With complete financial independence at the age of 34, Evans now sits on the board of directors for Engage and is involved with an e-commerce startup, cybuy.com. Drawing from lessons learned during his sabbatical, Evans has made it a point to create a healthy business culture at Accipiter that "enables employees to take time to be with their kids."

"I also made it clear to my investors at Accipiter that I wasn't the workaholic type," he says. He had discovered that "I didn't have to sacrifice my family to start a business. Things can be more balanced."

8. Take risks.

While on his sabbatical, Phillips sat under an olive tree in Sienna and wrote a 10-page memo about the company, its employees, and their families. "It was so cathartic," he says. He sent the document to the company's chairman because although it was a risk, he felt he might appreciate it. "You seldom get the straight poop from people you work with," he says, adding that the chairman "loved it."

"After the sabbatical, I've become more willing to say what I feel and not be so compromising anymore," Phillips says. It also enabled him to look forward to what comes next, after he leaves his current position.

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9. Get out before you burn out.

Allin Foulkrod, CEO of Creative Visions Inc., a Raleigh, N.C., events and design company, took an "S.O.S. sabbatical" in 1999. He called a time out to save himself as well as the company. He knew it was time when a key employee suggested he needed to strengthen his leadership skills. It was a tough time for Foulkrod, in



DOUG TOMPKINS/PATAGONIA

his early 30s, who felt passionless and burned out. "After 50,000 consecutive executive decisions," he says, "I really needed to get away for a while."

He admits he was very nervous about the sabbatical. "The first day, I got up, showered, got dressed, and thought, 'Wow, what do I do now?'" He took walks ("first time in 10 years"), spent time with his family ("It was terrific to be there for a family member at 3 in the afternoon"), and did lots of soul searching.

After a month, he went back to work with a new perspective and objectivity about his company. "I learned how to trust my employees," he says. "I learned how to be compassionate."

10. Take a mini-sabbatical every day.

Foulkrod recently took a morning off

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to buy snacks for employees who were setting up for a big event. While riding in a truck with an employee, he talked to the guy about his life, something he wouldn't have done before. He would have been way too rushed in the past.

"I learned a new way to love my employees," he says. The guy who's worked 15-hour days since high school and who used to boast that his clients could reach him day or night now says, "Sometimes I just sit for an hour with my feet up on my desk and think." ■