

# Class Act

HOW YOU WENT FROM CLASS CLOWN,  
JOCK OR GEEK TO ENTREPRENEUR

lot of us are still going to be remembered as, say, the fat kid with a mouthful of braces, or the well-liked but simple-minded jock. Still, there are some good arguments for going, even if it's only to chart

**EVERY FIVE** or 10 years, we have to make a choice: ignore that high school reunion invite, or suck it up and go. After all, no matter how successful we may be today, a

your progress and see how your high school personality shaped your entrepreneurial personality.

Take David Newman,

41—a former class clown

who's now the managing

partner of BusinessDNA,

tography editor for the school newspaper, Alpert was also captain of the math team.

Alpert now runs two catalog companies with combined revenues of \$14 million so far this year. She started her first company, Professional Cutlery Direct, in 1993 with just \$8,000, and grew it to \$8 million in sales this year from internally generated cash flow. As she puts it, "I look at things very analytically. I was attracted to creating a direct-to-consumer business because so much of the success is based on the quality of the analytics. It's very data-driven."

Meanwhile, thirtysomething Rachel Weingarten is president of New York City-based [GTK] Marketing Group, which projects 2005 revenues of \$2 million. She feels she was a misfit in high school, precisely because she didn't have a label. But that helped her, too—she was drawn to working at a young age, designing her own line of denim clothing in the 1980s. Explains Weingarten, "My early experiences instilled in me a love for work, for doing things my way and for not following the pack, but rather for setting trends and positioning my clients as trailblazers."

This is all good news for the class clowns, the geeks and the misfits, but what about the popular kids? Not surprisingly, they can fare well, too. Marianne O'Connor was voted "Most Likely to Succeed" at her Malden, Massachusetts, high school. Today, she runs Sterling Communications, a \$4 million high-

tech PR agency in Silicon Valley. O'Connor, 44, believes co-captaining her high school's cheerleading team prepared her for office politics, speaking at her graduation gave her a crash course in public speaking, and ballet dancing gave her focus.

Still, she admits she never saw her future in technology. "If you'd told me in high school that one day I'd be talking about long-haul optical transport, I'd have said, 'What's that, a train?'"

In the end, no matter what your persona in high school, you were learning something useful for your business. Says Howard Ross, an organization development consultant and CEO of Cook Ross, an HR firm in Silver Spring, Maryland, "We all have values that transcend the times of our lives."

—GEOFF WILLIAMS

**33%**  
of an executive's time is spent responding to crises or problems.



**Back in the day:** Terri Alpert, David Newman and Marianne O'Connor (l. to r.) reflect on high school to see how they got where they are today.

a consulting firm in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, and founder of Unconsulting, a marketing strategy firm. The two businesses project combined revenues of about half a million dollars in 2006. Back in high school, Newman was hosting Frisbee matches on the roof of his school and frequenting the principal's office for trying out his stand-up material in class. Only in hindsight does he seem a likely candidate for a future as a successful entrepreneur.

Being a class clown has "given me a very useful set of traits today as a 'sort of' grown-up entrepreneur," argues Newman. "Think about it—class clowns, by their very nature, are not afraid to fail, unlike the geniuses. They thrive on being different, unlike the geeks, who suffer by being different. They focus on getting noticed among the noise, unlike the cool kids, who focus on fitting in. They have the extra bandwidth to get their work done, *plus* be creative, funny and a little irreverent, unlike the dummies. And class clowns want to get along with *all* the other groups to expand their audience, unlike the jocks, who just need to impress other jocks."

Terri Alpert, 42, describes herself as being social but also "very nerdy" in high school. Like Newman, she believes her high school traits help her now as an entrepreneur. Besides being the pho-

