

Licking an Entrepreneurial Life into Shape

CEOer David Feldman, World-Renowned and Successful Philatelist, Has Made Living His Life a True Art Form; and He Should Know!

By Karen Seidman

As David Feldman is a self-described philatelist, it's only fitting that he approaches living his life much like he does when acquiring a new and precious stamp — with passion, enthusiasm, a singular individuality and a carefully planned strategy. Though the six-year CEO member regards himself as more of a “dealer” than a “collector” of stamps and art, one can still detect the personal characteristics inherent in a truly successful collector of beautiful things. He's a man blessed and equally surrounded by material goods as well as intangible treasures — a vibrant life filled with meaning and spirituality; a large, loving family; two lucrative businesses; numerous rewarding interests; and many valuable works of art, including his most cherished possession — Leonardo da Vinci's original and unfinished work of Mona Lisa.

And all this success and wealth acquired was due solely to stamps. Who would have thought that something as small as a postage stamp would be something Feldman could parlay into a dreamlike globe-trotting existence? Definitely not Feldman; well not at first.

In fact, though David's introduction to stamps began at the early age of eight when he was a schoolboy in Dublin, Ireland, it was never the stamps themselves that young David was attracted to. It was the excitement that the stamps instilled in his childhood friends. Recognizing his friends' fascination with stamps, Feldman's entrepreneurial instincts were awakened and he quickly took advantage of a business opportunity and opened a stamp exchange.

“My school friends and I played games and I won lots of stamps, but was unsure what to do with them. Realizing my friends coveted them so much, I began a little ‘club,’ and started selling the stamps for pennies each, and the business grew,” he said.

At 12, David's entrepreneurial skills were honed, and in 1959, he took out his first advertisement in a *Mickey Mouse* weekly comic book. Soon David has a host of buyers and his first “foreign” customers. “It was a great and fulfilling adventure,” he explains, “discovering that free enterprise can bring so much motivation, imagination and innovation to an inspiring entrepreneur. And what was so nice was that money came along, too, and money brought spending choices and an inner feeling of ‘power’ especially thrilling to a young boy.”

And that was all the launch pad he needed.

After completing university degrees in business and philosophy, David settled in Geneva, Switzerland, where the stamp business he started flourished into an international stamp auction business, and then expanded into an art auction business. By the late 1980s, Feldman was joined by a retiring president of Christie's, and the business quickly propelled into the third largest auction company

in the world — after Christie's and Sotheby's — with a headquarters based in Geneva and offices and auctions regularly held in New York, Paris, London, Hong Kong and Tokyo, and departments and sales in impressionist, modern and old master paintings; jewelry, watches and gems; Islamic art; silver; objects d'art; and of course, stamps.

Differing from his partner's view on the business' vision (Feldman wanted more specialization in fewer fields, instead of further continuous expansion away from their niche), they parted ways.

Here again, Feldman's entrepreneurial instincts kicked in, and he again returned to his philatelic roots; but this time, armed with a rolodex of important contacts in the painting world.

Today his company, David Feldman, SA, is thriving due to a narrower strategic focus on stamps and artwork and the incorporation of state-of-the-art, innovative technology that utilizes online auction sales in real-time, something similar to eBay but offering audio as well as other sophistications.

Among his notable credits, Feldman is the world-record holder for a single philatelic sale — 2.75 million Swiss francs, still considered by *The Guinness Book* as the most valuable object in the world by weight, volume and density — as well as the recipient for the highest price paid for a single philatelic item at auction — US\$5 million.

Mona Lisa

But as far as distinctions go, nothing compares to his most prized possession, the Mona Lisa.

Feldman explains that Leonardo da Vinci painted two versions of "La Joconde," an original portrait (unfinished) of the enchanting 23-year-old Mona Lisa del Giocondo, and a later completed version which now hangs in the Louvre and is generally acknowledged as THE most famous painting in the world.

"The first portrait had been left in the vault of a Swiss bank for decades, and now is in my hands," beams Feldman. "I have a great passion to conduct research on this painting, its true history and everything about it to the fullest. After that, I may publish the findings and make a major marketing campaign. To do this, I would like to find an equally enthusiastic partner to take the role as 'sponsor.' The opportunities are incalculable!"

And what makes this endeavor even more special, is that he can work with his sons on this family project. David and his wife, Fabienne, have six children: four sons and two adopted daughters from Thailand. In March of this year, David recently founded Switzerland's first real estate auction company with ambitions to handle prestige properties worldwide. Feldman, along with his two eldest sons, hope to combine the auction world with that of real estate, just like Christie's and Sotheby's have done with art. "Real estate auctions for high-value properties exist nowhere in the world in a consistent way or level," he explains.

New Undertakings on the Horizon

But David wouldn't be David without moving forward and conquering uncharted territories. Next up is to finish work on a book of memoirs that will share many of his interesting adventures, including the Mona Lisa, his philatelic accomplishments, the mission for the adoption of his two daughters, and his quest for spiritual enrichment. In addition to his business pursuits, Feldman also established the Greater Consciousness Institute in Geneva and is building a home/retreat in southern Arizona.

If there's one thing David Feldman can teach us is that anything is possible. And that if you're determined, prepared to make efforts to stay healthy, willing to work hard and take risks, you too, can "stamp" out an entrepreneurial life that's rare, treasured and highly sought-after.