

How to Be a Successful Businesswoman in Dermatology



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KEYWORDS

• Business • Businesswoman • Success • Successful • Practice

KEY POINTS

- Success is a personal construct.
- The intent of this article is to help the reader formulate their own vision of success and to provide advice to get the reader on their own road to success.
- The content of the article is based on interviews with many successful businesswomen in dermatology, as well as the personal experience of the author.

INTRODUCTION

Success is a personal construct. The intent of this article is to help you formulate your vision of success and offer advice to get you on your own road to success.¹ It is based on personal experience as well as interviews with many successful businesswomen in dermatology whom I have had the good fortune of befriending over the years. It is hoped that, some or most of these ideas, thoughts, and suggestions resonate with you and can help you on your journey.

DISCUSSION

What Is Success?

Define success

The first step to becoming a successful businesswoman or businessperson in dermatology, or in any field for that matter, is to define what success means to you.² For some, success equals wealth or fame. For others, it means autonomy, knowledge, favorable patient outcomes, balance, happiness in the workplace, good stewardship, or any number of other concepts.

For me, I was driven by a desire for autonomy and balance that would allow me the flexibility to spend meaningful time with my family and the freedom to stay engaged in organized medicine. It was important to me to be able to grow and build

the brand of my solo private dermatology practice while also making a difference for our specialty and our patients. I was also driven by a desire for excellence. I knew that if I were to start a practice, it had to offer exceptional care in a uniquely friendly and caring environment that would exceed patient expectations—the type of atmosphere that I would most enjoy as a patient. In these areas, I feel I have succeeded. Yet, my vision of success changes as I move through life. As I begin to feel comfortable and balanced on one stepping stone, I set my sights on the next direction and stepping stone along the way. Success to me is fluid, dynamic, and accompanied by a sense of satisfaction, gratitude, and fulfillment.

Realize success has different meanings to different people

In the words of Kavita Mariwalla, MD, owner of Mariwalla Dermatology in New York and Vice President of the American Society for Dermatologic Surgeons (ASDS), “In dermatology, success has meant being able to grow and build something that results in better patient care. Everything I have added to my practice in terms of services or technology has always had that in mind. It’s not so much ‘will it make me money’, but rather ‘will this improve patient care or allow us to be able to offer something we don’t already have?’ My father

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always says, ‘Don’t chase money, let money chase you’. So keeping patients in the forefront of what decisions I make has been the marker of success for me” (e-mail communication, February 2023).

To other successful businesswomen in dermatology, success has to do with patient outcomes and the work environment. According to Melissa Piliang, MD, Associate Professor of Dermatology, Vice Chair of Education, and Co-Director of Dermatopathology Sections at Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio, “My personal definition of success is making things better—patients, processes, mentees. Because, for me, that is what it is all about—caring for patients, helping people. When someone recognizes that something I did helped them, the feeling I get is indescribable—it feels like success” (e-mail communication, February 2023).

To others, success has to do with leadership. For Cheryl Burgess, MD, founder of the Center for Dermatology and Dermatologic Surgery in Washington, DC, and former member of the AAD Board of Directors, “You know when you’re successful (in dermatology and in life) when you become a leader amongst those in your environment or surroundings; everything appears effortless and there is a sense of calmness that fulfills your well-being. A leader looks for opportunities to give of themselves freely to others rather than holding back; build rather than tear down; serve rather than be served and be willing to learn and remain teachable to pass it forward” (e-mail communication, January 2023).

To Doris Day, MD, author, medical consultant, and owner of Day Dermatology and Aesthetics in New York, success is dynamic. “I think of success as an ongoing process, not an end. It’s something I see looking back and something I strive for daily as I go forward, but it’s not something I have in the moment. It sums up as loving what I do and feeling fulfilled by the life I am living. I want to look back and live a life that I would live the same way over and over again; that would be a great success. It’s something I try to live by every day” (e-mail communication, January 2023). Like Dr Day, Deirdre Hooper, MD, cofounder of Audubon Dermatology in New Orleans and treasurer of ASDS, sees success broadly. “I feel most successful when I am enjoying the people around me—my family, my colleagues, and my work team. Of course, I love setting and achieving a goal, but I have learned to set goals that feed a balanced family life and satisfy my intellectual curiosity. The rest just seems to follow” (e-mail communication, February 2023). And to internationally renowned oculoplastic surgeon and honorary

lifetime member of the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD), Jean Carruthers, MD, whose entrepreneurial spirit led to the first use of botulinum toxin as a neuromodulator, success is simple. “Success to me means I am liked and respected by my peers and my patients and students!” (text message communication, February 2023).

Other successful businesswomen in dermatology believe that success is achieved when one finds balance. According to Mona Gohara, MD, medical consultant and President of the Women’s Dermatologic Society, “To me, success is finding fulfillment and balance in your professional and personal life. There is nothing greater than enjoying life in and out of the office” (e-mail communication, January 2023). Similarly, Sue Ellen Cox, MD, founder and medical director of Aesthetic Solutions in North Carolina and Immediate Past President of ASDS, says, “An important aspect of success for many is a balanced life—physical, mental and spiritual. It is also important to contribute to your specialty and pay forward all the success and privileges that you have been given” (e-mail communication, January 2023).

How to Become Successful

Decide what type of practice you really want

Today, your practice model options are relatively limitless.³ You can be a subspecialist, an academician or private practitioner, an owner or an employee, or any combination of the aforementioned. If you aren’t sure, it’s ok. You can always change your track. However, the sooner you head down your chosen path, the sooner and more fully you will be able to develop and grow your career.

Perhaps the 2 most important decisions to make early on are whether you want to pursue an academic, nonacademic, or combination of academic and private practice career and whether you want to be a business owner or an employee.^{4,5} The time commitments associated with any of these paths can be quite variable, as is the level of responsibility one assumes.

Personally, I chose the path of being the owner of a solo private practice with an academic affiliation. This choice enabled me to teach residents and remain connected with my academic institution while allowing me the opportunity to build my own practice model and provide the type of personalized care that is very important to me. Being a practice owner means that I am essentially responsible not only for the care of my patients but also for the livelihood and well-being of my entire staff; 24/7/365, everything that occurs within the walls of my practice is my responsibility. I am

willing to accept that responsibility because autonomy is very important to me, and owning a solo practice aligns with that priority. Essentially, if you align your business with your life, you can achieve happiness, which I believe to be a major contributor to success.

Align your business with your life

Determine your priorities and make sure that your practice aligns with those priorities. For some people, financial remuneration is a priority and a major contributing factor in why they choose their career path. Understand that compensation varies greatly depending on the career path you choose in dermatology. Niche specialization and/or a concierge type of practice may yield higher compensation than an academic, rural, or part-time practice. Interestingly, not one successful businesswoman in dermatology whom I interviewed mentioned money or identified it with success.

For many dermatologists, location is a priority. Do you want to live near your extended family, near a major academic center, or in a remote underserved area? Do you want to travel and undertake a locum tenens position? Or do you want to live wherever you find your dream job? Also consider your commute. If you have or plan to have a family, obviously a longer commute equates to less time with family. And if time is your priority, owning a solo practice or running an academic program will likely yield significantly less free time than job-sharing or working part-time in an established clinic.

Choose your work and home locations wisely

When making sure that the life you create is the life you want, location becomes very important. If snow skiing is one of your greatest sources of exercise and enjoyment, you probably won't want to live in a warm climate. If you thrive off fast-paced hustle and bustle, you probably won't want to work in a rural town far from a city. Since you will likely spend much of your time working, having the ability to escape to your happy place during those brief interludes of time will be important.

The location of your work in relation to your home is also extremely important. Long commutes can be stressful and hard on you, your significant other, and your family. The more time you spend traveling means the less time you get to spend with the ones you love—the ones who support you and need you.

If you have children, the distance from your work to your school system matters. Working close to your children's school system will allow you the chance to attend school activities, sporting events, performances, and so on and be readily

available if your children need you. My husband, Corey Howard, MD, and I chose to live near our workplace so that we could maximize family time and be readily available to head back to the office in the event of a patient emergency. In fact, availability and flexibility were important factors that led us to become solo private practice owners.

Whatever practice type you choose, make a plan

Whether you decide to open your own practice by yourself or with others, join an established practice, or enter academic medicine, there are innumerable online resources that can assist you in the process.^{6,7} In addition, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) offers many resources to help you in your career path. For instance, the AAD Practice Resource Center offers valuable online and hard copy tools to help you regardless of what type of practice you enter.⁸ They also have staff dedicated to answering your practice management questions whether you are just starting your practice or are well-established in your career.

If you start a dermatology practice, it will be a much different experience if you start it on your own versus starting it with others. If you start your own independent practice, you have the luxury of making all your decisions but also the responsibility of assuming all the risks.⁹ Before going into business with others, make sure your vision, goals, and expectations align. It is helpful if your strengths and weaknesses complement each other in a way that will help ensure practice viability.

As Deanne Mraz Robinson, MD, President and Co-founder of Modern Dermatology of Connecticut and Chief Medical Officer of Ideal Image, says, "Business success means financial, intellectual and operational freedom. I achieved this by opening my own practice with my partner. We created a work culture that not only emphasized patient care, but also stressed the well-being of the provider to focus on work-life balance." Although their visions aligned, before establishing their partnership, Dr Mraz Robinson and her business partner engaged in the all-important step of writing and signing a contract. "We wrote our contract as if we were dissolving the practice before we even opened the doors. We prepared for the worst so we could be ready for whatever happened" (text message communication, February 2023).

Starting a practice requires making a business plan.⁴ It will help you critically analyze what your goals are, what resources you need to achieve those initial goals, what it will cost you, what steps you must take, and what nuances you might

encounter as you develop your business. You will need to share your business plan with your bank or lending partner if you are getting funding.⁶ I recommend getting lending quotes from several banks before deciding on one. Banks might compete for better loan rates that may be fixed versus adjustable, long-term, or short-term. If possible, make sure that there is minimal or no penalty for early pay-off, which you may want to do, if financially feasible, to avoid paying additional interest.

Surround yourself with the right people

Regardless of what practice type you choose, it is important to find the professionals who will help you manage important aspects of your life.⁹ They include your lawyer, accountant, banker, advisor, and insurer. When seeking out these professionals, do not hesitate to ask them if they can recommend experts in the other fields. The better they know you, your practice or professional circumstances, and your financial situation, the more helpful (and possibly less expensive) they will be. Meeting with them on an annual or semiannual basis will ensure accuracy of your accounts and finances and ensure that you are prepared for the future. Having their contact information at your fingertips will help alleviate stress when time is of the essence. There might even be benefit in building connections between them. For instance, when seeking advice about borrowing money for the purchase or lease of a laser or other expensive device, you might want your financial lender to connect with your accountant or financial advisor so that their expertise contributes favorably to your decision-making.

As the business owner of my own dermatology practice, I realized early on that, in addition to the aforementioned professionals, I needed to hire a good office administrator to help me manage my business. I knew that I could not manage my office administration, financials, human resources, patient services, communications, marketing, and everything else it takes to run an office without the help of someone who knew how to do these tasks better than I did. Unfortunately, my first administrator did not work out well. Nor did my second. Nor third. Finding the right practice administrator is perhaps the most difficult part of operating a business. Physicians are notorious for being “bad at business,” so we are ripe targets for being taken advantage of financially. My practice was no exception.

I found that applicants seeking an office administrator position frequently overstate their qualifications and are unable to meet the needs of the job. Thankfully, my husband, who is also a physician, but who manages to grasp business concepts better

than most, was able to pull my business through the tough times when I was “between” office administrators. Although difficult to do, making the time, energy, and financial investment to obtain the right administrator is critical. Your administrator can make or break your practice. I recommend hiring an administrator who has an MBA or equivalent experience, a keen business acumen, and a vision that is in keeping with your goals. Meet with your administrator at least weekly to review staffing issues and day-to-day operations, at least monthly to review financials (balance sheet, profit and loss statements, income and spending trends, etc.), and at least biannually to review budget, marketing needs, and long-term goals.

Delegate appropriately

Many, if not most, physicians are strong-minded and driven self-starters who are not used to relying on others. To be successful in the business of dermatology means you must rely on others by delegating responsibilities wisely and regularly—both at work and at home. You might be the type to say that if you want the job done right, you have to do it yourself. However, as your responsibilities and time demands increase, especially if you have a family at home, you will find that you simply cannot do everything yourself. You must give up the reigns of total control and delegate.

Most importantly, delegate the jobs you don't like doing and the jobs you don't need to do to someone else. Hiring people to help with cleaning and cooking, for instance, can give you the gift of time to spend with your family or to use for work, exercise, or mental health. The money you spend will pay for itself in your increased happiness and productivity.

At work, let people you trust and who are capable of doing things for you do them. For instance, if you are used to doing your own anesthesia for a biopsy, but your nurse is proficient at numbing, let them anesthetize the patient. If your aesthetic patient wants to know about postprocedure care and your staff is well-versed in it, let them answer the questions. Essentially, find people you trust to do the things you don't like to do or don't have to do, and you will have more time for doing the things that matter most to you.

Accept support

Undoubtedly, successful businesswomen share one thing in common—the support of others who helped them reach their goals. Support can come in many different forms—offering advice, boosting confidence, assisting financially, providing guidance, sharing knowledge or contacts, and so on. In whatever form it comes,

appreciate the support you receive and accept the support you might need.

As Adelaide Hebert, MD, Past President of both Women's Dermatological Society and the Society of Pediatric Dermatology, as well as Chief of Pediatric Dermatology at McGovern School of Medicine and Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston, says, "I feel that I became a successful businesswoman in Dermatology because my father (an obstetrician gynecologist) treated all of his seven children equally and genuinely believed that his girls would be as well-educated and prepared for life as his boys." She goes on to say, "My father had all seven children work in his office at various times. He believed that we should understand how a family business worked from the ground up. We learned everything from filing, scheduling appointments, assisting patients, scheduling, and, as a medical student, assisting with surgeries. What I carried forward from my father's example was a confidence to meet with individuals in the business world and collaborate with them" (e-mail communication, January 2023).

Dr Gohara relied on colleagues for help. As she says, "I asked for help. In my experience, no one gets anywhere alone. I was not ashamed to ask for help with my, at the time, young children, or professional goals. Dermatology is comprised of a small group of people who are more like family members—family members who are willing to help!" (e-mail communication, January 2023).

I can say, unequivocally, that much of my success is due to having a very strong support network made up of my spouse, family, friends, and colleagues who supported, guided, and encouraged me along the way. There were times along my journey when I lost direction, wanted to give up, thought I was not worthy, did not see the light at the end of the tunnel, or imagined that I couldn't succeed.¹⁰ Yet the people in my support network knew otherwise. I listened to them, heeded their advice, and leaned on them when necessary to restore my strength and renew my verve. Most successful women I speak with have these same thoughts of occasional self-doubt. I think that having these feelings is part of what makes us stronger, more driven in the end, and, perhaps, even more successful. When you realize that there are people who care about you and want to help you succeed, you don't want to let them down. And you don't want to let yourself down.

Always use the resources that you have at your disposal. Don't be afraid to ask for advice or words of wisdom from family, friends, colleagues, or mentors whom you trust. You might be surprised at how helpful they will be and how freely they

share their resources and knowledge. Truly successful people tend to want to elevate others and help them succeed as well.

Don't be afraid to do the hard work

Dr Piliang says, "The keys to success in the business of dermatology are similar to other fields: hard work, consistency, kindness and showing up. On repeat. Every day" (e-mail communication, February 2023).

According to Dr Day, "I have worked my way from the bottom up in many ways. I have worked in so many different jobs over the years that required so many different skill sets, and I did so much of my own administrative and daily work as I was growing my business.... All of that has helped me understand what the business needs, what it means to be in every role I ask of my staff, and where I need to pay attention in order to streamline the work and optimize the patient experience. There's a climb up to the top for a reason. Every step builds muscle and learning, and those give strength and confidence to take the next step. Sometimes we slip, but that learning is important as well" (e-mail communication, January 2023).

Most of our patients, and even our staff, do not realize the inordinate number of hours we put in as successful businesswomen in dermatology. I am usually the last one to leave the office, but my work doesn't end then. I often spend hours at night and on the weekends not only working on charts but managing the office, signing the checks, reviewing the invoices and statements, planning the marketing strategy, researching treatments, perusing current literature, writing for publications, preparing for conferences, participating in society leadership zoom conferences, and so on. All of these responsibilities are hard in their own way, largely because they take time away from my family and social life. But they are responsibilities that I have chosen to undertake as the owner of a solo dermatology practice and as a physician leader. I feel that they have helped enlighten me and make me a better physician, business owner, boss, and colleague.

Learn from your mistakes

Dr Day says, "In the beginning (I became successful) by failing a lot and by learning from my mistakes, as well as by listening to and learning from others smarter than me. As I grew it was more about seeing what worked, learning from that, tweaking it and doing more of the same" (e-mail communication, January 2023). Dr Carruthers agrees, saying, "I learned from my mistakes. I was never afraid to admit them and I asked for

lots of advice” (text message communication, February 2023).

That theme prevailed in my interviews with successful businesswomen in dermatology. We all make mistakes along the way. Some are bigger and more costly in terms of time, money, or stress, but most of them are reversible, recoverable, or even rewarding when they lead you down another, better path.

I appreciate Dr Mariwalla’s honesty when she says, “I made A LOT of mistakes. Running a successful business in dermatology isn’t something that comes naturally but is something you evolve into. Having honest conversations with friends who are practice owners has helped. But mainly it has been keeping tabs on the journals so my knowledge base doesn’t become outdated and then leaning into technology to help me run more efficiently. But basically, I only figured it out because I messed it up so many times. The key thing, however, is to make sure you are always a doctor first. When you lose sight of that, the whole thing goes down” (e-mail communication, February 2023).

Make the most of each patient’s experience

In the words of Dr Piliang, “Caring for your patients like they are your friends or family builds trust and loyalty. That reputation will have your phones ringing off the hook and your waiting rooms full” (e-mail communication, February 2023).

Allison Vidimos, MD, Chair of Cleveland Clinic’s Department of Dermatology, Vice Chair of the Cleveland Clinic Dermatology and Plastic Surgery Institute, and member of the AAD Board of Directors, says “Success for our department of dermatology means supporting engaged and fulfilled staff, residents, fellows and support staff who truly enjoy their work and find reward in delivering skilled, cutting edge, empathetic care for our patients. Success encompasses educating our staff, trainees and medical students and performing innovative research to improve the quality and safety of our care. Success means highly satisfied patients” (e-mail communication, February 2023).

One of the best procedures I have incorporated into my practice is to make each patient feel welcome, special, and at-home from the moment they make first contact with our front office team until after they are home from their visit. My staff is friendly and trained according to the motto, “The answer is yes. Now what is the question.” The office space is designed to feel comfortable and welcoming, clean, and professional to ensure patient confidence in the care we provide. After surgical procedures, I contact my patients to ensure their satisfaction. I also share with them

my cell phone number so they can contact me if they need anything from me or my staff. Patients love the personal attention. I love knowing that, if my patients have a true concern, I can address it right away. Essentially, we try to imagine and walk through the patient experience from start to finish to ensure we are providing them with the best care we can.

Success in Your Profession Outside of the Walls of Your Practice

Decide what role you want to take in your specialty

Engaging in some way with your specialty can make it more meaningful to you, especially when you know you have a positive impact. There are many ways to get involved. For instance, if you like to teach but are in private practice, you can affiliate with a university and teach residents. Or you can apply to be a speaker at local, state, national, or international dermatology meetings. If you like advocacy, you can participate in the AAD Association’s or American Society for Dermatologic Surgery Association’s national advocacy efforts. If you like governance, you can apply to be on one of the national dermatology organizations’ councils, committees, and task forces. Or you can join your local dermatology or medical associations and reach out to their leadership or administrators to find out how you can get involved. Local and state medical societies are always looking for interested physicians. You can also volunteer in your community, offering skin cancer screenings or lecturing on topics of interest to local residents.

Find your niche

Dermatology is one of the few specialties that offers a diverse spectrum of subspecialties. Ideally and traditionally, you can decide what aspect of dermatology is most intriguing to you during residency and complete your training with a fellowship in your subspecialty of choice. If you love treating acne, make it a focus of your practice. If you really enjoy the challenge of treating pigmentary disorders, learn all you can about it and become an expert in the field. Learn and do what makes you happy, and your patients will follow.

According to Linda Stein Gold, MD, AAD Vice President and Division Head of Dermatology and Director of Dermatology Clinical Research at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, “I have become successful by abiding by the motto ‘if there is a will, there is a way.’ I have stepped out of my comfort zone to accept challenges and opportunities. Even if I felt unprepared, I overprepared so when

the time came, I was the expert in the room” (e-mail communication, January 2023).

Personally, I have always enjoyed dermatologic surgery. When I consult with my patients, I always say, “My goal is to make it look like no skin cancer was ever there.” In keeping with that aim, I developed and published, over the course of my career, innovative suturing techniques to avoid transepidermal sutures for more optimal surgical outcomes. My interest in suturing techniques filled a niche in our specialty, which led me to create the AAD’s first hands-on suturing techniques course. Today, my focus is on beauty. Therefore, I studied the topic in depth and now lecture on it internationally.

Study or research it. Learn it. Teach it. Become the expert in it. Fill a niche. You can be the “go-to” person for whatever interests you most. Patients will come to you for your expertise. Dermatologists will benefit from your advice and knowledge. Giving back to our specialty by being a researcher and/or faculty member at educational meetings is hugely rewarding and a great way to become a leader in our specialty.

Build relationships

Relationships you build with your colleagues and peers will also provide long-term value. They will be a valuable source of education, information-sharing, trouble shooting, understanding, and camaraderie. They might also serve as a good referral source. They will understand the struggles of dealing with difficult staff, challenging patients, and regulatory burdens. They will also relate to the pressures of balancing a happy home life with a busy work life.

Your family and friends are your most important relationships, and they deserve special attention. Unfortunately, however, these relationships are often the ones that suffer the most, perhaps because we assume they will always be there for us. The fact that, for most of us, family and friends are always there for us and can provide our greatest source of enjoyment is why these relationships should be fostered. No matter how busy you are, set aside even a few minutes a day or a few hours a week to connect in person, over the phone, or virtually with those you love. It will matter to both of you.

What Does It Take to Be a Successful Businesswoman in Dermatology?

Success takes initiative, drive, determination, hard work, and the desire to succeed.

Deirdre Hooper summarized her journey to success well when she said, “I attribute the success I have to curiosity, hard work, and finding support

networks that help me achieve goals. I am always open to new ideas. I read a LOT, I stay involved with professional societies, and I listen to trusted friends. I am super organized with my calendar and to-do list, and I give 100 percent effort to tasks I undertake. Finally, I delegate as much as I can!” (e-mail communication, February 2023).

SUMMARY

Success is a personal construct that means something different to everyone. Successful businesswomen in dermatology know what type of practice they really want, and they create a plan to bring it to fruition. They align their business with their life and lifestyle, often choosing to live near their workplace. Most agree that it is important to surround themselves with people who support their goals and facilitate goal achievement. Although they often reluctantly accept support, they know when to delegate and how to delegate appropriately.

Successful businesswomen in dermatology are not afraid to do the hard work required to be successful and often feel that they gain knowledge and strength from the experience. When they make mistakes, they own up to them and learn from them. Most importantly, they agree that the patient is the focus of their practices, so they try to make the most of each patient’s experience. They also agree that relationships with family, friends, and colleagues, as well as personal growth, are of utmost significance outside of their practices.

Being successful means looking inside yourself, figuring out who you are, what drives you, what you really want, and what you are willing to give up in order to get there. It takes soul-searching and perseverance. Be honest with yourself. Know what you are capable of achieving and go for it.

DISCLOSURE

Financial Conflicts of Interest

None.

Professional Conflicts of Interest

Vice President-Elect, American Academy of Dermatology (AAD); Executive Committee, AAD; Board of Directors, American Society for Dermatologic Surgery; Board of Directors, Noah Worcester Dermatologic Society; Board of Directors, Florida Academy of Dermatology; Board of Directors, Florida Society for Dermatologic Surgeons; Chair, AMA Dermatology Section Council;

Past President, Florida Academy of Dermatology;
Past VP, Women's Dermatologic Society.

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