Del Norte Triplicate

COMMUNITY

Sir Richard Harpin

People You Should Know

By Tony D'Urso September 17, 2026

“Every entrepreneur needs to have a not-to-do list.”

Entrepreneurs are trained to look for opportunity.

A new customer. A new market. A new product. A new way to grow.

But what if opportunity itself becomes the distraction?

I recently spoke with Richard on The Tony DUrso Show at TonyDurso.com/podcast. He started HomeServe with £50,000 and spent more than three decades helping build it into an international company ultimately valued at more than £4 billion.

Yet Richard told me something I didn't expect.

Looking back, he believes HomeServe might have become twice as large if he had learned sooner to stop pursuing so many opportunities.

Richard describes entrepreneurs as “foxes.” We're curious. We see possibilities everywhere. Something new appears and our instinct is to investigate it.

He says growing a great company sometimes requires becoming more like a “hedgehog” – putting up your prickles, ignoring distractions and continuing methodically in the direction that matters.

That lesson about focus came from experience.

HomeServe ventured into furniture warranties, insurance repairs and smart-home devices. Some of those businesses took attention away from the company's core model.

“If I'd not been distracted by so many ideas, HomeServe could have been twice as big.”

That's a remarkable admission from someone who built a multibillion-pound company.

But Richard's story also challenges another assumption about entrepreneurship: that success requires a completely original idea.

HomeServe's first business model didn't work. The company nearly ran out of money twice. At one point, Richard's business partner told him his lifelong dream of becoming a successful entrepreneur was over and that he should return to Procter & Gamble.

Instead, Richard discovered a small water company offering an annual plumbing-emergency plan.

He studied it. Copied what worked. Then executed it better.

HomeServe eventually grew that basic concept across multiple services and countries.

As the company expanded, however, Richard encountered another obstacle familiar to many founders:

Himself.

Eight years into the business, he realized running the day-to-day operation wasn't his strength. He brought in people who were better at it and freed himself to work on the business rather than constantly inside it.

That meant learning to let go.

It also led Richard to another unconventional leadership lesson: stop spending so much energy trying to correct every weakness. Know what you're exceptionally good at, then surround yourself with talented people who can do the things you can't.

Perhaps that's the larger lesson behind his story.

Growth isn't always about adding more.

More ideas. More products. More markets. More responsibilities.

Sometimes the greatest opportunity is protecting the business from opportunities that don't belong.

Richard recommends reducing your strategy to a single sentence of fewer than 20 words. Then use it to judge what deserves your time – and what belongs on your not-to-do list.

In a world overflowing with new technologies, AI tools, strategies and possibilities, that's a discipline many entrepreneurs may need more than ever.

Or, as Richard puts it:

“It's all about the execution. It's not about the idea.”