



How to Be an Imagineer, According to Disney Legend Marty Sklar

IN DISNEY

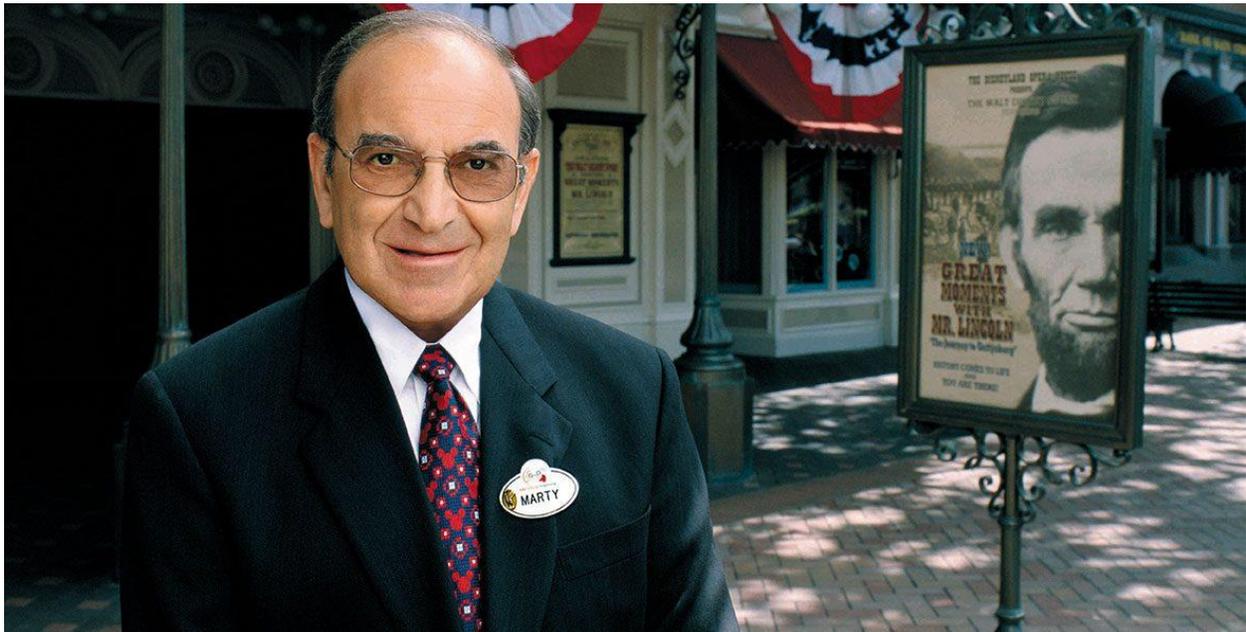
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Disney Legend and Walt Disney Imagineering hero Marty Sklar started his career with [The Walt Disney Company](#) in 1955. A month before [Disneyland Park](#) first opened, the UCLA Bruin was recruited as the chief-editor of *The Disneyland News*. After graduating, he joined Disney full-time in 1956, where he was the head of Disneyland's publicity and marketing.

During early morning on Main Street USA, Walt Disney sat down with Marty Sklar and asked him, "What are you doing [for me]?" By 1960, Marty Sklar became Walt Disney's "ghostwriter," being the man in charge of writing official statements and documents that would have Walt Disney named the author. The two became close associates and later friends. In 1961, Sklar transferred over to WED Enterprises (now Walt Disney Imagineering) per the request of Walt Disney. There, he worked on attractions such as Ford's Magic Skyway (later the PeopleMover), "it's a small world," and the Carousel of Progress for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.



Credit: D23

During his 54-year career with The Walt Disney Company, Sklar served as Vice President of Creative Development, Executive Vice President, and then President of Walt Disney Imagineering. He's the only person to attend the grand opening of every Disney Park across the globe.

For over 50 years, Walt Disney's philosophy burned in Marty Sklar and led him throughout his career. He once stated:

Working with Walt Disney was the greatest 'training by fire' anyone could ever experience. Our training was by Walt, who was always there pitching in with new ideas and improving everyone else's input. The fire was that we were constantly breaking new ground to create deadline projects never attempted before in this business. That, I'm proud to say, has never stopped in my years at Disney.

He retired from Imagineering on July 17, 2009. Still, he continued to guide future generations of Imagineers with his three autobiographies, numerous guest-teaching experiences at universities, and co-founding of the Ryman Arts School for young artists.

Among his greatest contributions are his “Mickey’s Ten Commandments,” the principles that formed the standard Imagineers use today to create Disney park experiences. In his book, *One Little Spark!*, Marty wrote:

When we followed them closely, we created magic. When we strayed from them... well, you will find examples of not achieving our objectives.

Let’s take a closer look at Mickey’s Ten Commandments and learn Marty Sklar’s advice on becoming a successful individual in the entertainment business, or even an Imagineer.

1) Know Your Audience

If you’re going to take away one rule from Mickey’s Ten Commandments, this is the one to *know*. Sklar wrote:

Identify the prime audience for your attraction or show before you begin design.

Understanding where your audience comes from, and their interest is key to creating a successful entertainment experience. You need to understand what still resonates with the hearts of fans. If *Star Wars* weren’t still a classic, there would be no Galaxy’s Edge or *The Mandalorian*.

In 2005, Disney California Adventure was in dire need of an upgrade. The park underperformed, and then-new CEO Bob Iger vowed to revitalize the park. Imagineer extraordinaire [Kevin Rafferty](#) took his idea of a “Carland USA” for DCA and teamed up with Pixar to create Cars Land.

Sklar gives Cars Land at Disney California Adventure as an example of earning a “Mousecar” (a Disney Oscar) for following this commandment.



Credit: Disney

No other land has hit it “out of the park” as [Cars Land](#) did in 2012. Sklar highlighted one of his favorite memories in his novel when a little boy exclaimed to his mother, “This is where they shot the movie!”

Imagineering perfectly transformed [Pixar's Cars](#) little town of Radiator Springs into a three-dimensional, physical land. The Cozy Cone Motel and Flo's V8 Cafe were brought to life as delicious restaurants, with Luigi's Rollickin' Roadsters and Radiator Springs Racers being the crown jewels of the land.

Cars Land is a fan favorite, and Disney fans couldn't have asked for a better adaptation of a film into a land.

2) Wear Your Guests' Shoes

Sklar insisted that his Imagineering cohorts experience their creations just as the guests would. Walt Disney would walk through Disneyland with his hair uncombed and sometimes in pj's to experience Disneyland like his guests. He purposely waited in line for Peter Pan's Flight to hear guests talk about what [Disneyland](#) nailed and what they could improve on. Sklar continued Walt's legacy by making Imagineering visit Disney parks on weekends and listen to what guests liked and disliked about their creations.

The Mousecar goes to Dumbo the Flying Elephant, Fantasyland, Magic Kingdom.



Credit: Disney

No other ride at Disney Parks lets tired parents rest their feet while their children can play as they wait in line to board Dumbo the Flying Elephant. On top of that, Imagineers added another [Dumbo the Flying Elephant](#) attraction at the [Magic Kingdom in Walt Disney World](#) to meet the high demand for popularity.

Sklar applauds Imagineering for taking an ingenious concept of creating a “queue without a queue.” They made an entirely new experience within an existing attraction that added to the overall magic of [Walt Disney World](#).

3) Organize the Flow of People and Ideas

When telling a story through any medium, you have to make sure that your story is easy to follow and clear to understand. Taking your audience throughout your story in an unorderly fashion creates confusion and dislike. Attractions should start at the beginning, follow-through the story to the climax, and then decline to the ending.

Sklar stated:

Make sure there is a logic and sequence in your stories and in the way guests experience them.

The Mousecar for this commandment goes to [Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Forbidden Eye](#), Disneyland Park, Anaheim.



Credit: Disney

Like all of us Disneyland fans, Marty Sklar couldn't get enough of that 0.5-mile queue leading into the [Temple of the Forbidden Eye](#). Sklar praises the craftsmanship and theming throughout Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Forbidden Eye. The queue starts within the lush vegetation of Adventureland near the Jungle Cruise and leads guests deeper and deeper into the jungle.

Once inside the caverns and old ruins of the temple, Imagineering tricks your brain to think you're apart of an *Indiana Jones* film. On top of that, you probably didn't realize that it's a half-mile trek to board the attraction. Imagineering perfectly organized how they brought guests into an off-site building while still telling an adventurous story. The queue doesn't take away from the story but adds to it.

4) Create a "Wienie" (Visual Magnet)

Disney legend has it that one evening while Walt was fixing up some hotdogs in his Hollywood-home, his dog was drawn to the waiving of the dog in Walt's hand and

began begging for the treat. Walt then had a vision much like [Dr. Emmet Brown in Back to the Future](#) with the Flux Capacitor. To attract guests to different parts of Disneyland, Walt needed to create a “wienie” that intrigued and invited them.

The [Matterhorn Mountain](#), Pixar-Pal-Around, and [Guardians of the Galaxy: Mission Breakout](#) all stick out like a sore thumb, but they bring guests to different parts of the parks that may otherwise go unnoticed (who doesn’t know every square-inch of Disneyland?!).

The Mousecar goes to The Fantasyland Castles in Disney Parks around the globe.



Credit: Disney

Walt’s wienie vision transformed into what today is Sleeping Beauty Castle at [Disneyland](#). Think about it: would people be attracted to walk down [Main Street USA](#) if there wasn’t a castle at the end of the line? When you go to a theme park and enter into the gates without a castle or some wienie in the eye’s view, there’s no motivation to venture inside. Disney’s castles, trees, and mountains are all perfect “wienies.”

5) Communicate with Visual Literacy

Like any great movie director like [Steven Spielberg](#), [Stanley Kubrick](#), or [Alfred Hitchcock](#), one must use colors, shape, lighting, form, and texture to tell a story. These are examples of nonverbal communication.

The "Goof" (the opposite of an Oscar) goes to The Haunted Mansion at Disneyland Park, Anaheim.



Credit: Disney

In his autobiography, [One Little Spark!](#), Sklar wrote:

I'm getting into trouble on this one... but I have to be honest about it. Part of my reluctance in critiquing Walt Disney himself is that Walt really liked something I wrote that reinforced his concept, and now I am about to criticize it... Here's the issue: this mansion does not look haunted from the outside. In fact, the exterior of the building was arguably designed and built before a show had been developed for the inside. And that is not the way good storytelling is accomplished.

Sklar later states that Imagineering would have approached [The Haunted Mansion](#) differently if they had not been entirely consumed in designing four attractions for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair. Walt was determined to create a haunted attraction at [Disneyland](#), but he gave priority to his first commitment: the World's Fair.

After the World's Fair, Imagineering followed Mickey's Fifth Commandment to the tee once inside the mansion. No other attraction communicates the creeps without speaking a word like [The Haunted Mansion](#). The audio of the Ghost Host, voiced by Paul Frees, is terrifying. But without the shadows, low-lighting, and cold colors within the mansion make it one of Disney's scariest attractions.

6) Avoid Overload — Create Turn-Ons

Master storytellers know it's wise to ease their audience into stories. If you overload a scene in a movie or book with too much information, viewers are left with confusion and disorientation. Sklar suggests:

Resist the temptation to overload your audience with too much information and too many objects.

The Mousecar goes to [Peter Pan's Flight](#), Fantasyland, [Disneyland](#).



Credit: Disney

Ever wonder why this attraction has a 45-minute wait right when [Disneyland](#) opens in the morning? Disney fans can't get enough of Peter Pan's Flight. Famous author Ray Bradbury personally thanked Walt Disney for letting him fly over London at night in a pirate ship and then relive the [Peter Pan](#) story all in under five minutes. Imagineers ease you into this story and keep the pace of the ride slow and easy. The music, lighting, and sets all create an incredibly fun journey for Disney fans of all ages.

7) Tell One Story at a Time

Much like Commandment #6, you should focus on one story at a time. Like Pirates of the Caribbean, successful Disney attractions can shift from one story to another, but they never overlap. You should always focus on completing sections of your tales before moving onto any other stories, and Sklar suggests:

Stick to the story line; good stories are clear, logical, and consistent.

The Mousecar goes to [The Carousel of Progress](#).



Credit: Disney

When General Electric approached to create an original attraction for the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, Walt Disney drafted his dream team of artists, musicians, writers, and magic-makers to produce the world's longest-lasting stage show. Carousel of Progress showcased the brand innovation of audio-animatronics. Unlike Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln, also made for the '64-65 World's Fair, this attraction utilized numerous animatronics throughout four different show scenes.

None of the stories overlap with one another in the carousel. Once that carousel begins to rotate, you're able to understand what may happen next, and the ending makes perfect sense. Marty Sklar was one of the main brains behind the writing of Carousel of Progress, and his work has lasted the test of time.

8) Avoid Contradictions – Maintain Identity

Commandment #6-7 goes hand-in-hand with this one. The key to being a great storyteller is trying not to confuse your audience. It sure can be easy to rush information, but it can make a huge difference to slow down in your thought process and convey your ideas in an orderly fashion. Marty wrote:

Details in design or content that contradict one another confuse an audience about your story or the time period it takes place in.

When it comes to attractions, Imagineers are always telling a story. The entrance, queue, physical attraction, and exit should all fit together like LEGO's. If you're forcing something in your design, it won't tell the right story. It might confuse your audience and hurt your overall message. The queue and exit *Star Tours* take place at a *Star Wars*-themed airport. If you exited the attraction through an Imperial Star Destroyer, the entire storyline would be ruined.

The Mousecar goes to Shanghai Disneyland.



Credit: Kent Phillips

Sklar praised Imagineering's President Bob Weis leadership in maintaining Chinese tradition with the Disney identity. When asked, Bob Weis stated:

One thing we learned from you [Marty Sklar] is know your audience. In the case of China, that initially meant reaching out and trying to get to know a culture that we as Americans really knew nothing about.

9) For Every Ounce of Treatment, Provide a Ton of Treat

When it comes to educating your audience, you never want to let them know that they're being educated! Marty exclaimed the importance of this in his [novel](#):

In our business, Walt Disney said, you can educate people — but don't tell them you're doing it! Make it fun!

Around the world, Disney Parks inform generations of everything from history, drawing, or how to drive a car. Fan-favorite attractions like Spaceship Earth, Test Track, and Autopia are all educational but fun!

The Mousecar for this commandment goes to "it's a small world."



Credit: Disney

Love it or hate it; this attraction nails it to educate audiences with fun and laughter. You're transported to nearly every culture worldwide and learn about different civilizations, fashions, and customs in just one sitting. Though that song may be annoying to some, it conveys world peace and understanding, something the world always needs a reminder of.

10) Keep it up! (Maintain It)

No matter what Disney theme park you're at, it's always clean. Custodial [Cast Members](#) are still in earshot, and before a piece of trash lands on the ground, they're there to catch it! Walt's main point behind creating [Disneyland](#) was to have a clean park where families could enjoy their weekend.

The reason attractions go through so many refurbishments during a year is that Imagineering wants to ensure that everything will work. If you only had one day at [Disneyland](#), but [Big Thunder Mountain Railroad](#) suddenly broke down when you were on the attraction, your heart would be crushed. Your heart might be crushed if the attraction was already under construction, but it's far worst to be experiencing the fun and have it cut short.

The Goof goes to "Lost Disneyland Maintenance."



Credit: Disney

During the early 2000s, The Walt Disney Company was at war over replacing Michael Eisner as CEO with Bob Iger. On top of that, Disneyland received a new President in the mid-1990s, Paul Pressler, that shifted the park's focus to merchandise rather than attractions. Money that went into maintaining attractions like the PeopleMover and Skyway went towards clothing, accessories, and keychains.

The heyday of Disneyland attractions sadly disappeared, and the park was in a state of limbo. The question arose of “who’s in charge?” Walt Disney’s vision of having a clean and well-maintained park was temporarily absent, but Disney found their magic again, and Disneyland came back to life like never before.



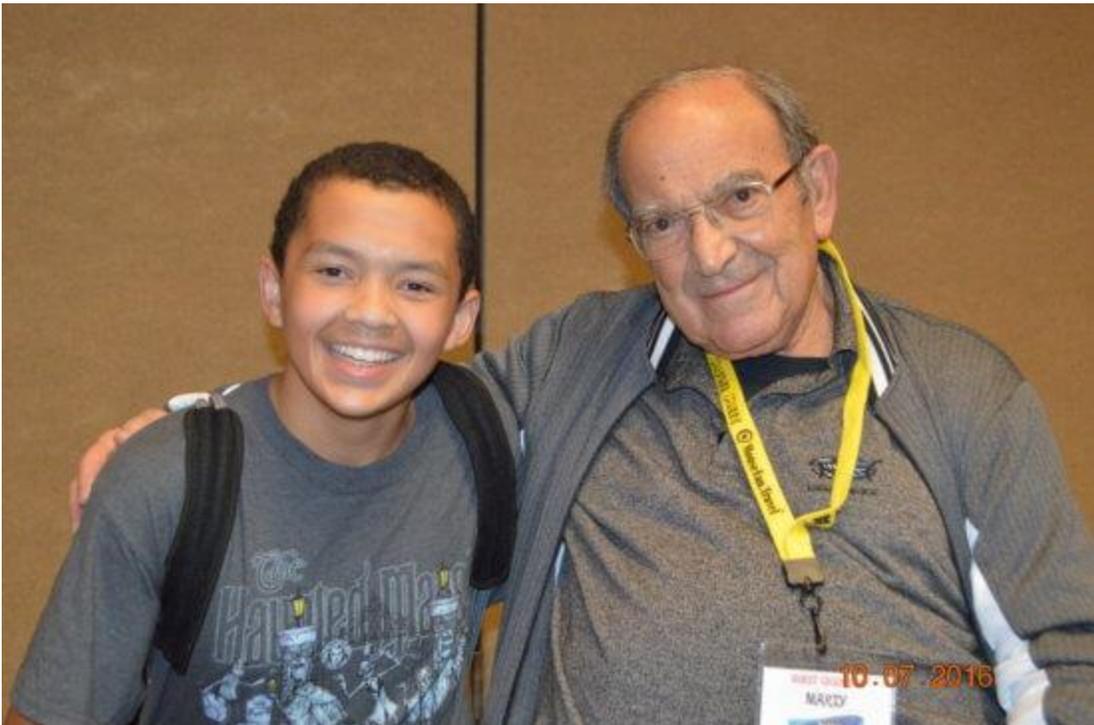
Credit: ITM Alex Lue

Sadly, Marty Sklar passed away on July 27, 2017, at his Hollywood Hills home at the age of 83. After his 54-year career with Disney, the “ultimate Disney Imagineer,” [according to Bob Chapek](#), Marty authored numerous books about his fantastic job and the stories that came with it: [Dream It! Do It!: My Half-Century Creating Disney’s Magic Kingdoms](#) (2013), [One Little Spark!: Mickey’s Ten Commandments and The Road to Imagineering](#) (2015), and [Travels with Figment On the Road in Search of Disney Dreams](#).



Credit: ITM Alex Lue

Marty was the champion of Disney fans and turned into an honorary “grandpa” to many. His warmth, integrity, and kindness radiated off of him. If you could be in the same room with the man, your spirit was refilled, and you dared to accomplish any task. Many consider him one of the most incredible Disney Legends.



Credit: ITM Alex Lue

Marty's legendary persona, work ethic, and passion for Walt Disney's dream will live on forever. He's made the world a far better place more times than anyone can count during his lifetime, and that happiness will always be available for the world to enjoy.



Alex Lue

When he's not in Disneyland, Alex loves to make YouTube videos, watch old movies, and play the guitar. In his spare time, Alex learns all things theme park history, travels Route 66, and listens to the Eagles!

www.youtube.com/alexthelue