

LEARN FROM THE BEST

**10 lessons I learned
from mistakes at
Amazon, Google
and Facebook**

BY ALAN JACOBSON

*For Zoe and Sophie,
and Tanya*

10 Lessons for Success

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CHAPTER 1

I DIDN'T HOLD OUT FOR BILLIONS. I SOLD MY APP FOR MILLIONS



In 2008, I built an educational website for my 10-year-old daughter. Six years later, I sold it for seven figures.

In between, I had a brush with Rupert Murdoch, Jeff Bezos, Ben Bradlee, bankruptcy and jail. Survived a flood, lost a parent and a business, then got fired. Lost a house and sold another, lost two girlfriends and got engaged. Lost a boat and a car. Bought another

one of each, and sold a plane. Almost gave up.

Through it all I persisted. I made millions and I learned 10 lessons I'm happy to share with you.

But why should you take advice from a dot com millionaire, like me, when you can take advice from a dot com billionaire? Because you, like me, have a better chance of making millions than making billions.

Listen, I'm no genius. The only thing I have in common with Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk is a

Myers-Briggs temperament.

If you're as smart as those guys, you've already made your billions.

So chances are, you're no genius. But if you were curious enough to read this far, I know you're sorta smart and motivated. That's all it takes to make millions, plus the 10 lessons I learned. But don't get me wrong. I'm like you — not a genius, just smarter than the average bear.

In 2014, I sold the site to a large educational institution in Washington, but it's still possible for

one person to build an app and sell it for seven figures.

The screenshot shows the TweenTribune website. At the top is a blue header with the site name "TweenTribune" in white, and buttons for "TEACHER SIGN UP" and "LOG IN". Below the header, navigation links include "GRADES K-4", "GRADES 5-8", "GRADES 9-12", "SPANISH", "CONTACT+FAQS", and "CAN'T LOG IN?". A banner below the header states: "Google for Education is the sole corporate supporter of our 165,190 registered teachers and 1,621,931 students".

The main content area features a large image collage. The top row includes photos of Justin Bieber, a woman in a crown, and Michelle Obama. The bottom row is dominated by a large photo of a bulldog wearing a crown. Below the collage is the text: "Bieber busted? From problem; Mrs. Obama speaks out; Beautiful bulldog - AP photos".

Below the collage is a date and theme section: "April 23, 2014" with a globe icon, and "Around the in pictures".

Below this is a featured article snippet: "Man grows new nose" with a small image of a person. The text reads: "In a north London hospital, scientists are growing noses, ears and blood vessels. It is a bold attempt to make body parts in the laboratory. But it isn't the only lab in the world that is pursuing the futuristic idea of growing organs for transplant. Only a handful of patie... - Posted on April 23, 2014". Below the snippet are links for "Read more", "5 comments", and "Log in to post a comment".

On the right side of the page, there is a "Topics" section with a list of categories: Animals, Art, Book reviews, Education, Entertainment, Fashion, Food & Health, Inspiration, National news, News you can use, Odd news, Opinion, Science, Sports, Technology, Tweens in the news, and World news.

Below the topics is a search bar: "Search this site:" followed by an input field and a "Search" button.

At the bottom right is a "Recent comments" section. A comment from user "isaac3313" is visible: "Galaxy got better, but iPhone still best".

Josh Wardle sold Wordle to The New York Times for seven figures this year, which seems like a good deal for

the Times to me. So you merely need to bring your smarts and persistence, glean what you can from these 10 lessons, and have at it.

Think less Cinderella, more seven figures.

Statistically speaking, you have a better chance of making millions than making billions. So if you can be satisfied with millions instead of billions, read on.

Each chapter takes 7 minutes or less to read. Seven is a good number.

CHAPTER 2

HOPE IS NOT A BUSINESS MODEL

Let's talk business models. But if you mention the word "hope" in the same breath as your revenue scheme, I won't be holding my breath until you succeed.

That said, I'm not gonna be an iconoclast and insist that you have your business model resolved before you deploy your online presence — or whatever endeavor you're pursuing.

Arguably, the most successful site in the world, Google, was deployed with no business model at all. The only thing more brilliant than the business model Google ultimately deployed — targeting ads to users’ search queries — was its revolutionary way to do search.

And Craigslist began with no business model. Eventually, it was eventually monetized by charging for select categories in select cities.

Over at Facebook, you’d think Mark Zuckerberg resisted advertising from a **scene from “The Social Network.”**

But advertising on Facebook goes back all the way to its founding in 2004. These first ads were rather crude. It took six years for Facebook to allow advertisers to target their ads demographically and tap into the true power of the platform – that was six years of missed opportunity.

Furthermore, during those six years, ads annoyed users as the ads became increasingly more intrusive – especially when ads began appearing in users' main news feed.

Ultimately, it took Sheryl Sanberg to sort out the mess around 2014, making a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Zuckerberg lured her away from Google so she could control advertising in a way that didn't "spoil the party."

But should you wait to deploy your revenue strategy?

If you have a winning business model, there's no need to delay. But how can you know whether it's a winner before you deploy? You got me. So, if there's any chance that pursuing your revenue model might interfere with some other aspect of your enterprise, wait. For instance, if building audience, reputation,

loyalty, AMU (Average Monthly Users) — or whatever — is essential to your enterprise, you better nail those down first. Even if your revenue model does nothing more than distract from other more important priorities, wait. And it doesn't matter whether your business model is advertising, subscriptions, commissions, leases, licensing, SAAS, direct-to-consumer, business-to-business or service, etc. — any one of these could interfere with other essential elements of your enterprise.

WHY AM I HARPING ON THIS?

Because the only thing worse than no

business model is a bad business model. I should know because my original business model was a loser. Fortunately, I was able to recover. But not before wasting several years and \$150,000 chasing the wrong customer.

After I wised up, healthy revenues and minimal expenses gave my site an astonishing profit margin — well beyond 50%. This made it attractive for an acquisition.

What follows is a case study of what didn't work, and what finally did work.

BUSINESS MODEL CASE STUDY

Like every entrepreneur, I thought my business model was a lead-pipe cinch that couldn't go wrong. How wrong I was.

As one of the few newspaper designers in the world, I have a unique relationship with newspapers across the U.S. You can see my work at BrassTacksDesign.com.

(Unfortunately, this site hasn't been updated since 2008 when the newspaper industry tanked. It's not optimized for mobile so it looks better on a bigger screen.)

I had planned for revenue to come from display advertising, both programmatic national advertising and local advertising. I would recruit newspapers, both from my pool of clients as well as others.

SO MUCH FOR STEP #1.

ON TO STEP #2.

Step #2 was building audience, because the ads needed eyeballs to turn views into dollars. I planned to leverage the unique relationship that newspapers have with teachers via a program called “Newspapers in Education.” Through this program, newspapers are delivered to schools

at no cost for use in classrooms, and teachers share their contact information with newspapers. I planned to use this contact info to reach out to teachers and offer them the use of my site at no cost, plus free training and technical support.

Now here's where it gets even better. Each teacher has 20–120 students. So each teacher who participated could increase the audience many times over. And readership would be compulsory, because teachers would assign their students to use the site.

Oh, if only newspaper readership

could have been made compulsory in all age groups! Then newspapers would still have the license to print money that they had enjoyed for decades. Instead of the ignominious end they've come to. But I digress... back to my business model.

Under my plan, there would be no cost to newspapers — and they would have the opportunity to create the next generation of news consumers in a classroom environment with adult supervision. Research has shown that newspaper readership is a habit, so newspapers are motivated to hook people when they're young.

And there would be no cost to teachers. So, free for newspapers with a 50% revenue share with me, and free for teachers.

But it didn't work.

Here's where I went wrong: I overestimated the appetite that newspapers had for a free program that would generate revenue via advertising and promote newspaper readership.

A NEWSPAPER PRO WEIGHS IN

This was all summed up neatly [in a blog by Alan Mutter](#). Alan is a

seasoned newspaper man, with stints at the Chicago Sun-Times and San Francisco Chronicle. He is also a professor of journalism at UC Berkeley. Alan wrote:

“After spending many frustrating months trying to interest publishers in his idea, Alan got a piece of advice. “Forget newspapers,” a friend told him, using saltier language.

Alan said, and I can confirm, that newspapers responded to this innovative idea with the same question all innovators hear from them: “Who else is doing it?”

Newspapers are notoriously risk-averse, and they won't pursue any initiatives without proof of concept. They're followers, not leaders. Sheep.

I did get a half-dozen forward-looking newspapers to participate, including The (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot, The Bakersfield Californian, The Traverse City Record-Eagle, The (Fredericksburg) Free Lance-Star, The Brainerd (Minnesota) Dispatch, and The Valdosta (Georgia) Daily Times.

I will elaborate on how I found my way out of this morass in another

lesson, but part of the solution was to abandon newspapers — both as advertising partners and as a means of building audience. In hindsight, I should have realized how difficult it would be to target advertising to kids because:

- a) Virtually all programmatic advertising does not target kids.
- b) Kids have almost no money to spend. This limited the number of advertisers who wanted to reach them.
- c) In 2011, the FTC announced

changes to COPPA — the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act. These changes made it virtually impossible to display programmatic advertising to kids under 13.

Kids are a tough crowd. Just ask Facebook, which has been trying for years and still hasn’t delivered “Facebook for Kids.” Disney’s failed effort only lasted a couple years.

I’m skipping forward to when I had 250,000 teachers registered on the site. Teachers would prove to be the source of a business model that worked spectacularly.

Teachers, not students would be the revenue solution.

There is one big-ticket item that all teachers want: an M.Ed. (Masters in Education). Some teachers want it for self-improvement. Others want it for the salary boost they get.

The cost of an online M.Ed. varies from \$2,000 to \$21,000 from one of the more reputable schools, such as Penn State, according to bestcollegesonline.com.

When a marketing company delivers a teacher who enrolls for the M.Ed. in

response to outreach from the marketing company, these online schools typically payout 1/4 of the tuition for each teacher.

My client was one of the higher end schools, so the advertising revenue was about \$5,000 per teacher.

My operating expenses were limited to two items: my subscription to the Associated Press, for the daily feed of news stories and photos; and two servers at Rackspace, one running Apache and the other running MySQL. I never accounted for my time, because I had plenty of it. After all,

newspapers were dying and no longer hiring pricey consultants like myself. So with two manageable fixed costs, my margins increased significantly with each teacher who enrolled per month in response to our outreach.

So, I had been barking up the wrong tree with my newspaper strategy for advertising and students for audience. The solution was in front of me the entire time. I just couldn't see it. I was blinded by my confidence in my business model.

Don't make the same mistake.

CHAPTER 3

FIND A LOOPHOLE

“Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?”

And Goliath cursed David by his gods. “Come here, and I’ll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!”

You can’t beat the King James for trash talk.

Goliath had only fought battles hand-to-hand, but David wisely never let Goliath get within arm’s length.

Goliath complained that David wasn't "fighting fair," but who said he had to?

Today's tech titans were once Davids. Early in their careers they relied on loopholes that allowed them to stay within the rules, even if they violated norms.

Skirting the law may offend your delicate sensibilities and sense of fair play, but you gotta do what you gotta do. None of these "early Davids" broke any rules, or busted anyone's balls...well, maybe Tim Ferriss did.

THE LICHEN LOOPHOLE

In its first few years, Amazon had to buy products from wholesalers who wouldn't sell just one or two books — they had a ten-book minimum, and that was non-negotiable.

“I tried to negotiate with them,” said Jeff Bezos. “Let us just pay a small fee, and you waive the 10-book order,” and so on. But they wouldn't go for it. What's a tech titan-to-be to do?

Bezos found a loophole: Wholesalers required 10 books to be *ordered*, but they did not require 10 books to be

delivered. So Amazon found an obscure book on lichens that none of its wholesalers actually carried.

Then, whenever Amazon needed to order one book, they ordered the book they wanted, and then nine copies of the lichen book. Wholesalers would deliver the one that Amazon wanted, along with a very sincere apology about not having been able to fulfill the nine copies of the lichen book order.

“I’ve since talked and joked at length with the people at these companies about this,” says Bezos. They actually

think it's very funny.”

Somehow, I don't believe the wholesalers think it is funny.

Somebody was bearing that cost — it was probably passed on to other customers. But this subterfuge worked for Amazon. So who cares, and we're all good, right? Jeff's gonna do what Jeff's gotta do.

THE KICKBOXING LOOPHOLE

Tim Ferriss exploited a loophole to win the gold medal at the 1999 Chinese Kickboxing National Championships. It wasn't because he was good at punching and kicking.

Here's how he did it:

He won, he writes in “[The 4-Hour Work Week](#),” by reading the rules and looking for unexploited opportunities. He found two:

- 1. Weigh-ins were the day prior to competition**, rather than the day of the competition. Using dehydration techniques commonly practiced by Olympic wrestlers, he claims he lost 28 pounds in 18 hours. Unlikely? Yes. But he's Tim Ferriss. And he did win, so...nothing succeeds like success, right?

2. Make your opponent the fall guy.

Tim found this stipulation in the rules: If one combatant fell off the elevated platform three times in a single round, his opponent won by default. Tim used this technicality and merely pushed people off, rather than fight them.

The result? He won all of his matches by technical knockout and went home a national champion.

Isn't pushing people out of the ring pushing the boundaries of ethics? Not at all, says Tim — "it's no more than doing the uncommon within the

rules.”

THE FACEMASH LOOPHOLE

Before there was Facebook, there was FaceMash. The site used “photos compiled from the online face books of nine Harvard Houses, placing two next to each other at a time and asking users to choose the “hotter” person,” according to the Harvard Crimson.

To populate the site with photos, Jeff Zuckerberg breached whatever security existed to download the images, immortalized in [this scene](#) from “The Social Network.”

Chances are, campus security did not anticipate that anyone would go to the trouble to write a script and automate the process of downloading the images. It's likely that all the images were uploaded one-at-a-time, and no one considered the possibility that someone would batch download them.

Zuckerberg faced expulsion and was charged with breaching security, violating copyrights and violating individual privacy. Ultimately, the charges were dropped, Zuckerberg created Facebook and the rest is history, friend.

THE LEXILE LOOPHOLE

Lexile is an automated system for determining the reading level of books — typically for grades 1–12.

Lexile is quite opaque about how their system works, but basically it uses an algorithm that employs an exception dictionary and calculates characters-per-words and words per sentence as a proxy for reading level.

Got it?

It sounds more complicated than it is. Think of it this way: bigger words and longer sentences are harder to read. Ergo, if a book has relatively more big

words and long sentences — think Faulkner — it's harder to read and likely to be of a higher reading level.

So why did I care about this arcana that should only be the province of librarians and reading specialists?

My chief competitor, Achieve3000, used Lexile and teachers loved it. And an up-and-comer, Newsela, also used it. So I was forced to add Lexile, or something like it, to remain competitive. Ultimately, I reverse engineered Lexile's software and created my own text-leveler, which was superior, IMHO. But more about

that in another lesson.

Lexile was slow and expensive. Files had to be sent to North Carolina for processing, typically taking a week to turnaround. That wouldn't work for news updated daily, which was one of my competitive advantages.

The short-term work-around?

To encourage people to pay for Lexile's service, they offered a self-service, free version of Lexile. Just upload your .txt file and get a Lexile score instantly. The only rub was that the text was limited to 1,000 words —

clearly not enough for an entire book beyond the most elementary level.

But Lexile had assumed that anyone wanting its service would want if for book-length text, rather than daily news stories from the Associated Press I had, which rarely exceed 1,000 words.

So I was able to use their free, instant system because they hadn't anticipated a use such as mine. Lexile claimed its free product was not as "accurate" as their paid service, but I never detected a difference.

So, what's the takeaway from all of this?

The bigger the organization (book wholesalers, Chinese Kickboxing Association, Harvard, Lexile), the more likely it has missed something that a little guy (early Amazon, Tim Ferriss, early Mark Zuckerberg, me) can exploit.

Just do it.

CHAPTER 4

SOLVE A PROBLEM WORTH SOLVING

Lots of great things began with two guys in a garage: Think Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak (Apple); Bill Gates and Paul Allen (Microsoft); Larry Page and Sergey Brin (Google).

Now think a middle-aged guy and his 10-year-old daughter in my garage-now-office, staring into computer screens on a Saturday afternoon in October 2008.

Sophie had a problem. I could see it in her face. It was a long one.

“What’s up, Soph?”

Sophie was frustrated with a homework assignment. It required her to write reports on news stories from websites designated by her teacher.

“The news is boring,” said Sophie.

I’ve been a newsman all my life. Well, so far anyway. I worked on the school paper when I was in junior high school. And the yearbook. I had my

first photo published – with name credit – in my local newspaper when I was in 8th grade. I went on to have a career as a photojournalist, designer and news editor.

So imagine my reaction. How could Sophie denigrate something I've loved — my passion, really — when I have enjoyed working with news for decades?

DULL, DULL, DEATHLY DULL

The proof is in the pudding, they say. And for good reason. I leaned over Sophie's shoulder to get a look at the sites she was using.

She was right. They were boring. I told her to give me 30 minutes.

I knew the news was more interesting than this. Even kid-friendly news could be more interesting. So I went to a half-dozen news sites — AOL, nytimes, washpost — and found six stories I thought Sophie would be interested in. Then I whipped a rudimentary page of HTML so Sophie could see all six stories on a single web page. Each story had a headline and summary with a hyperlink to the entire story.

“This is great!” said Sophie. “Now I want to write some stories. How can I do that?”

I explained to her that writing is only one part of being a journalist. The other, more important part is the reporting — the gathering of information from people, other sources as well as first-hand experience — before the writing begins.

I could not think of a way for Sophie to do any reporting in the amount of time allotted for homework. Then I had an idea: what if Sophie could post

comments about the stories she was reading? This would satisfy her teacher's requirement that Sophie compose something in writing.

Sophie said that would work for her. I had solved her problem.

But as soon as she told me it worked for her, I realized it would work for the 13 million kids like her in American middle schools.

And the site was born.



Zoe and her sister, Sophie, at right

Here was the idea: Think of it as "Weekly Reader" but online, curated by an experienced news editor, updated daily and interactive with a social media component — the comments posted by students and moderated by teachers.

The next step was build out. I knew I could build it in Drupal, a highly customizable CMS (Content Management System). I had been introduced to Drupal by Jay Small, now a digitally focused media executive, but back then he was another guy like me working with newspapers. In 2007 we had collaborated on a website called realpeoplerealstuff.com, which was a mashup of YouTube and Craigslist.

realpeoplerealstuff.com got mentions in The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, and I made an appearance on NPR's "Marketplace"

to talk about it along with Craig of Craigslist.

But Craig saw no future in video-based classified advertising. And he was right. I shut down the site a couple years later. It was the first of a dozen online ventures I would pursue that didn't make it. More about failure in another chapter.

THE BUILD OUT ON DRUPAL

My experience on realpeoplerealstuff had provided all the training I needed for rewriting CSS and deploying plugins. But there was a rub: even though Drupal's core configuration supports

comments, there was no way to distinguish the comments of students from different teachers in different classrooms. And this was an essential feature. Here's why:

As you know, the internet can be an dangerous place – especially for children. So it was essential that teachers had control, in the form of a moderation dashboard, that allowed them to preview comments created by students before they were published and made public.

As I envisioned TweenTribune, students would be grouped by teacher

and by classroom — because some teachers have more than one classroom of students.

Enter Sudeep Goyal and Ebizon Digital of Uttar Pradesh, India. Sudeep recommended that we use Drupal’s “Node Comments” to establish the necessary taxonomy. This would be the start of a long and life-changing relationship for me. But more about that later.

So, Sudeep solved a problem for me and I solved a problem for my daughter and tweens like her.

IT'S ALL ABOUT SOLVING PROBLEMS

According to Entrepreneur, as long as consumers have problems, they will always search for solutions. People will always look for better, faster and smarter ways to accomplish everyday tasks. And fortunately for entrepreneurs, there are still lots of rooms for improvements in existing products. That said, the biggest issue for most founders is finding these painful problems and matching them with the best solutions possible.

Most entrepreneurs, innovators and developers solve a problem — but

their businesses fail — not because they failed to solve a problem, but because they only solved a problem for themselves and not for an audience or customer base that could support a business.

So don't fall prey to the mistake that most entrepreneurs and innovators make. Remember you are solving a problem for others, not yourself. In other words, a “problem worth solving.” You may develop or imagine a product or solution, but if it doesn't find an audience or customers, it has no future except with dilettantes like those who created it. I know. I have

been such a dilettante, at times.

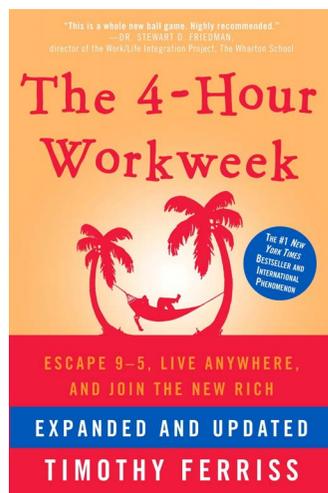
Granted, your business should be your passion. Some entrepreneurs look to solve problems they identify with or feel passionate about. They choose this path because work should be less about work and more about enjoying the journey, according to Entrepreneur.

You will need all the inspiration, commitment and the perseverance you can muster to make it as an entrepreneur, hence the need to start a business you are passionate about.

But remember, it's about them, not you.

CHAPTER 5

FIND A BOOK TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE



Sometimes a book can change a life. A book changed mine. It was written by Tim Ferriss. It's called “[The 4-Hour Work Week.](#)”

What, you were expecting “The Power of Now?” Let me be clear: Tim’s book is not morally uplifting. But it had what I needed to build my site. Specifically, the three things that I

would have never considered otherwise.

And that's what I mean by "a book that changes your life." A book that compels you to follow a road that you wouldn't have taken to paraphrase Robert Frost.

Tim is an American entrepreneur, investor, author, podcaster, and lifestyle guru. He became well-known through his "4-Hour" self-help book series including the 4-Hour Work Week, the 4-Hour Body, and the 4-Hour Chef, that focused on lifestyle optimizations via the internet and

globalization of labor and markets.

THE FIRST WAY TIM FERRISS CHANGED MY LIFE

Tim is all about globalization. He was one of the first to realize that the internet has made the entire world a single marketplace – both for goods and services. Now, anything can be made anywhere for anyone anywhere and work can be performed anywhere for anyone anywhere.

This drives down the cost of goods and services for everyone everywhere.

In “The 4-Hour Work Week,” Tim

Ferriss quotes from AJ Jacobs, editor-at-large at Esquire, who wrote “My Outsourced Life.” AJ’s books are available here.

AJ wrote:

Tom Friedman writes for The New York Times. His book, “The World Is Flat,” is all about how outsourcing to India and China is not just for tech support and carmakers but is poised to transform every industry in America, from law to banking to accounting.

Brickwork is one of the companies Tom mentioned in his book. I explained that

I'd like to hire someone to help with Esquire-related tasks — doing research, formatting memos, like that. The company's CEO, Vivek Kulhari, responds with “It would be a great pleasure to be talking to someone of your stature.” Already I am liking this. I've never had stature before.

A couple of days later, I get an email from my new “remote executive assistant.”

*Dear Jacobs,
My name is Honey K. Balani. I would be assisting you in your editorial and personal job. . . . I would try to adapt*

myself as per your requirements that would lead to desired satisfaction.

Desired satisfaction. This is great.

Honey then completed her first project for me: research on the person Esquire has chosen as the Sexiest Woman Alive. I've been assigned to write a profile of this woman, and I really don't want to have to slog through all the heavy-breathing fan Web sites about her. When I open Honey's file, I have this reaction: America is fucked. There are charts. There are section headers. There is a well-organized breakdown of her pets, measurements, and favorite foods

(e.g., swordfish). If all Bangalorians are like Honey, I pity Americans about to graduate college. They're up against a hungry, polite, Excel-proficient Indian army. Put it this way: Honey ends her emails with "Right time for right action, starts now!" Your average American assistant believes the "right time for right action" starts after a Starbucks venti latte and a discussion of last night's Amazing Race 8.

I was reading Tim's book while I was developing the site. Tim's mention of AJ's article really got my attention because I had reached an impasse.

As I mentioned in Lesson 1, “even though Drupal’s core configuration supports comments, there was no way to distinguish the comments of students from different teachers in different classrooms. And this was an essential feature for my new site.”

I did not have enough experience with Drupal, PHP, MySQL to solve this problem on my own. So I knew I needed to enlist a developer to solve this problem as well as whatever coding challenges I might face in the future.

I had worked with an excellent

developer before on realpeoplerealstuff.com. But he charged \$150/hour — which I did not want to invest in the new site after losing \$100,000 on realpeoplerealstuff.com.

So I considered hiring a developer in India. But how could I know that they could solve my problem, rather than merely taking my money and making excuses? I asked my friend Jay Small, and he told me to examine the responses to my RFP (Request for Proposal) and see whether the response included an explanation of how the developer would solve my

problem.

FINDING A DEVELOPER

I submitted six RFPs. I got three back. Only one was professional in form, design and content. It came from Priyanka Jhamnani, Vice President of Professional Services at Ebizon Digital in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India.

In particular, the proposal contained an explanation of the proposed solution I needed to expand the taxonomy of comments beyond story nodes to teachers, classrooms and students. (node_comment, for you Drupal geeks)

Seeing this explanation met the test that Jay told me to look for. So I decided to move forward with Ebizon.

The cost for this solution, plus a half dozen other small fixes was \$1,500, with \$500 to be paid upfront and \$1,000 due upon delivery. The hourly rate for the developers was \$15 — that was ten times less than I had been paying! (Keep in mind that this was back in 2008 — you might not be able to get that rate today.)

So I was willing to gamble \$500 on Ebizon. And I'm happy I did. That first

bit of development work led to a long-term relationship that exists to this day. I have been to India twice to work shoulder-to-shoulder with their developers, and Sudeep Goyal, CEO of Ebizon has been here to Virginia once to work shoulder-to-shoulder with me.

Ebizon has provided an extraordinary level of support to me, support that changed my life by making my new site possible.



Alan and Sudeep

Ironically, I think back to a conversation I had with Tyler Evans, a young rising star within the world of newspaper graphics who worked at The New York Times.

Tyler told me, “There’s no way you can deploy a quality website using developers in India.”

My first thought was “aren’t you a smug son-of-a-bitch.” But on reflection I think it’s ironic that Tyler hadn’t read his fellow Timesman’s book. Tyler should read “The World Is Flat” because I learned that it is.

THE SECOND WAY TIM FERRISS CHANGED MY LIFE

According to Tim, “Doing the Unrealistic is Easier Than Doing the Realistic.”

Or, to put it in my own words, “Don’t hesitate to attempt the impossible because you’ll have no competition.”

Here’s the tale that Tim tells to illustrate his point, and mine. The story begins with a challenge that he made to a class of Princeton students.

Tim offered a round-trip ticket to anywhere in the world to anyone who completed a “challenge” in the most impressive way.

The challenge was designed to test their comfort zones while forcing them to use some of the tactics Tim

teaches. It was simplicity itself: Contact three seemingly impossible-to-reach people — such as J. Lo, Bill Clinton and J.D. Salinger — and get at least one to reply to three questions.

Tim believes success can be measured in the number of uncomfortable conversations you're willing to have. He felt that if he could help students overcome the fear of rejection with cold-calling and cold-emailing, it would serve them forever.

Of 20 students, all frothing at the mouth to win a free spin across the globe, how many attempted the

challenge?

Not a one.

There were many excuses, but one real reason that repeated itself: It was a difficult challenge, perhaps impossible, and the other students would outdo them. Since all of them overestimated the competition, no one responded.

But according the rules he had set, if someone had sent me no more than an illegible one-paragraph response, Tim would have been obligated to give them the prize. This result both

fascinated and depressed him.

TIM'S OBSERVATION ON THE RESULT

Ninety-nine percent of people in the world are convinced they are incapable of achieving great things, so they aim for mediocre. The level of competition, therefore, is fiercest for “realistic” goals, paradoxically making them the most time- and energy-consuming. For instance, it is easier to raise \$1,000,000 than \$100,000.

If you're insecure, guess what? The rest of the world is, too. Do not

overestimate the competition and underestimate yourself.

SO, HOW DID THIS IMPACT ME?

When I launched site, I knew I faced the threat of competition from two venerable sources. Scholastic is the largest educational publisher in the world; Reader's Digest owned Weekly Reader and eventually sold it to Scholastic. And, unbeknownst to me, I had another competitor: Achieve3000, which was entrenched in classrooms across the country.

But Tim taught me to “attempt the impossible because you’ll have no

competition.” This is the second life-changing thing I learned from Tim.

And there’s a moralistic component to this that is essential for us to advance as a species:

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends upon the unreasonable man.”

— George Bernard Shaw

THE THIRD WAY TIM FERRISS CHANGED MY LIFE

Tim Ferriss wrote: “Pick an

affordable niche market...Creating demand is hard. Don't create a product, then seek someone to sell it to. Instead, find a market—define your customers—then find or develop a product for them.”

For years I had been telling my newspaper clients to pursue niche “communities of interest” online, rather than the geographically local markets they had served for more than a century. But they clung to the notion that their market extended no further than the distance their delivery trucks could drive to reach their readers before sunrise.

Newspapers didn't understand the global reach of the internet.

I believed every newspaper should “own” a niche.

For instance, my adopted hometown, Norfolk, Virginia, is the home of world's largest navy base and the America's Sixth Fleet. To my way of thinking, The Virginian-Pilot should host the world's best site about the U.S. Navy.

Instead, The Virginian-Pilot continues to believe their niche is a geographically-defined, local

“community.” But with the rise of the internet, geography is irrelevant and that’s why I encouraged my clients to pursue “communities of common interest” regardless of location.

Every town in America has something that makes it special — even the smallest of towns. For instance, my client in Aberdeen, South Dakota has the home of L. Frank Baum (the author of “The Wizard of Oz”), so the Aberdeen American-News should could host the world’s best site about the Wizard of Oz.

NOW WAS THE TIME

All my clients were recalcitrant. So it was time for me to put my money where my mouth was, and pursue a niche “community of interest” myself. Tim gave me the push I needed when the time had come to put up or shut up. My daughter Sophie demonstrated that there was no news product for kids her age, commonly referred to as “tweens.”

Weekly Reader served elementary school students; Scholastic served high school students. But it seemed to me that there was no product for middle school students — that was

my niche.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT GETS MEASURED GETS IMPROVED

In the early days of the Internet — think 1995 — virtually all domain names were registered in one place: Network Solutions.

Their prices were extortionate and the service was terrible.

But they were Network Solutions. They didn't care. They didn't have to.

Bob Parsons had a solution to Network Solutions. In 1997, he launched GoDaddy, which offered domain name registration with reasonable prices, and friendly, competent customer support. Eventually, GoDaddy became the largest domain registrar in the world.

Suck on that, Network Solutions!

Bob has 16 Rules for Success. Let's focus on #9: Anything that is measured and watched, improves.

This leads us to the work of W. Edwards Deming. Uh, who?

Deming was an American engineer, statistician, professor, author, lecturer, and management consultant. He is best known for his work in Japan beginning in 1950. Many in Japan credit Deming as one of the inspirations for what has become known as the Japanese post-war economic miracle of 1950 to 1960, when Japan rose from the ashes of war on the road to becoming the second-largest economy in the world.

This came about through processes partially influenced by the ideas Deming taught, particularly his

concept of “Continuous Improvement.” It dovetailed culturally with the Japanese concept of Kaizen: Small daily improvements eventually result in huge advantages.”

Believe it or not, there was a time when “Made in Japan” meant poor quality. Deming changed that. To wit:

According to Wikipedia, here’s how Japanese car companies were able to overtake their American counterparts beginning in 1950:

Ford Motor Company was

simultaneously manufacturing a car model with transmissions made in Japan, (by Mazda) and the United States (by Ford). Soon after the car model was on the market in 1950, Ford customers were requesting the model with Japanese transmissions over the US-made transmissions, and they were willing to wait for the Japanese model.

As both transmissions were made to the same specifications, Ford engineers could not understand the customer preference for the model with Japanese transmissions. Finally, Ford engineers took apart the two

different transmissions. The American-made car parts were all within specified tolerance levels. However, the Japanese car parts were much closer to the nominal values for the parts. This made the Japanese cars run more smoothly and customers experienced fewer problems.

AND THE POINT OF THIS IS...?

No industry is more easily measured than the world of the internet. From page views, to unique visitors to average monthly users, the internet is like baseball — a bounteous bounty of statistics.

And not only do we have all this data, but we get this data for free and in real time from Google Analytics. They say you can't get fast, good and cheap all from one source, but Google Analytics proves otherwise.

On my site, I tracked page views and unique visitors — who doesn't? But other metrics were more meaningful, such as:

Email open rates: I could easily correlate short, compelling subject lines with higher open rates. The best performer was: “Teacher in Ohio Blown Away.” Some teachers

mistakenly believed that a teacher had been shot. When in fact, it was merely an Ohio teacher telling me she was “blown away” by my site. Seeing this data motivated me to find the most compelling content for my email newsletters.

Server performance: In Terminal, I could see the load on the servers in real time. High server loads were the “canary in the coal mine.” When I saw the servers spike under load, I knew we had to optimize our code, possibly by indexing frequently accessed queries.

Teacher registrations: More teachers = more students = more page views. So I tracked teacher registrations in relation to outreach and time of year. For instance, I saw the highest rates of registration at the beginning of January. I assumed this was because schools have a rolling startup in August and September, but most restart in January on the same day. So registration were concentrated over a few days in winter, rather than a few weeks in summer.

In short, watching the numbers tends to make the numbers grow. Or as Management guru Peter Drucker put

it, “Whatever gets measured gets managed.”

CHAPTER 7

NEVER STOP INNOVATING

Amazon released the Fire Phone in 2014. It was a flop.

It cost Amazon more than \$100 million dollars, but Jeff Bezos was fine with it.

“You can’t, for one minute, feel bad about the Fire Phone. Promise me you won’t lose a minute of sleep,” Bezos told Ian Freed, a key leader in the Fire Phone’s development, according to

The New Yorker.

This reaction is one of two parts of Bezos' ethos:

“As a company grows, everything needs to scale, including the size of your failed experiments. If the size of your failures isn't growing, you're not going to be inventing at a size that can actually move the needle,” Bezos wrote in his 2018 annual letter to shareholders.

It's worth taking risks, because if you do, one blockbuster success can outweigh multiple losses.

Bezos' second secret to success is that you have to be willing to take time to float, be curious and experiment, according to CNBC.

“Wandering in business is not efficient ... but it's also not random,” Bezos says in his letter to stockholders.

“It's guided — by hunch, gut, intuition, curiosity, and powered by a deep conviction that the prize for customers is big enough that it's worth being a little messy and tangential to find our way there.”

Amazon took a big risk with the Fire Phone and it didn't payoff. But work on the Fire Phone included work on voice recognition technology, which eventually formed the heart of Alexa — an enormous winner for Amazon.

The time spent on the failed phone helped propel the Alexa's success.

“While the Fire phone was a failure, we were able to take our learnings and accelerate our efforts building Echo and Alexa,” Bezos wrote in the shareholder letter.

In other words, those who wander are

not lost. You never know where your journey will lead if you remain open to opportunity.

TIME FOR MY BOOT HEELS TO BE...WELL, YOU KNOW

I had been doing some wandering of my own in Fall of 2012. Once again, my site had reached a plateau. New teacher registrations were steady, but they were offset by attrition amongst teachers. In the teaching profession, 50% of teachers leave every five years, so churn is a fact of life.

I had done my fare share of innovating, including:

A photo of the day, with a novel way of engaging kids — they were required to submit a suggested caption before they could see the actual caption

Lesson plans, tailored to the content and interactive nature of my site

An essay contest with \$10,000 in cash prizes. Students were challenged to answer this question in 100 words or less: “How does technology make the world a better place?” We received 16,000 entries — more than twice the number of entries received by a contest that Microsoft sponsored at

the same time.

Mobile apps for iOS and Android.

Sister sites for students in elementary school, high school and a version in Spanish

Even with four sites, I could not get the growth I sought. In the Fall of 2012, I didn't know what else to do. So I did the obvious. I asked the customer.

ASK THE CUSTOMER

When all else fails, ask the customer. This may be the most valuable advice

I can impart.

So, I contacted my 100 most-active teachers and asked them what I could do to increase their participation in my sites. Thirteen teachers responded. Of those 13 responses, several said they loved the sites just as they were but they were too busy with “Common Core.”

I thought to myself, “What the hell is Common Core?”

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

are a set of educational goals that were adopted by (rather than imposed upon) the states as a result of a federal initiative called “No Child Left Behind.” Most states adopted the same standards, but some states went their own way to meet the de facto federal requirement. For instance, Texas adopted STAAR and Virginia adopted SOLs. Yes, Virginia, in Virginia they actually call them SOLs. What were they thinking?

I know that’s a lot of alphabet soup, but I put it all in here to make a point. Prior to launching my site, I had 30+ years in newspapers and zero

experience in education. But to compete in the education space, I had to come up to speed on the issues facing education and teachers, notably Common Core.

The same will be true for you. If you are not already an expert on the stakes and stakeholders of the enterprise you are pursuing, you need to become one. But not to worry.

Tim Ferriss explains it all in “The 4-Hour Work Week.”

If you aren’t an expert, don’t sweat it. First “expert” in the context of

selling product means that you know more about a the topic than the purchaser. No more. It is not necessary to be the best — just better than a small target number of your prospective clients.

On page 170 of ‘The 4-hour Work Week’ check out Tim’s “Expert Builder” How to Become a Top Expert in 4 Weeks.”

I took Tim’s advice and quickly became an expert on Common Core. I particularly focused on CCSS requirements for “non-fiction reading” which were at much higher

levels than current curricula. In other words, the non-fiction content of my sites could help teachers meet Common Core standards, rather than be a distraction.

So I began a program to align my site's content and the user experience to Common Core. I had just introduced new Common Core-aligned lesson plans which were integrated into each teacher's dashboard for distribution to students when they logged in. Little did I realize that the much-despised Common Core requirements would ultimately lead to the acquisition of

my site 18 months later. The results of Common Core would be measured by testing conducted by Smarter Balanced and PARCC. And both of them required Lexile-leveled reading material.

WHAT THE HELL IS LEXILE?

Lexile is an automated system for determining the reading level of books — typically for grades 1–12. Lexile is quite opaque about how their system works, but basically they use an algorithm that employs a dictionary and calculates characters-per-words and words-per-sentence as a proxy for reading level.

Got it?

It sounds more complicated than it is. Think of it this way: bigger words and longer sentences are harder to read. Ergo, if a book has relatively more big words and long sentences — think Faulkner — it's harder to read than Dr. Seuss who used mostly short, one-syllable words.

So why did I care about this arcana that should only be the province of librarians and reading specialists? Lexile was required and I had to provide it.

But there was a hitch. Lexile wasn't perfect. Far from it.

Dr. Seuss isn't the only author who employed short words and short sentences. So did Hemingway. So did J.D. Salinger, whose "Catcher in the Rye" clocks in with a Lexile level of "4th grade" along with a prostitute on page 2.

Lexile doesn't measure the appropriateness of content. Instead it merely measures length of words and sentences.

As an outsider to the educational

ecosystem, I couldn't believe teachers and standards-setters had bought into this sham. Furthermore, I believed I could reverse-engineer Lexile's algorithm, and add a sophisticated exception dictionary that could help sniff out content that was inappropriate for younger readers.

And that's what I did. Well, me and Sudeep.

In the summer of 2013, Sudeep Goyal of Ebizon Digital was visiting me in Virginia from his home in India. We were working shoulder-to-shoulder

on some previously agreed-to enhancements to my site. But in the middle of this work I asked Sudeep about Lexile.

Could he create an algorithm that reported reading difficulty based on word length and sentence length, and also included an exception dictionary that I would compile?

And...if he could do that, could he also use Lexile's free online tool for capturing Lexile levels of works shorter than 1,000 words?

And...if he could do that could he also display the results side-by-side in

real time from both Lexile and my version of a text leveler?

“Yes,” he said. Sudeep is a man of few words.

A week later, ReadRank was born — that’s what I called the online tool that generated two reading level results simultaneously in real time.

Some people thought I was off my rocker to pursue ReadRank. “What’s the point?” they said. “Lexile is the accepted standard.”

But ultimately, I believe I was

vindicated.

In 2019, the The Washington Post published “What’s wrong with assigning books — and kids — reading levels.”

The Post published a long list of famous adult-themed titles that earned Lexile levels for 3rd- and 4th graders, as well as young children’s books that earned Lexile levels for 12th grade.

According to the Post, “We find these exceptions — as exemplified by these titles — to be insurmountable. They

demonstrate the fundamental flaw in reducing books to algorithms and creating reading levels based on them.”

But that story ran in 2019. Back in the summer of 2013, I wanted to promote ReadRank, my newly minted innovation. So I joined SIIA — an organization that promotes the creation of software, information, or other publishing for specialized industries, such as education. A one-month membership earned me the right to submit a press release via organization’s monthly newsletter. It also landed my email address on a list

used by other members.

A couple months later, I received an email newsletter from Chris Curran at Educational Growth Associates (now Tyton Partners). They are investment bankers who connect buyers and sellers of software and products, primarily in the education sector. They were also connected with SIIA.

Are you following all these breadcrumbs?

I emailed Chris and asked him whether he'd be interested in my sites. He said yes.

A few weeks later, he set up meetings for me with two prospective buyers. Four months later, my sites were acquired — and I paid cash for a sailboat 😊

TO RECAP

The Bush Administration's introduction of No Child Left Behind led to Common Core, which led to Smarter Balanced and PARCC standards to achieve Common Core's goals, which required Lexile, which led to my development of ReadRank, which I chose to promote via a membership with SIIA, which put me on their mailing list, which Chris

Curren used to promote his business, Education Growth Advisors, to whom I reached out upon receiving his newsletter via email. And then Chris facilitated the acquisition of my site.

What a long, strange trip it's been, right?

It's not enough to merely practice "Continuous Improvement" on your existing enterprise. You must never stop innovating and adding to your offering. In Fall of 2012, I was on the verge of turning a profit and teacher registrations, while not growing, were sufficient to offset churn. I could

have rested on my laurels, but instead I pursued an entirely new offering, ReadRank, without a guarantee that it would enhance my sites.

But without ReadRank, and the path it put me on, my sites would not have been acquired.

So keep walking, my friend.

Remember to be original. Be an innovator – not a copy cat – or you will be doomed to failure like Google+ – the search engine giant’s failed attempt to compete with Facebook. Speaking of which...

CHAPTER 8

YOU GOTTA RUN YOUR BUSINESS LIKE A BUSINESS

In the Beginning, there was Google.

Scratch that. Start again.

In the Beginning, there was Yahoo — where a team of editors curated the internet by hand. Seriously, I am not making this up.

Back then, Google didn't even exist, as difficult as it is to imagine an

internet without Google. Or our language without Google as a verb.

Now that we've cleared that up, let's move on to yet another misconception.

There is no doubt that the world is forever indebted to Larry Page and Sergey Brin for their invention of the Google search engine.

Its contribution to the human race is incalculable.

But the thing that made Google one of the most financially valuable

companies — its revenue model — was invented by someone else.

According to Slate.com, the revenue scheme was created by Bill Gross for goto.com.

Gross linked the display of ads to the search terms users submitted. So ads were pertinent and relevant to users. To drive home just how efficient these ads could be, Gross came up with an audacious pricing scheme. Instead of paying for page-views — an old-media model that had come to dominate the Web — advertisers would pay only when people actually

clicked on their ads.

GOOGLE FINDS A BUSINESS MODEL

Here's how Google became the advertising behemoth we know today. The idea for the Google search engine goes back to Larry and Sergey's seminal paper in 1995. The strength of their idea attracted funding from outside investors, including Michael Moritz. But by 1999, Moritz was getting antsy, as described in John Battelle's book, "The Search."

“We really couldn’t figure out the business model,” Moritz says in *The Search*. “There was a period where things were looking pretty bleak.” Larry and Sergey understood they needed to generate revenue, but they hated the idea of banner advertising. Google was starting to catch on with users, but it was bleeding cash.

It was time for Larry and Sergey to run their business like a business.

Enter Gross and his ingenious revenue scheme.

“The whole point of Internet

advertising, I thought, was accountability,” Gross says. “You could measure it, unlike with print ads. But here was everyone still selling ads the old way: buy a bunch of impressions, cross your fingers, and hope it turns out well.”

Later, Google rolled out a new, self-service advertising product called AdWords that allowed businesses to purchase text ads on search-results pages. This was the final piece of the puzzle. And the rest, is history.

FACEBOOK FINDS A BUSINESS MODEL

This scene from “The Social Network” famously shows Mark Zuckerberg’s resistance to advertising.

And Mark made the right decision – at that time. But eventually, Mark knew that he had to introduce advertising to his social platform.

The time had come for him to run his business like a business. To Mark’s credit, he knew what he didn’t know. And he knew he didn’t know how to integrate advertising into Facebook. So he lured Sheryl Sandberg away from Google and she did what Mark couldn’t: she made Facebook one of

the most valuable companies on Earth.

Here's how she did it.

Sandberg arrived at Facebook in 2008. Facebook tried several advertising strategies over several years, but none of them leveraged the inherent strength of the platform: Facebook knows who you are and what you want because you tell Facebook who you are and what you want with every click you make.

Eventually, Sheryl and company hit their stride, introducing some novel

innovations to online advertising. There are two things that make Facebook the ultimate advertising platform:

1. Facebook knows everything about you — even the things that aren't revealed to Google via search history. So Facebook can serve up the most relevant advertising.

In much the same way that Google serves up ads based on the terms that users submit for search, Facebook serves ads based on user behavior, in the form of content that users post and their reaction to content posted

by others.

In both cases, ad display is driven by the input from users.

2. Facebook has strict standards for its advertising. Every ad is viewed by a human being and checked for compliance with Facebook's advertising guidelines before it is approved for display on the Facebook network.

One of the most interesting of these guidelines is the "20% rule." Because most traditional online ads contain a lot of text, and because Facebook

didn't want ads on its platform to look like ads, Facebook would not approve any ads in which more than 20% of an ad's image was occupied by text.

Then operationally, Facebook unveiled the Facebook Conversion Pixel, according to matchnode.com. The Facebook pixel is a bit of code to install across a website that feeds data back to Facebook on how a user interacts with a website outside of Facebook.

Before the Facebook pixel, if a user saw an ad for a pair of shoes and

clicked off of Facebook to another site to purchase the shoes, marketers could not tell whether the user bought the shoes as a result of seeing the ad. Without that data, marketers could not tell which ads are “working” for them.

Or, as Philadelphia retailer John Wanamaker put it more than a century ago:

“Half my advertising spend is wasted; the trouble is, I don’t know which half.”

But with the conversion pixel

(conversion means “sale,” in most cases), retailers and marketers can now determine which ads are most effective at getting people to buy.

So Facebook’s advertising is at work both off and on Facebook 24/7/365. And we have Sheryl Sandberg to thank.

A “COME TO JESUS” MOMENT

October 2012. I’d launched my site four years before. 2008 brought the mortgage meltdown and the beginning of the end for the newspaper industry. For the previous twenty years, I’d earned a healthy

living as a “high-priced” newspaper design consultant. But all that ended in 2008.

So for four years I had been paying for hosting at Rackspace (Two servers, 1 DB and 1 Webhead), along with alimony, child support, private school tuition and private health insurance for my ex-wife and two kids, to the tune of \$100,000/year.

With no income since 2008, I had completely drained my retirement savings. I was on the edge of a precipice, and had composed a farewell letter to the hundreds of

thousands of teachers registered for my site. (Servers were a lot more expensive back then, and my site would be the first thing to go.) But then an advertising opportunity arose, albeit one with strings.

At the same time, there was growing pressure on all publishers — up to and including The New York Times, for something called “Sponsored Content,” in which promotional material (a.k.a. advertising) would be presented in the same context of editorial content, with virtually no visual distinction. As a long-time newsman, I was categorically opposed

to this blatant attempt to breach the wall between church (editorial) and state (advertising).

But desperate times call for desperate measures. What's a publisher to do?

My sentiments then were summed up by David Weinberger in an article called [“The Ethics of Using Paid Content in Journalism.”](#)

Weinberger wrote, *In the days of yore, you'd sometimes come across a spread in a tabloid that didn't seem quite right. The typography was off, and the content seemed to make too big a promise.*

When you put on your reading glasses you might have seen the word “advertisement” or “advertorial” in small print at the top of the page, and felt a little cheated. Nowadays, marketers are inserting their content in much more effective ways.

Here’s how Weinberger described his experience with with “Sponsored content:”

Personally, I don’t want sponsored content to be part of the “experience of a site.” I hate that I literally have to tilt my screen to see the yellow background of Google search results that indicates

they're ads. I'd prefer that Google use a fire-engine red background and I'd be willing to bring back the flashing label that says:

“A company paid us to put this here so you'd think it's an honest search result.”

I realize this issue seems quaint by today's standards, but back in 2012, it was a big deal to me and my colleagues in newsrooms.

Here's how Weinberger summed up the dilemma facing publishers who were whiplashed by the exodus of advertisers from their legacy print products:

There are two arguments in favor of paid content that seem to me to have at least some teeth:

The first argument is that sponsored content can be high quality and worthwhile, following journalistic conventions.

The second argument in favor of sponsored content is the one that adds the inevitability to the outcome: many media are desperate for cash.

I can confirm that many media were desperate for cash. I was one of them. Back to that “strings attached”

advertising opportunity.

One of my customers wanted me to add an interstitial “pop-up” to my site, to attract teachers to Concordia University’s online E.Ed. program. I could restrict display to teachers only, so no students would see it. But I would need to include my branding above this offer, which to my mind, conferred the imprimatur of my brand on this advertising message. See example, next page.

The image shows a screenshot of a web browser displaying an advertisement for Virginia Teachers. The ad has a blue background and features the following text:

VIRGINIA TEACHERS

Earn your M.Ed.
online in just a
year, and receive
an Apple iPad plus
free textbooks!

Below the text is a green button that says "Learn more...". To the right of the text is an image of an iPad displaying the text "Get an iPad!".

At the bottom of the ad is a white form with the following fields:

- First Name:
- Last Name:
- Phone: - -
- Zip Code:
- Email:
- Program of Interest:

There is a green "Submit" button with a right-pointing arrow. At the bottom of the ad is the logo for Concordia University Online, which includes the text "CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY ONLINE" and "MIDLAND, MISSOURI".

The background of the browser window shows a blurred page with text, including "79146 teachers", "20 CCSS", and "NON FICTION".

It was estimated that I would earn about \$5,000 a month from the interstitial. But I was reluctant to “prostitute” my brand. Seeking

wisdom, I sought out the advice of my girlfriend-at-the-time, who had a clearer view of the world than an idealist like myself.

“You gotta run your business like a business,” she said.

Now add a Russian accent to this admonition. Think Natasha from Rocky and Bullwinkle.

“You gotta run your business like a business,” she said.

So I did.

But wait! There's more:

After accepting the interstitial, I also accepted sponsored content in a form similar to Weinberger's example from Google.

It's a slippery slope, but that advertising revenue kept my boat afloat until I could afford to buy real one outright — when my site was acquired 18 months later.

CHAPTER 9

TELL YOUR STORY. THEN GET OTHERS TO TELL IT FOR YOU.

People loves stories. Reading them.
Hearing them. Telling them.

In “**Love Your Enemies**,” Arthur Brooks describes the work of Uri Hasson at Princeton University.

Hasson studies brain images produced by an fMRI.

Says Hasson, “We scan the brains of

people while they are either telling or listening to real-life stories. Before the storytelling begins, these scans show that the individuals' brain patterns are highly dissimilar and not in sync.”

However, once the storytelling begins, the listener engages with the story and suddenly his or her brain waves lock into a common pattern with the storyteller's. *“It's a clear and dramatic correlation,”* says Hasson.

According to Brooks, Hasson's studies showed that if the listener was drawn deeply into the story, his or her brain would actually get ahead of the

narrative being shared — anticipating and actively predicting the speaker's upcoming sentences.

Says Brooks, “*Stories bring people together. They possess the power to unite.*”

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Before you can sell a site, an app or any endeavor, you need to sell it — verbally. So get your story straight, make it as compelling, relevant and interesting as possible, then get others to tell it for you.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS BAD PR

My site got its first national press from goodhousekeeping.com. Rather than describe it, I'll reproduce the beginning of of it here.

“Each week, former newspaper designer Alan Jacobson watched his 10-year-old daughter, Sophie, write a report on a current topic for her science class. Sophie relied on a science news site for kids that was updated with just one or two articles a week with stories on subjects like fuzzy mold and household cleaners. But she soon became bored by these

stories, and Alan couldn't blame her. So he created a site where he posts 10 age-appropriate stories daily that, he says, kids will find compelling, relevant, and useful."

Everything has a beginning.

Everything has an "origin story."

Lucky for me, my site has a terrific origin story. If you don't have one, get one.

AND NOW, FOR ALL YOU INK-STAINED WRETCHES

Our next national press came in the form of **a story in Editor & Publisher**, the leading trade publication of the

newspaper industry. This story included the photo, below. Visuals enhance storytelling. Every (good) picture tells a story, right?



Zoe with her sister, Sophie, at right.

NEXT UP? ALAN MUTTER

Long-time newspaper critic Alan Mutter **used his story** about me to

write a scathing review of the moribund newspaper industry. But not before giving me a big pat on the back.

“A year ago, Alan Jacobson, a talented and indefatigably innovative newspaper designer, came up with an idea for a highly targeted, efficient-to-produce and effortlessly viral website that is exactly the sort of thing newspapers need to strengthen their online franchises.”

Then there was this [Wikipedia entry](#).

BRAD PITT AND GEORGE CLOONEY AND ME

Alan Mutter's story got the attention of **James Rainey at the Los Angeles Times**.

So I got to share the spotlight with Brad Pitt and George Clooney on the cover of the LA Times' entertainment section.

CHAPTER 10

FIND INSPIRATION. YOU'RE GONNA NEED IT.

Entrepreneurship is not easy. It's your time and your money. Your heart and soul. It's personal. People who tell you not to take it personally don't know what they're talking about.

Buckle up. It's gonna be a bumpy ride. As the Blind Seer says in "O, Brother Where Art Thou?"

"You will find a great fortune, but it

would not be the fortune you seek. But first you must travel a long and difficult road. A road fraught with peril. I cannot tell you how long this road shall be, but fear not the obstacles in your path, for fate has vouchsafed your reward.

Though the road may wind, yea, your hearts grow weary, still shall ye follow them, even unto your salvation.”

Many times you will want to give up. Don't.

Winston Churchill said, “*Courage is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.*”

And fail you will. Many times. If you aren't failing often then you aren't trying hard enough.

War photographer Robert Capa said: *“If you're pictures aren't good enough, you're not standing close enough.”* Capa was killed covering the War in Viet Nam. Capa's pictures were more than good.

Stay close to your endeavor. It may consume you sometimes. Don't fight it. Just go with it and do whatever your heart says you need to do. That passion won't last forever. Enjoy it while it lasts.

In an interview with PBS, Steve Jobs said:

“When you grow up you tend to get told the world is the way it is and your life is just to live your life inside the world. Try not to bash into the walls too much. Try to have a nice family life, have fun, save a little money.”

“That’s a very limited life. Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact, and that is — everything around you that you call life, was made up by people that were no smarter than you. And you can change it, you can influence it, you can build your own

things that other people can use.”

You can build things that other people can use. New things the world has never seen. You can solve problems worth solving for other people. It helps if you think different.

Two architects, three performers, two leaders, an inventor, an athlete, a entrepreneur, an aviator, a film director, an artist and a little girl. These are the people who appear in Apple’s “**Crazy Ones**” ad.

You are on a mission. There is honor in that mission. The world is

depending upon you to bring forth your vision for a better world.

Remember this:

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”— George Bernard Shaw

BE THE AGENT OF CHANGE

*“There is no more delicate matter to take in hand,
nor more dangerous to conduct,
nor more doubtful of success,
than to step up as a leader in the
introduction of change.*

*For he who innovates will have for his
enemies
all those who are well-off under the
existing order of things
and only lukewarm supporters in those
who might be better off under the new.”*
— Niccolò Machiavelli

And finally, there is this: Make your sources of inspiration personal. For

me, I come from a long line of ink-stained wretches, so I care about the written word. We work in pixels now, but the sacred honor associated with the dissemination of news, information and knowledge remains.

“Friend, you stand on sacred ground. This is a printing office.”

THIS IS A PRINTING-OFFICE

CROSSROADS OF CIVILIZATION
REFUGE OF ALL THE ARTS
AGAINST THE RAVAGES OF TIME
ARMORY OF THE FEARLESS TRUTH
AGAINST WHISPERING RUMOR
INCESSANT TRUMPET OF TRADE

FROM THIS PLACE WORDS MAY FLY ABROAD
NOT TO PERISH ON WAVES OF SOUND
NOT TO VARY WITH THE WRITER'S HAND
BUT FIXED IN TIME
HAVING BEEN VERIFIED IN PROOF

FRIEND YOU STAND ON THE SACRED GROUND
THIS IS A PRINTING-OFFICE

By Beatrice Warde, 1932

Put a folder on your desktop and label it “Inspiration.” Then fill it with stuff that inspires you. It will be there when you need it. And you will.