



Getting Unstuck: Heal your Life

Day Six – Create your Own Job

Create your own job—and yourself.

The previous chapters have already mentioned several points about creating money and opportunities. Let's take a moment and step back a bit.

Two key points raised so far are that (1) if there are no jobs, you can still earn a good living, and (2) it is easier to get work doing what you love than simply settling for whatever you can get.

Great! Then why doesn't that happen so much more often?

Because that second part is tricky.

First, most people—yes, most—have no idea what they want to do. That makes things difficult, that is, impossible. You know what would be fantastic right now? See...you're waiting to find out...you should be saying, "Yes I do!" and telling me enthusiastically what would be fantastic right now! Just a little humor, granted—but nonetheless true. We don't know what we want. This is why Napoleon Hill's point about a written definite major

purpose is so important. William Oncken (author of *Who's Got the Monkey?* and *Managing Management Time*) tells of asking his business consulting clients to write down the problem his company was there to solve in a sentence or two—because if they can't write it down, they damn sure don't know what it is...or what they want to happen instead.

Second, while talk of being proactive is common, the reality is we prefer to be reactive. We even aggrandize it, romancing the shoot from the hip fluid approach to events of the day, never seeing it for what it is—drifting rudderless. That's fine if you aren't really going anywhere. But if you're trying to accomplish a goal, drifting isn't likely to achieve that objective. Focusing on what you love is going to take prolonged proactive...well, focus! Reactive, though, is easier, and is generally manifested as complaining about conditions and exterior barriers as the reason for not achieving those dreams we can't specifically name. Try a test. For 30 days, simply don't complain. About anything. At all. The results—if you can get past the difficulty—will surprise and delight you. Most people—no cynicism here, just a statement of fact—will prefer to complain. It's how we most commonly do things.

Finally, given those two points, proclivity to react and not knowing what they want, most people, despite talk to the contrary, don't actually want to run their own enterprises. They might dabble in something part time for a while. But rarely do people step up and step out on their own. Getting a job is simply easier. And there's nothing wrong with that *per se*. The caveat, though, is to be sure to recognize that this is what's happening, that this is the preferred choice, and not to choose it while living life in resentment of the choice, the boss, the conditions, the customers, the company, and so forth. Choose, and choose fairly and completely. If the choice is to work for a boss, embrace that choice and be glad of it.

Be sure you want to run the show

Almost everyone thinks, "Gee, if *I* were the owner/manager, things would really straighten up around here!" And, feeling fully capable, this is a frustrating thought. Why are some people kept down, when others thrive, rising to the top? Where's the justice in the world?

See the victim thinking? The main problem here is—none of that is true.

All too often, managers become managers because they were employees who worked hard and were promoted as a reward for their hard work. This has two problems. First, the business just gained a completely untrained and inexperienced manager. And second, the business just lost its best worker.

Management has *nothing* to do with bossing people around (you may have noticed that doesn't work well anyway). Management has *everything* to do with the ability to get results *through other people*. It's a whole different game. The manager's ability in terms of doing the desired tasks is *irrelevant*. Absolutely irrelevant. If you're a manager, or would like to be, track down William Oncken's *Managing Management Time* (it's out of print—you might have

to find it on the web), and find an old recording (I have a cassette version!) of *The One Minute Manager meets the Monkey*, containing an eye-opening live lecture by both Oncken (his *Who's Got the Monkey* is the most requested business article reprint from the *Harvard Business Review* – you can find a PDF online) and Ken Blanchard (author of *The One Minute Manager*) as a starting place. From there a wealth of information awaits—but recognize you are *not* a natural manager. No one is. As Blanchard points out, “How many people work for you in round numbers?” The answer is zero—people work for themselves, and good managers know this (and what to do about it). As famous economist Peter Drucker put it, “Labor is a resource, not a cost.” These employees are your only hope—learn to manage their talents.

Similarly, many people dream of owning their own business. After all, when you were manager, it was always that owner in the way, right? Or more positively, you’ve always wanted to open your own _____ place, whether restaurant, shop, gallery, service etc. As we’ve discussed earlier, you can avoid being one of the 80% of businesses that fail in the first five years with some basic attention to market—simply opening your dream doors does *not* mean that because you built it, they will come—supplemented by reasonable financial planning grounded in realistic expectations, not wishful thinking (especially in terms of cash flow).

But here’s something else—of those business that survive, only 4% will still be around in ten years. And a lot of that isn’t even financial struggles—it’s creating unsustainable systems. What seemed like a good idea just doesn’t work well day after day after year after year. As Robert Frost observed, “By *working faithfully eight hours a day*, you may eventually get to be a boss and *work twelve hours a day*.” Many business owners would chuckle ruefully and point out they’d love to put in twelve hours and have a break from their sixteen hour days. They created plans that weren’t scalable, that is, that could work as business grew without growing the time input by the same amount (or even more). They are thus tied to their businesses.

And it’s really more the last part—all too many businesses are prisons created by their owner-inmates. Striving for success, people commonly overlook the balance of the rest of their lives. I don’t mean simply taking time to smell the roses. That won’t work—stuff needs to get done. What I mean is thinking through things like lifestyle, location, who you want to be working with, incorporating things that invigorate you as part of the business—living a life that’s you, now, rather than one you’re working toward “one day.” If you don’t, no matter how passionate you are to start, you’ll grow to hate and resent your own creation and prison warden.

I have made this mistake myself—repeatedly. I created the venture, it was off and running, it was well received—and I hated going to work. All of these ventures could have been saved; I just didn’t want to do it. I had focused on “Well, I *could* do this, or I *could* do that, and I *could* do this other thing” type thinking quite a bit, brainstorming some frankly nice enterprises—a musicians’ cooperative acting as if an independent label, a concert/event promoter, a business consultant, several music ensembles/bands, an independent performer/recording label, co-author, T’ai Chi teacher—all of which flourished for a bit,

then died with the help of their creator. By focusing on *could*, I did things a lot of people only imagine doing. But by overlooking whether I *should* as a long term endeavor, I ignored several intangibles that were too important to ignore for long.

And the same is true for jobs, incidentally. You can't work at your passion for school teaching, for example, and bemoan the lack of a top income. This just isn't going to happen in that profession, no matter how exhaustive or amazing your talents and accomplishments. If you want both the income and the teaching, you will have to recognize that the rest of the income will have to come from elsewhere. And if you don't have the time to invest, then it will have to be an automated enterprise.

But start by getting clear about who you are, what you want (from life, not just work), and how you prefer to pursue it. Stop blaming companies, managers, the economy, politicians, bad luck, family obligations, uncooperative people, or whatever else you invent as an excuse. Get clear about where you want to go and how. That's the real stumbling block. Then create plans to get there.

Jobs within jobs within jobs

As discussed in the previous chapter, if there "aren't any jobs," go networking—especially informational networking—to turn up the jobs in the "hidden" job market (which is the vast majority of jobs—a good 85%). If you are unemployed and looking for a job (remember that creating one is also an option), this is the place to start. There ARE jobs. There are always jobs—because there are always needs, and businesses need people to fulfill those needs. In down markets, that may not be so apparent, as hiring can be cautious, but that's still the case. You just need to look more closely. Remember to focus on what you actually want to be doing—that's key.

This applies to people currently employed looking to change jobs as well. However, here you have an option in the middle, one rarely considered—creating a new job at your current place of employment. If you're unhappy, for whatever reason—conditions, pay, coworkers—you may be able to change this without changing bosses. In a large company, you can ask for a transfer, of course, but here I'm talking about staying put but changing job titles—not a promotion, but a new job. I've done this three times, along with many more minor shifts within the same job.

The first, and most generic, was the book store management job. I was hired simply as another employee. I had just left a job I hated, and I took this lower paying job because I liked the New Age feel to the store and wanted to do a job I liked. Two months later, I was the Manager. How did I do that? I just started from the beginning doing the kind of work managers would do, on my own. The store didn't have a manager, just two joint owners (husband and wife), and they noticed, increased my pay and responsibilities.

I often hear, especially from young workers, but some older ones too, “Why should I work harder or do extra things? When they pay me more, I’ll do that!” These people will never get those promotions. That’s not how it works. They are asking employers to first take a chance, putting their money and the leadership of their business in the hands of an unproven and undemonstrated promise. Not gonna happen. Nein, Nyet, Nope. Instead, first be doing the extra work and taking those extra responsibilities, because this demonstrates your worth and capability. It also demonstrates your quality of a take-charge get-it-done responsible person—and that’s the kind of person employers want running their shows.

But what if it doesn’t pay off? Forget about that. You should be always growing anyway. As management guru Tom Peters advises, take the annual resume test—remember from the last chapter that this resume should be showing your specific contributions, not simply job title and time served. Each year’s resume should show a substantial improvement over the previous year. If not—you haven’t been growing, and that’s why nothing new is happening for you. What have you tried? What have you learned from your mistakes? And if you haven’t made any mistakes, then you haven’t been trying very much of any substance. Only when those things are in place can your employer notice anything about you—because you haven’t done much otherwise. When you have, you can build on your successes.

And if your boss doesn’t notice, or either can’t (because there’s no suitable opening) or doesn’t want to acknowledge your expanded worth, you have a basis for taking your bettered skills out into the marketplace for a better situation. Tom Peters recommends never asking for a raise. I’m not sure I’d go that far, but I get his point—either you’re getting fed where you are, or it’s time to go find a place that does. One caution, though—don’t get cocky. Don’t just quit and hit the street (all things being equal—there are always exceptions). Look first, give notice, start the new job. Or start the new business on the side and wait for it to grow. Over estimating your worth in the marketplace is common. Find out first, and don’t blame the market—adjust and build your skills.

The second took the “building on skills” approach. I was actually called and asked to teach a college music class, and after some hesitation, I did, and found I liked teaching. At the time, the college climate was very hot to implement multi-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches. I was flabbergasted; from my perspective as a performing artist, I couldn’t believe people didn’t already do this—how can you understand a piece out of context and connection? But, that was the case, and as you might imagine, they loved my course creations. And, once I’d designed, for example, a “Music and Literature” course, I now had experience as a Literature professor. My interdisciplinary/multicultural classes gave me powerful leverage from college to college to college, even letting me grow into teaching writing and literature as schools cut music and the arts to save a buck in slow economies.

This can be done almost anywhere. Learn more than you have to at your job. A friend of mine inspects housing construction for a large company overseeing compliance with state housing programs, and he makes a habit of getting certification after certification after certification. His boss encourages this, and it makes him one of the most valuable

employees in his position; they reward him with flexibility and raises, even letting him work from home two days a week, calling by conference call into meetings as needed. Some companies wisely pursue cross-training of their employees, and it's often not popular. Embrace it. Learn to do jobs you don't have to do. It will keep building both your resume and your pool of available skilled positions for which you qualify.

The third was by an inner proposal. I had just returned from Vermont, where I had been working for an independent label distributor, and returned to New York and needed a job quickly. So I took a position for a branch of a major label distributor, where the choices were shipping or salesman. [Yes, I was overqualified. Hey. It was a job.] Now I *did* like getting piles of free demo records and free tickets to major acts' concerts from the major labels' reps. And I didn't mind shipping, but I really didn't fit in with my heavy metal listening colleagues. The salesmen, on the other hand, got company vans for their own use and a great deal of freedom, driving from store to store taking spot inventories and racking product—and made far more money. However...openings were few. I got tired of waiting.

I did notice several things about our operation that could and should be improved. Inventory control was haphazard, and back-up stock hard to find (physically in the warehouse). Invoices were in a big pile, one for each salesman, and when questions arose, someone would have to dig down through the pile looking for that invoice. Ordering was done largely by eyeing the racks and writing orders on a pad, working from memory. It was a mess.

I mentioned these issues and my solutions to my boss, who...sort of took it under advisement. I got tired of shipping and turned in my notice. I did my two weeks, working just as well as always (no sense burning bridges)—and at 4:00 on my last day, one hour left, my boss called me into his office for a talk. “We don't want to lose you,” he said. “What would it cost us to keep you in an office job?” We discussed it, settled on nice raise, and I automated and implemented our new systems, as well as handling all the correspondence for our branch. Left with a lot of freedom, I continued to expand my job reach, even analyzing trends, something which once saved us a \$2 million account (when sales dropped, I showed how we increased their inventory turns, resulting in higher sales per square foot).

The same is true of outer proposals. You don't have to rely on what businesses are seeking to find employment. Go show them what they don't realize they're seeking. Yes, this takes a bigger sales job, but you also have (1) no competition and (2) they certainly know you're a go-getter/take-charge person—you're proving it in the moment.

I floated some that didn't work. It happens. But when I left the book store, I was interviewed at three independent label distributors in three different states, all of whom were interested not because they knew what they wanted me to do, but because I knew their businesses and product well, and had first hand experience succeeding at their clients' business. I got two offers, turned down the stingy one, and moved to the mountains of Vermont (which I wanted to do anyway), to do...well, we weren't quite sure. But I was

going to do it *there*—that was the point. In fact, I worked with them on their in-house marketing, until they went with an outside consultant. I was offered another position there, but decided to move on.

Bottom line here—you're allowed to *create*, not simply wait. Look for solutions that use your skills, experience, and interests—and propose them.

Entrepreneurship isn't all or nothing

Grow. If you aren't growing, It's not the job's fault—it's yours. And yes, that's scary. It also opens more opportunities at the same time. Manage your work life. Manage your managers—in the “how to get things done” sense. It's a team—whether you are the employee, the boss, the client, the supplier, the business owner, or the regulator, everyone has a part in the team, and recognizing that and working with it equals success. Working with others, however that pans out in your situation, is always key to getting unstuck. “I'm a loner” doesn't really work. You'll start to recognize that you *do* have control of your life.

What do you want? For me, that's primarily security. Money is nice, as is recognition, but since I've lived poor (including no heat or running water for a year living in the country in central New York State), being reasonably secure now and for the future is a high priority. It's not *the* answer—it's mine. But decide what it is for you.

Today, there's arguably more security in stepping out of the employment arena—at least for me. This took me quite a while to realize. I also took a long detour, especially around addiction (we all have them, large or small, recognized or not), covered in next chapter. Additionally, I had lost my spiritual focus (covered in the chapter after that—not in terms of religion, but in terms of inner balance and direction, a compass. And of course, I suffered from “Terminal Uniqueness,” as do many of us, preventing me for a long time from recognizing I couldn't do all this alone. There's a recipe for being stuck! I had to get honest and make major changes.

And that's the key thing about entrepreneurship—it forces you to look at you. When customers aren't clear about what you do or why they should buy, it's not that “they don't get it,” but that you aren't yet clear about this yourself. If your message is muddled, it's you. If your offerings aren't hitting home with potential clients, you aren't yet getting what they need and why. There's no one to blame—it's you. Fortunately, you are also in full control to change course, for example, seeking expert help, talking to clients about their needs, getting clear about who you serve (if the answer is “Everybody!” then you aren't clear about this).

But here's the other good news—entrepreneurship is not an either/or proposition. You might work a job (full or part time) for the health benefits, for example, while running a business you enjoy on the side, taking the pressure off having the business provide

everything. This also lets you try things without the panic of “What do we do if it doesn’t work?!”

If you don’t want to work a job, that still means your business doesn’t have to provide everything. If you’re working something you enjoy that is only paying 20% of your income goals, and isn’t likely to grow, figure out how to spend 20% of your time on this, and start an additional business. I noticed way back that a LOT of the successful local business people ran not one, but six businesses. Then I realized that was no coincidence. Nothing they did was the end all and be all. They had a business mindset, and not a “this business must be all things” ultimatum. And you’re allowed to change or sell your business, or just go out of business when you’re done with a particular pursuit. Closing up shop isn’t necessarily a negative event.

So put together a package that is uniquely you, that reflects your passions, that’s doable the way you want your life to go, and that meets your income goals. The possibilities for how to do that are endless. Enjoy!

Review of process

Even if you know you prefer to work for someone else, I still recommend thinking through the entrepreneur route. It will change favorably the way you approach your employment and the options you pursue. Consider yourself in the “labor supply” business. Take an annual look at your resume. Has it expanded considerably? If not, your “business” isn’t growing. What big mistakes did you make? If you haven’t made any, you didn’t really try anything particularly important. What did you learn from these mistakes? This is where real experience grows. Thinking like a business will also better help you serve your business owning clients (i.e., bosses).

If you’re considering a business, either looking for an idea or in love with an idea already, take time to cover several important bases before constructing your business plan. This will help you pay attention to both clients and yourself. So to review...

Make three long lists: your skills, things you enjoy, and community needs (wherever that “community” may be—includes a niche market reachable globally via the Internet, for example). Skills can be anything, from standard marketable skills to anything you happen to be good at. Same for things you enjoy, work or leisure--*somebody* has to work at the golf course! And for needs, think of all the times you’ve said, “You know, somebody should really do something about/like _____.”

Look for three way matches among all three columns. These are your viable business ideas. Don’t go starting them yet—but these are the possibilities. Any endeavor *lacking* a place in one of these lists is *not* going to succeed. Skills are great, but even a great skill doesn’t automatically mean a business. I’m an excellent professional bassoonist with an impressive music resume—but opening a bassoon studio in my small town of 500 people in a rural area

is probably not a good business move (I've had three bassoon students in the past 30 years). Things we enjoy are certainly worth pursuing, but reasonably, some of them are just going to make better hobbies. I like to take pictures, but there are local photographers who really, really rock at what they do—I let them handle that business (they would bury me). And all the skills and interest in the world aren't going to help if people just don't want or need what you do. Fortunately, in the Internet Age, your community is much larger than it used to be. But not if you hate working on computers.

Find three way matches. Find as many as you can—not only will you have options, but you may be able to construct a truly unique niche business that you'll love and that serves a real community. My favorite is *Woof*, a bakery that prepares treats for humans and dogs, catering to a clientele that hikes with their dogs (and carries appropriate gear as well). I know a pharmacist who makes golf clubs. These sorts of combinations are not only interesting and fun—but they are instant news stories as well.

Remember to look at the broader picture of what you want as well. What income do you seek? With what time commitment? Where do you want to live and work? With whom to you want to work—coworkers, clients, suppliers, and so forth? Is your business scalable, so that it continues to work as it grows? Can it be started and financed small scale, so you're not at risk financially? Will your schedule allow you to do the things that feed your spirit? To spend time with the people you love, family and friends? Does this path incorporate your dreams? Will it have you getting up excited to go to work each day (well, most days anyway)? These are questions to consider *before* you get into this, not down the road when they become problems.

Projects

Another route to consider is neither employee nor business owner—but projects.

Projects offer an important head start over much of the confusion in the typical employment/entrepreneur/income decision process—projects aren't forever. They aren't intended to be, and people don't get so caught up in future worries and projections over them. They come, and they go. Projects are more in the moment.

And that's great! A project can supplement income, or a string of projects can produce an overall living income stream. No need to worry about making the wrong life choices—projects are ended as readily as they began. On to the next project. Projects also can often better reflect endeavors that truly bring forth passion and excitement, changing to new ones as what seems enticing changes. Projects are flexible.

A string of related projects might congeal into a business endeavor. If they do, that business is more likely to reflect truly the interests of its owner than a single pursuit in a traditional direction typical of most businesses. Let people see who you are. Be who you are. Live it, at home and at work. Blend work and play. Lose the distinction.

Want to go help change the world in another country? Put together a project to gather the money and go (people will contribute for a worthy cause). Want to do something about a specific community problem? Dive in, get help, and solve it. Notice an interesting opportunity? Take it. Promote a concert series. Write an article. Assemble a blog for guest writers on a certain subject and monetize it. Or want to just relax and kayak? One man near my home did just that, kayaking the world after his formerly successful business collapsed— attracting enough sponsors and donors to make that entirely his new life.

The world is full of possibilities. Try the ones that appeal to you. Repeat or grow the ones you like. Move on from the ones you don't. Look honestly at what you want to do—and do it. When you make a decision, the world tends to collaborate, simply because people are clear about what you're doing. If people know you collect purple rocks, they'll bring you the purple ones they happen to find. If they just know you walk a lot looking at the ground, they won't help, because they don't get what you're doing.

Think of it this way. A lot of people hope for their dream job. A lot of people dream of something they can't imagine being a job. They're partly right—indeed, your dream job doesn't exist. You have to create it.

And you can. It's why you're here.

Designing and running your business

If you've never read it, I want to recommend “The E-Myth Revisited,” by Michael Gerber.

He describes the living hell all too common created by entrepreneurs who once loved their business, but are now owned by it. Everything is about them, and they have no time. Something isn't working. After all, you have to get clients, you have to provide product, you have to manage the finances, and you have to address the myriad other details inherent to just opening your doors. Or you have to oversee people and try to get them to do things the way your business needs them done, all while generating enough extra income to pay their wages as well.

Gerber proposes an idea that at first I found challenging, and then fascinating—design and run your business so that you can sell it. Not that you have to sell it, but think about it—when you're ready to pack up shop, if you just wind down and lock up, your business had no inherent value—you just made a job for yourself. But what if when you were done, you could sell what you built and take the cash back from your investment of time and labor and money? So Gerber suggests building your business as a prototype for a franchise. All over the country, maybe the world, people will follow your franchise model and achieve the same success as you.

See what happened there? He took you out of the picture (at least eventually). The business can run without you, using the careful systems you designed to ensure things run as they should, no matter who is following those systems. Just as with any other franchise, customers can walk into an franchise of your business anywhere and get the same services at the same quality no matter who is working there and no matter where in the world you are or what you're doing.

What's nice about this model is that it forces you to be honest. Too often, you are the glue holding everything together—but you *can't* be the everything in your business all at once all the time and still perform the work you intended to perform. The same person is trying to be the Entrepreneur, the Manager, and the Technician. We all like to shoot from the hip, just doing our own thing. But our Innovations need to be measured and tracked with Quantification (or our beliefs instead of reality will rule) and then Orchestrated effectively with workable and sustainable systems.

What is the Primary Aim of this business? Strategic Objective? Organizational Strategy? Management Strategy? People Strategy? Marketing Strategy? Systems Strategy? Without these, important parts of your business are missing. Like an automobile engine, even if most of the parts work, the motor won't run, and certainly won't run well or for very long, unless all the parts are properly in place and maintained well.

It all seems overwhelming and technical, I know. But if you want to realize your true vision, true to your real nature and passions, true to what you're all about, you're not going to do that while being torn in a hundred different directions. You need a structure, a complete structure, and if it's large, then recognize that from the start and scale back to what's doable and sustainable long term. And if you're thinking in terms of selling your business, handing over the keys and all your operations manuals to someone else who can then run it just as you think it should be run, then you will be forced to be honest, complete, and realistic. You aren't Superman; don't force yourself into something you can't do. Instead, lay it out so it's both doable and enjoyable, for you, your clients, your suppliers and associates (hired or outsourced).

Tim Ferriss' "The Four Hour Work Week" similarly has challenging but excellent takes on running your business, from something scalable (a product, vs. a service for Ferriss) that can be outsourced from idea to production to shipping to customer service. Literally. His book is rich in resources as well. If you're looking for hands off ownership, or looking to get more time free for yourself, this is a treasure trove.

One more strong recommendation—find people of like mind and similar pursuits, between 4-8 of them, and form a Master Mind group. Meet every week or two. Go over your progress, your ideas, and your plans. You'll find you need and appreciate the support alone, but you'll also get great ideas, new takes, and leads on resources you wouldn't have otherwise caught so readily. You in turn will find you have much to share as you listen to what others

are building. The idea is for all of you to succeed, to help achieve whatever a member decides to pursue. You will grow to love it.

Promoting your business for free

To do business, people need to find you. A lot of things will help that, many of them ineffective and time consuming. Flyers, for example, *can* work, but they're stuck on a board with a lot of other flyers, mostly unseen. Sooner or later, the specter of advertising raises its head, sniffing about. Trouble with the advertising beast is--it's expensive, and you don't yet know where your advertising efforts are best applied. And do you keep spending money waiting for the exposure to pay off, or is it not working? What to do? And what if you don't have a budget for advertising at all?

The good news is—a lot of this can be done for free. And your magic tool for doing this is—the press release.

I have frequently worked with people who told me, “Well, good luck—the papers just won't touch our stuff.” I've written a few hundred press releases, and I've never written one that didn't get printed. In fact, most of the time, they ran exactly as I wrote them. It's really just not a difficult thing to do—but it does require a shift in focus. So let's look at a few realities.

First, why would the papers print your releases?

Every morning, the editor gets up, and sees nothing but blank paper for the new day's publication. Every day, day after day. Give editors actual news, in a format they can just print to fill the available space where they want to run it, and you will be printed. It really is that easy.

Second, don't think everything has to run in the big papers. It can—I'm not discouraging you at all from this. But it's also there with a LOT of other material. You reach a lot of readers, but you're grouped with a lot of voices talking at once. Do it, but don't rely on it. Expand. What are all the little papers in the area? The weeklies, the freebies, the general interest or specific publications distributed in the stores. People actually read those. A lot of people. Your news will stand out there.

OK. Now...what is news?

For the smaller local papers, that you live there automatically makes a lot of things news. Same for your hometown, even if you no longer live there (which may or may not help your business interests). That you're launching a business is news. When you add a new product or service, that's news. When you hire or promote people, that's news. When you expand or change locations, that's news. These things should get you started.

Here's what ISN'T news—anything that reads like an ad. First, newspapers are in the business of selling ads, not running them free, and second, newspapers attract readers by printing news, and not commercial interests disguised as news. This may seem a subtle distinction at first, and thus, some of the rules arbitrary. They aren't. So...nothing that reads as hype. Nothing. Nothing in the second person (news isn't written using "you")—though you can quote yourself in the third person. No pricing—you can indicate where to go for additional information, but no dollar signs.

You can also *create* news. *Anything* related to charity is automatically news. So whatever you want to promote—combine it with charity. A big sale for a hardware store could include a promotion to promote a charity. Donate paint to Habitat for Humanity. Or simply anything you do for a charity is news, including your name and business. Publicity is publicity. Sleazy and manipulative will catch up to you, but if you've read this book this far, that's probably not a problem for you. My point is—don't scheme for a stellar publicity match; do good for the charities near and dear to your heart. The publicity helps the charity as well as your business. This works best when the connection says something about your heart and interests, not just that you help charities.

Writing press releases

Once you have this news, you have to write a press release very differently than you would write typically. Two things in particular are different—the paragraphs and direction of emphasis.

First, newspapers are printed in narrow columns. Thus, a “paragraph” is generally no more than two sentences. That's it—just two. In longer writing, you'd have a topic sentence, points to develop that topic, examples/evidence to support those points, and a concluding sentence. All too often, people have learned—incorrectly—to start with a vague sweeping statement, slowly get around to something resembling a point, and then repeat everything in vague terms, calling it a paragraph. Absolutely not.

Professional writers get right to the point and drive toward meaningful conclusions. And when you're writing a press release, you're writing for the newspaper; thus, your writing needs to be professional. Get right to the point in your first sentence; finish with a specific conclusion in your second sentence. Period.

Second, press releases are written to be flexible regarding available column inches (empty space on the page, measured by how many vertical inches in the column). This means they are written to be cut from the bottom. That means that if the last paragraph is cut, the release still reads like a complete article. If the last two are cut, it's still a complete article. If the last three...and so on. This means the very first paragraph is complete by itself, the first two paragraphs are complete by themselves, the first three paragraphs, and so forth.

Typically, we write to drive to the end. Not in a press release. All the important information—who, what, where, when, why, how—has to be in the very first paragraph, in only two sentences. Normally we develop the material, expanding on the points. Not here—facts. Get to the point. Done. Your press release should be no longer than a single page. You don't have a lot of room. So as you write, you're adding interesting and relevant facts, but points which can be sacrificed readily if the editor needs the room.

So forget what you inadvertently learned in school about “good” writing, especially padding it, trying to sound smart, wordiness, and so forth. Learn to write well and concisely in a small space. You can actually do this more readily than you might think by following just a few rules about conciseness, emphasis, and style.

Style first. Don't put on airs just because you're writing. Don't belabor how you're going to say it. Just say what you have to say. Put it down just like you talk. Congratulations—it's already better than 80% of writing. Seriously.

Now conciseness—you don't have much room; cut wordy habits. Here are the main culprits, and how to gain space without cutting your content:

*Empty phrases—*due to the fact that, in the event that, it is also of importance that, in order to, in regards to, when it comes to, has to do with, at the present time, it is true that...* and many, many more...short flocks of words just don't say much. Change them to short words that precisely say what you mean. Thus, *due to the fact that* becomes *because*, and *in the event that* becomes *if*. Common as it is, *in order to* can be just *to*, and it means exactly the same thing. And the rest of the list should be *regarding, when, concerns, presently,* and *true* (followed by a comma).

*Redundancy—*the general public, the stadium's total capacity, an unexpected surprise, surrounding on all sides, the field of electronics, brown in color, small in size, he is a person who, past history, refer back, enclosed within, a serious crisis, important essentials, rain fell from the sky, tears ran down my cheeks,* and many, many more phrases, though common, merely say the same thing twice. The public is general, capacity is total, surprises are unexpected, surrounded means on all sides, electronics is a field, brown is a color, small is a size, he is a personal pronoun, all history is past, all rain falls from the sky, all tears roll down our cheeks. *Refer back* and *enclosed within* literally say the same thing twice. All crises are serious (or they aren't really crises); all essentials are important.

*Don't hear the *whos*, kill the “*whiches*,” and transcend *being*. Clauses that start with “who is” or “who are,” or “which is” or “which are,” and often “that is,” along with various grammatical variations of these phrases, are wordy. All of them. Simply take *out* these phrases, and the sentence says *exactly* the same thing. Thus, “Pricing your panels, which is an important consideration for solar construction, etc. etc...” becomes “Pricing your panels, an important consideration for solar construction, etc. etc...,” and “Abraham Lincoln, who was President during the Civil War, etc. etc...,” becomes “Abraham Lincoln, President

during the Civil Wars, etc. etc.” And unless you’re discussing ontology, avoid the use of *being*—it’s always wordy. *The reason being is* that the extra “to be” verb can be cut: *The reason is* _____.

*Avoid starting sentences and clauses with expletives. *It is, it was, it has been, there is, there are, there was, there were, there will have been* and so forth offer a handy way to begin grammatical construction—but they don’t say anything. *It is raining.* WHAT is raining? You see? That’s a sentence...but without any information, just *rain*. *There are five things you might try* becomes *You might try five things*. See what happened? *There are* only announces the start of the sentence—and you still have to fill us in. Now, if you’re *deliberately* using these words—*there are your books*—then we’re good. Same with *it is*—if *it* refers to something, it functions as a pronoun, not an empty subject.

*Make characters subjects; make actions verbs. In 1936, Wolcott Gibbs parodied *Time Magazine’s* then awkward style, noting, “Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind.” Besides the difficulty for readers (who won’t spend time unraveling the mystery of your prose), many writers, attempting to appear proper, hide important information buried inside sentences. By making characters subjects, and making actions verbs, you will automatically improve your style: Who did what? That’s what readers want to know. So a sentence like, “*The concern on the part of the property owner was that the tree cutting by the neighbor extended across the property line to include his trees*” becomes “*The property owner was concerned the neighbor crossed the property line and cut his trees.*” The property owner and the neighbor became primary and secondary subjects (instead of *the concern* and *the tree cutting*), while the concept *concern* became the verb *concerned*.

*Cut unnecessary, vague, and over-the-top qualifiers. *Very, actually, really, quite, rather, terribly, a bit, somewhat, incredible, unbelievable, fantastic*, and descriptors like these both take up valuable space and don’t say much anyway. *The polar bear was really very huge* sounds lame, not impressive. *Your press releases are now somewhat good* isn’t giving you much information, is it? And the superlative adjectives just sound like the hype they are. Facts please. Tell us exciting things, instead of telling us to get excited.

*The most powerful part of a sentence is the end. Once we get there, a period stops us. We pause. We think. We reflect. And whatever’s at the end gets extra time. Use this opportunity wisely. The second most powerful part of a sentence is the other side of the period—the beginning. Whatever is at the beginning sets the tone, the scene; whatever is at the end is the grand finale, the final episode. So—take the most important, vivid, compelling image or idea and put it last. Take the second most important idea or image and put it first. Your sentences will sizzle. Don’t bury the juicy parts in the middle.

Another way to think of this to take the point of your sentence, or where you’re going next, and put it last; take the topic of the sentence, about which you’re making that point, and put it first. You’ll gain clarity, if not sizzle—and much is to be said for clarity. Something in the second sentence of a paragraph should refer to the previous one or to previous material.

This could be simply a pronoun or a word that points (*that, those, these, such, etc.*), or a repeated grammatical construction, but something that connects to what came before, for coherence. Each sentence should also contain new information (or it's pointless). Strive to go from old information at the beginning to the new information—this helps readers follow readily.

Formatting press releases

I'm going to start with how to format a printed release, one on paper to be mailed. Doing so will help understand the general principles behind a professional release—and you definitely want to be immediately perceived as professional, so that the release is accepted quickly, not put in the “deal with if we have time today” pile.

Then I'll address the online press release, as these add the need to write for search engine visibility in the Internet age. They are similar, but important details change the online release. So first, the underlying concepts in the print release.

Begin with your letterhead, so the editors immediately know the source. Immediately below it, skip a line and clearly indicate the contact person and info—without a contact, you're already sunk. Put “CONTACT” in all caps. Plus, a reporter might want to do a story, or the editor might just have a question or two. Across from the contact info, put the date you're sending the release.

Skip another line, and centered, in all caps, put the title of the release, i.e., what the headline of the article should be. Make this engaging but accurate, and news not ad copy. Know this—the editor is going to change it. I guarantee that. But your headline is still important—you're grabbing the editor's attention.

Skip another line, and left aligned, in all caps, type “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:” This is true even if you are sending the release two weeks ahead of time (and that's recommended); “immediate” here means to release this news at will, whenever the editor has space (and inclination).

Skip another line, and begin the body of your press release, skipping a line between paragraphs. Don't hyphenate words at the end of lines; they could appear hyphenated in midline when in print.

At the end, put any of these: ###, —END—, —30—, all of which signify the end to the editor.

Keep your release to a single page. The exception would be major news from a large, well-known source, in which case two pages is the maximum, and on page one, indicate that with “—more—” at the bottom. As a new start up, you fall into the one page category. More is not better in this context.

To send a print release, fold it in thirds so that the top third of the page shows when the release is pulled from envelope. Don't send it to a particular person, but rather to job titles, as different editors will fill the same shoes on different shifts. Don't send it to more than one department of the newspaper—you don't want it to run twice in the same paper (because it will be the end of printing your releases).

So that's how it worked...in the old days. Now let's update those concepts for the Internet age.

Writing an online press release

In addition to the considerations above, a press release today needs to survive online. That means it has to be readily searchable, formatted to take advantage of how search engines pick and rank search results.

Start with the headline. DON'T use all capital letters online. Skip a line. Then, under the headline, write a summary of the entire release, one to four sentences long. Include all the important information, as it might appear with just the title, the summary, and a link to the release.

Skip another line, type the dateline, and then your first paragraph: city, state, day, month, year—lead sentence. Remember to write so this paragraph can stand alone, and is compelling.

For your last paragraph, use a "boilerplate," that is, general information about your enterprise that can be used over and over. This could be a few sentences, then a paragraph with your web site and email for more information.

Skip a line; you're not done yet. Add "About _____" (your business name), and starting a fresh line (don't skip another line), give a two sentence primer on your business. Not hype or advertising copy—the facts.

Skip a line:

Media Contact:

Your name presumably

Phone number

Email

###

OK, that's the format. But there's still more to do.

Search engines look for key words, and your customers type in those words. But which ones? And will your release show up?

Fortunately, Google has a free keywords tool you can use to try various keywords and phrases, along with showing you various related words and phrases people typing into the search box in the past month. The tool also shows how many people used each word or phrase, and whether the competition for each word or phrase is low, medium, or high. You want words and phrases that (1) people are actually using (2) in large numbers (3) with low competition. This will help your piece show up higher in the rankings (where it's actually visible, not buried on page gazillion). These words and phrases need to show up in your copy and web tags.

From there—it all gets complicated and probably requires hiring a professional or investing a lot of your own time to learn. But those are the general guidelines for doing this inexpensively.

How else can I get the word out cheaply?

A lot of groups and clubs have speakers come to their gatherings and luncheons. Offer to come and address them on various topics.

Who are the people you're trying to reach? Where do they hang out? What else do they do?

A targeted blog can also work well. Be sure it's a useful resource, and join some bloggers' groups for tips and promotion.

If you do advertise, start with the small, local papers, and don't be afraid to negotiate. Try "What about a first time advertiser?" and, after a pause, "Is that the best you can offer?" (said nicely, a real question, not a retort). They will be MUCH cheaper than the regular city papers, and people DO read those little weeklies.

But the best way of all is word of mouth advertising. And to get good use of this, you must be doing something truly remarkable—that makes people remark about it. Just good won't really do it. What about your business is worth telling people about, as in "You won't believe what happened!" kind of Wow.

Back to self-reflection! But you'll do it—you are truly unique and remarkable. Show us!

