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November 27, 2007, 9:33 am

Want to Write a Business Best Seller? Here's How

Posted by Wendy Bounds

Lawyer Stephen Pollan has published 21 books since 1983, including best-sellers: "Die Broke," "Live Rich" and "Lifescritps." The father-in-law of actor Michael J. Fox, Mr. Pollan also is a professional coach to celebrities as well as media and entertainment leaders, start-up founders and Fortune 500 executives. He cranks out about a book a year, including his recently-published "Lifelines for Money Misfortunes." In an article about the book, USA Today called his outlook on life "blunt and realistic."

Like many prolific, money-making entrepreneur/writers, such as Seth Godin or Stephen Covey, Mr. Pollan has mastered a method - and coaches entrepreneurs how they can do it. This Q&A offers a snapshot of his principles:

Should every entrepreneur write a book?

Everyone in the personal-service business [lawyer, accountant, doctor, dentist, restaurant owner and others] should write a book. It adds another dimension to your brand, and that is expertise and scholarship. It works like magic. Expertise in America is a self-diagnosed disease. I was interested in writing books because it got me business. People regard books as evidence of authenticity.



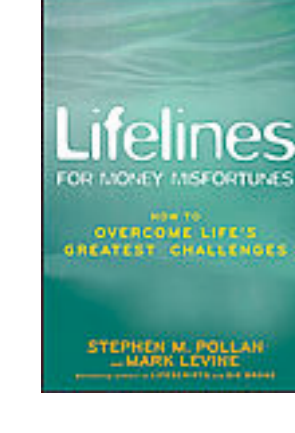
Stephen Pollan

What about people who make successful products?

Who cares? All it does is evoke big-shotism. However, "How I ..." - now that could be a very good book. A demonstration that it can be done. And that it didn't take a miracle. The gift there is hope in the sense that it enables the reader to do something. You've got to think of the marketplace and what drives people and satisfying needs. There's a gift in every book, and the gift has to be apparent.

Gift?

Telling a person how to start a business. Or how to write an effective business letter. With our book "Turning No Into Yes" - that is a cute title, but what we are doing is giving people a gift that tells them how to change people's minds. A gift is anything that makes you liked. That's a biggie. Anything that will make somebody like the reader. Everyone wants to be liked. That explains the success of "How to Win Friends and Influence People."



And the title?

I hate to tell you that I start first with the title. The hardest thing, the single hardest thing about writing a book is coming up with a good title. It's either exciting or new, or it's ballsy. Or it's maybe sweet. "The Botany of Desire" was my son Michael's third book. It's a beautiful, beautiful title. If you can do it in three or four words, you're doing great.

Take my book "Second Acts." That happened at the same time that people were going back to work, and thought they were too old. We said, 'What a great audience.' But it's not enough to say, 'You can get a job.' It was easy when we said Second Acts. That's something everybody can do.

Length?

No more than 60,000 to 70,000 words. There's nothing you can't do in 60,000 words. In terms of chapters, the number 7 and number 10 are good. In "Lifelines" we have 10 after the commandments.

What about a collaborator?

Absolutely get one. And getting one is very easy if you are going to get their name on the book. Make sure the cover language is "with" them. You want it to be "with" and not "and" because you want to be the big guy. [Note: Mr. Pollan has a collaborator Mark Levine, who he credits using "and" because they've worked together so long.] Let them learn to think like you. Let them become you. When a customer reads your book, you want them to recognize your voice.

I believe in giving the collaborator at least half of the advance, and I have no problem giving them all the royalties. You are making them an entrepreneur then. Remember: You are doing this strictly for your company.

Readers, what book do you want to write? What kind of book by a successful entrepreneur would you like most to read?

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Great advice, which I've followed. I'm a software/IP lawyer, and my book, "Creating Software Alliances," was published by Aspatore Books earlier this year. I doubt I'll make much money directly from book sales, but as Mr. Pollan notes, that's not the point. It's a matter of branding yourself as an expert. Moreover, the book-writing process forced me to deepen the skills and knowledge that prompted me to write the book in the first place.

For anyone intimidated by the prospect of undertaking a book, keep in mind that you can send a fairly simple proposal in outline form to book publishers in your field to see if there are any takers. Having a publisher take an interest in your ideas, and propose a publication date, is a great motivator for sitting down and actually cranking the book out.

Comment by Michael Whitener - November 27, 2007 at 10:16 am

I agree - great advice. I just shared the post with a couple friends who are struggling with current book projects. My first book, "The Savvy Designer's Guide to Success" was not the book I wanted to write - or the title I wanted on the cover. It was the book my publisher wanted me to write after contacting my to write a design industry volume. My title idea, "Designing in my Underwear: Briefs on a career," was deemed too "sexy" by the "suits" at the publisher (although it was much more appropriate to my personality and the content - and would have sold many more books!). My recently released book, "Identity Crisis!: 50 redesigns that transformed stale identities into successful brands," is the book I wanted to write and "Identity Crisis!" was the title I desired. I was adamant that the book have the exclamation point in the title, as I knew it would look great on the spine on bookstore shelves (it does!). I now have four other publishers interested in doing future books.

Comment by Jeff Fisher LogoMotives - November 27, 2007 at 10:58 am

Mr. Pollan offers some great advice, especially his concept of "a gift in every book." As a small business owner and a prolific reader of business books, I am only interested in receiving actionable information that will help make my business better and more profitable. I have no use for theories and hypotheticals.

As Mr. Pollan said, a business book should enable "the reader to do something." And it doesn't have to be an overwhelming amount of "stuff". If I learn just one new thing that I can immediately implement, then the book was well worth the time and cost. In some cases, that information ended up being worth a hundred or a thousand times the cost of the book!

As a brand new author, I hope that my book will also be a "gift" to my readers and that they will obtain new, useful and actionable information that they can immediately utilize in their business. My first book - The Home Office From Hell Cure - will be available in bookstores this coming April. Comment by Jeffrey A. Landers, Author of The Home Office From Hell Cure - November 27, 2007 at 1:10 pm

I agree. This was not only a great article it's also timely. It's timely because my second book Mo'Sense Book II: the Conduit Formula: the Secret to Making Money While You Sleep, is being released this December (visit www.mosense.com). As CPA he underscored the importance of developing my brand to increase revenue, and the article hit home because it gave me gift. The gift was that every book needs to give a gift, and Mo'Sense offers a gifts, a patent pending formula that when used with the provided momentum based rationale is the secret to making money while you sleep. I like getting gifts that I can use, and I certainly plan on using this wisdom to promote my books and businesses. Visit me on the web at www.mosense.com

Comment by Eric January, Author of Mo'Sense: Money & Economic Sense Based on the Natural Laws of Momentum - November 27, 2007 at 4:12 pm

Wendy, a great interview! I happen to disagree with just about everything he said, though! The biggest disagreement: writing a book is too hard, too much of a commitment to do it for such selfish reasons. If you don't want to share and give and help with every word, don't bother. Of course, he sells a lot more books than I do. Comment by Seth Godin - November 27, 2007 at 4:40 pm

I need to learn how to conduct market research for a product idea that I have, and the books and websites that I see are mostly all written for professional market resesarchers. Sites such as www.marketresearch101.com has some great information in it, but it really needs to be put into a book format for it to be helpful. That's the book that I would like to see created. Comment by Jon Gould - November 29, 2007 at 3:37 pm

You're right - write a book when you've got a great story to tell (which most good entrepreneurs do), and you must tell it. Steve LeVine, author The Oil and the Glory (Random House) http://www.oilandglory.com Comment by Steve LeVine - November 29, 2007 at 9:33 pm

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irmky cxelify http://ecchi-top.rikoshet.uni.cc/map.html ecchi top Comment by ecchi top - May 24, 2008 at 3:43 pm

For years, lots of people have told mew to write my lifes story. I can't write, but if told I know it would be the best seller. Comment by Keith Gollodge - June 7, 2008 at 9:51 pm

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ABOUT THIS BLOG

Independent Street covers the aspirations, quirks and unique challenges and opportunity of entrepreneurship. The Journal's Gwendolyn (Wendy) Bounds, is the lead writer. After a decade at the Journal following fashion, media, retail and technology, Bounds became small-business editor and columnist in 2004. She also pens a home improvement column called "About the House." A native of North Carolina, Bounds is author of "Little Chapel on the River," published by William Morrow, which chronicles her experiences at a small Irish pub fighting to survive in New York's Hudson River Valley. Please post comments to the blog. If you have a comment or topic suggestion for Wendy, please email independentstreet@wsj.com.

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