the Bestsellers ~~Guide~~

CHEAT SHEET

steal the **11 cheats** used by
the **25 biggest** business **bestsellers**

About this ~~Guide~~
CHEAT SHEET

As a ghostwriter and book coach, I've worked with CEOs and founders of billion dollar companies, edited for founders of household name brands, and even earned money as a screenwriter. My clients' books have garnered **30+ accolades**, including the **Kirkus Star**, an **A rating from Publishers Weekly**, and **#1 on Audible** for Nonfiction. In 2025, I was honored to be named as a finalist for the **Andy Award** (a.k.a., the Oscar of Ghostwriting).

Recently, I wondered if there was a formula behind the top **bestselling business books of all time** (i.e., the last 100 years). What made these books so successful?

And more importantly, can that formula be copied like you're back in calculus?

(Spoiler alert: Yes, it can be.)

It's nearly impossible to perfectly quantify the top bestselling business books. But I've come pretty dang close by using **Google, Goodreads, ChatGPT, and Amazon** to cross-check and compile the following list of 25 books:

1. *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (Dale Carnegie)
2. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Stephen Covey)
3. *Think and Grow Rich* (Napoleon Hill)
4. *Good to Great* (Jim Collins)
5. *Atomic Habits* (James Clear)
6. Never Split the Difference (Chris Voss)
7. *Start With Why* (Simon Sinek)
8. *The Lean Startup* (Eric Ries)
9. *The Power of Habit* (Charles Duhigg)
10. *Freakonomics* (Steven D. Levitt & Stephen Dunbar)
11. *Influence* (Robert Cialdini)
12. The Hard Thing About Hard Things (Ben Horowitz)
13. *The 48 Laws of Power (Robert Gre*ene)
14. *Rich Dad Poor Dad* (Robert Kiyosaki)
15. *The 4-Hour Workweek* (Tim Ferriss)
16. *The Big Short* (Michael Lewis)
17. *Outliers* (Malcolm Gladwell)
18. *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Daniel Kahneman)
19. *Zero to One* (Peter Thiel)
20. *Creativity, Inc.* (Ed Catmull)
21. *Lean In* (Sheryl Sandberg)
22. *Essentialism* (Greg McKeown)
23. *Extreme Ownership* (Jocko Willink)
24. *Made to Stick* (Chip Heath)
25. *The Ride of a Lifetime* (Bog Iger)

I analyzed the **30 common elements** that contributed to their success, then distilled those down to **11 "cheats"** that any aspiring nonfiction author can emulate. For each cheat, you'll see **a lesson** (i.e. why it works), a **resource** to help you use the cheat, and why **the exception** to the cheat works (if there are exceptions to reference).

But first, some caveats…

CAVEAT 1
You might love some of the titles on this list. You might think some of these are overhyped and worthless. Or you might be cursing that your favorite didn't make the list. Me too.

Regardless, these books outperformed every other business book on the market. Some of these books even put their author on the map.

Love 'em or hate 'em, these 25 books share common elements that you can steal for your own book. And if you sub in one of your own favorite business titles, I'm sure you'll find the same elements at play.

Sub-caveat: I should mention that Walter Isaacson's biography *Steve Jobs* also appeared frequently in the search results. But I excluded it because it's a biography and, therefore, doesn't quite fit the profile of the other books.

CAVEAT 2
It's worth nothing that this list is tragically wanting in the diversity department. Only one book written by a woman made the list—Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, which in the post-COVID era has been criticized for being outdated. Which means women business authors have a huge opportunity to fill a void in the market.

Also, this list is whiter than a NASCAR audience. In fact, Robert Kiyosaki is the only person of color on the list. And that's both a huge shame—and a *massive* opportunity.

But the good news is this: These cheats will work regardless of your demographics.

CAVEAT 3
Look, I can't guarantee that using these cheats will make your book a runaway bestseller. Don't lose sight of the fact that many of these authors already had an established platform/following when they published. (Though not all.)

Consider this…

Bookscan tracked the sales of **3.2 million books** in 2021 and found that **fewer than 1 percent sold more than 5,000 copies**. (Source: *New York Times*, who know a thing or two about bestsellers.)[1]

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[1] Alexandra Alter, Elizabeth A. Harris, "A New Way to Choose Your Next Book," June 7, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/07/books/new-book-apps-tertulia.html

So with the odds against you right out of the gate, the question is **how are *you* going to become the exception?**

No book can be successful purely from following a checklist. Ideally, you have a ***compelling, original idea, a platform, and great writing***. (Go read *Get Signed* by Lucinda Halpern.)

But knowing these cheats can also help you **FIND that original idea, GROW that platform, and DEVELOP great writing**. These cheats can change your odds.

So with those caveats out of the way, let's cheat in the best way possible.

STORYTELLING WINS. EVERY TIME.

Lesson
Narrative storytelling turns your ideas into impact.

Every single book on the list shares one key quality: Storytelling.

I don't care what your job title is, what stats you can spout, or how brilliant your ideas are. If you can't convey those through story, then no one cares.

Anecdotes and case studies (e.g., *Outliers*, *Creativity, Inc.*) humanize ideas and boost retention.

Story arcs that take readers from A to Z (e.g., *Rich Dad Poor Dad*, *Ride of a Lifetime*) grab attention, keep readers engaged, and make abstract ideas practical and relatable.

Books like *Thinking, Fast and Slow* and *Freakonomics* use plenty of data and studies to bolster their main points, but they weave them into narrative form to remain readable and increase impact. Numbers tell a story—absolutely. But first, you have to find that story.

Resource
I'm going to be blatantly self-promoting right off the bat and recommend my book *Start With Story* because it teaches you how to transform your ideas into impact with storytelling, how to understand the qualities of great storytelling, and how to best apply storytelling.

But *The Science of Storytelling* by Will Storr is also worth your time, as is *Building a Story Brand 2.0* by Donald Miller.

Exception
There's no exception here. Seriously. That's how essential this cheat is. Great storytelling covers over a multitude of book sins.

CHEAT #2

TITLES MATTER. A TON.

Lesson

A short, clear, and memorable title is far better than a "clever" title.

The title is your book's hook. And if the hook doesn't work, the book doesn't work.

Fight the temptation to be clever with the title. Instead, you're better off with something so simple and memorable, they can't forget it.

Think and Grow Rich, *Good to Great*, *Zero to One*, *The Hard Thing About Hard Things* are all perfect examples because they are **short, convey a simple idea, and you only need to hear the title once** for it to stick.

Resource

Use this ChatGPT Prompt to help you ideate titles: *I'm working on a book about [TOPIC] in the spirit of [COMPARABLE BOOK TITLE(S)]. The key message is [YOUR MESSAGE/IDEA/ARGUMENT].*

If you need a list of title ideas, add: *Can you help me brainstorm some title ideas that are memorable, clear, and ideally 5 words or less?*

If you already have a list of potential titles, add: *I need help narrowing down potential book titles based on what will perform well in the market, especially in terms of memorability and clarity. Can you help me run a market analysis on some title ideas?*

Subtitle Note:
For subtitles, you should typically: (1) *Keep it to 12 words or less,* (2) *Make it SEO friendly,* (3) *Focus on appealing to your target reader,* and (4) *Build the subtitle around a big, relatable promise* (see Cheat #3).

ChatGPT prompt to use: *I need subtitle ideas for my book about [TOPIC] that is comparable to [BOOK TITLE(S)]. My working title is [TITLE], and I need a subtitle that is preferably 12 words or less, SEO friendly, and will appeal to [TARGET READER] by conveying how they can [YOUR BIG, RELATABLE PROMISE]. Can you provide me a list of 10 ideas?*

Exceptions

The exception to this cheat is when your title or subtitle is **provocative** or **induces curiosity**.

Freakonomics misses on clarity, but as a branded term, it nails memorability and curiosity. *How to Win Friends & Influence People* breaks the rule on being concise, but it's incredibly clear, incites curiosity factor, and delivers a promise all in one.

If you can't hit both memorability and clarity, then aim to use curiosity to fill in the gap.

CHEAT #3

MAKE A BIG, RELATABLE PROMISE.

Lesson
Big, Relatable promises offer readers a transformation result that feels 100% achievable.

Make a promise and you'll make an impression. The bigger the promise, the bigger the impression.

Books like *Atomic Habits*, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, and *Think and Grow Rich* are great examples of delivering on a big, relatable promise.

Your promise should be closely related to your title. In fact, you'll notice that many of the subtitles for the 25 books provide such a promise:

• *Start With Why:* **How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action**
• *Essentialism:* **The Disciplined Pursuit of Less**
• *Made to Stick:* **Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die**

Whether you do so in your title or not, make sure you are making and delivering on a promise to your reader in the book.

Resource
Try this exercise:

1. *Make a list of 5 to 10 problems you solve for people.*
2. *What are the common themes for those problems?* (If needed, ask ChatGPT or Claude to find the common themes for you.)
3. *How does the solution you provide satisfy the problem?*
4. *Turn your Theme/Solution into a promise.*

Exception

When you've already achieved a high status, then you have more freedom to share your story without having to provide a clear promise. Even so, you should make it clear you're proving some sort of lesson for the reader to learn.

Case in point, Bob Iger's business memoir *The Ride of a Lifetime: Lessons Learned from 15 Years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company*. There's no specific promise being made here, but that's because Disney is one of the best-recognized brands on the planet. That in of itself isn't terribly relatable, but there is an inherent promise that his story will provide lessons for the reader to relate to.

CHEAT #4

CHALLENGE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM.

Lesson

Challenge the conventional wisdom by sharing a contrarian perspective or by reframing an unpopular idea.

Alright, here's where things get a little tough. You've got to unleash your inner contrarian—which will be tough if you're a Professional People Pleaser like I am. But let loose those **unpopular opinions** or any beliefs that go against "industry standards." And don't be afraid to **reframe an idea**, especially ideas that give people a strong reaction.

For instance, in Robert Greene's *The 48 Laws of Power*, he reframes an unpopular idea by teaching readers to appear dumb so that you can get people to open up and reveal their true motives.

Want to stand out? Challenge the conventions. Be contrarian. Be different.

Resource

Do the following exercise:

1. Write down a list of your unpopular opinions. The stronger, the better.
2. Compile a list of some "best practices" and assumptions in your industry. Ask yourself: "Where have I seen these misapplied, misunderstood, or utterly fail?"
3. Now type up a bulleted list of all these thoughts from 1 and 2 into a document. Remove any nuance words like "sometimes," "often," and "usually."
4. Copy-and-paste into ChatGPT or Claude and use the following prompt: *Can you help me take this list and transform each item into a clear, memorable, and snappy phrase?*
5. Narrow down the list to ones you can turn into key concepts for your book.

Exception

Plenty of books on the list of 25 don't fully follow this cheat. But what they do is at least convey the conventional wisdom through a clear and memorable concept to make it "stickier." Or they pair the tried-and-true concept with their unique experience/lens.

For instance, in *Extreme Ownership*, Jocko Willink teaches that "There are No Bad Teams, Only Bad Leaders." Hardly a fresh concept, but it's clear and memorable. Then he breathes new life into the concept by pairing it with his experience as a Navy SEAL.

Clear. Memorable. Unique lens.

Pro Tip: If you're unable to challenge conventional wisdom, then look at how you can breathe new life into it. Avoid the standard case studies and examples that everyone else uses. Leverage your personal story and experience to convey the concept.

GIVE ACTIONABLE FRAMEWORKS.

Lesson

Empower readers with step-by-step methods and repeatable models.

As much as I love storytelling, it's not enough. You can't be all philosophy. You also have to also be practical.

The most successful nonfiction business books provide readers not only with big ideas and big stories, but actionable frameworks. Many aspiring authors make the mistake of offering up lots of inspirational and philosophical thoughts—but then leave readers stranded with no actions to take.

Stephen Covey's *7 Habits* and Tim Ferriss's "DEAL Framework" from *The 4-Hour Workweek* are great examples. There's a couple ways you can do the same:

1. *Codify your own practices:* Look at the actions you take over and over to successfully solve a problem or generate success. Spend time turning it into a bullet list that is action-oriented and then give it name. Acronyms are really popular here, even if I personally think they're overdone.
2. *Put a fresh spin on a standard framework:* Use something familiar to introduce something new. In my own book, *Start With Story*, I did this by taking the Scientific Method but applying it to storytelling.

Maybe you have your own twist on the Eisenhower decision matrix or an update to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Go for it—so long as it remains action-oriented.

Resource

To play this game, you'll need the REF: Reverse-Engineering Framework.

1. **Make a list of your biggest wins.** This is the fun step.
2. **For each win, write the steps that you took to achieve the outcome.** Pro Tip: Go in reverse order. Don't ignore the steps that might have looked like mis-steps at the time.
3. **Compare and contrast the steps for each one.** Cross out the steps that were unique to that project. Circle the steps that were the same. Consider whether any of the steps next to each other can be combined. Consolidate until you have a finalized framework of less than 10 steps. (Pro Tip: The shorter, the better. Even 10 feels excessive.)
4. **Explore the possibility of turning these steps into a visual.** Could it be an infographic? A circle? A ladder? (Pro Tip: Ask Chat GPT or Claude for ideas.)
5. **Name your framework.** By naming it, you take more ownership of the process. You put your personal stamp on it. (Pro Tip: Double-check that no one else is using the same name or has it already trademarked/copyrighted. For example, I was originally going to call this "The Frameworking Framework, but that's already being used by the FrameWorks Institute.)

The REF:
REVERSE-ENGINEERING FRAMEWORK

> **LIST YOUR BIGGEST WINS**

> **WRITE STEPS YOU TOOK TO SUCCEED**

> **COMBINE OR CONSOLIDATE STEPS**

> **TURN YOUR FRAMEWORK INTO A VISUAL.**

> **NAME YOUR FRAMEWORK**

WARNING: *Don't overdo it with frameworks.* You don't need to have one for every single principle you teach. The best frameworks combine your principles, concepts, and best practices.

Exception

Never force frameworks. If you can't apply a framework to 90% of your ideal readers, then drop it. Also, if your book falls more into the business memoir category like *Shoe Dog* by Phil Knight or *The Ride of a Lifetime*, then you can stick with teaching broad principles rather than turning them into a framework.

The same could be said about Michael Lewis's *The Big Short*, which takes more of a journalistic approach. Certainly, there are plenty of business lessons to be learned, but do we need a framework for it? Nah.

CHEAT #6

NICHE DOWN. THEN NICHE UP.

Lesson

Position your book to have broad appeal to a niche audience.

This is a tough, tough one. You've probably heard the phrase "niche down" so many times, you're sick of it. (Me too.) But the bestselling nonfiction books all do something that defies the convention—they also niche *up*.

When planning your book, you should niche down to define one clear ideal reader. Give them a name. Give them a backstory. Write *to* that avatar.

But find the ideas and topics that slice through industry and demographic specifics. Your book will read best if it feels like a 1:1 conversation. But if you're too specific, then you can't scale your message.

Niche down to your ideal reader. Niche up your message.

For instance, a book like *The Lean Startup* appeals directly to entrepreneurs in the earliest phases of business building. But the lessons could appeal to many different types of entrepreneurs. *Niche audience. Broad appeal.*

Resource

The Eavesdropper Test.

Imagine yourself going to a coffee shop to meet up with a mentee who wants to learn from you. Who are they? What are the struggles they're facing? What advice will you give them?

Now imagine there is someone at the next table over—the Eavesdropper. You don't know their story, why they're there, or what their struggles are. But what parts of your conversation would make them lean over in curiosity?

Exception

Plenty of business books are successful without niche-ing up. Niche-ing down your message to establish industry authority is a perfectly good strategy. Without an established audience and robust email list of 50,000+, you're unlikely to land on the major bestseller lists anyway. In such cases, stick with the niche.

Example 1: A parenting expert/psychology Ph.D. chooses to write a book specifically aimed at parents of teenagers who just received a mental health diagnosis.

Example 2: A coder who created a successful app decides to write a book for other coders to learn how to set up their own mobile app development company.

P.S. "Bestselling" isn't the only metric for success with books. Arguably, it's not even the best metric.

CHEAT #7

BECOME QUOTABLE.

Lesson

To become quotable, you need a distinct voice to differentiate yourself.

I'd wager that 90% of the business books published each year sound almost exactly the same. And that's only going to get worse as more people try to cut corners with AI or hire cheap ghostwriters. (Pro Tip: With ghostwriting, you get what you pay for.)

Finding your author voice takes practice. Especially when searching for those quotable key phrases that will make great sound bytes or quote-worthy social media posts.

Authors like Robert Greene, Tim Ferriss, and Jocko Willink have distinct voices and writing styles, which makes them more quotable. A century after his book came out, people are still quoting Dale Carnegie on the daily.

Best Practices:
1. Keep language simple (8th grade or below).
2. Avoid jargon.
3. Keep it short. (12 words or less for max memorability.)

Put another way: **Don't try to sound smart. Make the reader *feel* smart.**

Now, start documenting:
1. Examples and expressions you use on a regular basis
2. Catchphrases that you use
3. Colloquialisms you use

Survey your colleagues, your friends, your partner, and your kids. What have you said so many times, they've memorized it?

Resource
Use this Catchphrase Exercise to guide you in developing your "voice brand" and finding your quotable phrases:

1. **Observe:** Pay attention to the phrases you use consistently or the key ideas you use in everyday work and life.
2. **Brainstorm:** Make a list of those observations and track the phrases you use the most, along with how people respond.
3. **Iterate:** Find the clearest, most succinct way to express the phrase. Say it aloud, write it on paper, try the new phrase out with people. If it doesn't land well, then adjust the wording and try again.
4. **Own It:** Pick the winning catchphrase and implement it into your lexicon, your content, and your lessons. In time, you'll become known as the one associated with the phrase.

Example: Simon Sinek didn't invent the concept of purpose-driven brands. But he owns the phrase "people don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it."

Exception
Being quotable doesn't always mean coming up with something entirely original. Exceptions could include tweaking well-known phrases. Like my client who tweaked "work smarter, not harder" to his own phrase of "working harder is working smarter." Which also doubles as one of his contrarian views.

I don't love the term "Writer's Block" because it misses the mark in describing the true obstacle authors face: *Fear*. Fear of the book failing. Fear of what critics will say. So instead, I use the term "Page Fright," which is just a play on "Stage Fright."

CHEAT #8

BE RELEVANT.

Lesson

To be relevant, you must either leverage a trend or share an evergreen message.

Two ways to make your message relevant:

1. **Capitalize on a current trend.** (Relevant NOW.)
2. **Find an evergreen message.** (Relevant *FOR-EV-ER*.)

It's difficult to pull off both of these at once. Nor should you. The first helps you establish authority in the midst of a rising trend. But you'll need to be ready to update your message.

For example, *Crush It!* By Gary Vaynerchuk was a huge hit in 2009, putting him on the map as an influencer. But the original version of the book faded from popularity because it focused on platforms and strategies that became outdated.

Likewise, *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg capitalized on pain points faced by women in the workplace and spawned the "girl boss' culture. But it's now dangerously close to losing relevance, with some accusing it of being tone-deaf on systemic inequality. But that doesn't change the fact that its message struck a relevant chord at the time.

Both books are great examples of capitalizing on current trends and hot topics—seizing relevancy in the moment.

And then you've got books that remain relevant because of their evergreen messages, like *How to Win Friends & Influence People* or *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.

In fact, the majority of books on the list of 25 fall into this latter category rather than capitalizing on a trendy topic. There's no denying the staying power of that kind of relevancy. People will still be buying Dale Carnegie 50 years from now, if not longer.

Resource

While you could certainly use tools like Claude or ChatGPT to help you hone your relevancy, whether you're opting for trendy or evergreen, you know what's even better?

Tapping into the power of real human beings.

Beta Readers:
If you're shooting for capitalizing on a trend, then assemble a team of beta readers who are closely associated with your topic. Get their guidance on whether you're including the right information or missing any holes.

Book Coach/Developmental Editor:
If you're looking for evergreen messaging, you could also use beta readers, but hiring a book coach or developmental editor is a better bet. You need a trained set of eyes who can spot when you're drifting towards "trendy" and help you translate into an evergreen message.

Exception

Every now and then, there's a story so striking that it can both capitalize on a trend while also being evergreen. *The Big Short* is an example of a book that successfully walks the tightrope between trendy and evergreen. In the wake of the Great Recession, it rode the wave of people looking for someone to blame. But the book remains relevant by pointing out an evergreen problem—*Don't fail to see the Big Picture*.

I tend to recommend that you shoot for evergreen over trendy, especially if you want to be traditionally published. But ultimately, your path to relevancy depends on your goals for your book.

CHEAT #9

THE POWER OF PATTERN.

Lesson

Your book's structure should feel effortless.

People like rhythm and structure, even when they claim to be free spirits. There's a comfort in order.

Books like *The Power of Habit* and *Atomic Habits* nail exactly what they preach—they instill the power of habits into their very structure. They follow a predictable pattern that creates a sense of flow.

Thinking back to Cheat #2, your chapter titles are especially important. Your book's Table of Contents needs to tell a story and answer your reader's question: *What's in it for me?*

The majority of your chapters should follow a repetitive structure and pattern. This helps readers with retention, and helps keep your message on track while you're writing. Without a pattern, it's too easy to go off the rails and chase rabbits that your readers don't want to chase.

Some guides to follow:
1. Use clear titles, not clever titles.
2. Use the same structure, chapter to chapter to create a comfortable predictability and flow for the reader.
3. Go deep, not wide with each topic. (You can always save some ideas for another book, or for blogs, or for podcast episodes, etc.)
4. Incorporate refrains or summaries at the end of chapters to improve reader retention and show clear application.

Resource

Two recommendations here:

First, see Chapter 6 of *Start With Story* for structures/concepts to use that will help you with structure. Especially **The Rhetorical Triangle** and **The Concept Circle**. (I know, I know, blatant self-promotion.)

Second, have your book outline reviewed by a seasoned Developmental Editor, ideally before you start writing. Better yet, hire a Developmental Editor to assist you in putting together the book outline.

You'll avoid so many common mistakes with your structure and message if you hash it out with a professional. You could end up saving thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of time. Not an exaggeration. (Yes, more blatant self-promotion.)

Exception

If you opt to tell a chronological business memoir, then your structure is Time rather than Topic. Difficult to pull off, but this structure can create a sense of the reader riding alongside you.

Creativity, Inc. is one such exception where the narrative moves mostly chronologically and the lessons are woven in as they were learned/practiced. Even so, he still finds ways to identify a theme/perspective that can anchor each chapter. Also, he's able to organically reiterate insights to connect the dots throughout the book.

CHEAT #10

SIMPLE, BOLD COVERS.

Lesson

A simple, bold cover is your greatest hook.

No doubt about it—**people judge books by their covers**. A great book hidden behind a bad cover and bad title will likely never gain traction. But when it's paired with a great title, a great cover grabs readers before they even crack open the book.

Frankly, you don't need me to give you a lecture on this. I'm not a designer by trade. And you can probably look at your own bookshelf to determine this cheat is true.

Resource

No shocker here, but having a great cover designer is your greatest resource.

If you're going through a publisher, then they'll provide you with a cover designer. But they'll still need your input on what you like—colors you want to avoid, books that you like, where you want your name positioned, and so on.

If you're going the self-pub route, then you definitely want to put extra consideration here if you're going to stand out against the millions of other self-pub and hybrid-published titles out there. Look at the designer's portfolio, compare their work to books that you like.

Regardless of your publishing route, you can also get ChatGPT to help you narrow down options. Upload the designs you're considering and some examples of other books in your niche/topic area. Then use this prompt:

I need you to do a market analysis on some book cover designs I'm considering. I'd like you to compare the attached files to the books [TITLE, TITLE, and TITLE]. Tell me which of my cover design options are the most consistent with those comparative titles, which design is the most visually appealing, and if you have any suggestions for improvement.

Exception
Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And there are definitely some books on our list of 25 that I personally consider "bad covers." For instance, *Think and Grow Rich*, *The 4-Hour Workweek* and *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*.

All three benefit from having great titles, though. And in the case of *4-Hour*, a killer subtitle with a bold promise: *Escape 9—5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich*. So yes, you can offset the liability of a not-great cover with a super-great title/subtitle.

But your best best is still to have a simple and bold cover design that will remain as evergreen as possible. While design trends change, there are certain aspects of design that don't.

CHEAT #11

MARATHON MARKETING.

Lesson
Publishing is the starting line, not the finish line

For this analogy to work, consider marathon training. When I trained for my first marathon, it took over a year for me to get ready. The best thing I did?

Told people I was training for a marathon. And then paid for races as soon as registration opened.

See, most authors don't put enough skin in the game early enough. But you have to cheat the system, starting with talking about your book *before* it even exists.

This sounds counterintuitive, especially if you come from a traditional business setting where you only market a product *after* it's available. **Not so with books.**

Ideally, you should be talking about it before you even have an outline. You should be testing out content ideas through conversations with people, social media posts, or working with a book coach.

That's like a marathoner stretching, exercising, and doing practice runs like 5Ks, 10Ks, and then half marathons. All that preparation pays off.

And then there's the other half of the equation… So many authors do a big push when the book releases and then that's it. No more mention of their book hardly ever. That's like someone training for a marathon just to get their picture taken at the start line. A big, fat DNF.

The marathon only counts if you finish it. Publishing is the starting line. Everything after is the marathon.

Never forget that **you are your book's primary evangelist.** Even if you have a traditional publisher and a PR firm in your corner, you must become the Eliud Kipchoge of marketing your book.

Eliud Kipchoge
•*2x Olympic gold medalist for the marathon.*
•*Only person to run 26.2 miles in under 2 hours.*
•*Actual superhuman.*

Resource

Hire a professional book marketer to help guide you because book marketing isn't one-size-fits-all. But here is a Marketing Idea Buffet to get you hungry:

1. **Social media posts** that present the book's key ideas/unconventional wisdom/major takeaways. (Pro Tip: Focus on the platform where your Ideal Reader hangs out.)

2. **Blogs and articles** published on industry-specific sites. (Pro Tip: Focus on sites with more traffic than yours.)
3. Develop a **list of podcasts** you want to go on. (Pro Tip: Start engaging with the creators now. Organically open the opportunities to be a guest.)
4. **Build your personal brand** up more—professional headshots, headline consistent with your book's messaging, website where people can download a free resource. (Pro Tip: Build up that email list and follower count.)
5. **Network with influencers** in your niche. (Pro Tip: This helps feed other items on the list.)
6. Develop some **pre-order bonuses and giveaways** to build up those pre-order numbers. (Pro Tip: Value-driven videos, previous chapter, bonus material, etc. all make viable options.)
7. **Video content** of you signing books and leaving them places for people to find. (Pro Tip: Integrate this with your social media strategy.)
8. **Plan a book tour**—libraries, bookstore readings, businesses related to your topic, conferences, etc. (Pro Tip: Pre-order your own copies to be available at these venues to boost your preorder count for the book's launch. You can help recoup the cost when you sell copies at these events.)
9. Leverage the **speaking circuit** in your niche. Even if you're not doing keynotes right away, ask organizers how you can help out. Ask your existing network. Build that trust and relationship first.

You'll notice there's a lot of cross-media opportunity in these ideas. That's then whole point. Each item should feed into the others.

Keep in mind that most agents/traditional publishers want to work with nonfiction authors who have at least 50,000 people on an email list/social media, active speaking engagements, etc. They need to see you've put in the miles first. So waiting to build your brand and following *after* the book? That's like showing up to the marathon without even stretching.

Time for a cliché to sum it all up: *It's a marathon. Not a sprint.*

Exception

Yes, there are a few exceptions on the list of 25. Obviously, Carnegie's book came out in a totally different era. But he had already developed a reputation for influence before his book came out. The book simply scaled his impact and established his legacy.

Yes, Kiyosaki's book was initially self-published. He had no platform, was rejected by agents and publishers, and sold it wherever and however he could. But that was his version of marathon marketing.

The cheat still holds true even in these exceptions: When you treat publishing as the starting line, it changes your entire approach. You build up perseverance instead of burning out and dropping out.

GET CAUGHT CHEATING

About now, you might be thinking: *"But I don't want to just copy what someone else did. I want my book to be totally different."*

Good!

But that's why these are cheats. The books on this list provide us the answer sheet—they don't change your voice, your ideas, or your goals. Those all belong to you. And those are what will make your book different. The cheats will just help you beat the curve.

Even if you don't sell millions of books, these 11 cheats will help you do what 99% of aspiring authors never do:

Create a kick-ass book.

In a sea of AI-generated content and conventional advice being repeated with no flavor, you'll stand out. You just need to get caught cheating.

Case in point, one of the major features of a book proposal that is sent to agents and authors is the **Comparative Titles** section. This is where you compare your book to others in the market. You say why your book is like the well-known book, but also how it's different.

For instance:
"My book HACKING GEN-Z is like *Atomic Habits* but shows Millennials and Gen-X'ers how to apply the business habits that are making Gen-Z influencers so successful."

"My book THE SELF-EMPLOYMENT TRAP is on a collision course with *The 4-Hour Workweek*. While it has a similar goal for helping people achieve self-sufficiency, it teaches people how to keep their 9-to-5 stability while building proven streams of external income. This helps readers future-proof themselves for both retirement or during the next round of layoffs."

See how that works? You show how your book emulates the success of other known books (cheats) but also how it stands out. You get caught cheating, but you also rewrite the rules.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

Depending on your situation, here's what you do next:

"I don't even have an outline yet, just an idea."
Great. This is the perfect time for you to apply the cheats.

1. Build up that platform. Network, network, network. Build lists.
2. Define your Ideal Reader.
3. Clarify your big, relatable promise.
4. Develop your quotable phrases, your contrarian ideas, and your frameworks.
5. Define your relevancy—trend or evergreen?
6. Figure out how you'll niche up your message.
7. Hire a book coach.
8. Either hire a developmental editor to help you create an outline or use an outlining tool like this one.

"I've got an outline but I don't know if it's any good."
Cool. It's not too late. Follow everything on the list above but also:

9. Triple-check that your outline aligns to your goals. (Not every idea you've ever had needs to make it into the book.)
10. Test out your ideas to get feedback. (Real-life convos and online responses/metrics.)

"I've started writing and now I realize I'm doing some of this totally wrong."
Then stop. Hit pause. Don't fall for the fallacy of sunk cost.

Go back and revisit all of these. Refine and redefine. Hire help. Join a book coaching group.

"I've finished writing a book, but now I'm worried it's not any good."
Welcome to the club. You're officially a writer.

But have a manuscript review done before you pay $5K—$10K for a full developmental edit. Most legit developmental editors (hi) will do a manuscript review for a lower cost or review a sample chapter/10 pages to identify any major problems and suggest improvements.

"Look, I've done all these things."
I doubt it. Or else you wouldn't have read this far.

But then you need to decide what publishing route you want to follow. Check out my free webinar to learn more about the 3 Publishing Routes and what you need to succeed for each one. And you'll also learn some dirty secrets of publishing.

BEFORE YOU GO

Thanks for downloading this cheat sheet and taking a chance on yourself. Nothing here is easy to do, but so worth it to have a book that not only you love but that readers will love, too.

If you're looking for more cheats to become a better writer and storyteller, then you should follow me on LinkedIn.

Or if LinkedIn's not your jam, you can subscribe to Everything Is Storytelling, a newsletter where you'll find advice on writing and publishing.

Happy cheating. I can't wait to see what you come up with.