

THE JUICY GUIDE TO **ENTREPRENEURIAL INSPIRATION**

ADVICE ON HOW TO:
SPARK YOUR CREATIVITY
— AND —
**ACTIVATE YOUR
INNER FIRE**



MARIA ROSS

The Juicy Guide to Entrepreneurial Inspiration: Advice on How to Spark Your Creativity and Activate Your Inner Fire

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So You Want to Be Inspired.....	3
Stuck? 4 Questions to Summon Your Inspirational Muse	7
Leprechauns, Charms and the Space to Make Magic.....	9
All You Really Have Is Your Story.....	11
Why You Are Called to Create Something that Matters	12
Raise the Bar	14
Be Interested to Be Interesting.....	15
Why Do You Do What You Do? Ideas to Reconnect with Your Purpose + Passion	16
Stuck in Neutral? 4 Ways to Reboot Your Business and Rekindle Your Fire	17
Face Forward. Eyes on the Road. The One Rule You Should Never Forget When Chasing Your Dream.....	19
NO Is Not a Dirty Word.....	21
When You Shouldn't Give 100%.....	23
7 Simple and Stunning Blog Post Ideas to Keep Your Writing Flowing	25
Why Me? Why NOT Me?	28
What Is Your Artistic Work Manifesto? Yep, You Need One.....	30
What the \$%^& Are You Waiting For?	32
Should You Silence the Critics? 4 Tips to Filter Criticism.....	34
How to Understand Your Competitors without Falling into a Jealousy Trap.....	36
Ouch! 7 Ways to Deal with Criticism.....	39
Closing Thoughts and Book Extras	42
About the Author, Maria Ross	44
Acknowledgments.....	45

So You Want to Be Inspired...

Working for yourself can bring many things to your life. A sense of freedom and control over your own destiny. The opportunity to bring your own grand vision to life. The chance to create the next big global powerhouse, powerful non-profit or even to enrich the lives of those who consume your art.

There is a grand fairy tale about entrepreneurship and self-employment. People think you work three hours and then spend the rest of your time lounging on a beach, learning how to tango or simply swinging in a hammock reading your favorite book. The truth could not be more different, despite what some gurus will try to tell you.

Someone once joked that being an entrepreneur means you can work whenever you want—as long as it's 24/7. Sounds about right.

When I embarked on my business ownership journey back in 2008, I had the same skewed vision of what life would be like. I even told people, “I’m going to start consulting so I can have more time for my other passions, writing and acting.” And while I have been able to fit some of that in, the truth is, this entrepreneurial thing can be a lot harder and lonelier than people ever imagine. It requires hustle, decisiveness, drive, and soul-drenching belief in what you’re doing—not to mention a thick skin and resilience to withstand and adapt to any hurricane that a cranky customer, high-maintenance client, internet troll or deceptive business partner can lob at you.

Whew. I’m tired just reading that sentence. Oh, that reminds me: running a business requires stamina. And the worst part (for me anyway) is that it can sometimes get really, really lonely to be in it all by yourself.

But all is not lost. Many entrepreneurs out there have found a way to make things work for them. With the right people supporting you and the right inspirational infusions sparking your creativity, there is nothing better, in my opinion. You get to build a brand of your own. You get to make every decision without politics or permission. You get to create and invent. You get to design cool business cards and work in your pajamas (only if you work from home. If you have a shop, I’d advise against it). You can take an afternoon off to play with your toddler at the zoo. I truly believe that running your own business is actually a personal development exercise, requiring you to dig deep into your strengths and weaknesses and face your fears.

You will learn more about yourself along this journey than you could ever imagine. Because of this, it is helpful to have a handy, dandy “pocket muse” to wrench you out of mediocrity and shake up your thinking from time to time.

Well, your muse is delivered. This eBook is a collection of my best content to spark your creative fire and lift you up. Sort of like a pint of mint chocolate chip

ice cream or that ridiculously perfect motivational quote you found on Instagram that stopped you dead in your tracks.

But who am I to inspire you as you build your business and your brand?

My Business-Building Story

I started my brand consultancy in 2008 and you could say it was accidental. Sort of. Really, there are no accidents and the idea to hang out my own shingle and help businesses create brand and marketing strategies always seemed a pipe dream. My corporate career was extremely successful—taking me from a management consultant at a top-tier global firm, to a marketing manager at Discovery Networks (yay, *Animal Planet!*) to Account Manager at a small ad agency and then eight years as a Silicon Valley marketing executive. I lived through the technology boom and bust and always landed on my feet. But I'd often get bored quickly or look to the next new adventure. And, perhaps like you, I longed for more freedom in my schedule to pursue other passions: as mentioned above, writing and acting.

Red Slice started as a personal blog full of whimsical wine, film and cultural musings. It then became a business website I would tinker with on the side as I dreamed, *"If I worked for myself, how would I position my services? What message would I want to convey? What brand would I build?"* I knew I wanted to build something fresh, smart and practical. A brand that reflected my voice, which is at times energetic, funny, to-the-point and full of tough love. Tina Fey is my imagined brand spokesperson.

When the writing was on the wall and my last tech company laid off the marketing department in preparation for a sale, opportunity knocked. I flipped the switch on that hidden website and Red Slice as a brand consultancy was born. Being a brand strategist, I naturally put a lot of upfront thought into my own brand strategy, which enabled me to make smart marketing moves, network effectively and put my best foot forward. If this was all there was to this business-ownership thing, I thought, this will be easy.

And then two things happened:

One, after frantically dealing with legal requirements, tax issues, website hosting providers, accounting software, computer glitches and a host of other crap I never really wanted to deal with, *while* trying to drum up business *and* serve the clients I already had, I realized: I'm doing more than just branding. I'm doing *everything*. And a wise, experienced entrepreneur gently told me, "Maria, learn how to outsource what you are not good at and what doesn't bring your joy."

Entrepreneurial Truth #1: While you might love what you do, remember that running a business means you have to do that...*and* everything else, Find support. Outsource. No business owner is an expert in everything so find people who are and focus on what *you* do best.

Second, I got lonely.

If you're a fellow extrovert, you know we thrive in groups. I am addicted to brainstorming sessions and team offsites. I love collaborating, flinging ideas back and forth and shaping something stronger than any one person could on their own. Whiteboards and dry erase markers are like candy to me.

But as a business of one? Crickets. Let's just say I talked to the dog a lot that first year.

So I made it work. I reached out, made coffee dates and attended networking events. And I formed relationships that to this day inspire me, provoke me and guide me when I need a sanity check.

It's *on you* to network and hustle. It's *on you* to reach out, make coffee dates, attend networking events and essentially grow your "co-worker" community.

They just won't be in the cubicle next door.

Entrepreneurial Truth #2: You have to create your own collaborative cohort, and seek out trusted advisors to get out of your own head and make you better at what you do.

Fast-forward all these years and I've been fortunate to work with fabulous and passionate clients all over the world. I've crafted brand stories that have resulted in joyful client screams, and even a few tears (the good kind). Many of my amazing clients have since built successful brands and this never fails to thrill me, even now. My colleagues continue to inspire and support me. It has been an honor to delight large crowds and be interviewed on national TV, as well as on countless podcasts and talk radio shows. Oh, and I achieved a lifelong dream of becoming a published author. I'm blessed.

The road was not always easy. Maybe you can relate to this: I am often still unsure of what the hell I'm doing. But I stayed the course and kept my brand clear and consistent. And over time, I became *known* for my brand. My trusted colleagues even gently told me if something I was doing was "off-brand" or not a good fit. I have learned to let go, to outsource to invest in support so I can focus on what I do best, which is consulting, writing and speaking.

And most importantly: When things get stale or I feel dejected, jealous or hopeless, I know where to turn for motivation. Seeking out those shots of inspiration is not a luxury: it's a vital part of keeping your business fresh and your offerings creative. You as a person are your business' most important asset. If you don't nourish your heart, body and mind, then who will? You wouldn't bash your computer until it breaks, would you? You need to take better care of you than you would any piece of office equipment.

Entrepreneurial Truth #3: YOU are your most important business asset. Stay motivated, inspired and healthy in mind, body and soul so you can give it your best, every single day.

This *Juicy Guide* series is designed to help you on your own entrepreneurial journey. And I mean “entrepreneurial” in whatever form that means for you: starting a business or a non-profit, working as a freelancer, launching a big project, or even selling your art as an author, actor or artist, which requires you to *think* like a business owner. Getting the business fundamentals right is important, but finding ways to stay fresh and inspired on this often tough journey is going to light up your work. In these pages, you will find some of my best motivational content that will hopefully guide, inform and delight you. Think of this eBook as a virtual coffee date, where you can pick my brain for some fabulous advice!

You have a passion and a purpose for delivering something. If you didn't you wouldn't be reading this book. How you present this to the world can make all the difference to its success or failure. **Customers and prospects can tell if you are not absolutely in love with what you do so you need to keep that fire burning brightly.** Hopefully the lessons and tips in these pages will help you feed your inner muse and discipline her to come out and play when you call.

If it does, please kindly share your thoughts with an Amazon review and recommend this book to other folks you may know who need to spark their creativity and activate their inner fire. You'll soon find, if you haven't already, that one of the coolest perks of an entrepreneurial lifestyle is the willingness to share resources with each other.

And you are invited to join my Red Slice Nation email tribe for regular wit, wisdom and insights. We are a community of rockstars and changemakers out to create, invent and delight. At Red Slice, I serve up business and brand advice, with a side of inspiration for accomplishing whatever your big dream might be. I may not have all the answers, but I can point you in the right direction and am happy to share resources and lessons that will help you on your journey. We're all in this together.

Please share any and all of your feedback with me on Twitter [@redslicenation](https://twitter.com/redslicenation). Would love to hear from you!

Best,

Maria Ross

Stuck? 4 Questions to Summon Your Inspirational Muse

Everywhere you look these days, it seems *inspiration* is on everyone's mind. Inspiration for your business, your family life, your soul. Heck, inspiration to help you find—and make—meaning in your world.

I had the pleasure recently to work with two clients who are all about inspiring others: one [teaches mindfulness principles](#) so that manic people can take a breath, shift perspective and choose healthier actions, leading to less anxiety, stronger relationships and better quality (and satisfaction in) work. Another is [inspiring soul-seekers](#) to peel back the dusty layers and get back in touch with who they really are and what they *really want* by running creative workshops and soulful camp experiences.

If you're like me, you often need to find your inspirational vitamin boost in insightful people or special places. I call this "Summoning Your Muse." Where are the places you go or people you seek when you need that motivational high? It's not enough to keep your head down, locked on your work and your to-do lists: every human being needs to reflect, make space and see things differently in order to recharge.

Ask the right questions and inspiration can find you.

When summoning your muse, here are four questions to ask and invite her in:

1. **Do you enjoy your physical space?**

I firmly believe our environment affects our mood and creativity. Do you work in a cramped, messy corner of your living room, or do you have a small, cozy nook that lights you up? Do you need space? Do you need color? Heck, is your chair comfortable? I find that working outside my home office in a funky little coffee shop helps me focus better and sparks new ideas. Think about your physical environment and what you need to be your most productive and create or find that space for yourself.

2. **Who is on your cheerleading team?**

Do you have a team of people you can call on when you need inspiration in different parts of your life? I have a friend I call when I need quick-hit, practical advice about life, one I call when I need a soulful, spontaneous girl chat about love and desire, one I exchange email missives with when we need to work out angst or transition, one I turn to for business motivation when I'm stuck...you get the idea. Who is on your team and do you have any gaps?

3. **Can you make space in your schedule?**

I'm realizing that I don't have space to think and create these days so I'm taking steps to change that. I'm going to be scheduling sacred time on my

calendar to write, plan for the business, and take an afternoon off at the park with my baby boy. If you get all crazy and fidgety when you end up having some time on your hands, then you have a problem! We all need quiet and non-busy reflection time. Your schedule won't magically open up for you so you have to put your foot down and demand what YOU want from your calendar. How do you want your day or week to look? What are you willing to give up, and on what will you absolutely not budge? The weeks go faster as we get older—do you really want to look back and see that your year was filled with crap that you didn't really want to do?

4. **How can you shift your perspective?**

A friend recently told me that I need to “change my conversation” about time. Time is, after all, a construct, and if I go in with the mindset that “I’m crazed! I have no time to do anything! I am way too overwhelmed” then, darn it, that’s my reality. But if I let go a bit and shift my mindset to “I have plenty of time to get everything done” or adopt a more curious or joyful approach, then I will indeed impact my reality. What is your mindset? Approach your work, life and relationships with joy, with curiosity, with abundance. Instead of “I *have* to...” think, “Wow! I *get the opportunity* to...” This could apply to working out, visiting family, or attending a child’s school play. It sounds woo-woo but I swear, it really, really works.

Speaking of my “team” of muses, these lovely friends of mine have some great wisdom to share with you, too. Enjoy:

- Want to more fully, richly commit to giving your best in everything you do? Read [Empty the Tank](#) by the soulful Alexandra Franzen.
- Looking for a snappy pick-me-up to make your spirit soar? Check out [9 Promising, Powerful Quotes Your Business Will Love](#) by the witty and wise Sarah Von Bargen.
- Need a heart-boost about the great content you put out into the world when you think no one is listening? Devour [Not Getting The Comments, Likes And Shares That You Crave? Behold: The Silent Obsessor](#) by the feisty Melissa Cassera.
- Looking for ways to shift your mindset about the things you “have” to do to make them more joyful? You will adore [Finding Prayer in All Things](#) by the lovely Jamie Greenwood.

Leprechauns, Charms and the Space to Make Magic

Last year, I took two weeks off for vacation in England and Scotland and prepped everything in my life for a work detox. I call it a “work detox,” not a full-on digital one, because I specifically set things up to take a break from work email, while still enjoying personal connections via social media: Coordinating a meetup with a friend via Twitter. Posting pics of my sweet babe playing at London’s Museum of Childhood or our family atop the London Eye, bundled up in the cold weather despite the bright sunlight. Instagramming new-fallen snow in the Scottish Highlands before it quickly melted away. Sharing a hilarious video of my mother-in-law’s Boxer and Jack Russell up in Scotland licking my baby boy with gusto—and his attempts to kiss them back.

St. Patrick’s Day was shortly after this lovely respite, and so my mind was filled with lucky charms, Irish blessings and pots of gold. How can we make magic in our lives on a regular basis?

Since I’m not a leprechaun, I can only share some ideas for how that two-week playdate away from work on foreign soil helped me recapture a bit of magic in my own work and life—and how you might be able to do the same:

1. **Remove or Outsource the Clutter.**

I knew my Type A personality would go mad if I just “didn’t check email” for two weeks and let it pile up. But I didn’t want that time-suck distracting me from my family and vacation time. So I asked for help. My rockstar virtual assistant (VA) checked my email while I was gone, with instructions on how to respond, what to delete and when to send me an urgent text. And guess what? The sky didn’t fall. No one was upset. I had zero junk email piled up. My business didn’t shatter to pieces. If anything, more new opportunities awaited me upon my return. And more importantly, I used that time to create magical memories and slow down. Now that I’m more used to it, I’m also finding ways to check email only a few times a day.

What is taking up space in your life that doesn’t serve you or your business? Can you outsource it or delete it completely to make time for silence, laughter, and peace? You have to remove what’s not working before you can replace it with what does.

2. **Change Your Environment.**

Okay, so we can’t always travel 6000+ miles from where our obligations and responsibilities surround us in order to “get away.” But shifting your location, surroundings or context can do wonders for throwing you just a bit off kilter so you are more aware, more alive, more thoughtful. When your surroundings are new, they tend to have a magical, sparkly glow. You’re simply paying more attention because things are unfamiliar. That shift in focus can result in amazing connections—like when I happened to

meet the chief marketing officer of Pizza Hut UK at a London café over breakfast. It can spark new dreams—like my desire to pick some other travel destinations for the year. And it can laser-focus you on what is important and what can simply fall away. Hint: A lot more can fall away than you keep telling yourself.

How can you change the scenery in your everyday life? Is it a staycation at a great boutique hotel or perhaps working out of a new coffee shop instead of your old office? Can you take a new route to work or repaint a room? Shift your surroundings so you can shift your focus.

3. Appoint a Muse.

Upon my return, I was lucky enough to have a call with one of my dear gal pals who is also a trusted colleague, inspiring entrepreneur, business-scheming partner-in-crime, idea generator and all-around cheerleader. I realized my joyful talks with her keep me motivated on the bigger picture. She inspires me to dream big and explore what I want. Our calls are magical and I always hang up buzzing with energy, as if she's weaved a little spell around me.

Who can you meet up with regularly to be your personal muse—and for whom you can do the same? Make sure you have these magical elves on speed dial and set up regular dates with them so you get out of your own head and your own ruts. Collaboration breeds all sort of creativity and wonder.

Don't wait for the leprechaun. There are lots of way to create your own charms and spells to inject magic into your world.

All You Really Have Is Your Story

Most of us have not invented anything new.

We are not doing something customers or clients can't get elsewhere. We are not discovering a new element or identifying a new species or creating a way for humans to live on Mars. (Some of you may be working on this, but most of us are not.)

But what you do and how you do it is utterly unique. Because you are the one doing it.

We know this to be true of art. But even in that case, chances are you're not using a medium that has never been used before, right? If you paint, there are other paintings. If you take photos, there are other photographers. It's all about the artist's perspective and what they create that draws us to one over the other.

This is true in your business, too. You are an artist.

You put your own spin, motivation and values on the work. Working with you is unlike working with any other human being. The experience can never, ever be replicated, even if two people work from the exact same playbook.

All you have in this noisy world to stand out and attract the right people is your story. What is the meaning and mission behind your work? What is the main benefit your clients or customers will achieve? How will they feel when it's over? How will it impact them days, months and years down the road?

That is your story and that is what you need to talk about. That is what people sign up for. It is what makes them choose you over the hundreds of other people doing or selling exactly what you sell.

All you have is your story. Know what it is. Tell it well.

Why You Are Called to Create Something that Matters

Here's the story of why I started crying in the Safeway checkout line.

There I was, three months after giving birth to my son and buying a few groceries in a rare respite outside of the house. As I waited in line, my tired eyes scanned across the magazine headlines screaming at me from the checkout stand:

"Hate Your Butt? 5 Secrets to a Body You'll Love!"

"Miracle Cream Erases Wrinkles Forever!"

"How to Be Rich and Powerful...and Work Less than Three Days a Week!"

"(CELEB) Tells All about Her Life, Loves and Drug Use in Hot New Autobiography—Buy it Today!"

A wave of panic flooded over me as tears sprang to my eyes. Frustrated tears. Angry tears.

Was this the world my darling little boy has just entered? This is what he has to look forward to once he learns how to read? Yikes.

Maybe it was post-partum hormones but, really...no. Anyone who knows me knows I have hated hyperbolic marketing and trashy reality TV (worse, people who are famous just for acting like infants) for a while. And the digital marketing world is no different: people promising riches, six-figure incomes, and pretty much everything but an evil lair in your own mountain hideaway (although it's probably out there).

Despairing, I surfed social media when I got home and just felt sicker. All the noise, empty claims, the "Buy This!" and "You Need That!" It seemed everyone was promising people—entrepreneurs and women especially—a pot of gold at the end of their own personal rainbow.

I'm all for optimism. But I'm also for truth and value. For putting in the hard work required to build something wonderful. And many people I know offer such value to their clients and customers every day. You just can't always hear them above the din.

Then, I finally got it. **It's not about silencing the crazies.** They will always be there, promising people the sun, moon and stars, and yes, they will find an audience to believe them.

But the more of us who pledge to put something good out into the world, something decent, and thoughtful and true—the more the tide will rise and lift us all up. It's not about stopping them.

It's about stepping up ourselves and ensuring the stories we tell are honest, the work we deliver is of quality and, most importantly, the marketing we create has value and meaning.

We see examples everywhere, if we look hard enough. People like [Marie Forleo](#), [Alexandra Franzen](#), and [Jay Baer](#) market themselves and what they offer with integrity, hope, and meaning. These are the ones we should emulate. These are the people we should strive to become.

Make meaning. You owe it to this noisy world to create something amazing and market it truthfully.

Raise the Bar

It's not about competing. It's about ensuring there is no substitute for doing what you do.

Instead of *"That's not our policy,"* try, *"Here are some options for you."*

Instead of *"We can't help you,"* try, *"Here are a few referrals for you so you can make things happen. I'm happy to make an introduction"*

Instead of *"These are all the reasons you didn't get what you wanted,"* try, *"I am so sorry you are disappointed and I should have done better. How can I make it right?"*

Instead of *"I don't accept comments on my blog because I only care about pushing out my ideas, not how you feel about them,"* how about, *"Got feedback? Ping me on Twitter. Or Facebook or..."*

Instead of *"Here's why your negative feedback is wrong or our actions are justified,"* how about, *"Wow! Thank you for taking the time to show us how we can do better. There must be others who feel like you do who've never said anything."*

If you want to create something irresistible, start with listening to what people really desire.

Raise the bar by delighting people in unexpected ways.

That's how you raise the bar. That's how you stand out. That's how you create something of which you can be proud.

Be Interested to Be Interesting

Here is the magical secret to creating an irresistible brand, business or piece of art.

Ready?

Be interested in order to be interesting.

If you're not interested in selling sweaters, no one will be interested in buying them.

If you're not interested in defending people in court, they won't be interested in hiring you to represent them.

If you're not excited about your book, passionate about your products or if you don't create your art with a joyful heart, no one will respond any differently.

When you're not interested in what you do, no one will find your work interesting.

As purveyor, inventor, entrepreneur or creator, you have to care the most.

It's charming to say, "I hate self-promotion," but, really, if not you, then who? If things are a grind for you, why should they magically transform for your audience?

I'm not saying hard work is not involved. Late nights. Panic. Stress. Fear. Sacrifice. Plain old bad days.

But you are Customer #1. And if it's not interesting to you, others will simply follow your lead.

Why Do You Do What You Do? Ideas to Reconnect with Your Purpose + Passion

Your business is an extension of you. It started with an idea and a hope and a problem you were itching to solve. A vision of how you could improve someone's life, work, relationships, self-esteem or home.

For a moment, forget about the features and functions. Forget about the "tricks." Forget about the bonus materials or free reports or "Act by This Date" price promotions or 6-week programs or loyalty cards or sales numbers or social media stats and think back to your idea, *your story*.

What did you want to put into the world to leave it a better place than how you found it? What problems did you want to solve for people to make them feel joyful, empowered or efficient?

People connect with stories + people, with passion + purpose...not products, not services, not even brands.

Without a story, without standing for something, you are simply a transactional commodity. And when was the last time *that* ever rocked anyone's world? There's no loyalty there. That's like saying you're loyal to the DMV simply because they renew your driver's license every few years.

If you're having trouble remembering your story or have lost sight of your purpose amidst the chaos of everyday entrepreneurship, here are some inspirations to help you find your mojo again:

Ask your best friend, mentor, or close confidante to remind you of what you told them when you said you wanted to (*fill in the blank*) and what got you jazzed about it. You know, those nights when, after a few too many G&Ts, your eyes lit up and you said, "If I could create this, people would love it!"

Create a simple "[Value Proposition Hack](#)."

Revisit that old [mission statement](#) you once wrote long ago. You know, the one that was imperfect and raw and beautiful and captured every essence of hope you had when you first started.

Stay inspired by soaking up goodness from others who have found their stories and made magic in their worlds. And know that if they can do it, you can do it too. Like [Alexandra](#) or [Ali](#) or [Warren and Betsy](#).

Review Simon Sinek's now famous TED talk, *How Great Leaders Inspire Action* and [find your own "Why."](#)

Stuck in Neutral? 4 Ways to Reboot Your Business and Rekindle Your Fire

Ah, the first blushes of entrepreneurial love. The romance! The energy! But what happens when the passion fades and the reality of demanding customers/clients, overwhelming marketing options and painful tasks (bookkeeping, anyone?) creeps in? Suddenly, your business becomes a grind and you find yourself working harder for less reward, less return...and less joy. Your once appreciative and dreamy-eyed business starts angrily demanding more of your time and energy—but in return, rewards you with the wrong customers, a weak profit margin and doesn't take you out salsa dancing anymore.

I've been where you are. I know what it feels like to have your business success lead you down the wrong path. How choices innocently pile up, each one seemingly rational, paving a perfect road to discontent.

So about two years into my business, I took a step back. I sought the objective counsel of colleagues, [a wise coach](#) and [a wondrous wordsmith](#) and tweaked my business model and messaging—my core brand elements. I started doing more of what I loved and ditched what wasn't working. And you know what? My heart (and success) soared.

If your business and heart feel stuck in neutral, here are four ways to reboot:

1. **What do you hate doing? STOP IT!**

If your business offerings have kept piling on so you can simply cater to every single need under the sun, you need to take stock and simplify your business model. What activities bring you the most joy? Do you love teaching and strategic planning but hate detailed tactics? Then start doing more workshops or retainer projects and don't offer hourly project work. Do you love doing massage and energy work but hate giving facials? Then cut down your services list. This also translates into how you talk about yourself (i.e., maybe you're no longer a "full-service spa" but a "body care studio").

2. **Play with pricing or packaging to attract the right customers/clients.**

You may find that the people you are attracting pay little but demand a lot, leaving little profit margin in the end. How about adding more value/quality to your offerings and increasing your prices to deter more budget-conscious folks and attract a more affluent market? Or offering a tiered set of products or services to give more cost-conscious folks a self-service option, while freeing up your time for deeper, higher-value work that you adore.

3. **Revisit your messaging.**

Take a good, hard look at your web copy, company descriptor or even job

title. Are you saying you do everything for anybody? Are you too vague and not focused on clear, crisp benefits? Does it sound boring, even to you? This could either be a) attracting the wrong type of work or b) confusing the prospective people that you *really* want. Remember, when you try to create a brand that is all things to all people, you end up being nothing to no one. Detail out your ideal customer or client and only focus on content, services or products—and the appropriate messaging—to attract those people. Don't worry about pleasing (or offending) anyone else but that target. Trust me, they'll be fine without you.

4. Audit your visual brand.

OK, this one may require an investment to make some changes. Based on the people you really, *really* want to attract and the kind of work you really, *really* want to be doing, is your visual branding way off base? Do you need to modernize your colors, select bolder fonts or change out your imagery to better appeal to those people? I once consulted with someone trying to attract high-powered Alpha-male executives—and yet her website was all pastel colors and flowery script fonts. She was beating her head against the wall and wondering why those powerful male executives were not hiring her. She needed to update her look and feel to match her new offerings and target clients. Side benefit? Updating your visual look and feel might also get your heart racing with pride again about your business and give you a new opportunity for some word of mouth buzz.

With these tips, you can shift out of neutral and into overdrive again. In a good way, of course. Don't drive yourself crazy. OK, I'll stop with the driving metaphors...

Face Forward. Eyes on the Road. The One Rule You Should Never Forget When Chasing Your Dream.

Years ago, I got into a car accident on Virginia's George Washington Parkway, just outside of D.C. Morning traffic crawled along on this gorgeous bypass road alongside the Potomac River. I was happily headed to my gig as a Marketing Manager at Discovery Networks (yes, I used to get to put on marketing events for The Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and TLC—before TLC turned into trashy reality programming—I loved it.) Glancing down to tweak the radio, I only took my eyes off the road for a second, but it was enough to miss the guy two cars in front of me stopping short. I jammed my foot on the brake and—WHAM! —slammed into the car in front of me.

The responsible culprit—the car two cars up—disappeared into traffic. The car and driver I'd hit were fine. My hood, however, was slightly crunched and liquid dripped from the engine, making the car undriveable. My airbag should have gone off, I was told later. Thank God traffic had been moving so slowly at the time. The police officer was sympathetic to my plight when he heard what happened, and it pained him to say this but...

"Sorry. I have to cite you. You rear-ended her, even though she slammed on the brakes because of that other car. Her responsibility was the car in front of her, which she didn't hit. But you did hit her so, unfortunately, you're the one at fault."

I get it. We all learn in driving school about the two-car (or is it three? See, I forget...) distance rule: You are responsible for leaving the appropriate stopping distance between yourself and the car in front of you so that if they *do* slam on the brakes, you can avoid an accident.

Kind of a powerful metaphor, don't you think?

You are responsible for what's in front of you, not what's behind you.

You can't change the past so stop cursing that horrible old boss, lamenting that start-up you passed up that made every employee a gazillionaire, fretting over whether you should have taken that course, attended that event or invested in that opportunity. Interpersonally, stop dwelling on who's nipping at your heels, what other people think about you or who's more successful than you.

It's done. Face forward. Eyes on the road. All of that nonsense is their business. Not yours.

What are you responsible for now? Only your goals, your forward-momentum from this point on. Forget the distractions. Stop looking back.

God is clever. There's a reason he didn't put eyes in the back of our heads.

Try thinking about one event, opportunity or insecurity that you can let go of today to keep your eyes on the prize.

NO Is Not a Dirty Word

I think we're programmed to see "No" as a dirty word from a young age. No candy before bedtime. No, don't touch that outlet. No, you can't have the car tonight. No, you absolutely cannot date that guy who's ten years older than you and is picking you up on his motorcycle...

Here's the truth:

Saying NO is actually a gift.

Why?

It's a gift *for you* because sometimes we need to say "no" in order to focus on what matters. We need to keep our eyes on the prize. If you say "no" to the wrong clients and focus on serving the ones you enjoy, those who will pay you what you're worth and gladly spread the word about how awesome you are, your business is going to be a lot more successful.

I don't care how big or small your company is. You've got to treat loyal customers better than the rest. You've got to serve their needs first and offer them special perks, privileges or rewards.

Remember your brand strategy. Who are you talking to? Who are your "people?" Who matters to your business? Your customers and clients represent your brand to others, so choose wisely.

I'm not suggesting you act rudely toward prospects or anyone in your audience. Not at all. I'm talking more about managing your time, attention and budget better and investing in the right people for your business.

If you are too busy dealing with the wrong people, you won't have the bandwidth to serve the right ones.

Saying "no" is also a gift to those to whom you say "no." You give them the freedom to find a better fit, to find what they are looking for at a price they are comfortable paying. You also avoid becoming bitter as time goes on and making both you and the customer unhappy in the end. If something is a bad fit from the start, it's better to cut bait right then and there.

Also, you give them a gift because you don't agree to something you don't have time, energy or passion to deliver. Instead of overcommitting and making everyone unhappy, focus on quality rather than quantity. It may hurt to say "no" to that client, customer, or even volunteer opportunity—but remember that you do them more harm if you can't truly deliver your best for them. Let them find someone who *will* invest their best.

See? “No” is not a dirty word and, frankly, it needs to be said with love and respect way more often.

When You Shouldn't Give 100%

We're taught that practice makes perfect. Cleanliness is next to godliness. Give 110%.

I was a straight-A student in high school. I remember being devastated when I got my first B ever (Geometry) and I was brought to tears in college when I got the first C of my life (Microeconomics). Even when I got an A-minus, I was annoyed. I'm not sure what I thought: did I really think anything less than an A-plus was a complete and utter failure on my part? Did I think it meant I hadn't mastered or learned the content?

Math was especially challenging for me. I was more of a vocabulary and English gal. But I was good at memorization so many of my math classes were about nailing down the formula and replicating it—even if I didn't understand the theory or reasoning behind it. Not the best way to learn, is it?

Sometimes that pursuit of the A-plus can hurt us. If we are such perfectionists, we may never get our newsletters out each month, or write that novel, or take a chance on that new business pitch. We may never launch that website.

Waiting for perfection is an impossible task, since perfection is never possible. And that means you'll spend your life and career *planning* to do things rather than *making them happen*.

There is a reason software companies release new versions every year. Version 1.0 is never going to be as good as 5.0 or even 10.0. They roll out something that is, for the most part, complete, learn from their mistakes, and gather feedback, tweak and refine. Rinse. Repeat. If companies had not failed when trying to introduce tablets in the past, the iPad may never have been so successful now. If that first brick of a cell phone had never seen the market until it was "perfect," we'd never have had generations of phones leading up to the sleek, small, powerful smart phones of today.

[Seth Godin](#) always talks about the importance of shipping. Strategy and planning are vital, don't get me wrong. But at some point, you have to tell the inner perfectionist to shut the hell up and ship your product, launch your website, open your shop or start your consulting practice.

You'll learn. You'll get feedback. And you'll evolve. Years ago, I spoke at *The New York Times Small Business Summit* about brand evolution. We spoke about the fact that, while a brand should stay true to its core values and mission, it can and *should* evolve.

The world changes too fast for you to ever keep up with some mythical perfection standard built on shifting sands.

So are you going to wait and wait for 100% perfection before you do anything—and be the best-intentioned business or person who never accomplished a thing? Or are you going to put in the strategy work, get to a solid 80% and push those efforts out the door so you can keep on going, keep on improving and keep on innovating?

Doers DO. It really is that simple.

7 Simple and Stunning Blog Post Ideas to Keep Your Writing Flowing

You're staring at the cursor and it's blinking at you, taunting you. You sigh.

When you were out driving earlier today, you had a ton of clever blog post ideas that just came to you with no effort. But you couldn't write them down. And now—POOF—they are gone with the wind.

This happens to me all the time. I seriously wish I could record the thoughts I have right before falling asleep. I've written five novels in my head this way. But I can't remember a damn thing once I wake up. So I was inspired by a [hilarious video](#) from my buddy Amy Schmittauer of Savvy Sexy Social to share my own take on seven simple and stunning blog post ideas. These will help so much when you can't think of anything to write about.

And BONUS TIME: Any of these can easily be turned into a free email opt-in download, a lead magnet for your next course, an eBook, a podcast, a video...you get the idea. Recycle, people.

Oh, and the numbers below are arbitrary. It's up to you to pick how many you can create—but play around with being short and sweet (*3 Quick Tips...*) versus providing a more exhaustive resource (*64 Ways to...*). See what resonates with your audience the most.

1. **3 Crucial Tips for... (YOUR SUBJECT AREA HERE)**

...Building a Website, ...Finding Inner Peace, ...Choosing a Killer Date Outfit, ...Buying the Right Engagement Ring. Whatever your business does, surely there are three basic tips that you always seem to share with prospects or customers. This worked well for me when writing [4 Clever Ways to Make it Easy For Others to Promote You](#) and [3 Tips for Smarter Small Business Marketing](#). Don't fall into the trap (as I once did before a wise woman slapped me upside the head, with love) of assuming "everyone know this." They don't. It's why you have a job.

2. **6 Questions to Ask When... (YOUR SUBJECT AREA)**

People love to read articles that guide them toward making a decision. And, heck, no one says you can't choose questions that would immediately point them to your offerings if they are a good fit—just make sure you're being unbiased, as people may feel like you're being slimy instead of helpful. So how about 6 questions to ask yourself when: *...Choosing the Right Accounting Software, ...Picking the Perfect Executive Coach, ...Creating Your Social Media Strategy.*

3. **5 Powerful (YOUR FIELD) Lessons from (POPULAR NEWS TOPIC/CULTURAL REFERENCE)**

This one is super fun, because it allows you to be timely (and show up in popular search phrases) and showcase your cleverness by relating your expertise to something that culturally binds us. One of my most popular blog posts was [4 Powerful Business Lessons from James Bond and Skyfall](#). The other form this can take is “*What (POPULAR TOPIC) Can Teach You About (YOUR FIELD)*.” Relate your key lessons or tips to something timely and hot and give it a fun spin (if the topic allows for it) or simply analyze a current news story through the lens of your expertise, as I did in popular posts about [Lance Armstrong’s](#) and [Susan G. Komen’s](#) epic brand fails.

4. **7 Lessons Learned When (YOUR FIELD OR INTEREST)**

You have wisdom to share based on your experience (See #1 above) and your audience is thirsting for it. What can you share about mistakes you’ve made, unique things you’ve done, or clients you’ve worked with? What can they learn from your story? Remember, share your lessons but ensure you make it about how it applies to the reader. I loved sharing [7 Lessons I Learned While Writing A Book...And What They Can Teach You](#) as well as, yes, the [7 Lessons That A Brain Injury Can Teach You About Your Brand](#).

5. **Pose a question related to your subject area.**

Think about the most popular questions you get asked about your business, brand or profession and turn that into a single-threaded blog post. *How Do I Write Good Sales Copy? How Do I Work with a Stylist? How Long Does a Website Take to Build? [What Is a Brand Strategy?](#)* Your expertise can shine, your readers get great advice and new readers don’t feel like they missed some inside joke. Remember, your audience may be at different phases of the buying cycle and are only just now getting to know you and your brand.

6. **Interview another rockstar expert.**

Are there folks related to your field from whom your audience would loooooove to get the inside scoop? You don’t have to be the expert in everything. But you can be the go-to resource for curating that info for your community. Are you a health and wellness coach? Interview a stylist to help your clients showcase their brand new healthy bods. Are you an Etsy store selling handmade jewelry? Interview a party planner on how to throw the perfect jewelry party for your friends. Do you sell customer management software to small businesses? Interview a [branding expert](#) to give them tips on how to build their brand online and create compelling content. These can be super easy to create. In my [Slice of Brilliance column](#), I interview experts in related fields that are of interest to my readers and send them three questions. You get a great blog post, your audience gets great content, and you get the added bonus of that rockstar also promoting your post to their tribe! #Winning

7. Make one observation on your industry and present your point of view.

These are the thought leader posts, the ones that inspire, delight, provoke thought—and get shared. There must be something you love or hate about your industry about which you have a strong opinion: your disgust with smarmy sales pitches (if you're a sales consultant), your crush on brands that give back to the community (if you run an advertising agency), your confusion over why contracts can't be written in plain English (if you're a lawyer), your deep hatred of hyperbolic software sales claims (if you run a software company). How can you make this personal commentary interesting and relevant to your audience? Ensure there's a strong takeaway that they can ponder or act upon—otherwise it's just a rant. I tried to do this with my observations about [how perfection holds many people back](#) from birthing their great ideas into the world or [why you are called to create something that matters](#), rather than spew more noise into the world.

When you think about it, there are a lot of ways you can come up with great blog posts for your audience. Try analyzing your favorite blogs. How can you borrow those ideas and post formats and parlay them into your own content to engage and delight your audience?

Why Me? Why NOT Me?

In our personal lives, we ask the first question a lot: Why did this tragic event happen to me? Why do I have to suffer fools? Why does it always rain when I forget my umbrella?

But as professionals, business owners, entrepreneurs and executives, we bring this same attitude to work with us:

Why would anyone publish my book?

Why would anyone buy this product?

Why would new clients sign on with me?

Who am I to change the way companies buy software? (Frankly, asking “Who am I to... (DO ANYTHING)?”

Why would I start a business based on passion instead of profit?

Here's my question back to 'ya: Why *not* you?

I have always felt this question deeply on the personal side. After all, why should you NOT be the one in the car accident/struck down with an illness/caught in the rain? I suffered a [brain aneurysm and almost died](#) and not once did I ask, “Why me?” What makes me so special that it should be someone else suffering instead of me?

Asking “Why me?” seems to me an incredibly selfish and fruitless waste of time.

What if you upended the question and asked “Why *not* me?” Just think about that. Why shouldn't you make money pursuing your passion? Why shouldn't you be the one to transform the way cupcakes are made? Why shouldn't you publish your great story for others to read? Why shouldn't you offer a unique service that no one has ever done before? Why shouldn't you create a racy brand in a boring category? WHY. NOT. YOU?

Asking “Why *not*?” instead of “Why?” instantly changes the conversation. It goes from self-doubt to birthright; from impossible to completely realistic; from “I could never...” to “Damn straight, I will!”

Take the chance. When someone (or your own inner critic) says, “Who are you to change things?” respond with, “Why shouldn't I be the change maker?” When the industry seems to demand that all the players look and sound alike, ask, “Why shouldn't we build a unique, quirky brand?” Southwest Airlines, Apple, Virgin America, MOO, DRYsoda—all of these companies had execs who didn't ask,

“Who are we to rock the boat and create such a radically different brand?” They had execs who created the brand they believed in and asked, “Why the hell *not* us?”

What Is Your Artistic Work Manifesto? Yep, You Need One.

Run, don't walk and pick up a copy of Seth Godin's book, [Linchpin](#). It's a super easy read with a powerful message—and you need this message whether you run your own business or work for someone else. It is absolutely changing (and validating) how I approach my work.

Seth is essentially calling us to “be artists” —whether we are a product designer for Apple or a waitress. It's not about the slog of punching a clock, or working for the man, or putting yourself on autopilot until 5 pm. What the world needs now are creative problem solvers. They are the ones who will achieve job security because they will make themselves indispensable. They will not be order takers, but change makers who innovate in countless ways big and small without being asked or “paid to.” He talks about our cultural shift from an industrialized workforce to an artistic workforce.

The beauty of this is that it applies no matter what your job. Bringing artistry to your work does not mean you have to work in paints or clay. It is the barista who sees you coming and immediately has your regular coffee drink ready at the bar, thus delighting you and starting your day off right. She may be working for nine bucks an hour, but she has just made herself indispensable by being an artist. Is it in her job description to do this? Heck no. But her passion to make you happy, to overdeliver, to humanize the transaction has now created a loyal customer—and I would bet, given her more back in return in job satisfaction and appreciation.

We've often heard the phrase, “If you're going to be a trash collector, be the best damn trash collector you can be.” There is nobility in that. And the world needs more of it.

For me, it comes down to caring about your work and being the best (*blank*) you can be by creating, problem solving and innovating. If you have a knack for taming angry customers and turning them around, that is an art. If you can lead a meeting effectively so all attendees leave motivated, aligned and clear on direction, that is an art. If you can brighten the day of every person who steps on your bus, that is an art. You can change one person's life, viewpoint, mood or business by operating this way. You can change the world.

Thinking about all of this, I wanted to see what my own artistic work manifesto would be. My personal and business mission is “To engage, inform and delight.” But what does that really mean day to day? Here goes:

- I will delight clients by articulating their mission and brand in exactly the way they desire, so they get goosebumps and shout, “Yes! That's it! That's what I've been trying to say and could never find the right words!”

- I will care more about their business than even they might by always giving honest and candid feedback—even if that means extra work or losing the account.
- I will touch and inspire every partner or client I work with by showing passion, energy and kindness during our time together. I will treat people well.
- I will connect people that can help each other just because it's the right thing to do, not because I get anything from it.
- I will teach others how to think about their business as a mission that enriches lives in some way and not just a widget-producing factory solely after profits—and I will show them that passion and profit are not mutually exclusive.
- I will surprise people by remembering their interests or our conversations and send them an article, press lead or whatever just to show I care.
- I will seek to work with clients who are passionate about their business and avoid those who I can clearly see will suck the energy out of me or my team. This will keep us positive, motivated and give us “mindspace” to delight the clients who are worth it—even if this means less money for the year.
- I will continue to write and tell stories in any forum (blog, book, stage, podcast, video) that inspire, provoke thought, inform or even just entertain.

I invite you to think about the art that lies within your business. How do you want to operate, show up in the world and create? To what do you want to devote yourself, regardless of the products or services you offer? How will you make your mark, big or small?

What the \$%^& Are You Waiting For?

I met someone several years ago on the set of a short film I was doing who told me she wanted to get into acting. So what did she do? She got involved behind the scenes instead. Her plan was that maybe she'd "fall into" being used on-camera by understanding the behind-the-scenes operations. Luckily, one time she did get asked to be a stand-in on set—a pretty cool paying gig that helps you get used to being in front of the camera and on-set.

Bless her heart. How comfortable to want the rewards without taking the risk. And how easy to put the risk of failure on someone else (*"But no one ever noticed me back there!"*).

If you want to act, *act*. Don't just be an extra, don't be a production assistant...take some damn acting classes, get professional headshots and start auditioning for any and every role you can. If you want to start a jewelry line, *start a jewelry line*. Take a course, experiment with some designs, and see if you can start throwing living room parties or snag a booth at your local farmer's market. If you want to launch your own consulting business, *launch your own consulting business*. Leverage the skills you've spent time, sweat and money developing, package them up into some irresistible offerings and just start networking.

Don't say, "Well, I do X right now, but one day I'd really like to (BLANK)." Start with "I'm a (BLANK) at heart, but I pay my bills doing X." A big part of being something is stepping into that role. Once you lead with that, you'll be surprised at the referrals or opportunities that can come your way.

I am a writer, an actress and a branding consultant. That is what I am. That is what is in my blood. Do I get the occasional, "Oh you're an actress! Have I seen any of your work?" Sure I do. But my answer is, "Probably not. I do a lot of theatre and the occasional short film project." But you know what? I am in plays. I am in short films. Ergo, I ACT! Just because my face is not plastered across tabloids or I don't have a multi-million dollar movie deal with Scorsese (how sweet would *that* be?!), I still act. Fame does not equate to doing the activity. I've never been to the Olympics either—does that mean I'm not "really" a skier?

When I opened my [brand consulting](#) business, I had to consciously stop defining myself by what I *was* and start embracing who I had become. No more, "Well, I used to be a Silicon Valley marketing director but now I'm doing my own thing." It became, "I am a brand strategist with almost 20 years experience with clients large and small."

No one is going to cast/hire/buy jewelry from someone who is not really committed to it. Why would they spend their money on someone who is not really quite sure they can deliver?

Confidence and moxie attracts.

If you don't get out there and claim your space, who is going to do it for you?

Should You Silence the Critics? 4 Tips to Filter Criticism

Criticism sucks. No getting around it. Regardless of how good your intentions or how crazy the critic, it never ceases to feel like a punch to the gut.

Here's the thing:

Good intentions can't protect you from criticism.

As you may know, I survived a near-fatal [brain aneurysm rupture](#) and wrote a book about it to be a voice for brain injury survivors, as well as help anyone bounce back from a crisis. I stripped the most vulnerable and scariest time in my life naked to help others and be a voice for those who didn't have one.

Even with hundreds of heartwarming reviews and countless private emails from people who told me how my book inspired and informed them, it's the outlying nasty comments that stick with me:

Behold this one, where the reader completely misunderstood my intentions: *It might have been a good story, but...the constant bragging about herself got old. I made it right to the point where she was talking about her beautiful hair and how people were either jealous or downright hated her for it and deleted it off of my device.*

Or this puzzling one, which I don't even understand: *I am happy for your recovery, but it was not because you had your college education which you seem to think makes you superior.*

Or this one criticizing my writing (yes, I did hire an editor!): *She needs to ask for an editor, several items are touched upon at least twice, it becomes annoying and it makes you feel like a terrible person when you are not rooting for her but begging for the end.*

Or this one, which made me strangely feel the need to apologize that I did not die: *Interesting story well told, but not terribly exciting or suspenseful.*

And one that made me (and my husband) laugh out loud:

It's her husband who deserves all the credit for pulling their lives back together.

So here's my question to you: Should you silence the critics?

No. But treat criticism like a pot of pasta you are draining for dinner. Release the water and keep the good stuff!

Here are four ways to filter criticism when it strikes:

1. Take what's valid and leave what's not.

I agree with some of the feedback about the writing rambling a bit. And it was useful to learn what some people would have preferred to hear more about or how they would have liked it structured. This is something I'm constantly working on and, even with an editor, this can always be improved for my next book.

2. Focus on the good feedback.

Who loved it? Who did it inspire, change, transform? Those people are your tribe. Don't diminish the impact your work DID have.

3. Recognize they have their own lens.

The strange comment about me thinking I'm better than anyone because I went to college (mentioned in the book to point out how confusing and complex medical information can be for anyone, even those with a college degree) is perhaps rooted in this woman's deep bitterness about never going, or maybe someone very arrogant held it over her head at one point in her life. I can't change that perspective no matter what I do.

4. Let go.

The "red hair" story was part of a larger lesson in identity: brain injury can rob people of many of the physical, emotional or cognitive traits that used to define them. The point was lost on this reader. And that's okay. What am I going to do: find everyone who ever read my book and make sure they understood exactly what I was trying to say?! That seems a tremendous waste of energy better devoted to new creations and inspirations. (PS: I have to applaud Goodreads for making a note next to low ratings that asks the author to take a breath and not respond to the comment in anger!)

Bottom line: Criticism can hurt you, amuse you or serve you. It's up to you to decide.

How to Understand Your Competitors without Falling into a Jealousy Trap

Stop me if this sounds familiar.

An [intelligent, experienced marketing professional](#) gives you the sage advice to keep an eye on what your competitors are doing.

So you do.

You subscribe to their newsletters. You pore over their lush, beautifully written blog posts. You stalk their social media profiles and notice that their followers number in the tens of thousands. You read all their testimonials and then stalk the people who gave those testimonials.

And instead of feeling inspired and informed, you feel completely, horrifically consumed by jealousy.

How can he get away with charging so much?! Why do her tweets get retweeted so many times? How'd he get 12,000 Facebook fans? I'm doing all the same things...why is she so much more popular than I am?!

(Cue minor meltdown.)

It's important to know what your competitors are doing. It's a lot more important to maintain your self-esteem.

With that in mind, here are five things you can do to stay abreast of your competitors without losing your mind or your sense of self.

1. **Know your strengths and preferences.**

Maybe your biggest competitor has an amazing Instagram account, filled with photos of her sweet toddler and handsome husband, but you're super private. Maybe they publish five long, thoughtful posts each week and you're more of a once-a-week blogger.

Before you check in with your competitors, take a few minutes to remind yourself of what you truly love doing and what you could do without. If you're loathe to use Pinterest, it doesn't matter how many Pinterest followers your competitor has, you won't be using that platform.

2. **Build your success backwards.**

What does success look like for you? Is it attending mid-week matinees because you *can*? Taking a month off every summer? Paying off your school debt in one fell swoop? A high-ceilinged, light-filled loft in Tribeca? However success looks to you, it's probably more complex than Instagram

followers or numbers of retweets.

When you know what your version of success looks like, you can reverse engineer it. You can work time into your schedule for matinees and summers off. You can save or earn with your school debt in mind. You can check out Tribeca's rental prices. When you're taking steps towards your personal version of success, you're less likely to be threatened by what others are doing.

3. Know that popularity doesn't always equal profitability.

One of my most successful friends didn't have a website. She ran an incredibly successful consulting business that relied exclusively on word of mouth. And she was raking in a six-figure income with a wait-list that she'd refer out to others.

Likewise, I know a few people with tens of thousands of Instagram followers who are barely scraping by. Or writers with *New York Times* bestsellers who still work part-time at ad agencies. A person's numbers—their social media followers, their retweets, their blog comments—don't tell the whole picture. Not by a long shot.

4. Look at their bigger picture.

Some of my favorite bloggers and online personalities have lives that are very, very different from mine—which means their offerings, blog posts, and social media updates will be very different. [Marie Forleo](#) is a wildly successful business coach who speaks mostly to women through highly-styled, polished videos she produces each week. Natalie Sisson of [The Suitcase Entrepreneur](#) lives life as a global nomad and provides fabulous tools, content and resources for fellow wanderlust-seekers who want to create lifestyle businesses that don't tie them down. [Pioneer Woman](#) lives on a cattle ranch and home schools her four children and her successful blog following has led to her own show on The Food Network. [The Glamourai](#) is a ridiculously stylish 20-something fashion blogger who lives in NYC. [Joy The Baker](#) is a single, childfree, cat-loving food blogger who makes a home in New Orleans. I love these women; our lives couldn't be more different.

And because our lives are different, we approach business differently. I'm a new mom; I'm not interested in devoting 60 hours a week to my business. I don't want to just target women. I have other passions such as acting and writing that I want to build into my work. When you feel the green-eyed monster rearing its head, take a few steps back and consider the bigger picture—both yours *and* theirs.

5. Follow and research strategically.

Checking in on your competitors doesn't necessarily mean reading their blog daily or noting each and every time they tweet or post a photo. That's

a recipe for anxiety and neurosis.

Instead, set aside a few hours each month to see what a few competitors are up to and then approach this practice as an objective investigation. Less “I’ll never write as well as they do!” and more “I can see they post once a week, every Wednesday and tweet five times a day.”

The line between information and insecurity can be thin. Make sure you’re staying on the right side!

Ouch! 7 Ways to Deal with Criticism

In the summer of 2013, I took a sabbatical after being accepted into a 5-week [summer acting congress](#) with San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.), one of the most respected theaters and actor training/MFA programs in the country. Alumni include Annette Bening, Denzel Washington, Elizabeth Banks, Anika Noni Rose and countless other working actors whose faces you've seen but whose names you may not know. Even Blaine from *Glee* is a Youth Conservatory graduate.

It was an amazing experience: creative, intense, exhausting, lively, moving. I had 15 other people in my "company" and we were like a band of brothers, spending sun-up to sundown together during those long weeks, exposing our most vulnerable selves and exploring expression via our voices, bodies and minds as we worked to become better storytellers.

Invited to completely let go and try everything out in order to get closer to the true art of acting, we were naked and exposed. Failures happened. Frustrations mounted. And inevitably, we were forced to confront criticism.

Thankfully, our instructors were some of the kindest and most generous people I've ever met. They had worked with some of the greats and I took everything they said to heart. Plus, I am the sort who *craves* feedback like a sugar addict on a juice cleanse. But sometimes, negative criticism can sting—especially when you completely put yourself out there—as you do with your business, your art or your work.

So how can you respond? Here are seven options you have to cope with criticism:

- 1. Breathe deeply, open your ears and listen.**

Easier said than done, but put aside your indignation for a second, take a deep breath and actively listen to the feedback. When you feel yourself slipping into an inner monologue of anger and despair—while the person is still talking—focus your mind on the words they are saying. Taking notes while you get this feedback can help you slow down and really hear the feedback so you can improve things for next time around.

- 2. Have a good cry.**

I don't recommend doing this while you are actually *receiving* the criticism for three reasons: One, it prevents you from practicing Tip #1. Two, if they are a nasty person, you don't want to give them the satisfaction. Three, if this is a professional situation, it can make the critic very uncomfortable and no matter what he or she says, they will *always* remember you as The Crier. If you must cry (and we've all been there), wait until you are alone and let the tears flow. I know this can be hard, especially when you feel

wronged or misunderstood, but try. And then once you're alone, enjoy the cathartic release. Once you clear the pain physically from your body, unclench your muscles and sniffle away the last of the sobs, your mind will be clear enough to play back the feedback and find the gold.

3. Argue your case.

I don't recommend this one in the moment as a rule...and this is coming from someone who has tried on several occasions. First, the person criticizing you may not give a fig what you think and so you are just wasting your breath. Second, getting defensive means you are not taking in what the person is saying to gain any sort of benefit out of it. And third, the person could be a boss, valuable client or a VIP decision maker who can make or break your career, and it's best not to burn bridges. Of course, if someone is stating outright lies, you should defend yourself, but do it with facts and have an adult discussion, not a tantrum. Or better yet, as I have done in the past, go away for a bit, consider the criticism and draft a "reply" of sorts, walking the person through your thinking. You may not change their mind, but they (and others who hear about it) will respect you far more for playing it cool. Nothing good happens when you let your temper get the best of you in the moment—trust an Italian redhead on this one, please.

4. Consider the context.

All of us who participated in this summer acting program understood—we were there to learn and the teachers were there to teach. That's what we paid for. If we couldn't take criticism along with praise, then what the hell were we all doing? The point of the program was to attempt, finesse and improve, and no one can do that in a vacuum. Same goes if you get negative customer, client or audience feedback. Appreciate that someone is taking the time to tell you how you can make things better; and also acknowledge the relationship—you are there to serve them. They have a right to tell you how they think you did. Learn from it and improve for the next time.

5. Understand the agenda.

Often people criticize in a very blunt and hurtful way and it can be anything but constructive. It feels like they personally hate you and want to watch you die. This stings the most, especially when you're not expecting it. But as with the tip above, it's all about seeing the bigger picture. What's this person's angle? Are you a threat? Does keeping you down elevate them? Or maybe this person uses fear and negativity as a way to exert power, as a previous manager of mine did. At first she made me so angry, I'd cry (*not in front of her – see #2*). When I realized this, I started to take her critiques with a grain of salt, throwing out the crap I thought was her own baggage and taking in what made sense. It actually helped our relationship. Or perhaps the critic has a certain communication style born out of personal tragedy or hurt. Whatever the case, consider the critique's

source and make sure you understand what's in it for them before you take everything to heart.

6. Don't dwell on one bad review.

I can't tell you how many times I've seen great online reviews and received kind emails about [my books](#), but then I let the one Negative Nellie nag at my soul. Everyone is entitled to their opinion and it's JUST ONE OPINION. Instead, look at the aggregate, not the extremes, and see if there are nuggets you can find for delighting people even further next time. Even the casting director we worked with that summer, who is pretty damn direct with feedback, always added that it was just her personal aesthetic, and that doesn't mean other casting directors would have a problem with a piece being performed a certain way. At least we knew with her that there was absolutely zero B.S., which was powerful and useful to us. If it helps, create a "Feel Good" folder and put all of your praise and compliments in that folder. When you find yourself dwelling on that one low presentation score or bad online review, start reading those "Feel Good" items and snap yourself out of it.

7. Do something.

If the critique is useful and you've considered the source and the context to be valid, I recommend you do something with it. Denying all feedback and continuing to do things the same old way is not a recipe for growth. Many people feel most comfortable wrapping themselves up in their cocoon of self-delusion, but I urge you seek out the takeaway in what critics offer up. You may find that something you intended did not come across as you'd hoped so you need to be clearer. Or that you overlooked a minor detail that you now understand makes a big difference. In my acting program, I learned that the emotions in my heart and head were not always translating into clear actions for the audience. So now I know I have some work to do. See how you can implement the valid criticism you get into real action steps and make your work/art shine even brighter.

No matter what the situation, always view negative feedback as a chance to improve and grow. Never use it as an excuse to quit.

I invite you to try one of the above the next time you're slapped with the criticism stick and see what transpires.

Closing Thoughts and Book Extras

Thank you for reading these inspirational insights and tips! Hope they prove useful to whatever creative or commercial endeavor you are pursuing.

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About the Author, Maria Ross

Maria Ross is a brand strategist, author, and speaker who believes cash flow and creativity are not mutually exclusive. She is the chief brand strategist and creator of Red Slice, a digital elixir of stories and strategies to boost your business, brand and brain. Maria is the author of [*Branding Basics for Small Business*](#) and a humorous and heartfelt memoir, [*Rebooting My Brain*](#). She is also the author of [*The Juicy Guide Series for Entrepreneurs*](#).

A unique entrepreneur, Maria started her career as a management consultant with Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting), advising Fortune 500 companies including Walgreens and Allstate. She then spent years in marketing and advertising on both the client and agency sides where she crafted brand, marketing and communications strategies for notable players including Discovery Networks and Monster.com.

After eight years as a Silicon Valley marketing executive for tech companies such as Business Objects (now SAP) and a host of startups and fast-growth companies, she started her own consulting firm, Red Slice, in 2008. A mere six months later, however, Maria miraculously survived a ruptured brain aneurysm that almost killed her. Against the odds, she got back on her feet, relaunched her business and today successfully advises startups and small businesses, blogs weekly and speaks on both business and inspirational topics. A dynamic speaker, Maria has delighted audiences ranging from the Chamber of Commerce to BlogHer to *The New York Times*. She has been featured in numerous media outlets, including MSNBC, ABC News, NPR, *Entrepreneur* and Forbes.com and is a Huffington Post contributor.

A lover of food, wine, CrossFit, football and film (she's an actress in her spare time), Maria is also passionate about giving back to the community. Her favorite causes include helping children, women and homeless or abused animals, as well as advocating for brain injury awareness as a keynote speaker, writer and advisory board member for the Brain Injury Network of the Bay Area. Maria lives with her husband, son and precocious Black Lab mutt in the San Francisco Bay Area. Learn how to tell your irresistible story at [Red Slice](#) or spark a Twitter convo with Maria @redslice or connect on Facebook at www.facebook.com/redslice.

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