

**THE JUICY GUIDE TO
TIME MANAGEMENT AND GOAL SETTING**

**ADVICE ON HOW TO:
WRANGLE YOUR CALENDAR
AND
SLAY OVERWHELM**



MARIA ROSS

The Juicy Guide to Time Management: How to Wrangle Your Calendar and Slay Overwhelm

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So You're Overwhelmed By Running Your Business...

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 more overwhelming than people ever imagine. It requires hustle, decisiveness, drive, and soul-drenching belief in what you're doing—not to mention the ability to be strategic, tactical and everything in between. You need to be able to plan ahead while also focusing on the work that needs to be done right now.

You don't just do your job. You do *every* job. You can't just love that one thing that you do, because you're going to have to do so much more.

- If you love baking cupcakes and decide to start a bakery, you'd better be prepared for the fact that you won't be spending 100% of your time baking cupcakes. You'll be marketing, doing inventory, negotiating rent, managing suppliers, emptying trash bins...and, lest we forget, serving as your own IT department when your computer crashes.
- If you love strategic consulting, you'd also better love marketing, business development, pitch meetings, networking, contracts, balancing the books...and, lest we forget, serving as your own IT department when your computer crashes.
- If you love design and illustration, you'd also better love marketing, client service, contracts, accounting, and, lest we forget, serving as your own IT department when your computer crashes.

You get what I'm saying.

Running a business is a job in and of itself. If you can only handle doing that *one thing* that you love doing, you'd be better served working for someone else and allowing them to worry about bookkeeping, marketing and sales.

So how do some people do it? How do so many creative entrepreneurial types seem to run their own businesses effortlessly, especially those who seem to be all over social media, and manage to blog every week, send out email newsletters, attend networking events...all while still making time for their family, friends and, well, you know, *living their life?*

They are not magical beings. They have simply learned some tricks and tips for how to manage their time and set effective goals.

The good news is that you can learn them too. Many entrepreneurs out there have found a way to make things work for them. With the right people supporting you and the right time management and goal setting strategies, it can be an amazing way to work. 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 face your fears.

You will learn more about yourself along this journey than you could ever imagine. And that means teaching yourself to manage your time and set your goals in a whole new way.

This eBook is a collection of my best content to help you set the right goals and manage your time and commitments. Sort of like a pocket coach to pull you out of your overwhelm so you can take some long, slow, deep breaths.

"Work/Life Balance" is a myth. Your life is not some perfect equation that requires you to give equal time to every aspect. Some things will take priority while others take a back seat. It's less about "balance" and more about "prioritization." Once you realize this, you can let go of trying to give everything equal weight and learn how to prioritize and adapt as needed.

Your life is not a scale. It's more like a sound board in a recording studio, where levers are switched up and down as needed.

But who am I to talk to you about juggling your own business and personal life?

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 to be 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 imaginary 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 is all there is to this business-ownership thing,"* I thought, *"this will be easy."*

And then two things happened:

First, 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 you 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 overwhelmed.

The dream of having all that free time to pursue writing and acting? What a joke. The time not spent on client work was spent on updating the website or creating marketing materials or crafting proposals or answering email or attending networking functions or pursuing press opportunities. And yes, wasting hours dealing with inexplicable email or printer issues.

But ever so slowly, I learned a valuable lesson. I don't have to say "yes" to everything. Just because someone else wants to meet with me *right now* does not mean I have to respond in kind. I don't have to pick up my phone every time it rings. I can set my own boundaries and shut myself away to work on strategic projects or creative endeavors if I plan that time in advance.

I am the master of my schedule. I get to decide how to spend my time.

Entrepreneurial Truth #2: You have to make time to do the things that are important to you, put them on your calendar, and treat yourself like your own very best VIP client by honoring those commitments.

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 learned strategies to manage my calendar and take care of myself mentally and physically. I've learned how to set goals that feel good, that get me excited each year rather than goals that feel like a burden. And most importantly, 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: I've learned that I am my most important business asset. That, like any machine, if I try to do too much and never set time for breaks or maintenance, I will run this precious asset into the ground. And when YOU are your business, what else will you be left with? I now put everything in my calendar, from bookkeeping tasks to strategic planning, so that I don't simply react and try to do everything RIGHT

THIS MINUTE but work realistically, calmly and leave breathing room for the unexpected crisis.

Entrepreneurial Truth #3: YOU are your most important business asset. Be a good boss to yourself and take ownership of your time and energy. Managing the overwhelm enables you to be creative, strategic and find the joy in your work every single day. And that is a difference that customers or clients can feel!

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 manage your time and set realistic goals on this often tough journey is going to lighten your load. In these pages, you will find some of my best approaches to time management and setting boundaries to 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 frazzled and overwhelmed, so you need to manage your time so you can manage your work. Hopefully the lessons and tips in these pages will help you prioritize effectively so you are happier, healthier and more present in your work.

If they do, please kindly share your thoughts with an Amazon review and recommend this book to other folks you may know who need to wrangle their calendars and slay overwhelm. 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 @redslice. I would love to hear from you!

Best,

Maria Ross

3 Crafty + Creative Ways to Set Goals

Are you tired of goal setting? Confession time: I'm kind of over it.

This, from the woman who used to lay out her New Year's goals in nice neat bullets, organized by category: Fitness, Career Travel...I even had a category for Fun. I am a woman who makes lists and loves to be measured, assessed, graded. "You've never met a test you didn't like," says my husband.

Yes, I'm a recovering goal setter.

A few years back, after my [major health crisis](#), I became gun-shy about goal-setting. I tried setting goals the old way but holding myself so accountable to a laundry list of big dreams overwhelmed me. During my fragile recovery, I tried to manage stress by removing as much friction from my life as possible—and that included all pressure to perform.

So what did this Type-A, former honor student do to stay ambitious, motivated and organized? I started playing with new ways to set goals. And it has not only made me happier, it makes my life less stressful, more fun—and I actually achieve more while still keeping myself open to new opportunities.

If your goals are crushing you, it's time to rethink how you set them.

Here are three crafty and creative ways to help you enjoy setting goals in business and in life:

1. Pick a theme or two:

A few years ago, I decided to set New Year's themes instead of New Year's resolutions. The first year, I chose Creativity and Abundance—and I achieved a lifelong dream of being accepted into an elite summer theatre program, plus I got pregnant. Creative and abundant indeed. Another year, the themes were Enrichment and Savor. By enrichment, I hoped to nurture great stuff that I already had rather than spend so much time inventing new things. And by savor, I meant presence, mindfulness and slowing down enough to appreciate the fleeting moments of my son's babyhood and my current life, just as it was. Picking themes not only attracts the feelings you want into your life, it creates open space to discover that many different roads can lead to what you really want internally and externally, rather than merely following a checklist of things to do.

Experiment with choosing two themes that cover both the types of things you'd like to experience in your work or life, as well as the emotions and mindset that go with them.

2. Determine the feelings behind your goals:

This idea is courtesy of my friend [Danielle LaPorte](#). She talks about goal setting not from the perspective of WHAT you want to do but HOW you want to feel. Danielle teaches that, most of the time, you are not chasing a goal, but you are actually craving a *feeling*. So what if you flipped your intentions around and started with *how you want to feel* and then backed into what steps it would take this year to get there? It's an intriguing concept—and somewhat related to my point above about themes for the year.

Experiment with determining how you'd like to feel next quarter in your business or in the next six months of your life. Elated? Accomplished? Recognized? Naughty? Financially secure? Wise? Then you can map out only those tasks or activities that lead to achieving that emotion.

3. Outline broad-brush achievements:

This is a method I've layered on top of my core themes in recent years. Brace yourself: this one goes against everything that this measurement-oriented marketer has always believed. I lay out large achievements, with no numbers or metrics attached to them. That's right. No revenue projections or book sales goals. No website visit metrics. No target number of speaking engagements. Instead, I set broad-brush goals starting from where I am now: Build up my platform and fan base, sell more books, focus on larger projects and less of them and make space to create my next book. This method is not for the faint of heart, but I have to tell you: this method completely re-energized and freed me the first year I did it. I actually ended up having a great year financially. It's amazing how, in my case, the money followed the passion and not vice versa.

Experiment with letting go and determining some broad-brush achievements that will light your year on fire. You'll be surprised how when you remove the pressure of numbers, you start to creatively brainstorm ways to make your goal a reality.

Planning for a Successful Year

Right around the end of the year, during the chaotic holiday season, is when we foolish mortals decide that we should find time to plan our strategic marketing for next year. Why do we do this to ourselves during this already crazy time? And what can you do to keep your sanity while building your killer marketing plan for the exciting new year to come? Here are a few tips to stop you from going postal.

1. **Remember your goals:** I know, I know. We all fall down on this one. But think about your realistic goals for the year, as well as some big and bold stretch goals. Realistic goals such as revenue, customers or new products are important. Once you also set stretch goals, however, you can back into what you need to do to make them a reality. And you can see if what you are going to spend on marketing will realistically get you there. Never do a marketing activity without a goal or objective in mind. Is it two new clients? Is it being featured in *The Wall Street Journal*? Is it increasing newsletter signups or Facebook followers? Your marketing plan should always reflect your goals if you don't want it to overwhelm you.
2. **Think depth, not breadth:** Focus on engaging and converting two to three ideal customer segments only. If you have the luxury of a huge marketing budget, then you can build a separate marketing plan for twenty-five different segments. I'm guessing, however, that as a solopreneur you do not have the budget or the bandwidth to market effectively to that many different markets. Focus on the most profitable and realistic ones and plan to get in front of them in multiple ways, at different stages of the buying cycle (see Tip #3). Mix awareness ads and social media tactics with direct email offers and high-touch events. Don't simply do one activity for each segment just for broad coverage. That will get you nowhere. Instead, think about trying to do different activities for the same segment each quarter. Better to consistently engage in three to four solid activities targeted to one segment than one ineffective standalone activity that each of them will barely remember.
3. **Map to the buying cycle:** You need a mix of activities in your marketing plan to cover the buying cycle phases: Awareness, Consideration, Evaluation and Purchase. A prospect's info needs when they don't even know you exist vs. when they are choosing between you and a competitor are very different. You need the constant air cover of awareness (ads, PR, etc.) to make your direct marketing activities (email offers, events) in the other phases more effective. Even just three or four tactics a quarter among all the phases, combined with ongoing awareness channels like blogs and newsletters can help.

4. **Partner with a few to create more value:** Don't just buy one ad here or do one webcast there. Partner deeply with two or three media properties or associations where you can have an integrated, multi-touch campaign to a consistent audience throughout the quarter or year. For example, I used to partner with an online tech portal when I worked B2B because my investment got me ad banners, dedicated emails, a few sponsored webcasts and event presence for one packaged price. I went deep with this audience to get in front of the same group multiple times. This helps you leverage your investment, do more effective marketing and get a real presence among the same group of prospects over and over again. Most associations or online entities have multiple platforms and are open to negotiate a unique package to fit your needs and budget, so talk to the ad sales rep and get creative.
5. **Never pay the rate card:** Feeding off #2, never pay the listed price for ad/sponsorship space. You can always negotiate. If you can't get the price down, then ask what else they can throw in. A dedicated email to their list? A regular column or contributed article? An extra lunch you can sponsor at the conference? Bag stuffers? Being able to introduce all the speakers at a luncheon? Your postcard/CD on attendee seats? Sponsorship of a weekly email with your logo and a special offer?
6. **Maintain consistency:** Spending all your cash on one bang-up event or campaign can be fun, but the hangover can last the rest of the year. If you have the money to do a big splash each quarter, great, but don't forget smaller outreach through the rest of the year. Social media can be a great friend to you here to stay constantly top of mind.
7. **Customers vs. prospects:** Mine your existing customers more effectively. Plan different activities to upsell/resell existing customers than you do for new prospects. They have different needs and one group is more familiar with you and what you have to offer than another. Some activities may be able to do double-duty, but remember to offer some special programs/incentives for existing customers.
8. **Create an editorial calendar:** Speaking of social media, try to plan your themes and content for at least 6 months out so you are not scrambling for what to say or what to promote. You can always do other topics as they come up. But this will keep you sane and also enable you to farm out some of the work if you can, i.e. hiring an intern to write/research blog posts, etc.
9. **Be flexible:** Be willing to try new things and measure them. If they don't work, tweak them or move on. The dirty little secret about marketing is that

oftentimes some tactics just don't work. But you learn from them, and you move on. As long as you have a good strategic basis for doing something, your efforts will never be wasted.

7 Questions to Help You Ruthlessly Prioritize

“Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”

How quaint.

I used to live by this mantra. But in today’s world of 24/7 smart phone access, juggling business/kids/relationship/self-care/community and an avalanche of data coming at us, it’s not really sound advice for staying sane.

As a new mama who owns her own business, I have graduated to a whole new level of “prioritization.” Whereas before I was overwhelmed by choices about when to write, create, strategize, serve clients, invent a new course, conduct a webcast...limited pockets of time these days force the most basic decisions: Do I wash my hair or feed my son before daycare? Do I do a load of laundry, pay the bills, or finish that blog post? Do I eat or shower?

These days, you’ve gotta practice “ruthless prioritization.”

Something that has helped this Type-A overachiever to ruthlessly prioritize has been to ask myself seven key questions before any task. Depending on the answer, you can decide to:

- Do it right away
- Do it by day’s end
- Schedule it
- Outsource it
- Say no
- Ignore it

When you’re having one of those crazy, busy, fire-drill days where it feels like your to-do list is as daunting as Mt. Everest, ask yourself these questions before doing each task. You may just feel lighter, less stressed and more in control:

1. **Is someone I care about depending on this and by a certain time?** The key words here are “someone I care about” and “depending.” This could be a client, a vital partner or a family member who truly needs you and needs you *now*. If you get asked for a favor by someone you barely know that will take time away from more important tasks, it can wait...or be politely turned down. When I choose to skip a shower on a crazy busy morning so I can feed my baby on

time—well, that’s pretty much a no-brainer. The boy needs food. But please remember: often, someone else’s urgency does not constitute an emergency on your part—unless you choose to let it.

2. **Can I quickly deal with it and get it off my plate?** When someone emails me for the name and number of that great designer I know, it takes me two seconds to send them the person’s contact card. Simple. Done. If they want me to send an email introducing the two of them—something I may want to spend some thought on—well, that can wait until tomorrow.
3. **Does it generate revenue?** We small business owners tend to waste time and energy on things that are not adding to our bottom line, which is sometimes totally okay. But on busy days, given a choice between updating a website page or conducting a paid client call...well, I don’t know about you, but I’ll take the money.
4. **Is there a point-of-no-return consequence for not dealing with this today?** If a reporter from *The Wall Street Journal* asks for an interview today, heck yeah, make time for the call. You’re on their deadline and you could miss your shot at national press. If someone from a blog you’ve never heard of before emails you out of the blue and asks you to fill out a 10-question email interview? You can schedule time to deal with that next week—and if they won’t wait, so be it. Other tasks in this category can include “Gotta pick up my only suit from the dry cleaner by closing time before my big meeting tomorrow” versus “A colleague wants to brainstorm about a joint event that is not taking place for another six months.”
5. **Am I the only one who can personally handle this?** Do you really have to be the one doing it? If not, give it to your [virtual assistant](#), refer it to a colleague, or hire someone from [TaskRabbit](#) or [Fiverr](#) to deal with it.
6. **What happens if I say no?** Sometimes we *think* we have to do something when really, it’s just our own internal pressure. I used to freak out if I missed a week of posting to my blog. But, really...is it a case of life or death if I miss a week to deal with something more important? Will my readers riot and take to the streets just because Red Slice did not post something new this week? The realistic answer is no. Everyone’s busy and while consistency is important, the sky won’t fall because my blog is not the most important thing in my readers’ world each week (but if it is, that’s totally cool...).
7. **Will it help me breathe easier?** Sometimes, I choose to spend time catching up on email or another solitary project over the weekend simply because it takes a weight off my shoulders and allows me to relax. So my husband and I

sometimes schedule a “work hour” on Sundays and then put our laptops away.
The payoff is an easier, breezier return to Monday.

When faced with your next time crunch, ask yourself these questions first to make a smarter decision about how you spend your precious time.

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 plans to pick 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 or customers and focus on serving the ones you enjoy, who will pay you what you're worth and who will gladly spread the word about how awesome your products or services 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 those 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.

How Starting with No Gets You to Yes

I've got a confession to make. The past few months have been full of angst for me over a simple and tired question you've most likely faced yourself:

What do I want to do when I grow up?

Now, I realize this is ridiculous coming from a 40-something wife, mother and business owner who seems to have it all locked down. I mean, seriously, shouldn't I be all grown up by now? Surely [publishing books](#) and [working with amazing clients](#) should be enough, right? Let's just coast into retirement.

Except that's not me. And if you're reading this, I don't think it's you either. While I love it all, I am always looking to the next horizon, challenge, and creative endeavor. Right now, I'm retrenching to figure out what my next book, project and evolution of Red Slice is going to look like. Basically figuring out how I can find my new passion while still serving my audience.

Part of being a changemaker and rockstar is that you *never settle*. You're always itching for the next big adventure and passionate about that crazy idea that the world needs.

Whether it's on a global scale or in your own backyard, passionate people crave "newness." And with that comes constant evaluation, analysis and action. A churning restlessness to peek around the next corner.

But how do you get to that elusive answer? Especially if you have many different interests, passions and "slices" to what you want to offer.

Here's a trick:

Start with No.

Sometimes placing parameters around what we don't want to do, say or be helps us whittle down to the core of what makes us tick. Instead of trying so hard to pick something in the vast whitespace of possibility, box yourself in a little bit and back into the answer.

What don't you want your business to look like? Which brand do you least want to emulate? What type of clients drain your energy? Which customers are not a good fit for you? What topic do you not want to write about? What product or service do you hate the idea of selling?

When you're not sure which road to take, pare down your choices by asking which way you *don't* want to go.

I discovered the value of this many times when trying to decide what to have for dinner. My husband and I often get the bright idea to go out to eat or order in, which inevitably leads to...

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Where do *you* want to go?"

We've discovered that if we start with what we're *not* in the mood for, we'll land more quickly on what we *are* in the mood for. We back into the answer.

Next time you're floundering to make a decision or find your next step, try starting with no. It just may get you to a faster yes.

The Not-So-Secret to Brand Success

There are no magical answers.

A few [posts have recently emerged](#) around this theme and when I start seeing patterns, it's good to pay attention.

Too often, entrepreneurs, solo business owners—and yes, even large company CEO's—think there is some magical cure to flagging sales, lack of brand awareness, or no clients knocking on the door. And so, they believe the claims like:

“Join my course and you will absolutely achieve six-figure success and prosperity!”

“Issue press releases every week and you will definitely get featured in The Wall Street Journal!”

“If you place one ad on my site, you will increase sales without lifting a finger!”

And often it turns out these courses, techniques, or masterminds are just fluff.

I've had enough. Haven't you?

There are millions out there who will pay for a quick fix, an easy answer, a way to earn money without putting in the work. They claim it should be easy. Yes, it doesn't always have to be rocket science, but when was the last time you saw someone achieve meteoric success without any real value, smarts, hard work or talent? I should clarify: ***lasting success***--because reality TV stars who are famous for being famous won't (I hope) be here for long.

If you want to be a reality TV star, by all means, go ahead. Godspeed. I, on the other hand, prefer to use marketing for good rather than evil. I prefer to create marketing that delights, informs and tells the truth. I'd prefer to build a business based on real honest-to-goodness value for someone and if I do that for fewer people rather than duping millions, perhaps I'll sleep better at night, knowing I created something real, good and valuable in the world.

Yes, your business should bring you joy. Yes, you shouldn't have to slog if things don't feel right. I'm all about only doing the marketing activities you enjoy (if they reach your target audience) or at least finding a way to make them enjoyable.

But I'm tired of the modern day snake oil salesmen, aren't you? Tired of hyperbolic claims, tired of people charging thousands for something that won't bring real value to a business. Of course, it's all in the eye of the beholder. And you can only find value if you actually take what someone teaches you and turn it into real action.

But I guess that's my point. The not-so-secret to brand success? DO. THE. WORK.

Bring the value. Be authentic, be vulnerable, be unique--but the most successful folks I know are finding joy in their business while *also* providing real value for their clients and customers.

Marketing is not about lying to people. It can be used for good rather than evil.

How to Finish: 5 Tips for Making Wild Dreams Come True

Why is dreaming up our big ideas so much easier than making them happen? This insightful guest chapter from Betsy Talbot of [An Uncluttered Life](#) will change all that.

When you embark on a big project for your business, even one as essential (and fun!) as branding, it's easy to get lost in the details and spin out of control. Either your list of actions or decisions grows so big you can't possibly finish it (so you don't even start), or you make a serious dent in the list but run out of steam before you finish.

It is frustrating to be gung-ho about something important and watch it wither away to apathy or outright frustration before it is finished.

My husband Warren and I are pros at getting things done. It has always been true, but it is even more so since we first had the idea to travel the world in 2008. We eventually made our journey into a lifestyle media business called An Uncluttered Life, and we create books and videos to show other people how to create the life they really want from the life they already have. We challenge ourselves personally and creatively to do new things, publicly and privately, and we mostly succeed.

I'm not writing this to brag. I'm writing because people notice these things, and we get this question *a lot* via email and in person:

Why do we accomplish so many of our personal and business goals while other people struggle to even get started on theirs?

While we'd like to think it is because we are superhuman (only because we could then justify wearing shiny costumes and capes), the answer is much more practical.

In fact, it consists of just 5 basic tips which I'm going to share with you today. Tip #1 is...

1. Goals have deadlines:

We wrote in one of our best-selling books, [Dream Save Do: An Action Plan for Dreamers](#), that a dream without a deadline is already dead. This is true if your goal is as big as a trip around the world or as small as making one sales call per day.

After you've determined a goal, whether it is to move, start a side business, paint your house, save money, get a new job, or lose weight, the first step is giving yourself a finish date. Without it, you won't push yourself to get it done, no matter

how much you want it. The status quo and routine of life is too comforting, too hard to break out of, without a specific reason to do so.

When we start a writing project, the first step is to give ourselves a publish date. From the very first word of the project, we know when it is due and how many words have to be written each day to make it happen. When we decide to travel to a new destination, we pick a date to go/arrive. We may leave a lot of details open after we decide to do something, but we never shrink back from a deadline.

The action of setting a date propels you to begin the work to make your goal a reality.

2. Take action on dreams every single day:

You can't really be part-time about your goals and dreams or you'll never reach them. Many people think life is changed by big steps, huge events, and giant milestones, but the truth is that big, lasting change happens in the tiny steps and choices you make every single day. The cumulative effect of those small steps is what brings about the milestones and big leaps everyone around you thinks happened overnight.

Before we left on this journey in 2010, we sold a few possessions every single week for 2 years. Creating Craigslist ads isn't glamorous, but it took this daily attention to decluttering to free us up to leave (and pad our bank account at the same time).

Now we use the same strategy to carve out time to write books, set up an editorial calendar, manage our websites, edit photographs, practice languages, exercise, market our books, and contribute to other websites. We also make time to connect with our friends and family around the world every week. Most people think we're on permanent vacation, but it is because we do these essential things that we continue to live a life of travel and experience.

You don't get something for nothing.

The small actions you take on your goals every single day are a better predictor of overall success than your perfectly drafted plans or good intentions.

3. Don't be afraid to try something new or make a mistake:

When you want to accomplish more things, it means you'll be doing more. It may sound simple to spell it out like that, but people forget. And when the things you want to get done are new to you, you are bound to make mistakes.

Warren and I screw up regularly, but we typically don't screw up twice on the same thing. The key in all this new activity is to learn from what works as well as what doesn't so you continually improve as you go. When you eventually become good at one thing, it opens up space in your life to become a beginner at something else.

When we were in Peru we signed up for our first multi-day trek. We had zero experience other than walking, and we came very ill-equipped to handle the rigors of the journey. We were wet and tired every single day—we didn't even bring rain gear during the rainy season!—but we learned a lot. Since then, we've become pros at trekking and do it all over the world.

The key is to never stop making mistakes because it means you've stopped trying new things.

4. Know how to take negative feedback:

Opinions are like assholes: everyone's got one. And sometimes the person giving you his opinion is an asshole. But getting something done requires a certain amount of rubber to your skin. You will always have critics, even when you do amazing things (*"Campbell's Soup says thousands will lose jobs after Betsy Talbot selfishly cures common cold! Details at 11."*). Sometimes the feedback is justified and you can learn from it, making you or your project better, and other times you're going to just have to let it bounce off.

The key is divorcing your personal feelings of worth from feedback on your endeavors, both good and bad. Failure or mistakes on a project do not equate to failures or mistakes as a human being. This is also when you discover that some people will love what you are doing for the exact same reasons others hate it. You will never please everyone, and knowing this from the start will help you keep moving—and learning—when negative feedback starts.

When you can step to the side and view feedback in a more objective way, it allows you to glean the lessons and discard the trash quickly and productively.

5. Track actions and results:

Whether you geek out like we do with a spreadsheet or you journal your progress creatively with video or art, staying on track with a goal requires tracking. If your project is longer than a day, you will forget what you've done, the brainstorms you had for what to do next, or the ideas others contribute along the way. Tracking also keeps you from veering off into unnecessary tasks as your attention wanders.

Weight Watchers has built their entire business around tracking food and calorie intake daily and weighing weekly. Athletes keep track of their personal best performance times so they can improve. Project managers track everything from software development to building houses.

We keep track of the metrics on our website, Facebook page, and book sales, learning what works and what doesn't. We track our pitches to other websites, radio, and magazines. We monitor our daily word counts when working on a book. We make a list of all the things we want to see/eat/do when we arrive in a new location so we won't forget.

It can be as simple as a small notebook or as elaborate as a software program.

You'll reach your goals faster if you know what to do, when to do it, and what happens as a result of doing it.

How You Can Get More Things Done

Whether you have one big dream in mind or just want to accomplish more of the small stuff on a regular basis, these five habits will create the perfect environment to make it happen. We work these habits every day, and they have given us a life we once only dreamed of. In fact, that's why we never had it before: we were only dreaming!

- **Set a firm deadline**
- **Take daily action on your goals**
- **Don't be afraid of mistakes and trying new things**
- **Learn from negative feedback (and ignore it when there is nothing to learn)**
- **Track your actions and results**

Are You a Solopreneur? 3 Perks and 3 Downsides You Can Easily Combat

Going solo in your business is either a launch strategy or a deliberate business model choice. Sometimes you are just getting off the ground and you're a Party of One, doing everything from accounting to marketing to product development. Other times, though, you are intentionally creating a lifestyle business and don't want extra complication from staff, tax requirements or overhead.

I've deliberately chosen a "solopreneur" model for my business and have no plans to build an agency. I like being in control, not managing people, and being able to handle the ebbs and flows that writing and consulting bring. Plus, I find it's easy to keep overhead low and ramp up or pare down by partnering with others as needed.

Being a solopreneur both rocks and sucks—but you can combat the parts that make you want to poke your eye out. Perhaps you can relate?

Three perks to being a solopreneur business:

1. **Control:** You maintain control over all business and marketing decisions. There are no politics to deal with or egos to soothe. After my long stint in corporate America, this is a godsend for my stress level.
2. **Creativity:** You can get crazy creative on marketing ideas, promotional pushes and even which projects you take on.
3. **Speed:** When you make a decision, you're done and off to the races. No internal selling, pleading or persuasion required. I have decided on marketing efforts in the morning and implemented them by that afternoon, easy peasy. I can take advantage of last-minute opportunities and react fast.

OK, I couldn't resist a fourth bonus perk:

4. **Selectivity:** You can work with whom you like, when you like. And if it doesn't work out, you never have to sub-contract that person or continue with that client or customer ever again if you don't want to.

With upside, comes downside, though.

Three challenges of being a solopreneur—and steps you can take to alleviate the pain:

1. **Lack of collaboration:** If you're extroverted like me, one of the joys of working on a team is a meeting where you're all hashing out ideas on a whiteboard. You can get out of your own head and vet ideas with other smart people. Working solo, you miss out on that sanity check from others and potentially limit your thinking, creativity or perspective. Those voices in your head may be leading you astray and you might never know it.

COMBAT THIS! Pull together your own makeshift Board of Directors or accountability group of other solopreneurs. Choose people you respect but who also come at things from a different point of view. I collaborate with a few key partners and often ask to bounce ideas off of them or seek their advice when making a major decision. Another colleague of mine often will email a close group of trusted partners to get a consensus or conversation going when she needs to make a quick decision. Your collaborative team won't be handed to you when you work alone, so put one together yourself—and offer to play that role for others if they need it.

2. **Loneliness:** This is kind of related to the issue above, but it's more than that. I miss shared office moments, blowing off steam with others, lunch dates, heck--water cooler gossip. I even go work at my husband's office or in a coffee shop every now and then just to be around other people. Talking to the dog only gets me so far, and even he gets bored with my running commentary and, every now and then, just gives up and retreats to the other room.

COMBAT THIS! Get social on your own. Make time for coffee dates to form relationships with other freelancer colleagues. Join local groups and associations. Participate in online forums. Attend conferences. Force yourself out of your office at least 2-3 times per week just to be social. Or arrange phone or Skype meetings with other solopreneurs where you can each just unwind for 30 minutes, laugh, share, vent and support each other.

3. **Lack of resources:** It's all you, baby! You are chief cook, bottle washer and accountant. If you don't do it, it won't get done. Your to-do list is never complete and there are always way more ideas than hours in the day or mental energy that you can expend. It can be hard to unplug when you are all you've got. And this can lead to stress, headaches, poor health and damaged relationships.

COMBAT THIS! Ask for help. You are not supposed to be an expert at everything. Why do you think big companies have so many employees?! If you are not technical, outsource your website maintenance and design. If you hate writing, hire a part-time writer to put together your materials or blog posts. If

you know something will never get done if it stays on your To-Do list, hire someone else to do it for you! The flip side is that this scarcity mentality helps you pare down to the most important tasks in your business right now. Save the stuff you love to do, or the tasks only you can do for your precious time and attention. Everything else? Get help. Hire a virtual assistant. Send your receipts to a bookkeeper. One big caveat here: don't barter for everything. You simply exchange one set of tasks taking up your time for another. If you want to really free up time, make the investment in paying someone else to do it.

The Good "If" and the Bad "If"

"If" can be a powerful word.

I recently watched a documentary about a football coach who lost his parents and sister in a car crash. Years later, he was still blaming himself. "If I wasn't playing in that game, they wouldn't have been in the car to come see me and maybe they'd still be here."

This comment made me so sad for him.

The bad "If" is when you use the word to lament the past. When used to berate yourself over things you can't control or change, "If" can lead to damage and torture.

"If I had taken that other job, I would have been happier."

"If I had not spent all that money on that trip, I'd have the money to buy a new computer."

"If only I'd been home, he would have survived the stroke."

This is neither helpful nor productive. True, we need to learn from our mistakes so we don't repeat them, but nine times out of ten, this type of "If-ing" is just ridiculous. How can you predict the future? How can you think you can stop a speeding train or the death of a loved one or an unexpected layoff? You can't.

I think we do this to fool ourselves into thinking we have control over certain events. But the truth is we don't. All we can do is prepare for the future as best we can with the information we have at hand. That's where the good "If" comes in.

Good "If's" are those that help you plan for future opportunity:

"If I buy emergency supplies, we'll be safe during the power outage."

"If I plan all my errands, I can make the most efficient use of my time today."

"If I create a strong brand and marketing plan now, I can reach my business goals this year."

See? Much more productive, proactive and useful.

“If” looks much better in front of you rather than behind you

Be mindful of how you use the word “If.” Those two little letters can cause a whole hot mess of despair—or they can open up infinite possibilities.

Brand Time-Savers: 3 Tips to Make Blogging Easier

Blah, blah, BLOGGING.

If you just sighed in disgust, overwhelm or sheer panic at simply reading the B-word, I'd like to talk to you today. Blogging is, in my opinion, one of the single best ways to grow your business, boost your brand and hustle up some thought leadership street cred. Think of it like you are the editor of your own little magazine: press releases and pitching be darned! You have the ultimate in with the editor of You.com--YOU.

How can blogging help your brand and business?

1. It gives you a forum to promote your expertise and point of view.
2. It's SEO-licious, meaning you can write about your core product or service areas and search engines will develop huge crushes on you.
3. It provides your target audience with information, advice, entertainment—all great things to build community and nurture future sales and customer loyalty.
4. It offers you content to share in social media (for those days when you're like, "What the heck should I tweet about?").
5. It gives visitors a reason to keep coming back to your site.
6. It provides the press with examples of your expertise in case they are writing a story for which you'd be PERFECT.

I could go on and on.

"But I hate writing, Mariiiiiiaaaaa!" (enter whining) "I don't have time." "What should I blog about?"

I will admit that I have it a bit easier, as writing is my joy—it's my favorite form of expression. But even I have days where I face a blank Word document, with a blinking cursor mocking my lack of creativity. We all do. **The muse does not always show up when it's convenient for us.** Sometimes she's out grabbing a caramel macchiato and surfing One Kings Lane for fun household furnishings.

So here are three tips for making blogging easier and—hell—more fun:

1. **Jot down every question someone has ever asked you about your line of work:** Seriously, the [juicy ones](#), the silly ones, the obvious ones, the annoying ones. Are you a knitting store? How about "How can I learn to knit?" "Where can

I find fashionable patterns?" "Isn't this something just old women do?" Or are you a personal trainer? "What are the best super foods I should be eating?" "How can I start on Day One if I'm overweight?" "Don't I need to be wealthy to have a personal trainer?" Perhaps you're a social media consultant: "How do I start on Twitter?" "Which platforms should I be on?" "When are the best times to post on Facebook?"—or even "What questions should I ask to find a good social media consultant?" Got your list? BOOM. You just came up with three months' worth of blog post topics.

2. **Riff on trendy topics:** Let's say the Grammy Awards are coming up. Can you relate something about your business back to music, a Grammy winning star or even something controversial that happened at the show? New movies come out all the time. Can you relate some tips about your products or services back to a [popular film](#)? These kind of posts are as much fun to write as they are to read—and you can take advantage of trending topics when promoting the content on social media. For example, if #Grammys are hot, hot, hot the day after the event, you can use that hashtag to promote your post.
3. **Interview interesting people:** Who would your target audience (or you) love to hear from? Are there related experts who complement what you provide that would be valuable for your readers? You don't have to come up with all the blog post ideas yourself—sometimes the best thing to do is feature another interesting person with juicy nuggets of wisdom to share. Not only will your audience love it, but you create a built-in promotional partner—and you get to be generous and support someone else's great brand so perhaps later they may support you.

4 Ways to Jumpstart Your Business after a Break

New baby. Extended sabbatical. [Major health crisis](#). Six months abroad...heck, [years abroad](#).

People ebb and flow out of big businesses without a peep. But when you're a business of one—or even five—who's left steering the brand awareness ship while you go island hopping?

I had my major [health crisis](#) just six months after launching my own consulting business. You know what happened? Well, for one thing, time did not implode upon itself—everything that seemed urgent faded away, as it should. While I did miss a conference call the day after my brain aneurysm ruptured (I bet the client never thought they'd hear *that* excuse from my husband), the world did not end. But practically speaking, the blog went cold, the networking ceased and the cacophony of market noise enveloped my absence like a black hole. In the blink of an eye, my business profile faded.

So how is it that 4+ years later, my business is thriving more than it ever has? How is it that I had the best business year financially not long after I fell into the void?

If you have to take a voluntary—or unexpected—break from your business, **here are four tips that served me well in cranking up the brand awareness engine again.** These are also useful if you simply need to revive your personal brand after a long absence:

1. **Rev up your blogging:** When you emerge from your cocoon, one of the few things you have in your control is the ability to add useful content to the world again. And besides, perhaps your client work is dried up for now, so what else have you got to do? Build out a new editorial calendar and maybe amp up your blogging for the time being. Maybe you normally blog once a week, so increase that to twice. Make your content super useful, super sexy and super keyword-rich so you can get back on the web radar again. Combine this with sending out a few Tweets and Facebook updates about your latest post and you can boost your exposure efforts.
2. **Jump into the online conversation:** Again, you can control your content output, so leverage all those great new blog posts in online communities you can find on LinkedIn, Facebook or perhaps standalone, niche ones such as [LearnSavvy](#)—or whatever industry-specific places reign supreme for you. Start commenting on relevant blogs or articles on a consistent basis to raise your profile again. Just target three per day at about 30 minutes each day. Or maybe

pitch a few contributed articles to media outlets like American Express Open Forum or Entrepreneur.com for even more exposure and street cred.

- 3. Invite key people to your welcome back party:** When I returned from my hiatus, I reached out to several colleagues with phone calls or personalized emails letting them know where I'd been and that I was up to my old tricks again and ready for action. You may think people know what's going on with you but really, they don't. They are too busy. Reach out individually to trusted contacts via email or LinkedIn. Take them out for coffee to let them know what business or clients you are looking for and kindly ask if they can spread the word for you. Don't be afraid to ask "competitors" as well—they might be so busy that they are turning folks away, so you can help them out, and maybe give them a referral fee in exchange. And always ask how you can help them in return. People are kinder than you think—and it's a great way to reconnect.
- 4. Get out there, live and in person:** Pick two to three key networking groups or clubs and start amping up your face time again. Attend lunches, happy hours, book signings. When I was returning to work after my health issues, this was quite a challenge for me as I was still recovering and suffering from massive fatigue—plus I couldn't drive at the time. But I forced myself to try to go to one live event per week. And I asked gracious friends to drive me. They were only too happy to help, since they didn't want to go alone either!

There are some people on the periphery of my professional circle who did not even realize I had been out of commission for six months—not sure if that's good or bad! But it tells me I did a good job of trying to stay connected and present as much as I could.

7 Lessons Learned While Writing My Book...and What They Can Teach You

Ever wanted to write a book?

When I was six, I wrote an elaborate children's story about a family of mice who vacation at Disneyworld. I detailed their quaint village, their quirky personalities and every road trip adventure they encountered along the way. I never quite finished the tale, but relished the creative writing process. Which explains all the poems, unpublished essays, and Chapter One drafts sitting on my laptop, gathering metaphorical dust.

Do you have an unfinished opus about your expertise hiding in your laptop? How about the next Harry Potter or crime thriller?

Fast forward to my...ahem...forties: I have now [authored two books](#) and published several print and online articles. There are seven valuable lessons I've learned that may help you with your future screenplay, non-fiction best-seller or literary novel.

1. **Discipline your muse:** Sorry, folks. Inspiration doesn't always just "strike" especially when you're on deadline. I used to write only when I literally couldn't stop the ideas from tumbling out of my head. That doesn't work well when you have a launch date or an expectant publisher. I thought the muse would simply strike at her own whim and I could just lazily wait for her arrival—when, really, she often comes when you discipline yourself and consistently sit down to write. Make your writing schedule realistic like I did and break it up into doable chunks (i.e., this week, I'll complete the outline. Next week, I'll focus on Chapter One.) If you sit down and just start writing, just like showing up to a job, some days you'll produce brilliance and others you'll produce crap. And if you need to take a break one day, take it. Ditch the guilt and then get back to the work tomorrow. The more you produce, the more you'll finesse, tweak, explore, hammer out, invent—and the more likely those "A-ha!" moments will come. It's a probability game. The more you do, the more chances you'll find gems in the work.
2. **Commit out loud:** If you're working on a book, you're *working on a book*. That means people need to understand your schedule may be different, you might not be at your spouse's beck and call and you may have to pass up certain activities. How do you make this happen? Not by hiding your writing in the dark of night, but by sharing your goal with the people in your life. State your intentions out loud so you not only force yourself to commit, but you set

others' expectations of your time and attention. If you treat your writing as a hobby, to be done only "when you have time" or "feel like it" (see #1) it will never get done. Added bonus? You can find support, cheerleading and maybe even a few proofreaders along the way.

3. **Get comfortable with feedback:** If you wither and die when someone gives you constructive criticism, get over it or go home. No one is perfect and every writer will tell you that good writing is re-writing. You need objective outsiders to review your work, especially professional editors and proofreaders. What may make sense in your own head could leave readers scratching theirs. My editors (rightly) questioned my chapter order, whether a story really made sense or not, and where I was repeating myself. Just like your brand needs an objective audit, the same is true for your book. But make sure you are seeking out feedback from trusted experts (professional developmental editors, etc.) or readers in your target audience and not merely changing course according to the whim on any old critic who comes your way...which brings me to #4...
4. **Picture your reader:** Just like with a brand strategy, it helps to identify your actual reader. Not only will this help you effectively market the book, it prevents the writing from becoming a tangled mess. You absolutely need to be clear about for whom you are writing and what they will get. Branding Basics for Small Business was written with small business owners, non-profit leaders and entrepreneurs in mind. I had a very clear picture of these people and this image guided the wording, explanations and analogies that I used. I wrote Rebooting My Brain for women struggling to overcome a life crisis, as well as brain injury caregivers and survivors. I pictured them in my mind as I typed. What questions might they have? What information would they want to know? What would move, delight or inspire them? This ensured my memoir became something universal, useful and valuable for others.
5. **Prepare for diverse reactions:** This one was a shocker. Turns out, the people I thought would be most excited by my book writing expressed passing interest (if that), and others who I thought wouldn't give a damn became my best cheerleaders. At first, it really irritated me and, honestly, made me very sad and unsure. Here I was, doing something that absolutely petrified me, and it was like certain people close to me were not even acknowledging it. Recognize that writing a book is an art form and not everyone "gets" artists. Some people don't know how to respond, some may think you're nuts, others will drool with envy and still others will admire you beyond belief and support you full throttle. And by support, I mean even just simply remembering that you're holed up writing

and asking you how it's going from time to time. But I finally learned that my big dream was big *to me* and people are usually just doing the best they know how. They have their own lives to live and dreams to pursue and may not even realize how deeply their reactions (or non-reactions) are hurting you. If certain people in your life don't engage for whatever reason, that's kind of not any of your business—you have work to do. Throw expectations of other people's reactions out the door, write the book because your soul has to, *needs to*, and be humble and grateful to those who openly support your dream.

6. **Prepare for self-doubt...often:** At every point in my writing process, for both books, I doubted myself. My expertise, knowledge, ability to tell a good story, whether people would care, whether they would judge me. You name it, I thought it. This is natural when you follow a dream. Someone once said that if you're scared, then you know you're doing the right thing. Every writer has at one point during the writing process thought, "What the hell am I doing?" But if you believe in yourself, your knowledge, and your story—and never lose sight of the value it will provide—that will help you stay the course. Post inspirational notes, talk to other writers, find an online writing community and surround yourself with people who will prop you up (or take you out for vodka tonics) when doubt attacks.
7. **It's your story...TELL IT!** One day while writing *Rebooting My Brain*, my heart sank as I scrolled through title after title of "aneurysm survivor" books on Amazon and I thought, "What can I possibly add to this conversation? Some of these people overcome much worse long-term disabilities than I am dealing with. Plus, I'm not famous or anything so who will care about my story?" One of my dearest friends emailed me, "Maria, *Eat, Pray, Love* was just about a regular woman who got divorced and took a trip. How many books have been written about *that*? It's all in how you TELL it, in your own unique voice, which makes it a story people will want—and need--to read." Bless her wise perspective. And the countless emails I've received from people thanking me for what my books have done for them is all the proof I need that she was right. No one can tell a story or share wisdom the way you can and you just may touch someone in a way no other book or story can. Don't think your story isn't valuable because the plotline has been done. If that were true, people would never write another new book again. Put your unique spin on it and just believe.

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 a bit miffed. I'm not sure what I thought: was anything less than an A-plus a complete and utter failure on my part? Did I think it meant I hadn't mastered 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 goal of perfection—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 mostly 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 the sleek, small, powerful smart phones of today.

[Seth Godin](#) always talks about the importance of shipping. Strategy and planning is 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](#)* on a panel called *Evolve Your Brand*. 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. It changes by the second.

So are you going to wait and 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, improving and innovating?

Doers DO. It really is that simple.

Leprechauns, Charms and the Space to Make Magic

A while back, I took two weeks off for a London vacation and prepped everything in my life for a work detox.

I call it a “work detox” and 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 among neon lights at London’s Museum of Childhood or my 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 dogs up in Scotland licking my baby boy with love and gusto—and his attempts to kiss them back.

When March rolls around each year, St. Patrick’s Day fills our minds with lucky charms, Irish blessings and pots of gold. But let’s not wait until then to talk about how to make more magic in your life.

While I’m not a leprechaun, fairy or other mystic being, I can share how this two-week playdate away from work on foreign soil helped me recapture a bit of magic and verve in my own 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. But I didn’t want the email time-suck to distract 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 business and 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 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, and 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 CMO of Pizza Hut UK at a café over breakfast. It can spark new dreams—like our 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, business-scheming partner-in-crime, idea generator and all-around cheerleader. I realized my joyful business talks with her keep me focused and motivated on the bigger picture. She inspires me to dream big and find out 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 can you 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. Collaboration breeds all sorts of creativity and wonder.

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

How to Spring Clean Your Brand, Business (& Life)

Ah, spring. That time of year when the trees bud, the air warms (in most places) and we start to shed our winter cloaks in lieu of open-toed sandals and lighter fabrics. Freeing ourselves from the unwanted weight of heavy parkas and wool mittens feels pretty darn good.

And with that, we also crave shedding some of the crap in our lives with a healthy dose of spring cleaning.

Removing the clutter and streamlining our lives applies equally to our businesses and brands. **When we're lighter and unencumbered, we can better focus and stop clogging our time, brains and businesses with the things that don't matter.** Here's a handy guide to how to perform such much needed spring cleaning on your business—but these can equally apply to your life:

1. Conduct an audit:

What really needs to stay or go? Has your menu of offerings turned into an endless buffet that only serves to confuse customers and distract your focus? Review your current business offerings and keep the ones making you money, while removing the deadwood of those that don't. Why waste your time and your prospects' attention on products or offerings that just take up space?

This audit can also apply to your brand. Which messages no longer serve you or your customers? Does your website look stale and dated? Has your brand evolved beyond what your materials are currently saying about it? Set aside time and review everything your customers see with a keen eye, and [get objective advice](#) on how to clarify, update or tighten up your brand look, feel, message and differentiation.

2. Review your partnerships:

Sometimes we form business partnerships when it makes perfect sense, but things can change. Review your best referral sources, from where website traffic comes and perhaps even your affiliate partners. Run the numbers and the time spent and see if you're getting the most out of these relationships. If there are relationships worth keeping, spend more attention making them really work for you. If they are not fruitful, release the deadwood and clear your mind, budget and schedule. You want to focus on fewer, more meaningful and higher quality partnerships that build you up, instead of sap your strength. PS: This exercise applies to networking groups and social media networks as well.

3. Clear the clutter:

Is your file system a disaster? Does your inbox overflow? Do you still have digital files from years ago that serve no purpose but to eat up storage space? Take a day to streamline and organize your systems to help make you more efficient in running your business. Consult with a personal organizer if you have trouble letting go. And speaking of systems, take a look at your business procedures and see where you can increase efficiency. Does billing clients take way too long? Do you spend too much time creating that monthly newsletter or managing your calendar? Document the tasks that are not a good use of your time and hire a virtual assistant or consult with an operations expert on how to manage your business better so you can spend more time being brilliant.

Why Hibernate?

A friend of mine recently commented that our lives cycle around metaphorical seasons of growth and change. Sometimes we are in the Spring, where ideas are blossoming, seeds are being planted and animals are poking up their heads as they venture from their winter lairs. For your business, this may mean new product ideas, connecting with potential partners, planning a brand facelift.

Summer is when we're white hot and sizzling. Everything is firing on all cylinders, we're in the Zone, things are happening, moving, shaking. Often this means you're in a crazy busy flurry of activity as well.

I imagine Fall to be the harvest. Maybe those connections you made at those networking events are finally bearing fruit. Maybe prospects on your email list slowly turn to buyers or clients. Maybe that press pitching you've been doing yields to a prime bit of ink.

And then there's Winter. Things go underground, dormant. Shutters close and we turn inward. We slow down. We unwind. While the snow falls, the tiny perennial seeds buried in the ground take a snooze to gear up for another glorious Spring.

The cycle continues.

Grinding away without any pause or rest is not a natural way to run a successful business—or live a happy life. When overwhelm runs you over, it is often because you have not yielded to the natural cycles we need as human beings. Just like you need to stop and fill up your car's gas tank or farmers must let fields go fallow every so often to replenish nutrients in the soil, so must you take a break. Step away and fill up your own "soul tank" to shore up your resilience, decrease manic stress and most importantly, fill up your creative well.

Learn to enjoy your winter as a necessary cycle of your life and your business. Hibernate. Retrench. Restore. Without giving yourself the time and space for creative thinking, innovation is just a buzzword and not a part of your brand

Closing Thoughts and Book Extras

Thank you for reading these time management and goal-setting insights and tips! I hope they prove useful to whatever creative or commercial endeavor you are pursuing.

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Books by Maria Ross to enjoy:

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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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