Are You Your Worst Book-Marketing Problem?

By Brian Jud

The biggest obstacles to book-selling success can be the authors or publishers themselves. Emotions such as fear, doubt, regret, and frustration, which are typical when trying something new, can too easily stall or destroy an effort to make large-quantity sales to non-bookstore buyers.

People struggle to manage self-imposed hurdles like these when it comes to making the leap from thinking about what you want to do and actually doing it.

As Erma Bombeck said, “It takes a lot of courage to show your dream to someone else.”

“Pursuing something new and different almost certainly involves risk—to your savings, reputation, career and self-image. Jeff Bezos has recalled telling his manager at the hedge fund D.E. Shaw about his notion to sell books online. ‘I think it would be a better idea for somebody who didn’t *already* have a good job,’ his boss replied. For Bezos, that comment distilled the dilemma: Should he jeopardize his current comfort, status, and security for the uncertain prospect of future gains?

Bezos struggled for a couple of days before finding a productive way to frame his decision. He pictured himself as an old man reflecting on his life. ‘Would I regret leaving this company?” he asked himself. “I thought, *When I’m 80, I’m not going to think about that; I’m not even going to remember it. But…I know for a fact, I have this idea, and if I don’t try, I’m going to regret [it].* As soon as I thought about it that way, I knew I had to give it a try.’ By projecting himself into the future, Bezos got a taste of the existential regret that comes from choices that run counter to our convictions or need for growth.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Take the Tombstone Test**

A variation of the “future regret” technique is the Tombstone Test, consisting of two questions:

1) What do you want your tombstone or obituary to say?

2) Are the actions you are taking today in line with the legacy you want to leave?

Your chosen legacy may be the number of people you helped with your content, or the ways in which you changed peoples’ lives. One way to reach tens of thousands of people at once is to have corporations each buy X0,000 of your books to give away in promotional campaigns.

That can be done, but not if you magnify the potential negative consequences of failure and imagine the self-recrimination you might feel if your venture turns out badly. The desire to avoid those feelings encourages conservatism, but you can counteract it. Instead of focusing on the pain that would accompany a failed effort, imagine how you will feel years from now if you fulfill your dream.

I understand how you feel when in that position. I felt that way when I was laid off my corporate job almost 30 years ago. I challenged myself by asking, “Should I continue in the corporate world, or do what I had wanted to do for many years – write a book.” In the decision process, I downplayed the odds of success, questioned the viability of this new career path to provide for my family, my capacity to develop a book and my ability to break into an established, competitive market. Then I thought that I would rather look back on my life and say, “I can’t believe that I did that,” than to look back and say, “I wish I had done that.” So, I wrote and published my first book (of 14) and built a new career. In the process I have helped many people reach their goals for increased sales.

“As Bezos committed to pursuing his venture, he was plagued by fears that it would fail. He told his parents that there was a 70% chance they would not get their seed money back. He was confident in the soundness of his idea, having rigorously analyzed the landscape and determined that books were the most viable products to sell online, but he was less sure that he had the knowledge to successfully execute on it. He realized that he could bolster his chances by securing access to a rich pool of tech talent and a wide array of books, so he relocated to Seattle—home of Microsoft and just a few hours’ drive from the largest book distributor in the United States. His fears drove him to work out key technical and logistical challenges in advance.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Fear can be an inhibiting force, or it can be a powerful teacher, signaling that you need more or different information and skills. The trouble with failure, beyond the obvious, is that it generates negative emotions -- denial, anger, despair, and self-blame -- that impede learning. To avoid that pitfall, start by dissecting your failure. Exactly what went wrong, and why? Which premises were false? Which ones held true? Pinpointing the source of your worry is critical to addressing it. Whatever your own strengths and weaknesses, you can manage them only if you know what they are. The process is not automatic: It requires conscious effort.

**Then what?**

What do you do once you have addressed, analyzed, and conquered your angst? The conventional remedy is to take time for rest and reflection. However, the biggest challenge in controlling your default to fear comes as you are shifting from reflection to action. So, take action and set your new course to non-bookstore marketing. Openness to new experiences and ideas inspires you and can lead to significant opportunities. Still, do not move too quickly, or new fears and self-doubt could rear their ugly heads.

Become mindful of your habitual ways of thinking and behaving, your tendencies and habits, what gives you energy and what frustrates you. Armed with those insights, you can reach out to new opportunities that will lead you to a perfect grade on your Tombstone Test.

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1. The information about Jeff Bezos was taken from the article “Stop Sabotaging Your Ability to Innovate” by Cyril Bouquet in the November-December 2021 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)