

Making a Business Book Pay Off

By *Bernie Thiel and Bob Buday*

Business books remain a popular marketing tool among professionals such as consultants, accountants and attorneys—and for good reason. A book provides an outlet by which professionals can communicate their insights and expertise, and the possibility of becoming a best-selling author can be enticing. Furthermore, having a book as one’s calling card conveys credibility and authority, and instantly sets the author apart from competitors who don’t—thus helping to influence prospects and sell more work. However, many professionals underestimate what it takes to develop a powerful, substantive book that engages and energizes readers and motivates them to call the author to learn more. Identifying the right topic, creating a logical structure for the chapters, developing the point of view that is conveyed, and ultimately writing the manuscript and marketing the book once it’s published all take considerable investment in time and money. But they also can pay off in a big way if done right.

The siren song of becoming a best-selling author is strong for many advice-givers. The prospect of having one’s ideas consumed by thousands or millions of people can be difficult to resist.

However, despite good intentions, many professional services firms severely underestimate what it takes to produce a book with substantial market impact. First there’s the issue of time. Paid advisors—whether they are management consultants, auditors, lawyers or accountants—are busy people and are expected to spend their work hours generating and delivering client work. Therefore, much of the work on a book must be done in the author’s spare time. Then there’s the effort required. Few people are so gifted that they can write a compelling book simply by sitting down and “putting pen to paper.” A successful book requires extensive research, rigorous analysis of data, and cogent writing. The investment can be \$500,000 or more, between the authors’ time, ghostwriter fees, promotional expenses, and research.

Does that mean that you shouldn’t embark on a book project? Not at all. Books can generate significant awareness of firm’s expertise. In fact, a good book can propel a professional services firm to atmospheric heights and easily recoup

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its often-hefty investment many times over. However, most business books fall far short of that. Poorly executed books can even tarnish the reputation of the author and the firm itself.

From developing and ghostwriting books and from closely watching others who have done so, we offer insights into what it takes to produce a successful business book—one that engages readers, provides solutions to a pressing business problem and, most important,

generates consulting business for the firm that authors it.

Strategy: It’s Not About the Book

Ironically, some of the most successful business books didn’t begin life as books. Rather, the book was simply the culmination of a long series of investments in research, analysis, consulting, and marketing on a topic. By the time the book-writing began, the ideas that formed the basis of the book had already been well-developed and familiar to potential book buyers.

This might seem like a minor point but it’s not. Many business books are “rush jobs” launched to capture a new market (e.g., e-commerce in the 1990s). In these books, examples are few and superficial (they often are based on news-

paper and magazine clippings). Prescriptions are predictable and unproven (they haven't worn the scars of client work). And key concepts are, well, conceptual.

The problem with books such as these is that their development was totally backwards. Rather than asking, "What book can we write to grab a stake in a new market?", the authors should have first asked "What topic do we already have some expertise in and experience with today, and how can we take it to market while further developing our ideas through best-practice and other research and eventually write a book?"

When a book is developed in this way, it will have much greater impact because the ideas are more likely to be novel, robust, and backed with rich, compelling examples. The behind-the-scenes work that culminated in the most successful business book of the 1990s—the 1993 blockbuster *Reengineering the Corporation* by Michael Hammer and James Champy—is a great example. Hammer and Champy didn't set out to write the book in the mid-1980s, when their two companies launched a research program on the management of information technology. But after several years of best-practice research across several studies, developing a reengineering approach, and gaining reengineering experience through consulting work, the two authors launched the writing of the book in 1992.

Of course, we all know what happened from there. On the strength of its novel ideas and scores of real-world examples (as well as a robust marketing push, which we'll discuss in a moment), *Reengineering* sold more than 2 million copies worldwide, catapulted Champy's firm, CSC Index, into consulting's "big leagues," and made reengineering a household word.

Developing the Content

Reengineering the Corporation is just one example of the fact that good business books take time to develop.

Effective books require data that supports the relevance of the topic (the "case for action") and the validity of the authors' prescriptions (rich case studies). They demand that this data be thoroughly analyzed. They mean letting that analysis shape the argument and not the opposite (which we've all too often seen). Research and analysis can take a minimum of six months and sometimes several years. *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*—blockbusters by Jim Collins—took more than five years each to research, develop, and write. One could argue that *Reengineering the Corporation* took at least six years.

Now contrast this with the way many business books are developed and written. A firm brings in a ghostwriter to sit down with the authors and "capture" their thinking. The authors have been pondering the topic, have collected dozens of articles, and perhaps pitched some work and

maybe even completed a project or two. If their ideas are nascent and examples few, there won't be much for the poor ghostwriter to capture. After writing a couple of incoherent or superficial drafts, the writer will be banished for "not getting it." A new writer will be ushered in and, like the king's jesters, he, too, may suffer the same fate.

The problem is this: Even the best ghostwriters will only be able to wallpaper over ideas whose walls are cracked or crumbling. The best prose in the world simply can't hide fundamental flaws in the logic and argument that form the basis of any good book, business or otherwise.

To avoid this scenario, you must first conduct your research, analyze the data, and develop an overarching theme of the book. Once you do, is it now time for the writer? One good way to find out is to critique your material on seven key criteria:

1. **Novelty** > Being unique, breaking whole new ground
2. **Focus** > Having a single fundamental message
3. **Relevance** > Proving that you're meeting a critical business need
4. **Validity** > Having case examples and other data to prove that the prescriptions work
5. **Practicality** > Demonstrating an approach that can be implemented
6. **Rigor** > Having tight, consistent logic throughout
7. **Clarity** > Using words and concepts that are clear or have been sufficiently explained

If the content meets these tests, it's time to bring in a ghostwriter. (Keep in mind that the opinion will be far more subjective if the authors are giving it.) The writer's first order of business is to help you to determine how to take the theme, analysis, and examples and organize them into a book. He will develop the overall architecture of the book—how the theme progresses from chapter to chapter.

Once the book's architecture is set, the writer then will develop detailed outlines for each chapter that put all arguments and supporting data in their place. This, in fact, is one of the most critical points in the book's development. If a detailed outline cannot be developed for the book—and by "detailed," we mean 50 pages or more—then you probably don't have enough content yet for a book.

The outline also is critical because it's the primary tool for extracting the authors' ideas and putting them on paper. The authors should talk through the outline with the writer, who will shape the transcript of the conversation into prose. But this conversation will only be productive if the authors are prepared to walk through the outline. In writing a book on supply chain performance for one of our clients, we had the four authors prepare diligently before every meeting,

during which they talked through the chapter outlines. Our message to them weeks before the meetings was: “Present each chapter to us as you would present a proposal to a prospect or client work to a client.” That forced them to sharpen their thinking so that they weren’t simply doing a “brain dump” (and, thus, saving us from doing rewrite after rewrite). The book that resulted from that effort, *Keeping Score*, went on to become one of the best-selling books in the history of its publisher, the Council of Logistics Management.

One other issue on content development relates to case studies. We have seen many instances in which book authors have viewed case studies as “color,” interesting snippets or anecdotes that add flavor to the book. While we acknowledge that having quotes from executives greatly improves the credibility and readability of a book and definitely should be included, this is not the primary reason you do case studies.

Case studies are, in fact, part of the research, not the writing, process. Case study interviews should be done in the early stages of content development to gather rich data that inform the authors’ prescriptions for how to solve the business problem the book addresses. They should not be done after most of the book is written and used to simply illustrate points where convenient.

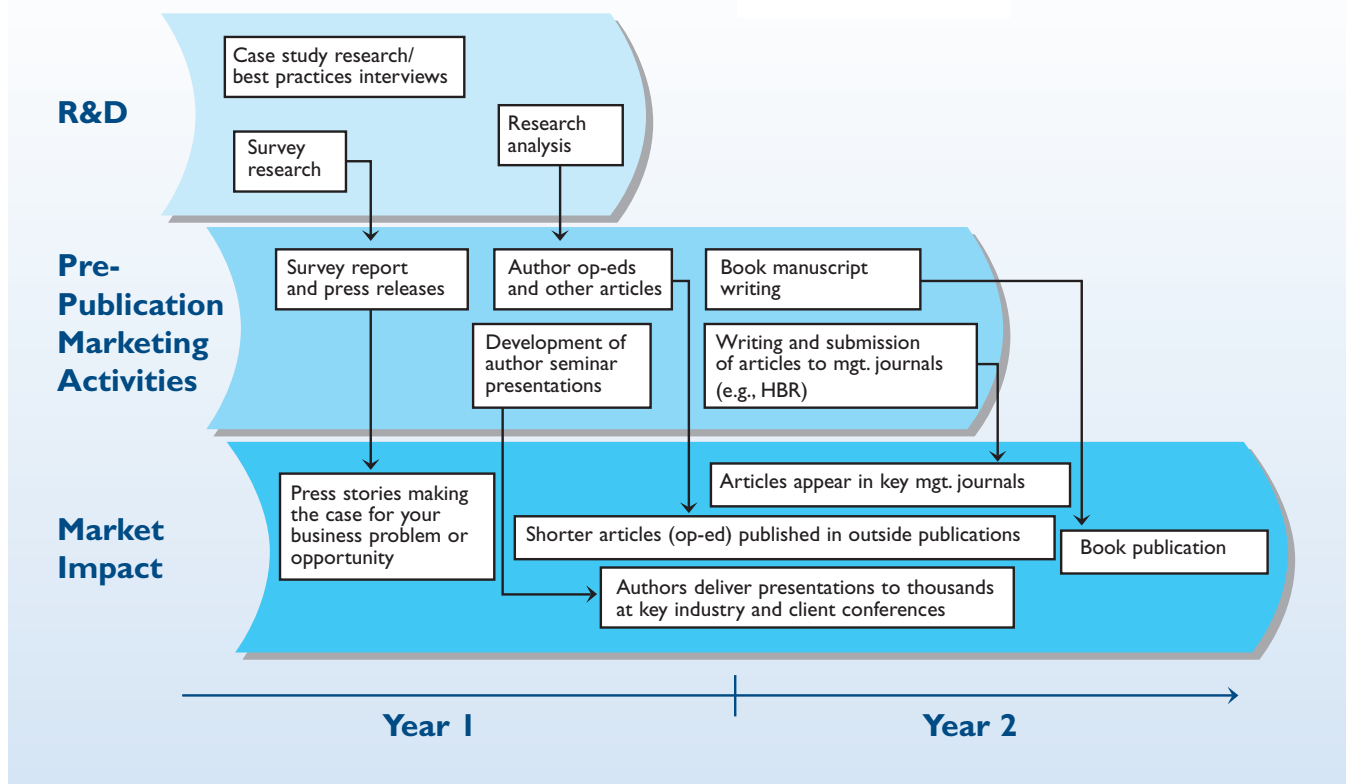
Start Marketing Long Before the Book Is Published

A book should never be the first publication a firm uses to get its message to market. Early in the research and analysis of the content, the firm should write and place articles, give presentations, and deliver the content in other ways to “prime the market” for the book.

Assume, for a moment, a firm’s idea has a 12-month research and development cycle (which is not uncommon). By month six, the firm should have done enough case study and/or survey research, and have sufficient relevant client work to draw upon, to pen a strong article for its own publication or an outside one. By that time, it should also be able to deliver compelling conference presentations on the idea (Figure 1).

If a survey is part of the research (something that should be done in the early months of the project), the survey results can be publicized when they become available. Surveys of executives can be an excellent tool to help make the case for the relevance of a firm’s idea. Finding out that a particular business problem is plaguing a great number of companies, at a great cost, can be the data necessary to make the case that there’s a fundamental business issue in the first place. Such data also is very newsworthy to business media which, by running stories on the survey results, will be giving you considerable (and free) advance publicity for your book.

Figure 1:
Book Development and Pre-Publication Marketing



Thus, over those 12 months of R&D on a concept, a firm has many chances to get various aspects of its concept to the marketplace. By the time the book-writing has begun, and the book is published, the marketplace will be familiar with the firm's concept. If they've been intrigued with what they've read or heard already, they will want more. That means the book is far more likely to hit a receptive market.

Let's go back to the *Reengineering the Corporation* example. Before the book was released in 1993, Hammer and CSC Index (where James Champy was CEO) had been marketing reengineering for several years. Hammer's classic *Harvard Business Review* article, "Don't Automate, Obliterate!" appeared in 1990. He and Index consultants authored numerous articles in other management and business publications (including Index's own periodicals) before and after that. And they had given numerous presentations to senior executives and the press on reengineering. So by the time the book was published, there was a large and informed market waiting to embrace it.

Don't Leave Marketing to the Publisher

Once the book is published, the firm should work collaboratively with the publisher's PR people to promote it aggressively. Typically, publishers will get the book to reviewers, search for serial rights (book excerpts in magazines and newspapers), and set up some journalist and broadcast interviews. To promote a book well, however, the firm should set up press interviews with reporters not covered by the publisher's PR people. These are often small, second-tier publications whose audiences generally will be more interested in your topic than readers of broader business publications.

Furthermore, the firm's PR staff should develop, write and place op-eds in key business publications (and business sections of general newspapers) to generate buzz. In our experience, few book publishers will help you write or place those articles.

The best way to view the division of labor between the publisher and the authoring firm is this: the former is responsible for promoting the product (i.e., the book itself), while the latter must promote the concept. One of the reasons that *Reengineering* became a phenomenon is that Index tirelessly and effectively promoted the concept to business audiences. No one can say for sure, but without such an effort behind it, *Reengineering* probably would be viewed today as simply a well-researched and well-written book instead of the blockbuster that it became.

Conclusion

A book is one of the most expensive and highest-risk marketing initiatives that a professional services firm can undertake. The payoff can be huge, but only if the project is approached correctly. Firms that research and develop their book ideas thoroughly, understand when and how to use a good ghostwriter, and market the book's ideas well before the book writing begins are much more likely to have success, before and after the book hits the stores. ▲

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Alterra Group helps professional services organizations raise awareness of and create demand for their services among key target audiences. We do this via three principal services: developing unique points of view, articulating those points of view in a variety of publications, and building powerful marketing campaigns around the content in those publications to get points of view in the hands of current and prospective clients. We have applied our approach to thought leadership marketing in a diverse group of professional services firms, including leading global outsourcing and systems integration companies, influential trade associations, midsize consulting and strategic advisory firms, boutique consultancies, and independent consultants and authors.

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