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Leaders are Readers!

Recently I was invited to speak at the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. The event was held at a nature center in the Badger State's beautiful north woods. Theoretically I was there to impart my knowledge of advertising to the group but, as always, I felt that I was the person who was doing most of the learning. The motivational speaker Charlie "Tremendous" Jones likes to say, "In five years you will be the same person you are today except for the books that you read and the people you meet," and my experiences with the WNA bear this out. After a full day of training, I spent a delightful evening sitting around a campfire talking advertising with a group of WNA members. The friendly people seated on the benches and logs under the starry Wisconsin sky represented hundreds of years of experience in advertising and publishing. This casual conversation was the functional equivalent of a university "master class" in advertising. As is usually the case when a group of successful people gather, the conversation turns to books.

Successful people are often described as "self-made" men or women. I think it is more accurate to describe them as "self-making" people because one of the things that makes them rise above their peers is their dedication to constant self-improvement. In some of my training classes, I have had people with over fifty years of experience in the industry (No pressure there!). These are people who never settle, who are never satisfied, people who always want to grow and become better at what they do. They listen attentively, and when they have an opportunity they seek out training, and most of all, they read.

Reading is what I like to call an "N.P.E." activity—"No Possible Excuse!" While we all can't get a Harvard MBA, or be mentored by Warren Buffett, we can all read the books written by the Harvard Business Review or Buffett. Reading provides unequalled ROI. A minimal investment of time and money in books pays huge dividends in enhanced professional skills, improved results and job satisfaction. With the availability of books from libraries or at bargain prices from online retailers, anyone can afford to polish their professional skills. During career coaching sessions I have had people tell me, "I don't have time to sit around reading. I'm far too busy." When I question them further, I usually find that they find time to watch mindless reality TV programs or to gossip around the office copier. People always seem to find the time for activities that they enjoy. Successful people enjoy being masters at their chosen profession which is why they find the time to read. For many years, I would arrive at the office early allowing myself time to read a chapter in a good business book. During my career I spent a lot of time driving, so I consider myself a graduate of what Zig Ziglar called "Automobile University." Over the years, I've listened to hundreds if not thousands of books on cassettes, CD's and now downloads in the car.

The most successful people in any line of work are true scholars of their profession. They expose themselves to a wide variety of books related to their field.

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In addition to books on sales or management techniques, there is much to be gained from reading biographies of successful people, motivational works and books on business in general. I have found keeping up with the latest advances in psychology is particularly valuable for sales people and managers. As with any other worthwhile activity, the more work you put into reading, the more you will benefit for it. When the author makes a point, pause in your reading and reflect on what you've just read. Think about it and ask yourself, "How can I use this? How does this apply to me?" I also ask, "does this make sense to me?" Taking time to ponder what you're reading and combining it with the practical knowledge you've gained on the job allows you to constantly polish your skills.

When I am finished with a good book, there are dozens of yellow post-it notes sticking out of its margins. These flags mark points I want to remember and consider further. I record many of these ideas in a journal I use to stimulate my thinking whenever I run into a challenge or a sales slump. This practice helps me to retain what I read and provides me with a database I can draw on at will. I have had situations when I was stumped on a call or in a meeting where Zig Ziglar or Harvey MacKay popped out of the back of my brain to give me a hand. Our lives and our careers are like a long journey, reading "packs our bags" so we have everything we need to get where we want to go and to enjoy the trip.

When I get together with business colleagues, we always share the titles of books that we have found to be interesting and useful. I returned home from Wisconsin with several additions to my reading list. What follows are some of the books which I found to be useful in my career. Some of these books are classics, some are even out of print but still readily available, others are relatively new but offer valuable insights. While this list is far from comprehensive, these are all books which I found helpful to me.

- *Man's Search for Meaning* by Dr. Viktor Frankl—This book tells the story of Frankl's imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp. It is an inspiring story of how he rose above his circumstances. This book is frequently referenced by many other authors and motivational speakers.
- *As a Man Thinketh* by James Allen—As you can tell from the archaic language used in the title, this book has been around for more than a century. It has remained in print since it was first published in 1902 and is still one of the best books on the power of maintaining a positive attitude.
- *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie—Another classic that is as valuable today as it was when it was originally published. Once "required" reading for all business people, this book is often neglected today. It is still one of the best works on working with people. Carnegie also authored the *Quick and Easy Way to Effective Public Speaking* and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* both of which are well worth reading.

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- *Managing* by Hal Geneen—Published in 1984, this book is out of print but available online. A good basic treatise on the art of management and the importance of paying attention to details.
- *The Effective Executive—the Definitive Guide to Getting Things Done* by Peter Drucker—Drucker was one of America’s leading business thinkers for seven decades. This is the best known of his many books. Reading Drucker is an excellent way to train yourself to think like a manager. For many years, I started my day by reading an entry in the Daily Drucker.
- *It’s Okay to Be the Boss, a Step-By-Step Guide to Becoming the Manager Your Employees Need* by Bruce Tulgan—A much more recent book on management. This is a great read for both new and experienced managers. Tulgan’s principles are designed to increase a leader’s effectiveness while reducing their stress level.
- *The One Minute Manager (Series)* by Ken Blanchard—These books are all short, easy to read and deliver a powerful message. The books in this extensive series are written in novel form which makes them very engaging and easy to comprehend. I gave many copies of *The One Minute Salesperson* to my reps as part of their sales training. I found *The One Minute Manager Builds High Performing Teams* and *The One Minute Manager Meets the Monkey* particularly valuable. (the “Monkey” refers to problems which your staff tries to palm off on you and how to get that “Monkey” off your back and onto theirs where it belongs)
- *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life* by Alan Lakein—This book is one of the best books ever written on the subject of time management. He suggests that his readers constantly ask themselves, “What is the best use of my time...Right Now!”
- *See You at The Top* by Zig Ziglar—One of Zig’s best. Ziglar was “the” trainer and writer for a generation of sales people. His books are packed full of practical wisdom written in his signature folksy style. Though written decades ago, Ziglar’s books still have a lot to offer. I highly recommend that you listen to the audiobook editions of his books because Ziglar’s energetic and enthusiastic style is guaranteed to motivate and excite the listener.
- *Little Red Book of Selling* by Jeffrey Gitomer—Gitomer is another prolific author of books on selling and leadership. Within the first few paragraphs, the reader of any of his books will realize that Gitomer is the “real deal.” His books demonstrate his experience and his clear understanding of the selling process.



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- *Ogilvy on Advertising* by David Ogilvy—Ogilvy was one of the original “Mad Men.” This book as well as his earlier *Confessions of an Advertising Man* and *The Unpublished Ogilvy* which was published after his death provide a tutorial on advertising by one of the most successful practitioners of the art.
- *Purple Cow* by Seth Godin—Seth Godin is one of the leading thinkers of marketing in the digital age. His books discuss presenting your ideas in a way that makes them “remarkable” so that they will stand out in a cluttered media environment.
- *How We Decide* by Jonah Lehrer—Making use of the latest advances in neuroscience, this book reviews how human beings make decisions. This information has a direct application to sales as it provides information on developing persuasive arguments for advertising.
- *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman—Another great book on the inner workings of the human mind. This book discusses the relationship between the conscious and unconscious minds. An instructive book for salespeople who want to fully engage their prospects and customers.
- *Drive the Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Daniel H. Pink—This book takes a fresh look at motivating our employees and customers to do what we wish them to do. Making use of the latest research into human behavior this book refutes many age old assumptions on what makes people “tick.”
- *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen M. Covey—This is one of my favorite books. Covey’s book lays out a plan for personal effectiveness that can enhance one’s personal as well as professional life. I reread this book from time to time and each time I discover a new idea or insight.

Mark Twain once said that, “The person who does not read good books has no advantage over the person who cannot read them.” Today’s business environment is highly competitive and to succeed we need to constantly improve our skills and our knowledge. The most effective way to maintain our competitive edge is to read widely and deeply, filling our minds with the information we need to inform and persuade our clients. While this is not a difficult task, it does require an investment of time. Committing to a daily business reading regimen is absolutely the best way to “turn a new page” in your career.

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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