

Behind the Business Book Show

Season 1 Episode 6: How to Craft Great Business Book Titles with Derek Lewis

Why is it important to craft a great title?

Business titles are all over the map. There are some bestsellers whose titles do a poor job of describing the book's content. At the other end of the scale, some books are completely clear, but never move off the shelf. Then there are books that don't have, really, that great of a title, but because the author did some fantastic marketing, the books were bestsellers.

How do you know you have a great book title?

The bottom line is this: a great title should be able to sell the book all by itself, without the person ever seeing the cover, knowing who the author is, or having been reached by any other kind of marketing.

If someone comes across just the title of the book, they hear it on the radio or the train, and they buy it based on the title alone, that is a successful title.

Are there any exceptions?

In looking at business books, you need to isolate the variable. For example, Seth Godin and Malcolm Gladwell, because they are so famous, already have great platforms, so it really doesn't matter what they name their books. Malcolm Gladwell's next book could be "Disparaging Hobgoblins", and it would be a number one bestseller. Not because of its title, but because of the author.

Then there are books that don't have, really, that great of a title, but because the author did some fantastic marketing, the books were bestsellers. For instance, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, by Rick Warren. The author wasn't well-known, but he became a bestseller through some really smart marketing.

Sometimes books are bestsellers because of factors other than the title.

So, a book may or may not fulfill its promise, but the title's purpose is to sell the book?

A title isn't supposed to convince me to implement what the author says. Its job is to grab my interest and ideally get me to buy the book.

Do authors and readers approach titles differently?

While an author writes their book from the inside out, the reader comes from the exact opposite. They start from the outside and work their way in.

This means your title, cover, and layout need to pique their interest. Then, your credentials and sales copy also have to do their job. So your reader has to go through all these elements before they actually get into the meat of your book.



How do you evaluate a book title when you're crafting it?

I use a hierarchy that builds one on top of the other, much like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I call this hierarchy the five Cs:

- **Clear** – your audience must understand what the book is about. There are between six and eleven thousand business books published every year; if a book title doesn't connect right away, we forget about it until we have to face that particular problem (the book solves) again. Examples: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *Writing Nonfiction*.
- **Compelling** – there has to be an emotional benefit, a promise of what the book is going to deliver. Examples: *Financial Peace*, *The 4-Hour Work Week*
- **Catchy** – if it's easy to say and remember so readers can easily recommend it. Use alliteration or rhyme if it works. Examples: *Good to Great*, *Built to Last*, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*
- **Clever** – be intriguing and unique, but don't sacrifice clarity for being clever. Examples: *Rework*; *Entreleadership*; *The Wizard of Ads*; *The War of Art*
- **Continuous** – set your book up for a series; if you can play off of the title of the previous book, those two titles will reinforce each other, and each book's title will help sell the other book. Examples; *The One Minute Manager*, then there was *The One Minute Entrepreneur*, *The One Minute Manager Meets the Monkey*, *How a Last Minute Manager Conquered Procrastination*; *The E Myth*, *The E Myth: Mastery*, *The E Myth in Real Estate*, *The E Myth in Law and Contracting*.

If you can accomplish the top three, you're in good shape.

What about subtitles?

Every business book should have a subtitle, or your title's wingman. It's not upfront, but it's there to reinforce your message. It's there to back up the main guy and to pick up the slack where he fails.

Examples:

- *Entreleadership: 20 Years of Practical Business Wisdom from the Trenches*
- *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9 to 5, Leave Anywhere, and Join the New Rich*

What are some common pitfalls authors should avoid in creating the perfect business title?

1. Don't sacrifice clarity or compelling promise just to be clever. If it doesn't sell the book, then your cleverness wasn't really that smart.
2. Avoid using industry-specific jargon. Although your title should clearly speak to your audience, it shouldn't speak to them to the exclusivity of everyone else.
3. Don't oversell your book. Don't use void, meaningless or empty, words. Your title needs to pack a punch. That punch needs to have some serious strength behind it.

What's your process for brainstorming business titles?

1. I, along with the client, come up with at least 100 to start. We do it over several sittings, so it could take days, weeks or even months.
2. Don't worry about whether the title works or not. Don't self-edit at this stage; you have to work through some of the trash before you can really get to the gold. You may find your subtitle or even chapter headings, so it's wise to aim for that first 100.



3. Go back and evaluate your list using the five Cs. Put them through the test, making sure they pass all steps and at the very least, your best choice should at least be clear and compelling. Don't skip one criterion just because it fulfills some of those others. It's got to be clear, then compelling, then catchy, and if it's all three of those things, then you can get clever. If you can even find a way to make a series out of it, then you've done better than I usually do.

How do you make a title clear and compelling?

Promise the reader something. The most important words of your book are the ones on its cover. Spend time brainstorming and measuring its effectiveness because a great title can sell the book all by itself.

Episode references

[How to Potty Train a Toddler in a Week](#)
[Booked Solid](#)
[The 4-Hour Work Week](#)
[Writing Nonfiction](#)
[How to Win Friends and Influence People](#)
[Financial Peace](#)
[Death by Meeting](#)
[The One Minute Manager](#)
[Good to Great](#)
[Built to Last](#)
[Eat that Frog](#)
[The Fred Factor](#)
[Why We Buy](#)
[The Art of the Start](#)
[What Got You Here Won't Get You There](#)
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[Your Marketing Sucks](#)
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