Book 3:

Learning through scars

($3,000/month, late 2020)

Alex West

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Preface

Before we begin. A disclaimer.

1. Zero advice

Most advice is bullshit. Or someone trying to sell something.

So I'm not going to give you any advice in this book. I want that to be clear from the start.

You only learn by doing. Not by studying. Listening. Or even reading books like this one.

So when you're done, close this book and go build a business. Experiment. Try things. And learn.

2. I don't own any of these ideas

If you find that I'm talking about things that you have thought, said, or even written before, I believe you.

Don't be stupid like me, I sometimes get mad when that happens.

At the end of the day, you are reading this. So we are somewhat similar.

3. This is not a playbook

I made my first million in my late twenties. Worked at an MIT startup. Competed in Muay Thai, kickboxing and BJJ. Completed a marathon and a triathlon. Became part of a Cambridge research study. Invented software that helps people with epilepsy. Traveled the world. And even got to meet and have coffee with one of the inventors of the internet.

That's all true. But none of it was intentional.

I was and still am a total idiot. I just kept going and got lucky. You'll see that very clearly in these books.

Cause luck is a real factor. And if anyone tells you it's not, they are full of shit.

4. These books get better over time

I am not a professional author, that's easy to see.

But my writing has improved since I started.

So these books get better over time.

Hang in there.

5. Too personal, too much information

Finally, this book might become too personal at times.

You can skip those parts.

If you actually end up reading these books to completion, you will know me better than some of my closest friends.

Which is weird. I know. But hey, at least you can call me your friend. And I mean that.

Book a time and we can setup a virtual coffee.

So now, let's begin, my friend.

Table of contents

Introduction

I can smell freedom. It's close.

After many years of trying and failing, I finally had one good product and one good distribution channel.

Things were changing. Fast.

Now I was able to niche down. Escape competition. Double down. Surpass my salary. And quit my job.

Here is what happened.

Full Recap

From afar, everything looks nice, smooth and linear:

For example, this year:

- Q1: Found a good B2B product, CyberLeads
- Q2: Found a good distribution channel, organic social
- Q3: Doubled down, niched down and surpassed my salary
- Q4: Incorporated, doubled my salary and quit my job

But, as you'll see, reality wasn't smooth. It was very stressful. And it was a very tough and bumpy road.

2 Year Recap

In the two years before this, I launched and failed 19 different products in a row.

In my best month, I was able to reach $200/month.

Not enough to survive and eat.

So I had to throw in the towel and get a real job.

That is described in "Book 1".

Q1 Recap

At the beginning of the year, while at my new job, I launched CyberLeads out of the blue.

I had no idea it would succeed. I was expecting yet another failure.

To my surprise.. the launch was a success. I got paying customers and validated my product.

Which is ironic, since it was my simplest product. A monthly newsletter with every single startup that raised money.

That was halfway through Q1 of this year.

This is described in "Book 2".

Q2 Recap

For close to three months after that, I tried multiple distribution channels and failed misserably in all of them. It was depressing.

However, in April, I discovered what would be my main distribution channel.

A tweet of mine unexpectedly blew up on Twitter.

A few days later, someone posted a personal blog post of mine which blew up and went to the top on HackerNews.

At last, I had a good product and a good channel.

My product was CyberLeads. And my distribution channel was organic social and my personal brand.

They were not perfect. But they worked. And that's all I needed.

That was halfway through Q2 of this year.

This is also described in "Book 2".

Q3 & Q4

Here is the rest of the story. Q3 and Q4 of this year.

Doubling down. Niching down. Surpassing my salary. Quitting my job. And everything I learned in the process.

Ok, let's do this. Let's rewind the tape.

I have just found my product and distribution channel and I'm growing fast.

I'm off to the races.

Part 1: My new weapon

Without even knowing it, my subconscious mind was cooking and forming something new over the last few months and years.

All the scars and experiences I collected from:
- My 19 failed products
- My success with CyberLeads
- And all the books I read

They were all bubbling up and forming something.

A new way of learning.

Let me explain.

Learning through scars

Notice a pattern in Q1 and Q2 of this year?

Notice how I found a good product and a good channel?

You can reread "Book 2" if you need a refresher.

Spoiler alert, I got lucky. I could pretend and act like I knew what I was doing, but it would be a lie.

Many things I thought would work, didn't. And many things I did without expecting anything in return, worked.

We all wanna feel like we're smart. And that we understand exactly why things happened the way they did. Me too.

But sometimes we can't. And that's ok. Actually, it's more than ok. It's normal. The world is random and chaotic.

It took a lot of "unlearning" for me to accept this and feel comfortable in this feeling.

Probably just like you, I was taught in school and university to think "top-down", assuming the world is a deterministic environment that can be summarized in a book or a blackboard:

- Here are all the variables
- Find the solution in your head
- Then go implement it

Well, I admit I can't do that. I can't figure out how the world works. Everytime I've tried to do that I've failed and wasted years of my precious life.

What I do know how to do is "fuck around and find out". Move fast. Try things. Expose my ideas and creations to the real world. Get a scar. Reflect. Learn. And try again.

Do that enough times, and people will start calling you lucky. Which you are, but by design.

It's easier to become 10x luckier by increasing your exposure and shots on target, than it is to become 10x better at understanding and predicting the world.

No one cares about you

You may think that increasing your exposure to the real world to become luckier comes with downsides. It's true.

One of them is the extra attention. Even if it's in digital form.

It might sound great to blow up and go viral, but I was not ready for it. I got severe anxiety at first.

I wanted everything to stop.

The likes. The comments. The retweets. Even the emails notifying me that I got a new customer. I was overwhelmed and wanted to go back to normality.

Especially after being attacked personally on HackerNews for running a lead generation business as if I was the devil.

A few days later though, everything had stopped.

I visited HackerNews again. They were attacking some other company that day.

"Oh.. I see.. It's someone else's turn today."

Their attack towards me was not personal. They don't know me. They don't care about me. And they have forgotten about me already.

That thought was liberating. It meant that I could fail miserably, in public, without any fear.

You may be the hero of your own movie, but in everyone else's you are nothing but an extra. You appear and flash on their screen for a second, and then you're gone forever.

A new way of learning

Using my learnings above, I was able to create my new formula.

One that allowed me to move fast, acquire real knowledge and most importantly get me results.

My formula of learning was the following:

- You have to be constantly experimenting
- While exposing your ideas and creations to the real world
- While moving fast and having low expectations
- And remembering that no one cares about you

In other words, learning through scars.

Through this process, I learned more about business, life and the world in 1 year than I did the previous 10.

Part 2: Niching down

In the next few months, competition started to rise.

But I was able to niche down, escape competition and shine.

All by using my new way of learning. And having some luck.

Here's what happened.

Attracting competition

My new strategy was creating extra competition for me.

Who would have thought. Showing your ideas, creations, learnings and results to the world creates copycats.

People were copying my business and my marketing word for word. Comma for comma.

I hated it at first. Was terrified of competing.

Up until this time, my only experience with competition was fighting in Muay Thai and kick boxing.

And, sadly, that is the definition of a zero-sum game. One person wins. Another person loses. By design.

Often in humiliating fashion. You could get knocked out in front of your girlfriend or your mother, for example.

Thankfully that never happened to me.

But still, I was wired to avoid competition at all costs.

However, whether I liked it or not, I had entered a crowded market. I already had competitors going in, and to make matters worse, people had started copying me.

I ended up having severe anxiety again.

I felt like they were stealing food from my plate. I felt like they were blocking my way to financial freedom and achieving my dreams.

As time went on, however, I started realizing that competition has very little effect on our potential.

Especially if you're in a healthy market.

In my opinion, a healthy market is:

• A non winner-take-all market
• Where you see many players making the amount of money you aspire to make
• With products that you could realistically build, market and run by yourself

That's it.

If you are in a market like this, just keep going.

Competition is not scary

I started realizing that competition wasn't scary after all.

My thoughts on competition actually changed a lot.

Many times, it felt like I wasn't even competing with others that offered the exact same product as me.

I used to think that it was as simple as having a similar product.

Now I believe it's a combination of many things:
• The product
• The target customer
• The distribution channel
• The positioning
• The founders' goals and vision
• Etc

Let me explain.

For example, you and someone else might have identical products, let's say an email marketing tool.

Same tech stack. Same features. Same everything.

The only difference is in the positioning. On your homepage it says "Email Marketing For B2B Founders" and on their homepage it says

"Email Marketing For English Teachers".

Are you really competing? No.

Same applies to the distribution channel.

You could have identical products and identical positioning, let's say, targeting "SaaS Founders". But you are marketing through your personal brand on Twitter and they are marketing as a large company with Google Ads.

Are you really competing? Not really.

And so on and so forth.

Unless all elements overlap, you aren't competing 100%.

And even if they all do overlap, what are the odds of your marketing efforts overlapping, so much, so consistently, that you start losing customers to a competitor? I highly doubt it.

And how many customers could you lose? Enough to lose your sleep? Enough to shut you down? Enough to slow you down substantially? I highly doubt it.

99 times of of 100, your customers aren't even aware of your competitors. Only you're stressing about them so badly.

You are most probably competing with their time, manual labor, boredom and an excel sheet. Not the people you think of as your competitors.

And even if you were to be outcompeted so badly, you can always escape competition by merely changing one of the above elements and/or niching down.

Deciding to niche down

Should you niche down?

Honestly, I don't know.

In my case, I was getting a lot of questions like "how are you different to X/Y/Z?".

I didn't like that. But maybe I shouldn't have minded.

I also wanted to increase prices over time and become more boutique rather than drop them.

Whenever I would try to increase prices, even a little, I would get questions like "why are you more expensive than X/Y/Z?"

For me, as you will see, niching down and increasing prices worked out perfectly.

But having said that, I don't think that everyone should niche down. Or increase prices. Or anything really.

In some cases, staying generic could be better. In other cases, being the cheapest could be better.

The point is that there are no rules. It's about trying and seeing for yourself.

So don't listen to anyone. Including me.

Niching down in the real world

Most business gurus tell you to niche down from the start.

Define your ICP, for example Chiropractors, and then develop a unique product or service for them.

Sometimes they want you to go into crazy detail.

"Male, 40 year old chiropractor living in the suburbs of LA. He makes $200k/year, has 3 kids and is stressed out."

What a load of bullshit. Seriously.

How would you know that before even starting? By "conducting research"? The only valid answer here is "I'm copying someone that is already making a lot of money doing exactly the same".

And even in that case, how do you know if it aligns with your distribution channels? If you can reach them again and again? If you like working with them?

Well.. you don't.

I think the best analogy for niching down is fishing:

• Being generic is like fishing with a wide net.

• Niching down is like fishing with a speargun.

Of course you can catch bigger fish with a speargun (aka charge higher prices and convert them easier), but it's also a lot easier to miss.

It's so much easier to catch fish with a wide net.

Especially in the beginning, when you don't really know who is interested and who you're going after.

In my opinion, this is the best way to do it:

• Start by casting a wide net (aka be generic)

• Analyze the fish you have caught (aka analyze the data)

• If any fish is special, develop a speargun (aka niche down)

But what makes a fish special?

Special fish

Ok, so I caught my first couple batches of fish.

My customers were a mix of SaaS companies, Freelancers, Consultants, Agencies, Journalists, VCs, IndieHackers, Solopreneurs and random curious individuals.

Now I had some real data:

• Who is interested enough to pay?

• Who is willing to pay the most?

• Who stays the longest?

• Who has the best results?

• Who do I enjoy working with?

I also ran a couple of surveys but honestly the data was not that useful. The best data is "who actually paid".

I was lucky cause agencies won in every single category:

• They were the largest category of customers

• They were willing to pay the most

• They stayed the longest

• They were the most successful, one closed a $50k deal

• I loved working with busy founders, zero support

I also remember listening to a podcast a couple years ago on IndieHackers and someone was explaining that you ideally wanna sell a solution to someone's number one pain point.

Not number two. Not number three. Strictly number one. It takes your product from "nice to have" to "must have". It makes it super easy for them to whip out their card and pay.

I remember finding a huge poll and it showed exactly this: finding new clients is the number one pain point of agencies.

That was not the case with SaaS and other types of companies.

So the answer was obvious. Agencies.

A sad reality

I remember I used to think that money is a direct indicator of how much value you're providing to the world.

But now I believe that's wrong. It's how much value you are providing to rich people and businesses.

Even if it's not providing much value, just making them a little more successful, these people are willing to pay a lot of money for it. Because they have the money.

Sadly, it's not really about who "needs" your product the most. It's about who "wants" it, has the money and is willing to pay for it the most.

I knew this from Epilepsy Blocker. I remember trying to persuade people with epilepsy to install my tool and pay $5/month. But, although they "needed" it and was potentially life saving, they didn't "want" it or didn't have the money to pay even $5/month for it.

Also here, with CyberLeads, I remember thinking that freelancers and consultants "need" my product more than agencies. After all, one client had the potential to completely transform their lives for them and their families.

But freelancers and consultants didn't want it enough to pay for it, and especially not at the prices agencies were willing to pay.

So I realized the cold truth.

It's not about who you think "needs" your product. It's about who "wants" it, has the money and is willing to pay for it.

In my case the two were very close to each other, so I was happy. I was going to focus on agencies.

Part 3: Escaping competition

Unknowingly, somewhere in June, I escaped all competition and took CyberLeads to new heights.

I didn't outcompete anyone. I didn't disrupt any market.

I just made a few small changes.

Little did I know that I escaped all competition.

New tagline

I simply changed my positioning by changing the tagline on my landing page, specifying that my product was for agencies.

From "Find fast growing startups to do business with" to "Find new clients for your agency".

That's it.

Social proof and testimonials

I collected testimonials from agencies that closed big deals and added them to the landing page.

A $50k deal here. A $25k deal there. A $10k deal elsewhere.

The landing page looked amazing.

I was so proud of CyberLeads now. It looked amazing and legit, even though initially I felt it was too boring and simple.

I actually started thinking of boring as cool.

I calculated that my customers had made in total more than I had made with CyberLeads.

Which felt morally correct.

Increased prices

With my targeted language and social proof, I was able to increase my prices again and again.

Doubled my prices. Then tripled them. Quadrupled them. Conversions kept going up at the same time.

It was amazing. I could not believe it.

A single tiny feature

After niching down, it was easier to improve the product and positioning as I had a clear target customer.

But again, things are simpler than you think.

This was months after changing the tagline and increasing my prices. Up until this point, I didn't add a single feature.

The only thing that was different between me and my competitors was the copy on my homepage.

Now I built one feature. Specific to agencies.

Nothing fancy, just an extra column to the newsletter that was called "Likely to outsource" and had values like "Design", "Development", "Marketing", etc.

For every startup that had just raised millions, you could see what they were likely to outsource to an agency.

I did this manually, one by one, while compiling the list.

That's it.

The results

The amount of people asking me "how are you different to X/Y/Z and why are you more expensive than X/Y/Z" went to down to zero.

Zero. Actually zero. Listen to me man, zero.

And conversions kept going up even as I doubled and then tripled my prices.

Just by making little tweaks and changes.

So don't worry, you don't have to be crazy different at first.

Tweak the copy. Maybe build a single feature. That's it.

Worst case scenario, it doesn't work out and you revert. Big deal.

Best case scenario, you escape competition, narrow your focus, and shine.

A crazy conversation

I'll never forget this story from the early days.

It was the first week after launching Cyberleads. I was at $300 MRR and someone was interested in subscribing.

It was an agency owner. I think he was from Canada.

He wanted to talk on the phone and ask me a few questions before committing to the $29/month plan.

Looking back, feels crazy that I accepted. But this was huge for me, a potential 10% growth if I closed him. So I accepted and gave him my number.

I was still working at my full time job. At lunch break, I went to the little park opposite the street.

Phone starts ringing. My heart is racing.

Before picking up the phone, I'm thinking:

"Fuck.. he might realize that I actually have no sophisticated systems with AI collecting the data, cleaning it, no team to verify it, nothing. It's just silly old me collecting a list of leads, one by one, by hand."

In those seconds, I kinda remembered Jason Cohen's amazing talk on called "Designing the ideal bootstrapped business". This talk was one of the main reasons I felt it was a good idea to niche down in the first place.

He argues that you should try to run your online business like a boutique, not a supermarket.

Only for a few people. High prices. Exceptional service.

"Fuck it. I'll flip it 180 degrees and own it."

I pick up the phone with confidence and we start talking.

- "Listen to me man, this is not another one of those platforms with a bunch of outdated and wrong leads collected by robots, that thousands of other companies are bombarding with spam every single day.

These are all exclusive, brand new leads that are updated, verified and handpicked one by one by a human. Me, actually."

He was impressed.

- "Damn, that's what I thought. To be honest, it sounded a bit too good to be true for $29/month, so I just wanted to check in and see that this is for real and not a scam. Ok, I'll subscribe right away, I love this."

Boom. Closed.

I go back to my desk. High on adrenaline. Feeling like Pablo Escobar with the deal I just slinged.

I start replaying the conversation in my head...

"Wait a minute.. did he just say that he didn't subscribe because it was too cheap? And that if it was more expensive, he would have subscribed without hesitation?"

What the hell? This is so counter intuitive. But I guess if I wanna be a boutique business, I need to have boutique prices.

Weaknesses to strengths

Through positioning and pricing, I started realizing that it's not about what you do. It's about how you do it.

• I always felt bad that I had a simple newsletter and not a sophisticated platform.
• I always felt bad that it was just me and not an actual startup team.
• I always felt bad that I was collecting the leads every month by hand and not using high tech AI software that no one else could build.

But after this conversation, I realized that these could be my strengths. I could use them to my advantage.

• Newsletters are simple, better than a bloated overcomplicated platform. Takes 10 seconds to setup.
• The fact that I'm not a big company with thousands of customers means that my leads are exclusive.
• Collecting the leads by hand means that the leads are up to date and manually verified, no other platform can promise this.

So, remember this. Maybe your weaknesses are your strengths. It's a matter of perspective and confidence.

There are no recipes

As you can see, again, positioning and pricing were a matter of trial and error.

Did I know if niching down was a good idea? No. I was open to reverting and becoming generic again.

Did I know that conversions would go up as I increased prices? No. I was actually expecting the opposite.

Did I know that agencies would be the best kind of customers? No. I was actually expecting SaaS or Freelancers initially.

Did I know that the handpicked angle would work? No. That random conversation was the inspiration for it.

Did I know that a single new feature would kill it? No. It was a random idea.

People were starting to ask for my advice.

"You want advice from ME? I have no fucking idea what I'm doing. Let alone what you should be doing."

Looking back, everything can make sense. And luck can be confused with skill, and vice versa.

Luckily for me, I have my daily blog and these books.

I can send people here, or revisit them myself and remember how lost I was.

Of course, I have caught myself giving advice as if I know what's up, but I try to avoid it.

The problem is that we always looking for recipes. We love following step by step guides.

"Ok, so I'll do this, and then that will happen."

But I've never found a step by step guide that has worked for me out of the box.

And I've never had a competitor copy me and have success. Every single one of them quit after a few weeks or months.

They built identical products. They tried the same distribution channels. They studied my revenue numbers. They read my blog. They even started speaking and writing in a similar way.

But every single one of them failed. Why? I don't know. Maybe the stars didn't align for them. Who knows.

You can't follow recipes and expect specific results.

Recipes do not exist.

There are no funnels

An important point when it comes to experimenting and coming up with your own recipes.

The results are not immediate. The results are usually a lagging indicator.

Contrary to popular belief and business gurus, I believe that funnels don't exist.

They are made up by professional marketers that are trying to make their job a science. When it's not.

This is what a customer journey is supposed to look like:

- User ends up on landing page
- User fills out a form
- User is added to a list
- User is sent an email

• Follow ups
• On follow up number 3, user buys

But this is what actually happens in the real world:

• User checks out your product
• Forgets about it
• User sees your product again 6 months later
• Leaves their email, forgets about it
• User has a conversation with a friend and randomly mentions your product. But he is currently moving houses, so he has other life priorities at the moment
• User checks their inbox 2 months later, tells themselves they will buy it, forgets about it
• User sees your product 1 month later on Twitter, buys it

Meanwhile, a day before he converted, you made small changes to your emails and homepage copy.

You're 100% sure that that's what triggered the conversion.

Funnels and orbits

A cool analogy is that there are no funnels, only orbits.

You can't make people buy.

All you can do is keep them in your orbit by showing them what you do and staying top of mind.

Again and again and again.

And one day, maybe they and decide they want to buy.

You cannot persuade anyone to do anything.

Part 4: Surpassing my salary

Things were growing fast.

Prices were going up. And with my new positioning, conversions were going up at the same time.

It was amazing.

But my MRR was swinging wildly.

I realized that MRR is a mirage. People don't stay forever. They churn. And it's hard to beat churn.

At the end of the day, I want to make money. Not MRR.

I started focusing on revenue.

It was a game changer.

Annual plan

I started experimenting with annual plans.

I calculated how much I make per customer:
• They pay me $49/month to $99/month
• They stay 2-4 months on average
• So I make $150 on average

I decided to offer an annual plan for $299/year.

I make double the amount of money. I make it all upfront. And customers feel like it's a steal.

People loved this plan. It was very popular.

I surpass my salary this way. Which is not that hard to do cause my salary was $2k/month.

I suppose that's the benefit of having a low salary and not living in a country like the US.

Surpassed my salary again the following month. And the month after that.

Life is good. Making around $3k/month from CyberLeads, and another $2k/month from my day job.

I am pinching myself every single day.

All I have to do is keep going and not burn out.

Don't fuck this up.

Building my systems

I always thought that businesses run like clocks. That they have bullet proof systems, that run perfectly and predictably.

Now I realize that isn't true. Every business is a shit show behind the scenes.

And especially in the early stages, that's ok.

All you need is traction.

My business doesn't have bulletproof or predictable systems. I feel like everything is barely holding on with duck tape, and that one day the whole thing will fall apart.

Funnily enough though, things have been improving consistently.

Maybe this is what running a company feels like.

You just find something that works well and keep doing it. Again and again. Until you find the next thing that works.

For example, my entire business is this:

- A landing page with a checkout button
- A manual method of collecting and compiling the list
- Sending the list to my customers on the 1st of the month

• Tweeting so I get more people to find out about my product

That's it.

So stupid.

But if it works, it's actually smart. Even if it's not as scientific, predictable or sophisticated as you would like.

Keeping things simple

Things are as complicated as we want them to be.

I see many people tracking growth percentages at decimal level. Tracking conversion rates. Bounce rates. Designing elaborate funnels.

And I've also been part of design meetings where grown adults discuss for hours what the color of a specific button should be.

I used to overcomplicate things as well. I was spinning my wheels and wasn't really getting anywhere.

One day, however, I read another one of Jason Cohen's blog posts. He talks about running his $100M/yr company focusing mainly on one metric. He calls it their "north star".

Seriously, you should read his blogs. They are a goldmine.

"Wait, so people are running $100M/year businesses focusing on one metric, and I'm here focusing on five?!"

As I said, I started tracking the one metric that matters. Revenue.

And the one metric that has the biggest impact on revenue. Traffic.

All the rest, as long as things are going fine, fuck them.

Focusing on distribution

With my limited time and energy, I decided to focus on marketing and distribution.

I always used to think that having "product-market-fit" was everything. From there on, everything would be easy.

Now I disagree. It's missing the most crucial part of the equation. Distribution.

Want an idea with the notorious product market fit? Here are a few. Don't worry, I'll give them to you for free.

A competitor to Notion. Airtable. Webflow. Jira. Salesforce. Slack. The list goes on and on.

Basically every single company that is doing great, is making a lot of money and is not in a winner take all market.

Yes, building things people don't want is the number one reason businesses fail. Don't ask me how I know it.

But if you just copy a successful product and enter a healthy market, the hard thing isn't finding an idea in demand. Or even building it.

The hard thing is consistently finding new customers.

And for that you need a solid distribution channel.

And the bad thing is that unless you already have a distribution channel up and running, you will have to build it from scratch. And that will take a loooooong time.

For example, it took me over two years to build up my Twitter account. And most other distribution channels take time also.

My competitors didn't give up due to lack of product market fit. My product that they copied had that.

They gave up because they didn't get enough traction.

So anyway, I was low on energy and time and could only focus on one thing, so I focused on this.

All into distribution and marketing.

Perfection does not exist

I decided to fully embrace CyberLeads and keep going.

The same way perfection does not exist in nature or life, it doesn't exist in business either.

This is perhaps my biggest lesson of the year.

Instead of trying to bend the universe to my will, just go with the flow.

A few examples:

• I always wanted to build a unique and sexy product that would be my passion. This year I decided that it's easier to just build something I know people find useful already, make money and then pursue my hobbies without the need to milk them and make money out of them.

• I always wanted to have an impact and make the world a better place through my work. This year I decided that it's easier to do something simple, make money and give a percentage of my income to charities.

• I always wanted to cater to the people that need my product the most, so I can deliver the most value. This year I decided that it's easier to cater to the people that can afford it and want it the most.

But even now, after all those compromises, my business is still far from perfect.

• Social is my main acquisition channel, which is unstable.
• I'm in a market with very high churn.
• My revenue is wild and fluctuates.

• My growth is not as smooth as I would like it to be.
• People compete with me all the time.
• I make myself vulnerable by sharing all my numbers and strategies.

In a perfect world, I would like to have predictable, scalable systems that work while I sleep.

Be in market with super low churn and customer lock in. Have SEO for customer acquisition. Have smooth, predictable, stable growth. Have MRR as my main metric.

But we don't live in a perfect world.

I have to adjust my sails to the wind, not adjust the weather.

As long as things are improving, keep going.

Business is counter intuitive

Finally, I accepted that things may feel uncomfortable and counter intuitive at times. But that's life.

It actually blew my mind how counter intuitive running an internet business, and life in general, can be.

I could go on forever, but here are a few things that come to mind.

• When ideating, don't keep your idea secret. Not only won't people steal it, but their feedback will help you improve it.

• When building, don't be a perfectionist. Not only it won't matter to your user, but you are probably making your product worse.

• When growing, share revenue numbers. You may get copied, but you will grow faster and inspire others. And, by the way, the internet is usually big enough for another player.

• When talking to customers, don't pretend to be a company. Being a one man team is a super power. You can connect to others easily.

Especially to fellow founders.

• When scaling, stick to one distribution channel. You may be missing out on other channels, but it's better to be great at one than average everywhere.

• When analyzing, stick to one metric. It's better to turn the screw that will make your business fly rather than turn all the screws a little bit.

• When growing, niche down to a specific segment of the market. Yes, it might be a smaller piece of the pie, but you can be the best and take advantage of power laws.

• When competing, ignore everyone and focus only on yourself. Focusing on things you cannot control is the definition of insanity.

• When executing, don't be afraid to fail and look stupid. Remember that no one cares about you, anyway.

It's hard for us monkeys to grasp the ideas of a "positive sum game", the vast scale of the internet or that people don't care about us. But we should try our best.

At times it felt like skiing on thin ice, but I kept going.

Part 5: Managing stress

Things were going great.

But not gonna lie, I was stressed out of my mind.

It was the most stressful year of my life.

I was on the brink. Some days I thought I was going crazy.

Ancient texts

Thankfully, an awesome book I read helped me a lot.

It's called "Enchiridion of Epictetus" and it's an ancient, 2000 year old greek text on the principles of Stoicism.

The main thesis of the book is that all things in life fall in one of two categories.

And it's not what you'd expect:
• Good things
• And bad things.

It's actually:
• Things you can control
• And things you can't

Focusing on the things you can control, while letting go of the things you cannot control, is the key to a happy life.

Focusing on what you cannot control is the definition of insanity.

So simple. Borderline cliche. But if you can actually drill it into your brain, it's life changing.

Super practical philosophy for entrepreneurship too, when you're up and down the rollercoaster.

Another thing that helped me manage my stress was exercise. Hard, physical exercise.

More on that later.

Doing hard things

Bro science incoming.

Regardless of your status, situation, or what happens in your life, I believe you'll always have some kind of stress.

We might be apex predators at the moment thanks to our intellect. But biologically speaking, we are also prey.

And prey survives by being sensitive to it's environment and therefore being easily stressed.

So, in part, our bodies are designed to feel stressed.

Even if you were crowned a prince tomorrow, you'd be stressed. Who knows, probably even more than now.

Now, this is my theory: I feel like there is a fixed amount of stress we HAVE to feel in our lives. Regardless of our environment.

And our bodies interpret most types of stress the same way. Whether you are looking for food in the savanna, running to catch a bus in the city, or going for a long run in the park. Same biochemistry.

It doesn't matter to your body the source of your stress. Physical, or mental. It doesn't care. Your glands are your glands.

What that means, is that you can fill up those "daily slots of stress" with hard physical exercise. Anyway, that's what I do and it makes the rest of the world seem easy and less stressful.

Also, I feel like doing hard things translates into other areas of your life. When I see a triathlete running a successful business, it makes sense to me.

How can that grit and perseverance not translate into other parts of your life?

Consistency and habits

I tried my best to do the most important things every day, despite life being chaotic with my day job.

I cannot make someone subscribe. I cannot make a competitor quit. But I can focus on the inputs that lead to that.

Mainly, focus on marketing. And being healthy.

I've noticed that when I do that, things always turn around. Whether it's straight away or with a small delay. Whether it's the way I expected or in some other unexpected way.

You put in the work, and then you get rewarded. It's happened too many times now to ignore.

A little notebook where I keep track of my habits has helped me with this.

It's a yearly calendar. Every day I write in green the things I did or did not do.

For example:

- Woke up early
- Wrote daily blog
- Tweeted
- Read book
- Run
- Etc

Not too many. Just things you want to do every day.

If I do one of them, I'll write it in green. Else, in red.

Funnily enough, your monkey brain will try to make the pages green.

Of course I missed some days. I'm not a robot. But it really helped.

Not my idea, it's from Atomic Habits. Awesome book.

Comfort zones expand

Everytime something happened and I experienced a lot of stress, I wanted everything to stop and go back to normality.

However, as soon as I got back to normality, I got bored and wanted stress that again.

And when it would happen again, it felt like nothing.

First time I went viral, I couldn't sleep for two days. A few months later, I replicated the same thing three times in a row and it felt like nothing.

First time I appeared on a podcast, I was terrified. Now, it's easy, I don't even prepare.

First time I was copied, I was stressed, scared and angry. Now, it doesn't mean anything.

And so on and so forth.

This is to show that we can become much more than we think.

Maybe the scariest things in the world aren't so scary.

Being worried vs being excited

One last thing on stress.

It's normal that the chaos of the world makes us feel worried about the future.

- So many things could go wrong. Right?

- But so many things could go right too!

The interesting thing about being worried and being excited is that they are very similar feelings.

Actually, you can trick yourself to feel excited instead of worried.

This was my biggest hack when I used to compete. While warming up, I was terrified and questioning why I'm doing this. I would always tell myself that this was my last fight.

Then, to feel better, I would brainwash myself:

"Man, I cannot wait to get in there! I'm so excited! This is what I love to do! I'm so happy! Let's get going! Come on already!"

Of course it was a lie. I was scared of being KO'd.

But it works if you really say it like you mean it.

So, maybe. Just maybe.. Instead of worrying all our lives, we can be excited all your lives?

Part 6: Bring it home baby

After all these years, I can't believe it.

I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

I am surpassing my salary again and again.

I think I'll make it.

The ceiling

This past summer, a friend of mine asked me where I think the ceiling is for CyberLeads. I paused for a second and thought about it.

"I think there is no ceiling for CyberLeads. Realistically, I think I am the ceiling."

The market is big. It supports many multi million dollar businesses. For someone like me, a million dollars is the sky.

This puts me in a very special place. I am the ceiling of my company, so in order to grow it, I have to grow myself.

I see no reason for it to stop growing, as long as I keep moving forward and improving.

Improve my ability to market it. Position it. Scale it. Design it. Improve it. Simplify it. Explain it. And continue making noise and putting myself out there.

Nothing else really matters. All the things I used to stress about, didn't matter.

• People duplicated my website word for word.
• People tried my distribution channels and strategies.
• People read my blog and started talking like me to promote their similar product.
• Other competitors ran ads against my name.
• Other competitors were inspired, put a twist to it, and tried to be better than me.
• I was skinned alive on HackerNews and called every name under the sun for running a lead generation company.
• One list was leaked and uploaded on the internet for free.

All these seemed like end game to me a year ago.

Now I understand that they mean nothing.

External factors don't matter as much as I thought.

You matter more.

Compound growth and linearity

Up until this year, I thought that the default growth curve of most things is linear.

I think this was also instilled in me from school. If I'm doing things right, I should see immediate and consistent results. And things should grow consistenly and linearly.

I used to read about people blooming late and about compound growth, but used to think it's a rare phenomenon.

And frankly, I thought it was wishful thinking. I felt sorry for myself watching or listening to podcasts about it.

So much so, that I would turn down the volume, even if I was alone in the house.

"Sure.. I've failed 10+ times trying to build a successful business, and you're telling me to trust the process?

Pff.. You just got lucky, mate. And maybe I'm just plain stupid."

Luckily, the same thing kind of thing happened to me as well.

A few years in, things have started to take off. And that's one of the reasons I'm writing these books.

Linearity is a myth, guys. Most people that post success stories are omitting their ugly pasts.

I've seen too many people that started at the same time as me quit somewhere along the way.

I'm starting to believe that most things in life compound. Relationships. Business. Skills. Investments. Complexity. Love.

From now on, I'm only going to be investing my time and efforts into things that interest me and compound.

Mastery, books and nuances

They say it takes decades to reach any kind of mastery, in anything. Because true wisdom is hidden in the nuances.

Sorry for yet another fighting analogy, but I know for sure it's true for this.

In fighting, the fundamentals are everything. A jab, a cross and a left hook can take you a long way. Even to a world championship.

But the nuances are what really take you there. Knowing when to throw each attack. Controling the distance. Mixing up tempos. The timing. The faints. The counters. The setups. The mentality. Your fight IQ.

And those nuances are only discovered in the fire. You can study tape, shadow box, hit the bag and the pads all you want. Practice fancy long combinations, slipping and countering imaginary strikes. But if you don't actually try the techniques in the ugly and real environment of a hard spar or a fight, you don't know if they work.

They could be complete bullshit. Usually they are.

Books are great too. But nuances cannot be explained in books either. Even in this one. So when you're done, close this book and go build a business.

You have to learn by failing almost every little, greasy step of the way.

And progress won't be linear either. Things will be slow, then some key breakthrough moments will come when you least expect them.

At least that's how it was for me.

All we can do is trust the process. If we work on the right things and are a little bit lucky, it will be worth it.

Appendix

What a ride. Went from a generic product, to niching down, escaping competition and increasing my prices.

Managed to surpass my salary and now I'm ready to quit my job.

I'm pinching myself every single day.

It's happening.

It's a philosophy class

Running a business is so much more than just making money.

You are tested daily. You have to grow personally. You have to have skin in the game and expose yourself to the world.

Be critiqued. Have competitors. Feel stressed. Endure the ups and downs. Accept that everything could come down crumbling. Accept that the results are not in your hand.

Your ethics, morals, patience and ego also have to be in check.

Sure. It's harder than just working for someone else.

But it makes you grow and feel alive.

What's next?

I'm about to quit my job to go full time on CyberLeads.

I'm going to write about it in detail in my next book.

Now I'm in the process of designing my ideal lifestyle.

It's tricky, because I want to keep things simple, and I also don't want to fall in the trap of working on my business all day.

The whole reason I started this journey was freedom.

Now that I have it, let's see if I'll be able to handle it.

Or if I'll crush under the pressure of having zero constraints.

Time travel

Hey. This is Alex from the future writing this.

I decided to clean up and re-post these blog posts as books.

Nothing changed. Even if I disagree nowadays with things that I said back then.

These books are for free.

But if you enjoyed them, you can do the following:

• Share it on X or LinkedIn

• DM me on X and we can set up a virtual coffee

Or don’t. It’s ok.

Thank you for reading.

Credits

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Constantly updating this list.