

**Book 6:**

**Breaking the frame**

**(\$6,000/month,  
year 4)**

**Alex West**

## **Not Business Advice**

How I made a million from my personal projects

## **Book 6: Breaking the frame**

(\$6,000/month, year 4)

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## **Introduction**

It's been almost a year since I quit my day job.

And I'm living the dream. Waking up without an alarm clock. Having free time. Enjoying life and exploring new hobbies.

But at the same time, I'm agitated. I'm not sure why.

I've been trying to build a second channel for CyberLeads.

But I can't do it. I have to keep on trying.

All I need is to grow one more order of magnitude. Go from the \$1,000s per month to the \$10,000s per month.

Then I will have changed my life forever.

## **Part 1: The hard way**

It's 1AM. Normally I should be in bed by this time.

But some dude just sold a picture of a rock for \$1M. Another guy launched an AI company and is making \$1M/year. And a teenager bought a crypto coin and made \$300k in the past few months.

Am I doing things wrong?

From my point of view, it feels like I'm riding a rocketship. I've completely transformed my life in the last 2 years.

But now I'm worried I'm choosing the hard way.

## **Database experiment**

I decided to make a bold change.

Turn CyberLeads into a database. A SaaS platform.

It felt like a better business model and it also aligned perfectly with the Google strategy I had been building for the past year.

It took a month to build. And I ran the experiment for two weeks.

## **Pandora's box**

For almost two weeks, nothing happened. Even though with the newsletter would get 1-2 new customers every week.

Then, on the last day of the experiment, on Sunday, I finally got my first customer.

I received the notification while I was walking and looking for a restaurant to sit down and eat.

I got excited. It was going to be an amazing day.

A few minutes later, however, it started. The angry support messages started flying in.

The customer was very confused as to how the database worked. He was mostly interested in the latest startups that raised money and was asking how often I update the database. In other words, he was interested in something like the newsletter I used to offer.

He also stumbled upon a bug and was angry about it. He made it clear.

## **Reality check**

The waiter comes to our table. Throats clearing, fingers tapping, quiet humming, everyone is waiting for me to order.

I'm completely glued to my phone.

The girl I was with ordered for both of us. I could tell the waiter was looking at me confused.

Eventually, after a long conversation with the customer, I give up. I reply to him and tell him that I will refund him when I get home.

I put the phone down and at last lift my head.

I take a deep breath and smile.

Ahhh...

What an idiot.

I'm so lucky to be running a newsletter.

## **Honest assessment**

After going home and killing the database, I felt completely sober and clear. It felt like a good time to look at my SEO again.

I was certain that this would be my next lever of growth.

But after a whole year of iterating and working on it, giving it my everything, here are my results.

After 12 months, 1 million impressions and tens of thousands of visitors, I got 5 customers.

Sometimes I get 5 customers from one good tweet.

I also realized that I grew by \$1k/month since quitting my job.

I think I could have grown the same if I just worked for 10 minutes per day to schedule a tweet.

I think it was all pretend work.

## **Sirens**

I thought that I had killed my perfectionism, but it always finds a way to disguise itself and find me again.

This time I told myself I was responsible. I was eliminating my final single point of failure by building a second channel. And that second channel would also be my the next lever of growth.

I decided that SEO was going to be that channel. And at last I was going to have a safe, stable and scalable business.

I was tricked. Again. And once again, I was lost.

It was a beautiful song.

## **Part 2: Shotgun**

I open my cabinet and bring out my good old friend. The shotgun.

Time to look for the next lever of growth. Run many experiments, fast and with low expectations. And don't fall in love with anything.

Stop thinking top down. Stop trying to be clever. Artist mode. Anything goes.

## **Upsells**

The first experiment I ran was building a dashboard where CyberLeads customers could log in and manage their subscription.

They could view all their lists, purchase older lists from the backlog or even upgrade to an annual plan.

But no one bought any lists or upgraded their subscription.

Then, I decided to start offering custom lists.

Either in a specific location. A specific industry. A specific funding stage. Or a combination of the above.

But I only had 1 sale in the span of months.

Finally, I tried to make it harder for people to cancel by asking them questions, offering them bundles and discounts before they cancel.

Didn't work either.

## **Affiliates**

A year ago I made an affiliate partnership with a friend. It helped me double my salary and quit my job.

Since then, I have tried to replicate this strategy with others and with my friend again but it has failed.

I reached out to people running agency and founder communities and even added a self-signup affiliate partnership deal on my website, offering a fair 50/50 split.

A few months later, I had more than 100 affiliate partners.

However, from these 100 partners, only 4 of them brought any customers, and only one of those brought more than 3.

Dealing with their constant emails, questions and requests, while also sending their commissions manually every month were the biggest pains in the ass, so I killed the program.

## **Lead magnets**

I decided to create free lists and post them on Reddit and Twitter.

I would give the list free of charge, in exchange for the details of people that were interested and could keep them in my orbit.

These posts did very well and hundreds of people accessed the lists, but almost no one bought. I think one person did after months of conversations and then canceled straight away.

It was a reverse filter. I was attracting beginner freelancers that were never intending to spend a single dollar.

They had a million questions, feedback and critiques. But no money.

## **Agency interviews**

I thought it might be a great idea to start a podcast interviewing agency founders.

I messaged a few agencies from my list and offered to interview them.

I was surprised how easy it was, everyone wants to tell their story. And everyone has a cool story.

However, I recorded a few video episodes but I didn't enjoy it that much. The scheduling, preparation and even the calls themselves were not that pleasant. I felt like a radio host.

I could not see me doing this long term.

## **Back to square one**

I decided to challenge everything. Even my decision to niche down to agencies, which up to this point I was so confident about.

Simple question. Why not triple the number of people I can sell to by going broad again?

I know I niched down to agencies in the past and had great success, but what if I was simply fooled by randomness?

You cannot split test reality, maybe I would've made more money if I had ignored competition and had never niched down.

I tried going generic again but my conversions dropped to the floor. I was happy. If this had worked out I think I would have gone crazy.

## **Agency partnerships**

I decided to start talking to some of my customers in order to brainstorm with them.

I asked them how they find clients. And I realize that most agencies get clients through referrals.

I knew that already. But what I didn't know is that not all referrals come through friends or past colleagues.

Some come through other agencies. They partner up and send clients to each other in exchange for a commission.

Wait a minute. I have a network with hundreds of agencies and I could connect them to each other.

So I have started making intros. It's part of the subscription now.

We'll see if this works over the next few months.

## **The next lever of growth**

This is it. How I found the next lever of growth.

The lever that will take me from the \$1,000s per month, to the \$10,000s per month. Maybe even \$100,000 per month.

Who would have guessed that this new lever of growth would

present itself to me in this form.

So many books read. So many podcasts listened to. So many experiments ran. So much writing and introspection. So many walks thinking, strategizing and brainstorming.

Yet, it came through a casual chat with a reader of my blog.

One morning I opened my inbox and I found an email from Vic.

He had bootstrapped a software company to over \$1M/year and was now running a VC backed startup. He explained that he had been reading my blog for years and suggested we have a chat.

I accepted. Why not. He seemed like a cool and friendly guy.

Plus, at the time, someone running a million dollar company seemed like a demi-god to me.

## **Million dollar question**

During our chat, Vic asked me a simple question.

*"So why do your customers unsubscribe?"*

*"Well.. I actually have a little form with a few questions when people cancel their subscription. And almost all of them are saying the exact same thing. That they don't have the time to setup everything and send the emails. Or they don't know how to do it."*

*"Then why don't you send the emails for them?"*

*"..."*

I didn't know what to say. Such a simple question.

He also explained that he was currently paying a company \$2k/month to do this for him. Send emails on his behalf for his new startup.

I had never thought about it. I didn't say anything. I felt so dumb.

Finally, I snapped out of it and explained that I don't want to run a service business with clients. That I only want to work on things that are scalable and don't require me to trade my time for money.

And the call ended somewhat like that.

But the seed was planted.

## **True work vs Pretend work**

This is what true work looks like.

Just for fun, I decided to play with the above idea.

I sent out an email to my customers. I said that I could either refer them to an agency or send the emails for them.

Eight people replied saying that they are interested. Usually I would get one reply to these experiments if I was lucky.

Had a meeting with one of them.

They wanted to work with me so referring them elsewhere wouldn't work.

They said that they had been following me for years and were customers for a long time. They said that they trusted me. We had conversations through email. I had sent them a welcoming present. Replied to every email from them. And so on.

I dropped a crazy price of \$2k/month just to see what they would say.

They accepted instantly.

Holy fuck. This could be huge.

### **Part 3: Going against my instincts**

So I'm not following any new trends. I'm not pivoting into SaaS. And I'm not even solving my last single point of failure with SEO.

On the contrary, I'm thinking of starting a service business.

This feels like moving in the wrong direction.

#### **The first call**

I close my laptop and take a deep breath. I just signed my first client.

We agreed to start working together at the beginning of the new year.

Before the sales call, I was stressed. Jumping up and down my room, shadowboxing and rehearsing what I'm gonna say.

After all, I was planning to casually ask someone to pay me \$2k/month for something I've never done before.

I felt impostor syndrome, but for the first time I tried to treat it like a compass. It meant I was pushing the limits of what I can do.

The call couldn't have gone better. After we were done, I felt insane relief. Endorphins. And a feeling of victory.

I decided to go for a little walk to digest what just happened. It was a massive milestone.

I felt euphoric. But somehow, I didn't like this feeling.

A few days later, the client asked for me to prepare a contract. I said yes. And then I procrastinated on it for days.

It looked like a mini employment contract.

I didn't like this either.

## **Nowhere left to hide**

Over the next few days, I closed another two clients at \$1,500/month.

I wasn't sure I liked it. But it was completely blowing my mind.

I always thought that software businesses were superior to service businesses.

But it took me 4 years to go from zero to \$5k/month with SaaS products. And 1 week to reach \$5k/month with my service.

I always thought that scaling meant laying foundations for a future explosion. Systems that could grow without me.

But now I doubled my business with a few manual emails and calls.

I always thought that scaling meant setting up things in a way to be able to have unlimited amount of customers and scale infinitely.

But now I am thinking that scaling is simply taking your revenue to the next level. Just one step. And that I don't care about infinite scaling, \$1M/year has always been end game for me anyway.

I always thought that I had to pick a lane. Product or service. Scalable or manual.

But now I'm seeing that this messy hybrid model might actually be

the answer I was looking for.

Finally, I always thought that trading my time for money was selling my soul to the devil.

But now I'm seeing that I have been working all day long on my "passive income" business. So how much worse can it get?

### **The answer I didn't want to hear**

Things were moving fast. It felt familiar. Similar to when I launched CyberLeads and found Twitter 2 years ago.

It's November. And we have signed and agreed to start with all of them in January.

I want some time to think about it and they also don't want to start new marketing activities at the end of the year.

I spent weeks walking up and down the sea front, stressed out of my mind, thinking.

What if my life becomes a disaster? What do I even know about running a service business? Do I even know how I'm going to do this? What if I can't handle all the work? Do I have to hire people? I don't want to be anyone's boss. I hated every boss I ever had.

I called everyone I know and trust to ask for their advice. After I was done talking, everyone kept telling me the exact same thing.

*"Alex, just follow the fucking money."*

I hated that answer.

## **Ariadne's thread**

I decided to imagine the different outcomes.

What happens if I succeed? And what happens if I fail?

Well, if I succeed, I'm at a point where I don't have to worry about money anymore. Literally.

And if I fail? What is the worst thing that can happen?

Well, worst case scenario is that I hate the lifestyle. I generate zero results for my clients and I feel embarrassed.

I refund all of them and go back to running my newsletter.

There is a clear way out of this labyrinth. And I am running out of places to hide.

## **Perfection is a matter of perspective**

While writing the previous chapters, I was reminded of a conversation I had that changed my life.

I was 18 and had a friend of mine staying over at my house for a few days. This was in our first year of university.

We were drinking, smoking and talking about life. Or at least as much as two 18 year olds can. I was complaining about my family and my relationship with my father.

After I was done complaining, my friend turned to me, looked at me in the eyes with a huge smile, eyes sparkling, and asked me:

*"Have you ever thought that your relationship with your father is just perfect?"*

My friend had lost his father a few years back. When we were still in high school.

I knew that. I've never felt more embarrassed. I'm actually blushing while writing this, all these years later.

Sometimes I bitch, moan and complain for things to be different. When they could be perfect already.

## **Appendix**

Thank you for reading and following along.

It really means a lot.

## **Traffic lights**

For the past few years, my life feels like a series of traffic lights that turn green, from red, right at the very last second, as I'm about to hit the brakes.

And I keep going and going.

Decided to make a radical change and move to Italy in two years ago.

Just when I thought that it was over cause I started my first serious full time job, I found CyberLeads and surpassed my salary.

At the exact tax deadline of that year, I registered myself as self employed and then quit my job.

Moved to Sicily the following year to qualify for some tax benefits and to lower my burn rate. Again, at the deadline.

Now I just sold a new service to clients for thousands of dollars per month when I don't even know how to do it.

And decided to relocate my business to Cyprus next year, again at the deadline.

Not because I'm procrastinating, but because I'm moving as fast as I can.

Life is hectic. But I feel alive.

## **Still on the fence**

I am still on the fence. Still scared of turning my business from the perfect lifestyle business to a monster.

But I always come back to what I wrote years ago when I was lost back in my hometown in Greece:

*"When in doubt, do the exact opposite of what you're doing."*

So what type of person would I be if I didn't follow my own advice?

I wouldn't deserve a single reader.

## **Time travel**

Hey. This is Alex from the future writing this.

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

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

Regardless of marketing or algorithms, the greatest books have always ended up in my hands through recommendations.

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

- Share them on X or LinkedIn
- Leave a review on Amazon
- And message me so we can have a chat

Or don't. It's ok.

Thank you for reading.

## **Wall of love**

Thanks to everyone that has been reading for the past years.

- I just finished the mini book series by @alexwestco and it's awesome. He brings you to his startup journey, and go personal in every stage: from shouting in the void for 2 years, to désillusion, to finally making it. It's raw and honest. It feels like you're with him. Much better than most biographies made to be published. The books are free. Go read them!

@marc\_louvion

- Got a long day ahead traveling back home so I got myself some nice books to read

@florinpop1705

- Finished all of them in one go. I could not stop. Oh, the pain!! Such an eye opener..

I am on my 3rd (failed) project in 6 months, but now I feel

@alexwestco saved me months, possibly years. thanks

@Andrei0Vlad

- The time is never right!!

@thepatwalls

- This is perfect!

@dvassallo

- That is the most inspirational piece of content I read. Bookmarking this for my future references

@tejas3732

- The most honest, powerful and inspiring thing I've read all year. Gives me so much hope to see that I can have a stable life without giving my life to a boring 9-5 desk job. Congratulations man.

@consolerod

- When I was a child I remember reading The Eternaut comic at night I was completely hooked up, waiting for the next night to read again and continue the story.

Yesterday I had the same feeling reading @alexwestco books and I woke up desperately to finish the sixth book.

Looking forward to the rest of the books

@AgustinVqz

- "Most advice is bullshit". I'm sold.

@martinrue

- Reading @alexwestco's third book and it's blowing my mind. His mini books aren't playbooks, but I've learned a ton from them. Really appreciate it.

@dzung\_fz

- This is really a great read for aspiring indie hackers. Raw, authentic and super honest. I used to read @alexwestco blogs 4 years ago and this part feels super relatable to me.

Yeah, those cute little side projects.

@ShresthaBheart

- Just started reading Alex's books.

Finished the first 2 today.

So much value + it's FREE.

Thank you so much Alex!!

@HsanC\_

- halfway through @alexwestco's book one, and i gotta say im surprised how brutally honest it is.

wish for more books to show the real mess of being an entrepreneur instead of handpicked highlights

@todorovskiognxn

- This is exactly what I needed. Great read.

@Renatello

- this feels like holding a mirror

this isn't some polished picture-perfect fairytale

just a raw, gritty, and accurate depiction of what figuring it out looks and feels like

reminds me that this shit is hard for everyone

@luisgnet

- Book 2 done, on to Book 3

but maybe I should get some work done first

Thanks for sharing all this knowledge Alex.

@lovish888

- I'm currently reading the books of @alexwestco and I had to laugh very loud in public at one part. A lesson every indiehacker/founder has to learn the hard way.

@TweetsOfSumit

- Feels illegal to read all these for free! Amazing stuff, zero BS, great work.

Already waiting for the last two books.

@mysancaktutan

- Been reading @alexwestco books and they are fire. so authentic and real, you feel like he's talking directly to you. Hella inspiring brother, keep going!

@MaximilianDrago

- On to book 3 @alexwestco

This speaks a lot as well to me. Humbling.

"The world is random and chaotic"

I can't go around and making sense of everything.

@cyphorous

- These words from the book 1 of @alexwestco hits different for the perfectionist I used to be.

Reading is a leverage for your actions.

Without action it's just a form of procrastination.

Damn, it's even a good sign, it means you're growing.

@kevin\_miguet

- I am only fishing up the book 1 @alexwestco but I can see myself at the very beginning of this journey. Thanks for sharing, it gives me the strength to build and document as well

@YAVIIN

- Goated quote by @alexwestco.

"Someone holds a gun to your head: "You have to generate revenue online by the end of the week. If you don't, you're dead." Extreme.

But effective. All the pretend work goes out of the window.

@byteberserker

- "Life is chaotic. And you shouldn't try to change that. Embrace it's unpredictability and make it work for you. Not against you."

Please, never stop writing man.

Thank you very much for sharing  
@luisetelo

- Exited to dive into @alexwestco's second book. I am a total newbie and I find it interesting to read his experience when starting out.

@lastFitStanding

- Yesterday went to the beach, brought the tablet with me to start reading N1, got so hooked, read until 50% of N5 haha

Thanks for such a nice write!

@rrmdp

- I'm reading the first one now.

Great writing and very honest. Love it!

@fisheryeah

- Just finished book 6, tight in time

@rasulkireev

- Loved the book - been reading your tweets for years now, and it was really interesting to hear the whole story. Can't wait for the next one :)

@scalingspencer

- Loved reading this, excited for the next one. Remember reading your blogs from when you were working in Milan. Inspired me to pursue my own thing and very happy I did

@alexandraeswan

- I read this in one sitting thanks for sharing man.

It is really eye opening the amount of struggle that is required to building something. Thank you for being this honest.

@JacobSchwarz963

- Great work, and great thoughts

@jdnoc

- Can't wait for book 2!

@GlitchPhoton

- Hey Alex, anxiously awaiting the next drop. Didn't see it yesterday. Any idea when we might expect it?

@KevinSidwar

- "It's easier to become 10x luckier by increasing your exposure, than it is to become 10x better at understanding and predicting the world." Love this, man.

@colestriler

- great read. you write very concisely yet cover a lot of ideas. it also shows that you are building mental fortitude to handle anything. congrats!

@swyx

- Mate, at the end of your article "Two Years" I was like: This is so sad, but here comes the happy part about the sales...nothing. Great read. I'm literally in the exact same spot!

@rubenkenes

- "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." Love this from @alexwestco

@fredrivett

- Reviewing 300 applications for notJust Incubator, I saw many founders doing the same mistakes we all go through at the beginning. Just read the first book by @alexwestco, and this hits home

@VadimNotJustDev

- Just finished @alexwestco Book 3. Learning Through Scars - a raw, unfiltered journey of building a \$3K/month business without selling courses. No fluff, just real talk about failure, luck, and the grind. If you're tired of gurus and want a real story, this one's for you. Davide Agostini

- Amigos, this is my truth that I have been drowning in for the last five years. Alex's book are a must-read

@Amigov\_AI

- Had to add @alexwestco as a case study in my upcoming Solopreneur Masterclass, among other incredible solopreneurs and small business owners we can all get inspiration from!

@flaviocopes

- I've never read a book in my life but I'm halfway on book 1. It's inspiring and makes me want to start a business.

@bel4dm

- Recently read @alexwestco's two Kindle books. Really is a great reminder that it may seem like everyone knows what they're doing... But we usually see only the successes, not the uncertainty, building + getting no traction, etc

You just gotta keep moving forward + building

@gavin\_wiener

- Last Sunday evening downloaded all @alexwestco books by chance opened the number 6 and started to read it I couldn't stop until I finished it

such a nice, authentic and hooking reading a real not BS entrepreneurship story

Nice one Alex.

@rrmdp

- I'm getting a lot of motivation out of these. Seems like all of builder X is reading them right now Alex!

@martinrue

- It seems like everyone is reading them right now!

@MahdiEzz\_code

## Credits

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- Danny Postma, thank you for showing us that even indie products can exit to a larger company. And that even after an exit, if you want it bad enough, you can go back to square one and try again and again until you succeed again.

- Jason Cohen, thank you for your amazing blog and talks. Probably the best business blog in the world. And for your talk on boutique bootstrapped businesses. Seriously, that talk helped me niche down, raise my prices and change my life.
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Constantly updating this list.