

The Obvious Choice

*Timeless Lessons
on Success, Profit, and
Finding Your Way*

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INTRODUCTION

Business Was Great, Once

One moment I was riding high, admired for what I'd built. The next moment, I was crying at my kitchen table, telling my general manager about his severance package on a video chat.

The story starts when I produced the first-ever course for online fitness training. We owned the market from 2013 to 2020. Days with \$100,000-plus in sales were normal.

Then, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world. While others suffered, my business soared. Overnight, and for reasons outside of their control, every personal trainer needed to work online.

It's super freakin' weird to write this, but the onset of the pandemic was basically a four-leaf clover shoved up the proverbial butt of my business.

We stopped doing everything that made us successful and hired costly brand consultants who told us how to speak and data analytics experts who told us how to convert. Drowning in reports, spreadsheets, and project briefs, I lost my way.

When you lose yourself, you forget why you're doing what you're doing. You show up and you do the work, but then you get home at the end of the day with nothing accomplished.

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Expenses exploded, sales flatlined. Business wasn't fun anymore. We were working so hard and spending so much money, and none of it was making a damn difference.

But none of that mattered, because, on July 23, 2021, I came home to find my son playing by himself.

"Mommy's sad," he said.

I walked upstairs to the bedroom. Alison was crying.

"I have cancer," she said.

We fell into each other's arms.

My business needed me. My family needed me. I didn't know what to do. All I knew was that I needed space. So, in September 2021, I fired everyone.

Cancer's unfair. I don't wish it on anybody. It does, however, have a habit of calling you out on your shit. Alison's diagnosis forced a fresh start. After we knew that she was going to be okay, it was time to build our business back up.

By this time, in addition to generating tens of millions of dollars in my own business, we had directly helped more than 65,000 individuals build and grow their own thing through our programs and coaching. This experience helped me develop and refine in very practical and specific terms what makes a person successful. When applying these lessons to myself, I began to realize that my own business did not need to be such a struggle.

While everybody else seemed to be distracted by shiny objects, the secret to avoid that, I'd learned, was to build a foundation on the stuff that worked before the internet existed—a devolution of sorts, back to a simpler time. To do less, but better. To look at modern marketing technology as an amplifier, not an ignitor. As fuel, not the fire.

Here's a few of the insights that I gained the freedom to apply:

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- Creating content is an overrated way to build a business short-term, but an underrated way to learn and connect.
- What you do to get results doesn't matter to others. What matters to others is what they'll become as a result of what you do.
- Large audiences are inefficient for deepening relationships. Trust needs touch. It is easier, faster, and more profitable to be famous to the family than it is to be famous on the internet.
- A product or service must be either free or expensive. Combine the two for explosive growth. Avoid the middle.
- Endlessly searching for the "best" way to do something is a surefire way to fail. Good enough, repeatedly, is how to get great.
- We often don't have a problem with authenticity. We have a problem trusting that our authentic self is enough.
- Our social media bubble represents maybe 0.01 percent of what goes on in the world that affects us and likely closer to 0.0000001 percent of what goes on in the world at large.
- In our world, we think that we know what matters. However, others don't live in our world, they live in theirs.

The truth of these insights (and others you'll read about) is self-evident and can be validated by your own experience as well as common sense. As you read this book, you may wonder how anybody succeeds in business without them.

It took some time to build back up, but the results have been remarkable. Revenue increased 300 percent with multimillion-dollar profitability and one-fifth of the staff.

As I began sharing these insights along with implementation strategies and case studies with my mentorship clients and with listeners on my podcast—also called *The Obvious Choice*—their lives and businesses were also enriched.

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Take Benjamin, for example. He'd just gotten engaged and decided it was time to grow his side gig to make some extra cash to buy a home. Before we met, he had just started a page on social media and had been posting content for a month.

His hope was that it would somehow magically lead to awareness, which would in turn somehow magically lead to customers. "A part of me knew that what I was doing on social media didn't make sense, but I didn't know another way," he said.

I call this the Underpants Gnomes Problem, prompted by a famous episode of *South Park*. The gnomes steal underpants and expect profit, but miss the middle step of how one thing leads to the other. You'll read more about it in Chapter 6, "Figure Out What Game You're Playing Online."

Instead of trying to impress people he'd never met, Benjamin followed the five-step Human Optimized Marketing System you'll read about in Chapter 11, "Become Famous to the Family." He made his first sale that day.

The ugly truth is that social media is a gloriously inefficient way to build a business. Consider it a savings account, an investment into long-term career capital. Make deposits with extra time and money. Hope it kicks off interest, but don't depend on it for short-term returns. Much more on this, and a four-stage, content-creation framework in Chapter 14, "Social Media Is Not Enough."

Instead of going for the biggest possible audience, those who understand the Obvious Choice know precisely who they're for (and not for), and they don't fall into the trap of trying to win the internet. They have a clear vision that allows them to get more benefit with less effort from their marketing while simultaneously removing all comparison to others. The result is a simpler and more reliable approach with higher profitability in less time and with less stress.

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Admittedly, there's a trade-off. The Obvious Choice might not become famous, celebrated in the media, or heralded as an against-all-odds, billion-dollar, unicorn success story.

For those who follow these principles, three to five million dollars in annual profit is the limit of what can be achieved with reliability, sustainability, and expectancy while maintaining a high quality of life. Though more is possible, it shouldn't be expected.

The reason for this limit is simple: at a certain point, more risk and more sacrifice are required to reach increasingly higher levels of income. Some people decide to accept this trade-off in exchange for a potentially larger windfall in the future. That's fine. Nobody's crazy. You won't find those stories celebrated here, however. Instead, we'll focus on the strategies and principles with the highest odds of success.

In 1982, John Naisbitt wrote in *Megatrends*, “The more high technology around us, the more the need for human touch.” He was right back then. He's right today. *The Obvious Choice* is about human connection, not technological domination.

This book is about the business that happens behind closed doors.

More than 90 percent of sales are “silent” in that they still happen through a combination of trust and word-of-mouth referrals. There's undue attention placed on the remaining 10 percent—the scraps—because they're easy to track, measure, and analyze.

By the time a sale can be measured, all the Obvious Choices have already been hired.

For every eighteen-year-old on social media who thinks they need a big following just to get a few customers, there are a hundred silent business owners quietly earning more money with less effort. If you're having trouble finding your way, the problem isn't

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you. The problem is what you've been made to believe it takes to succeed.

Building a business and becoming an online entertainer are different games people play. Neither's better or worse, but they have different time horizons, rules of engagement, odds of success, and reward mechanisms. Problems arise when you conflate the two—playing by the rules of one and desiring the rewards of the other.

You don't have to dance on the internet to succeed. If you want to dance, go for it. Clean up those Pumas. Get out there. Have fun. I'll buff up my 3-Stripe Adidas and join you.

All I'm saying is that you don't *have* to perform to the anonymous masses just to make a few sales. You never did, and you'll never need to. There's always been a faster, easier, and more reliable path to success, and there always will be.

One thing I've found to be true is that you spend years learning new stuff only to realize that there's maybe like ten to twenty big ideas that impact you. I've also realized that most business books contain one big idea stretched out. As a result, readers get the point and give up on it.

This book is different. It contains fifteen big ideas. They all revolve around a common theme, but can also be read independently of one another.

You might not connect with every idea. I'd be surprised if you did. We tend to zero in on immediate needs or frustrations. If you're reading something that isn't jiving with you, you have my permission to skip it and move on to the next chapter.

My hope is that the ideas you do connect with will help you make more money, help more people, and have more freedom.

Let's go.

When Ambition Results in Recklessness

*Broken Clocks — The Bug
Called “You” — Removing Recklessness*

The process of becoming the Obvious Choice begins with subtraction, not addition.

When we know what we want, we can clarify what we don't want. And even painful decisions, though not easy, become simple.

It's likely you're already doing many of the right things, but they're being suffocated under a carpet of chaotic ambition.

I penciled in the last bubble and raised my hand.

“Are you done?” the woman asked.

I looked up at her.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” I said.

Then I walked out of the university auditorium for the last time, utterly unaware and unprepared for the real world.

THE OBVIOUS CHOICE

Maybe you've just finished college or maybe you decided not to go. Maybe you've been in the working world for a while. Or maybe you've done some great things already and had some success, either as an employee or entrepreneur. Regardless of where you're at, we all remember the moment when we had a challenging realization:

Our world isn't a paint-by-numbers kit.

As young people, we're told what to do, how to think, and when and where to show up. Success is simple to understand: good grades are good, and bad grades are bad.

Then we grow up and realize that life isn't best lived by the kind of guy who only eats cheese in single slices. The rules aren't black and white. More so, grayish.

Should you try to get rich? Maybe.

How rich? I don't know.

Will getting rich make you happy? Probably not.

What will? I don't know that either.

For the ambitious, this ambiguity is hard to reconcile.



Broken Clocks

People tell you that ambition is the key to achieving your goals.

Ambition—be *ambitious*.

You hear it all the time. Ambition fuels passion. Creates a purpose in life. "Where there's no ambition, there's no success," they say.

What those same people don't tell you is that ambition left unchecked results in recklessness. It's comparison. It's never thinking that you're enough. It's living inside your own fantasy.

Your ambition might be the very thing holding you back from accomplishment.

Now, more than ever, our culture fans the flames of chaotic ambition. We can follow and interact with our idols on social

media, read any one of the 11,000 new books published every day, or add to the 226 million podcast episodes downloaded weekly. It's a fire hose of inspiration and education like never before. More often than not, what you're left with isn't confidence in your process but delusion.

Everywhere you look, somebody is achieving something better than you, faster than you, and has figured out something you *need* to know, or else (or else what?).

All of this results in constant disappointment because, if you're not careful, your expectations will rise faster than your results, no matter how much you've accomplished.

Whenever I think about how constant comparison to others' perceived success online is affecting my satisfaction, fulfillment, and well-being, I laugh the laugh human males tend to laugh when they want to hide emotion.



Jason had a great business. It was simple. It was profitable. And he did a good job. He wasn't famous on the internet but had built a local reputation. Old-school stuff.

One day his friend Maggie suggested he build an app to scale. She had good intentions. Maggie said her friend Jennifer has one and it seems to be going well.

Jason follows Matthew on Instagram. Matthew's always posting pictures with his girlfriend, traveling to exotic places and promoting his app.

"Does anybody know any app developers?" Jason posts in an online industry group one night. Recommendations are made. Sales calls are performed. Jason commits to a few thousand dollars, which quickly turns into a few more thousand dollars.

His app is ready. He prices it at \$20 a month. Why \$20? That's what others do.

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A few friends buy to support him. Then he has to find more customers but doesn't know how. He's never paid for ads or used social media to get customers before.

Unknowingly, Jason's gone from a simple business model where he needs a few customers paying him a lot to a complicated one that needs a lot of customers to pay him a little. He's learning the hardest-to-learn law of business: just because you build it doesn't mean they will come.

"Does anybody use a good social media growth agency?" Jason posts in the same group. Again, recommendations are made. Sales calls are performed. Jason commits to a few thousand dollars more.

Six months have passed. Jason's burned out. His local business is suffering. He's been focused on the app. It's time to renew his contract with the development company. He's delaying the decision by doom-scrolling Instagram when a post from Matthew appears in the feed. "I'm shutting down my app," it says.



Good business models get traded for bad ones. The ill-fated allure of seeking shortcuts is simply too tempting for many.

Inevitably, modern tactics and attention-grabbing high-risers flame out like Icarus too close to the sun, only to be replaced by another, to whom we then compare ourselves. The cycle repeats.

Leveraging technology to scale isn't a bad thing. It obviously can work. But it works less often, less reliably, takes longer, and requires more effort than you think. There's no free lunch. For many of us, the oldest business models are still the best business models.

It's true that there's always a way to cheat the system, but things always change with gimmicks. If you're constantly searching for a success hack, you might stumble upon one. Even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Chaotically ambitious individuals who chase fads rarely win out over an extended period. And yet, missing out on the short-term can be a hard pill to swallow, especially when others' success seems sudden and extreme.

Personal and professional success isn't the result of brilliance; it's the reward you get for being consistently not stupid longer than the other guy. For finding your way in a world determined for you to lose it.



The Bug Called “You”

The search shouldn't be for what works best. Rather, how to be your best self.

No one will understand you. It isn't ultimately that important. What's important is that you understand you.

We're all encoded differently. Your encoding goes beyond what you're good at. It's what you seem to naturally “get.”

This isn't a better or worse thing. Some of us are made out to become professionals like lawyers, doctors, or accountants. Others are encoded to be tradespeople, entrepreneurs, or creatives. That doesn't make anybody smarter or stupider. Different people are different.

When an entire world that doesn't know you is determined to tell you what to do, how to think, and who to become, the first step is to turn the microscope around.

Easier said than done.

Before he sold millions of copies of *Good to Great*, the business author Jim Collins's Stanford professor Rochelle Myers inspired him to study himself in much the same way that a scientist would study a bug, to imagine *he* was the bug—the bug called “you”—by keeping a Bug Book.¹

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It's hard to separate our actions from our motivations. Our feelings from our insecurities. Our facts from our biases. But scientists . . . scientists view the world as dispassionate and objective outsiders. Scientists don't judge what they study. Scientists merely observe.

Examination of yourself like what I'm about to describe might seem weird. At its core, this is a journaling exercise. And if you're not a journal person, don't worry, neither am I.

Set an alarm to alert you five times a day for a week. When the alarm goes off, give yourself a score from minus-2 to plus-2 in 0.5 increments. Minus-2 means you're feeling awful. Plus-2 means you're feeling amazing.

Beside your score, add anything meaningful from what you're doing, to who you're with, to what you ate, and anything else. Make your observation objective. Don't add commentary or assessment. Give yourself a score. Add additional observations. And close the book.

*You can download a Bug Book
worksheet to better study yourself at
www.JonathanGoodman.com/Bug.*



You can create your own Bug Book by dividing a page into four columns for the date, time, score, and observation. When your alarm

WHEN AMBITION RESULTS IN RECKLESSNESS

Date	Time	Score	Observation
Nov 7	9 am	+ 1.5	Biking Calvin to school with entire family.
	12:30 pm	+ 2	Focused writing, two-hour block.
	1:30 pm	- 0.5	Lunch. Not relaxing. Eating with one hand, phone in the other.
	4 pm	- 1.5	Brain fog. Unfocused.
	8 pm	- 2	Got caught in cycle of watching dumb internet videos while family is upstairs. Snuck too many post-dinner cookies.

goes off, fill in each column. When collecting your data, only write observations. Resist the urge to comment, analyze, or react.

At the end of the week, review all your minus-1s and minus-2s in addition to your plus-1s and plus-2s. Note any patterns. Then, write third-person observation statements.

Here are a few of mine from over the years:

- “The bug Jon felt energized when he woke up at 5am on a Saturday morning to write his book.”
- “The bug Jon felt brain fog when he scheduled two meetings on video back-to-back without a break.”
- “The bug Jon felt alert for his next call when he scheduled a fifteen-minute break in between video meetings to go for a short walk.”

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- “When the bug Jon reads fiction for fun, the world makes sense and moves at a more manageable pace.”
- “The bug Jon thinks Starbucks’s made-up language is ridiculous and still asks for a medium when ordering a coffee because that’s the proper word to use when describing the size of drink that he wants.”
- “The bug Jon likes creating content, but the acts of formatting and publishing to social media sap his energy and give him brain fog.”

Revisit this process at least every six months, or as often as necessary if you feel you’re losing your way. Many find it useful as an ongoing awareness exercise. I do.



Removing Recklessness

Just one thing keeps chaotic ambition going—anxiety. Keeping busy soothes our fear. Doing something saves us from the hard work of figuring out whether what we’re doing is making any damn difference.

Too often we find ourselves driven, yet tired. Motivated, yet anxious. Hardworking, yet frustrated and burned out. So much of what we do when we’re working hard simply doesn’t matter; it’s a reformative effect of our fast-paced, social-media-driven environment, the crushing pressure of ambition and competitiveness.

Nobody wants to be this way any more than they wanted to sit at the table at the back of the cafeteria on the first day of high school; it’s just something we’ve somehow all collectively accepted as how things are.

Recklessness, however, isn’t a necessary or inevitable condition of life; we chose it, if only by our acquiescence to it. When

WHEN AMBITION RESULTS IN RECKLESSNESS

we remove chaos, we're left with what's real. Whereas chaos lays waste to our efforts, true ambition is a powerful ally.

Chaotic ambition is reactive, comparative, and rushed. It leads to frustration and burnout.

True ambition is proactive, thoughtful, and strategic. It allows for calculated risk and provides the energy and direction necessary for achievement.

It has become very easy these days to work very hard on the wrong things.

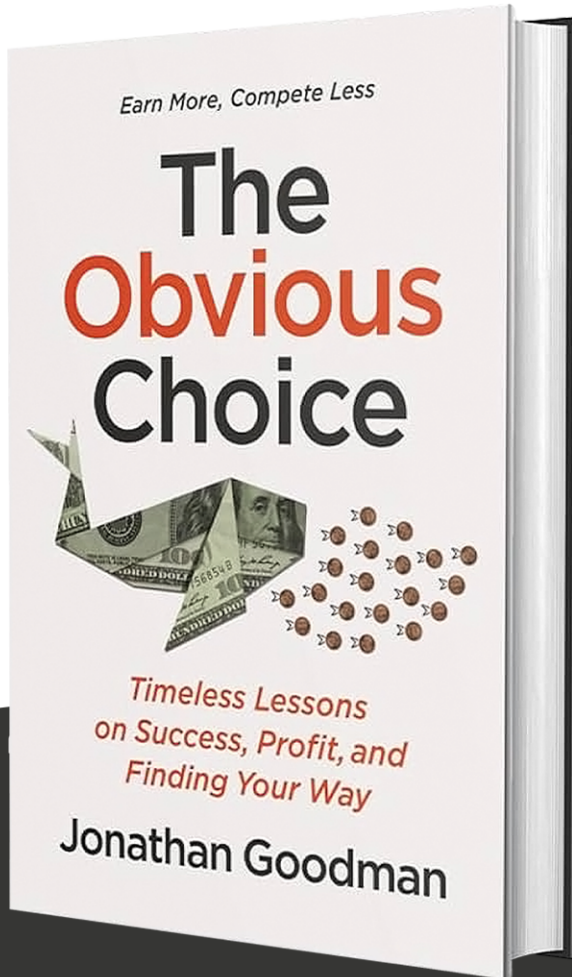
The secret to doing less and having more is to know yourself, and how you work, better. That's why the first step to becoming the Obvious Choice is to focus inward—to study yourself as an objective and dispassionate outsider—like a scientist, a scientist studying a bug.

Next, let's talk about why credentials don't matter much (and what does).

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