

by Lawrence San

Would You Like Fries with That Success Formula?

The road to success” may be a moronic cliché, but even non-morons secretly wish to travel that road — zooming when possible, trudging when necessary. I’ve spent countless hours (three) trying to figure out why I’m not — dare I say this in public? — zooming faster. If you’re already a high-speed success story, may you rot in . . . No, wait! What I meant to say was, there’s no reason for you to read this. For the rest of us, the question is obvious: How do we increase our velocity?

New-age psychobabble research has conclusively demonstrated that lack of zoominess isn’t caused by external roadblocks but by obstacles we ourselves create, by *schtuff* we do or fail to do. Since *schtuff* is usually subconscious, how do we figure out what we’re doing wrong?

Through introspection, maybe. This is one of my specialties (the other one involves vegetables); but unfortunately, introspection has a few drawbacks. I can spend so much time groping around inside my own psyche that I never actually *do* much. Not to mention the damage all that groping does to my exalted self-image: I ask you, would a superhuman be wallowing in self-analysis at two in the morning? But really, the biggest risk in psycho-meditation is simply that it may not work. I know several fellow Buddhist neurotics who practiced navel-gazing until their belly buttons swole up like grapes, and they *still* failed to have useful epiphanies.

Want to Sound Smart? Mention Books

Okay, let’s try a more external approach: turning to the experts. There are enough pop-psychology books and business-wis-

dom magazines to seriously challenge a New Jersey landfill; surely at least *some* of those authors have accurately surveyed the Road to Success and will give poor, struggling freelancers the map?

Nope. The guidebooks are usually mapless — but they do give lots of *formulas*. Unfortunately, each book’s formula tends to be different. To a skeptic, such inconsistency might imply inaccuracy: Perhaps life’s problems are too diverse to be encompassed by a few simple recipes? But individually, many of the formulas sound so *right*. Here’s one of my favorites (reported by Kenneth Atchity in his book, *A Writer’s Time*):

In Hollywood, it is said that four things guarantee success, in this order:

1. Perseverance (or determination, or stamina)
2. Connections
3. “Being fun to work with”
4. Talent

Atchity contends that talent is considered the most common of these traits, perseverance the least common. Doesn’t this sound accurate? You can read articles all day about how to cold-call potential clients or how to meet more people at business conferences . . . but how many independent professionals really even try? How many are willing to face repeated rejection?

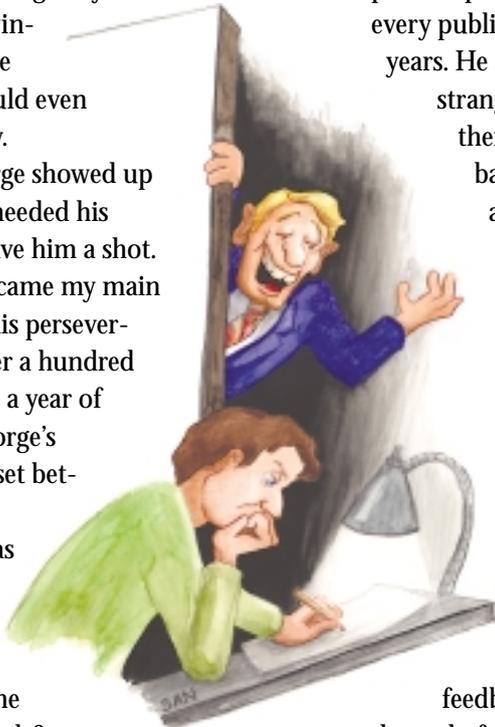
Enough Heavy Stuff, Tell Me a Story

True Story No. 1: As an art director in the pre-computer era, I bought a lot of typesetting. Naturally I was besieged by type salesmen, but after one or two of my gentle

rejections (“You! Out!”), they tended to permanently disappear. All but one of them.

George was a smooth, graceful salesman who kept showing up for months, seemingly immune to abuse. He wasn’t a pest; he’d just pop his head in my office door and say hello, perhaps leaving behind a new type catalog or some other small gift. “Let me know if I can ever do anything for you,” he’d say with a winning smile and be gone before I could even snarl menacingly.

One day George showed up when I actually needed his services, and I gave him a shot. Eventually he became my main vendor. In fact, his perseverance got him over a hundred thousand dollars a year of my business. George’s company didn’t set better type than the others; but he was always friendly and always available. Does this help prove the Hollywood formula?



That Story Blew, Tell Me Another One

True Story No. 2: And then there was Franklin, a scruffy, awkward character given to jerky body movements, alarming facial expressions, and incoherent mumbling. He was certain that his destiny was to be a cartoonist. That might seem reasonable under the circumstances, except for one unfortunate fact: When the Great Cartoonist in the Sky handed out drawing and writing talent, Franklin must have been in the can. But this guy was the most tenacious wannabe I’ve ever met. Every night after his minimum-

wage day job — and I mean *every* night — Franklin drew comic strips for hours. What perseverance! What discipline! What stupidity! Not only weren’t his strips funny, they were also repulsive to look at. Out of pity, I gave him free drawing lessons; but it was hopeless.

Still, Franklin never gave up. He mailed photocopies to every cartoon syndicate and every publication. Over and over again. For years. He also handed them out to strangers on the street and stuffed them in doorways. The only feedback he ever got from people was along these lines:

“Franklin, I’m gonna be honest with you. This is important, so listen carefully: You have no talent of any kind whatsoever.”

“Franklin, I’ve seen dead cockroaches that were funnier than these comic strips, and less ugly.”

“Franklin, would you please stop bothering me with this horseshit?”

But Franklin was deaf to the feedback and blind to the truth. And the end of the story? We’re not there yet — he’s still at it. Franklin’s real problem isn’t that he can’t write or draw — after all, he fails at everything else, too — no, his real problem is that he’s a schlemiel. You know, a bumbler, a schmo. Hell, you can tell he’s a schlemiel by the way he *walks*. True, Franklin’s combination of ultimate perseverance, zero talent, and absolute failure doesn’t exactly *disprove* the Hollywood formula, which, to be fair, implies that



you need perseverance *and* talent. But what kind of formula will help him overcome his schmoehood? And whose tale of perseverance should you learn from — George's or Franklin's?

Recipes for Freelance Bliss

There are hundreds of stories like George's and Franklin's, but, fortunately for you, this magazine isn't paying me by the word. In spite of that, I humbly report some other Formulas for Success:

"Formula for success: Underpromise and overdeliver." — Tom Peters

"The way to wealth ... depends chiefly on two words, industry and frugality; that is, waste neither time nor money."
— Benjamin Franklin

"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent." — Calvin Coolidge

Well, with Serious Cal we seem to have come full circle. Perhaps he was a consultant to Hollywood when he wasn't pretending to be president. Even assuming that he and all the other pundits are right, what, exactly, am I supposed to *do* with all this profundity? Talk about overload: Right now I'm reading a book about overcoming perfectionism (I have no *need* to read it, you understand, but it's rather sloppily written and I'm penciling in corrections as I go along); and an article about taking criticism better (yeah, I can guess what you're thinking, but keep your damn opinions to yourself, all right?); and a book about marketing myself (I'm at sanstudio.com!). Books, articles, formulas:

How's a busy-but-sensitive guy like me supposed to keep track of all this insight, let alone use it?

And There Wasn't Even a Couch, Honest

It was 25 years ago, and the old psychiatrist was smiling slightly, even though I was annoyed at him.

"You understand things about me that you're not telling me," I said accusingly.

"That may be true," he replied.

"So why don't you just *tell* me what you've figured out, instead of asking me occasional vague questions and making me do most of the talking?"

"If I told you things about yourself," he said calmly, "you'd just intellectualize them. Even if you believed me, it would be external wisdom." (This guy thought he was the old master on *Kung Fu* or something, which was strange because he was actually from the Bronx.) "My explaining things wouldn't help because it wouldn't be connected to what your life *feels* like. You have to figure schtuff out for yourself for it to help you."

Psychiatric clichés make me nauseous, but I guess he was right. That's why formulas don't help much, even if they are right: What matters is the way you *are*. (Bottom line for George and Franklin: The go-getter gets, the schmo schmoes.) You want to zoom up the Road to Success? Um, pardon me while I throw up. No, wait — what I meant to say was: Don't think about "success," just work on your rotten personality. No, wait ...

1099

Lawrence San, the founding editor of 1099 Magazine, is now a freelance writer and illustrator.

Life too calm for you? Need another fix of San's ravings? You'll find lots more online at 1099.com/insanity. (Some of his columns are not for the easily offended. Don't say we didn't warn you.)