



## Ray Edwards Show, Episode 570 From Big Idea to Best Seller

**Jeff Goins** 00:00

Ray Edwards Show, episode 570. From Big Idea to Best Seller.

**Announcer** 00:06

The Ray Edwards Show. This is the podcast for prosperity with purpose.

**Kris Edwards** 00:19

Hello, and welcome to the Ray Edwards Show. In just a couple moments we'll join Ray and Jeff Goins' conversation that they had about going from a big idea to a best seller. This is a follow-up to last week's podcast, which generated a lot of interest probably because of the \$150,000 check that Ray received from a publisher for essentially an idea. I mean, a very well laid out outline of an idea. But it got a lot of people curious about the entire process. So this is the audio from the video interview, we had some listeners say, hey, just don't make us go watch a video, just give us the stuff. So this is the stuff. Let's jump in and listen to Ray and Jeff talk about how this came to be.

**Ray Edwards** 01:05

This is the follow-up to the podcast interview where we didn't really go into a lot of details, right? I gotta tell you, I love the name of your company so much. I've been thinking about it ever since you told me your agency's called Fresh Complaint and where that comes from. Why Fresh Complaint, in case people missed that?

**Jeff Goins** 01:23

I think books need to pick fights, right. And a big idea as I define it is any idea that challenges your audience's assumptions. And you have to do that in a very artful way. And so in a way, a nonfiction book is sort of a fresh complaint, it's like a, it's like a new way of picking a fight around an old idea. And all what we call Big Idea of books typically have their basis in some sort of bone that the author is trying to pick with the world or with their industry or with the status quo. And so we challenge our authors to say something interesting and a little provocative because that's how you get attention.

**Ray Edwards** 02:03

Presumably, people who are watching this or listening to this want to write a book and they want other people to read it, how do we come up with an interesting idea?

**Jeff Goins** 02:11

You have to understand that the first idea that you came up with probably isn't your best idea. And that the best way to get to a great idea, an interesting idea, is to come up with a bunch of really bad ones first, and not be too precious about any of them. So when I meet an author, and they tell me, I've already got the title of my book, you know, I go, you're in trouble. Like, if you're already married, and the title of the book that you're currently writing, that's not a good way to go about it. Because you will discover things in the process of writing the book that you didn't know, you knew.

**Ray Edwards** 02:45

Do you find that people who say that, usually the title is all they have?

**Jeff Goins** 02:51

There's not as much substance as, as they think there is. Yeah, yeah. I mean, we're working with an author right now, where he came with a book cover a title, etc, we start digging into the book, you know, we're editing the book, we're kind of massaging it, we're doing some ghostwriting around it. And I just came back to him, I said, Hey, we can work with this title, we can work with this cover. But that's not the best process. I mean, you want to have a general idea of like how you're going to contain the idea. But as the idea grows and morphs, you want to work with it. And so I really do, like, don't start with the title. Don't start with how long it's going to be or even what it's about, start with your argument, your big idea. And if you don't have an argument, or if it takes six sentences to describe what the book is about, it's not clear enough. And part of what I do that can be sort of maddening for an author is we whittle it down and whittle it down and whittle it down. I mean, you and I spent months and months and months finding a really good idea that hits hard. And then even when we were writing the book, new ideas came. And so writing a book is a democracy where it's you and your book, and whoever else is involved. And the best idea wins, even if it's not your idea. When I wrote *Real Artists Don't Starve*, somebody who read that book and helped me edit the first draft of it gave me that title. And he didn't say, this is your title. He said, it kind of seems like you're writing two books. One is a book about creativity. And the other book is like, where you're kind of saying real artists don't starve. And I was like, that's the title.

**Ray Edwards** 04:23

That is, in my experience as we went through that, it was a frustrating, it was actually kind of a scary process. Because there are times I felt like, do I even know what I'm doing? should I even be trying to write a book about this? Do I have anything to say? Is that a pretty common experience?

**Jeff Goins** 04:38

I think that's a wonderful disposition to have, which is, I don't know. I don't know. I remember talking to a friend of mine when I was working on maybe my third or fourth book, and I said, I don't know how to do this. You know, I feel lost. And it was only the belief that I shouldn't be lost that made me feel really bad about myself. And he said, Well, that's like, you know, that's every author. I said, but I've done this before, I should know how to do this. He said, No, you wrote

those books before, you've never written this book before. And so of course, you don't know how to do it, because you've never done it. And every book should test the author in some way. And every author that I know, starts a book thinking their idea is pretty good, and as we shared before, a good idea is often forgotten. Right? And a bad idea, an absurd idea is usually immediately or shortly thereafter, dismissed. What you want is a good idea, meaning you're not blatantly lying, you're not trying to obscure the truth or something, you're not trying to deceive anybody, because all that stuff eventually gets found out. You don't want to be one of those stories. But telling the truth or having a good argument. That's not enough. Right? What you want is something interesting. And as I said before, an interesting idea is any idea that challenges your audience's assumptions. And a really good formula for that is everybody thinks X, but what's actually true as Y.

**Ray Edwards 06:11**

So I remember talking to you about what kind of book I wanted to write, and I mentioned to you, there was a book I had read that I'm sure lots of people have heard of- this was before it was popular to put this word in the title of your book. It's become like, there's like a whole cottage industry of how many ways can we do this, but it was a book called The Subtle Art of Not Giving Up. What made that book stand out to me was the fact that it stood out. It was like, what on earth is this about, and as I picked it up, and began reading it in the store, which I think is a good sign, if you start not just glancing at the front and back cover with us to actually start reading the book. I usually know it while I'm buying this book, It startled me, and then it made me rethink my position on the whole idea of self-help and self-improvement and therapy. And so that, that is a good example of what you're talking about.

**Jeff Goins 07:04**

Yes. And what made Mark Manson's book succeed, or a number of factors all working together, it was not the title. Now understand that, like the title helps. But most people start with the title. And you need to start with the idea, the title follows the idea. The idea doesn't follow the title. And if you know what the idea is, the title can emphasize the big idea, right? So that is a book that is a self-help book, picking a fight with self-help with the modern genre of self-help, it is not a book about not giving an F about life, it is a book about only caring about the things that you should care about, and that you can control and then going "ah screw the rest of it", right. And that's a very smart book, Manson is a very smart guy. And it came from an article that he wrote on his website that went viral, right, and so this idea that you've gotta like that you've got some wonderful idea written on a scrap piece of paper in your safe, and someday you're gonna write that, it's nonsense. It doesn't work that way. You should be able to give your idea away to everybody without like if I tell you my book title, and you go write a book based on that book title. And that's all I had. No, that's not what that book had. That book had this big idea was this epic long blog post that hundreds of 1000s of people, millions of people read and shared. And then he said, maybe there's something to this. I called up a publisher and said, Hey, let's do this. But here's what's interesting about that book. I talked to Manson. He had close to a million people on his email list when that book came out. Those of us in the world of marketing go slam dunk.

**Ray Edwards 08:47**

Hello, yeah, that's...

**Jeff Goins** 08:48

I met him three years after that book had come out. It had sold 9 million copies, I think he wanted to sell something like 12 million copies. And he said, I can trace about 50,000 sales. 50,000 units sold 50,000 copies of The Subtle Art to my email list. The rest of it was just the thing became a phenomenon. And so I mean, I've sold 50,000 copies of a book in a year. You know, like, if that's all his email list did for him. Then what is the force multiplier? It's a big idea that anybody can pretty easily understand. And then they start talking about it, right? So you take that big idea, and you put it into the right channels, and it spreads. Another example is The Four-hour Workweek. That is not a book about working four hours a week, but that's a pretty good hook. But Tim Ferriss didn't start with the title. How do I know because he talks about it on his blog. He talked about how he split test different ideas. The original title of The Four Hour Workweek was drug dealing for fun and profit, which is like provocative, but it's it's a little bit absurd, and so an interesting idea is where ordinary meets absurd, and when you find that blend, you've got something with some teeth. And that takes time and effort.

**Ray Edwards** 10:08

Yeah. And I mean that, that whole description you just gave of Mark's process for how he sold his book and how he'd built that email list. And really, when you were talking about the title not being the treasure, this is something that I've just now have seen the correlation between that process and writing books. And when I teach my copywriting students, which is I tell them the headline is always the last thing you write.

**Jeff Goins** 10:31

Well, tell me if you do it this way because I think we've talked about this before. I write a headline, and then you write the sales letter, and then you go back and make that headline as good as you possibly can. And that's how you should write a book, you should start with some title, Steve Pressfield, you know, the author of The War of Art, he's superstitious, he's a very spiritual guy. I don't know that people know this about him. But he's a very spiritual person. And he's got all these like rituals and stuff. And one of his superstitions is you never call the Word doc, or whatever you're writing in what you think the title is going to be.

**Ray Edwards** 11:05

That's interesting.

**Jeff Goins** 11:06

Totally, yeah, you just make a fake title. And like, I call, I can't remember what, but like all of his war novels and stuff, he always called it something else, and then figured out the title later, or even if he knew what he was gonna call it, he called something else. So like when I wrote *Real Artists Don't Starve*, the title of the book was always called Michelangelo, because that was the hook was Michelangelo was a millionaire, and yada, yada yada, real artists don't starve. But that was always the name of the book.

**Ray Edwards** 11:33

Which is such a great story. I'm surprised more people don't run with that story. But yeah, I often when I'm writing sales, copy, I start with a headline, I write the copy, I refine the copy, I'll go back and maybe fix maybe 50% of the time I fixed the headline make it better. But the other 50% of

the time, as I'm nearing the end of the writing process of the sales copy, I have an epiphany and I realized, Oh, this is the headline.

**Jeff Goins** 11:57

Love that.

**Ray Edwards** 11:58

So that sounds like a very similar process.

**Jeff Goins** 12:00

Well, just to open the kimono, you and I are writing a book right now. And we went in with what we thought was a pretty kickass title. And the publisher kind of was like, Yeah, okay, fine. And we got a couple of nudges, and we doubled down on the title. And it's interesting, right? This came up multiple times, we thought we were writing a book about belief, and we kind of were, but there were multiple times where you said, I don't know if this is what this is about. Ya know. And I was probably the most stubborn person because I think I came up with the title or pulled it out of you when we were talking about it. And then I was like, Oh, well, this is the title. And you wrote this, right? And you liked it. And I got, and I was like, Oh, this is what we were trying to say. And now we know what we're trying to say. We told the publisher and they liked it. So that's why you can't be married to a title don't pick your title. Have your big idea, right. And a big idea of your book was most people think you believe the things that you believe, because they're true, instead of believing the things that you believe because you want them to be true. And that was a pretty, that's a pretty interesting argument for a book, you know, from an author like you, I think.

**Ray Edwards** 13:11

It is on both sides, writing it and reading it.

**Jeff Goins** 13:15

Totally.

**Ray Edwards** 13:15

This whole process has been so fascinating to me because frankly, I've never seen writing as a democracy. I've seen it as a dictatorship, benevolent dictatorship. And that now I know, that has limited me. I'm actually I've become reignited about writing, about communicating clearly, not just about copywriting, but about writing other books, other things, because of my discovery of the power of this democratic open process of writing and being willing to get feedback, because ultimately, that's what the whole game is about. Right?

**Jeff Goins** 13:49

Yeah. And it's a democracy, not a committee. That doesn't mean everybody's vote counts. What I mean by that is the best idea always wins. It's not that it's not that we have to get everybody to agree on it. Because I've done that that's, that's a nightmare. If you ever see an author crowdsourcing their book title, don't do it. It's not a dictatorship. And it's not a committee. It's a democracy where the best ideas get to win. And you see that on shows like Madmen where Don Draper gives this creative assignment to his team, and they kind of come back with safe stuff. And he kind of always saves the day at the 11th hour with some brilliant idea. And everybody

goes, Oh, yeah, that was brilliant. I have found that in order for an idea to succeed and books, to quote Seth Godin are just shareable ideas. And so ideas evolve and they change and what you're trying to do is come up with the most interesting way to say this thing right now. So people react and respond to it and half of that equation is being confident about it. The first half is this is a great idea. The second half is just going this is the idea.

**Ray Edwards 14:58**

Yeah, and even if you succeeded in like writing your book in secret, or not letting anybody have any input, and then getting it published, whether you publish it yourself or somebody else does, and getting it out to lots of people, maybe you went and bought one of those best seller promotional campaigns, we'll call it that. And you got lots of copies out into the world. If it's no good, that's the end. It's done.

**Jeff Goins 14:58**

Yeah. No.

**Ray Edwards 15:01**

You're ultimately going to get the feedback. I think it's better to get it as you go. And then develop the confidence. You've got something interesting that people want to talk about. *The War of Art* is a really interesting example to me because it's a great story. But I was part of the story. I got that book back when nobody had ever heard of it, it seemed. And it was a friend of mine who said, Oh, you're, you're stuck, you should read this book.

**Jeff Goins 15:43**

Yeah, it was a sleeper best seller is what they call that. For years, it sold hundreds of 1000s of copies by selling 10 20,000 copies a year. For decades, when we talk about a bestseller, that's we're talking about. A book that has a great idea, it's got some legs, enter, there's a promotional strategy attached to it, but I mean, this is the age-old quote on marketing, which is good marketing makes a bad product fail faster. So a book is a product. And this is the interesting thing about a book that I've never really thought of. A book is one of the few products where all of the marketing is inside the product. You cannot say x about a book and sell Y. I can do that with a mop. I can show you a picture of a shiny floor and I get to sell the mop. With a book, I can't really do that. The experience of the product is reading the words on the page and experiencing some sort of transformation. And so you really do have to bake all of the marketing into the book while you're writing it, which means you have to think about the people that are going to be reading it, which means you probably have to be talking to some of those people. Now you're not writing what they want you to write, but you're saying stuff that gets them to react. And if you're saying stuff and people go oh, okay, yeah, that's interesting. No, right, you're dead. When I was working on *Real Artists Don't Starve* and the publisher was saying we can't call it that. We need to call it The Creative Advantage. Nice, safe title. I knew that some people wouldn't like that title. I knew that it was going to piss off part of my demographic. And I'm a nice guy. I don't like pissing people off. It scared me. And I was actually, I was finishing my edits. And I was at a speaking gig. And I was staying in this cabin with these other attendees of the speaking gig. It was a real, you know, high-level speaking gig, we were sleeping in a bunk bed with the attendees. And I met this guy who was from New Jersey, and he, he was a creative director for an ad agency. And I was telling about the book he was, that's what I want to do, man, like, I want to be a full-time artist. And I said, Well, hey, just tell me what you think about

this title. Like, what's your reaction to this? And I said, *Real Artists Don't Starve*. And I'd like, it was hard for me to say it. And I was scared, you know? And he's looked at me, the guy's from Jersey, and he's like, Yeah, yeah, man.

**Ray Edwards 15:45**

Yeah,

**Jeff Goins 15:55**

I'd go pick up that book. And I'd be like, skim, you know, and then I'd read it. And I'd be like, Oh, he's right, you know. Right or wrong, good or bad. What that told me was, that's the kind of reaction that I want readers of this book to have. And I'm willing to bite the bullet to do it. But you want people to react. You don't want them to dismiss it. Tim Ferriss said that when he wrote *The Four Hour Workweek* he was trying to get people mad at him or love him, but not in between, because that's how books die.

**Ray Edwards 18:30**

Yeah, friend of mine says, love me or hate me. But there ain't no money in the middle. Yeah, I'll be the crass commercialist and I'll say that. I actually, I envied almost bitterly, that title. When you publish that book, I was like, Oh, that's such a perfect title.

**Jeff Goins 18:35**

It's a fun title is good message I had to it was a decision point for me because I had to double down on it. And that book has got me in front of audiences that I never imagined getting in front of. The ING Bank in Amsterdam brought me in for a symposium for artists, where I get to talk about money and art.

**Ray Edwards 19:07**

Wow, Wow.

**Jeff Goins 19:08**

For one of the bigger banks of the world, and was one of the largest banks in the world, a good size bank. I got to talk to artists, and I got to talk to money people. That was a cool gig.

**Ray Edwards 19:17**

Now, listen, I mean, stop and think about this. This is kind of amazing because people talk about how people read less these days. They're reading tweets, and they're reading little streams of information online, but books still have this amazing power. They are portable magic, right? And they can spark something like the reaction like that guy had to the title of your book, and like other people have had to different had different reactions to the title of your book or other books. I don't know if anything else that has that kind of power. That is also the reason I brought up portable magic is whether you're getting people to download the Kindle version, or you're handing them a copy of a book. That's the magic. It's like your idea transportable and you can it's like *Inception*.

**Jeff Goins 19:58**

Yeah, yeah, I actually do think of it as *inception*. Like you've got to inject the simplest, most interesting idea that spreads, and a person can create a world around it. *Four Hour Workweek*,

that's inception. People built their lives around that magic, and essentialism, you know, like, there are these books that come along that go, wow. And it's not just magic. It's not just luck. It may be surprising to the author. But when you look back, you go, Oh, they had this thing going, this thing going, this thing going. As I was telling the ING story, you know, I was thinking, somebody might be going, Oh, that? Well, yeah, because you're, you, you're Jeff Goins, or whatever, because that name means something to a certain group of people on the internet. The people that brought me in for that speaking, had no idea who I was, they heard about my book.

**Jeff Goins** 20:44

Yep.

**Jeff Goins** 20:45

And so what a book does, so forget about books for a second. Books are dead. Tweet, long live tweets, or whatever, are ideas dead? It is a great way to spread an idea for a couple of reasons. One, the process forces you to make your ideas better. I put all kinds of stupid stuff on Twitter just ideas. Because it's easy. Writing a book is not easy, even if you self-publish it, it's not easy. And you're constantly honing and tweaking and whittling it down to the best thing that you could possibly say. So it forces you to do that. Not everybody does it. So you're going to stand out people know that it's hard. And of course, there's authority attached to a book. And so if you have an idea that you want to get in front of other people that don't know you and don't know who you are, probably the best way to do it is to write a book based on an interesting idea that deserves to be heard.

**Ray Edwards** 21:37

No doubt. I 100% agree with that. You know, I wrote a book about how to write copy that sells. And we've sold a little over 30,000 copies of it's a self- well entrepreneurially, published, yes, sort of pseudo-self-published. And that book has made me millions of dollars. I wrote it with an intention. And it's fulfilled that intention. And I love that book. For that reason, this book that you and I are working on now, that's going to be coming out in the near future, more near now than it was yesterday. I'm excited to share the idea and see what happens. We can just do the quick collapsing time description of what happened. We talked through the idea we came up with the first title, we went through the process you described earlier, we have the title that we have now, which is I think, pretty interesting. I think it'll pick a fight or two.

**Jeff Goins** 22:23

I think so, too.

**Ray Edwards** 22:23

And I got an advance from a major publisher.

**Jeff Goins** 22:27

Yeah.

**Ray Edwards** 22:27

Is it okay?

**Jeff Goins** 22:28

That originally published The Subtle Art

**Jeff Goins** 22:31

Yeah, exactly. Which is funny, because I think I told you way back when I'd like to write a book like this, and publish a book like this. And we're working with the agent and with the publishing company. So that's just strange magic. And the point is not. Okay. It's interesting that I got \$150,000. Advance that was surprising. Because here's the reason why I say that. People say, Well, that's easy for you, because you're Ray Edwards, well, to the publishing world, they don't know who I am. I'm just this guy who has a little business and a few people that follow him on the internet.

**Jeff Goins** 22:58

And publishers are skeptical of bloggers and social media people, just because you have a large online audience doesn't mean it's going to be easy to be published, for lots of reasons. Part of it is kind of this New York snobbery, you know, but because you're just publishing ideas on the internet, you don't have to jump through a million hoops. There is this sense that you don't have much to say.

**Ray Edwards** 23:21

So that felt like almost a miracle. And as I look back, it's no, it wasn't a miracle. I mean, it's amazing. I'm very grateful for it. But there was a process that we walked through together, you knew explicitly, you knew, you had a framework in your mind about well, this is what we need to do if we're gonna take this idea to published book.

**Jeff Goins** 23:37

Yes.

**Ray Edwards** 23:38

Do you mind sharing a little of what that framework looks like? And we're actually going to gather a few people together and go through this together, If you're interested, you may want to do that. But can you kind of walk us through that?

**Jeff Goins** 23:47

Sure. So it's building on what we already talked about, which is you start with a big idea, the formula for big ideas, everybody thinks X. But what's actually true is Y. This is everything that Jesus ever said, you know, most of the things that Gandhi said a lot of what Martin Luther King jr. did embodied this framework, which is you think the world is this way, and it's actually this way. That's how to start a movement. That's how you get your religion to spread. That's how you market a product is it has to be surprising in a good way. Surprising in a bad way is terrifying, surprising, in a good way is funny or delightful. So we start with the big idea. And then we structure the book around two basic structures of a book. You can do an arc structure, which is feels kind of like a novel or a story, which could be a memoir, or it could be like a Malcolm Gladwell-esque kind of your the explication of your argument feels like a narrative arc, or the more common way is a modular format, where you start with your big idea at the very beginning. And then you kind of have these modules as if you're creating a course that you spell out over time. So we start with the big idea, we figure out how we're going to structure it and then we write a

book proposal based on that and we follow a template. My team and I follow a template that is based on working with dozens of authors over the years and working with lots of different agents, some of which have sold these books that we mentioned on this call that, that made millions of dollars, I borrowed from all of these different templates, every agent has a different template for creating a book proposal. And we codify that into our own template. And I just guided you through that process of filling that out.

**Ray Edwards** 25:23

Yeah, and it works beautifully. And whether you are going to get your book published by a New York publisher, or whether you're going to self-publish it, or whatever you're going to do, I think this process is extraordinarily valuable. You're gonna have a much better book, and like I mentioned, the book that I self-published about writing copy and how it's made me lots of money, you could, you could be writing that kind of book or you maybe you want to sell your idea to New York. Would you agree this process is valuable for anybody writing a book?

**Jeff Goins** 25:49

Yeah, it is. And we have people that hire us for lots of money, typically, around \$25,000, people will hire my team for three months commitment to guide them through this process. And if you're an indie author, we call it a book plan. If you are trying to get a book deal with a publisher, we call it a book proposal. It's the same document. One is these are sales letters, right? A book proposal is a business plan, where you are trying to sell your idea to a publisher, and they're going to pay you money to publish it right? Whether that sales letter goes to somebody else, or it stays with you, you need a plan to write the book and most people just start writing that is the worst way to start writing a book is to just start writing, start with an intent, have a clear goal and idea of what you want to accomplish, and have the best idea for what this book is going to be about and how you're going to structure it. Because as we've already established, once the book is done, the marketing is over, right. And so if you go in with a crappy plan, you end up with a crappy book. And so if you are somebody who's published books before to crickets, and I've done that before, where you've got this big idea, and you try to share it with the world, and it doesn't work, or you've never published a book before, or you just want to see what it's going to take to go to the next level. It starts with the plan, Big Idea, structure, and then a plan to write it.

**Ray Edwards** 27:11

So we were talking, we had this idea because you've got you've done workshops where you walk people through this process as well. And we were talking about what if we took my book proposal, and since we're getting close to the time, the book will come out what if we did a workshop and actually walked people through this process on their own book, showing them what we did with mine as an example and you get to see the finished product. But the really important thing is you get to go through the process of making your own book plan or book proposal in that workshop. And so that, that's what we're doing. And it's gonna be fun and it's super inexpensive and I think you will get tremendous value out of going through this process.

**Kris Edwards** 27:52

Okay, we will end the conversation right there. The rest of it is pretty much about the workshop it is well worth your time to investigate that if you are in a position where you're like, Hey, I've got a big idea that should be a best selling book. If that's you, visit this address, [prosperouswriter.com](http://prosperouswriter.com). Of course, there is a special price for those who act early. So if you're

interested, just do it. [prosperouswriter.com](http://prosperouswriter.com). We will see you next week and as Ray would say, live long and prosper.

**Announcer 28:25**

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