

**DAN MARTELL**

**BUY** 

**BACK**

 **YOUR**

**TIME**

**GET UNSTUCK, RECLAIM YOUR FREEDOM,  
AND BUILD YOUR EMPIRE**

# BUY BACK YOUR TIME



Get Unstuck, Reclaim Your Freedom,  
and Build Your Empire

**DAN MARTELL**

PORTFOLIO / PENGUIN



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*To Renée, Max, and Noah, you are my everything.*

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## INTRODUCTION

# How Business Saved My Life (Then Almost Ruined It)

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**I STARED AT THE GUN** in my duffel bag.

*If I just point it at these cops, they'll end my miserable life for me.*

Wiping the sweat from my eyes, I peered into the rearview mirror. Two armed police officers were racing toward my car. I'd just led them on a high-speed chase and crashed into the side of a house. They'd finally caught up and had every reason to fire on sight. It was game over.

Hopelessness flooded me. Memories of a lifetime of troubled antics. Shoplifting in grade school. Stints in group homes in middle school. Getting booted from high school.

When my mom found drugs, money, and stolen guns at our house, she'd finally had enough and called the cops. But my brother Pierre tipped me off, so instead of waiting around to get arrested, I took the \$63 he offered and went on the run, hiding in hunting camps and crashing on friends' couches. Finally, after weeks of trying to stay one step ahead of the police, I decided to leave my small Canadian town of Moncton, New Brunswick, and head to Montreal, where my uncle lived.

I stole a car and left town—but I didn't get far. I was on the road only a short time when I hit a random roadblock. Feeding the cops a bogus story about forgetting my driver's license, as soon as they turned their backs to look up my info in their computer, I gunned the engine and sped away.

The next few minutes were like a car chase out of a movie: slamming the accelerator, pounding the horn, weaving in and out of traffic—before finally crashing into the side of a house.

That’s when I reached for the gun.

But it got stuck as I tried to remove it—jammed somehow. I yanked and yanked, but it wouldn’t budge. Then the cops yanked *me* into their cruiser.

Fast-forward to a six-month sentence in an adult jail because of the severity of my crimes. I tried to keep to myself and stay out of trouble, but old habits die hard, and eventually I ended up getting into a fight that landed me in solitary confinement. Finally, after spending almost seventy-two hours alone in my underwear, Brian, a guard, entered my cell.

“Come on,” he said. He led me to a side room, ushered me inside, then locked the door. I looked around at the room, realizing that this was one of the few areas without cameras.

My heart was in my throat. Brian stared at me, and after a long pause, he asked a simple but profound question:

“Dan, why are you here?”

“Well I got in a fight with Kirk at breakfast—”

He cut me off. “No, I mean, why are you in jail?”

I stammered, offering a few feeble answers: “I stole a car. I ran from the cops—”

Brian interrupted me. “No, Dan. I’ve been here for almost ten years, and I’ve met a lot of kids. *A lot*. But I see you trying to do your homework and stay out of trouble. You’re different. It doesn’t make sense to me. *You* don’t belong here.”

Hot tears came pouring down my face as Brian explained that he thought I was “meant for something else.” Until that day, I’d only ever heard what a troublemaker I was. But somehow Brian saw potential in me. And his words gave me hope for a better life.

Looking back now, I can see that throughout my troubled childhood, I had *always* shown potential: I was creative, I was willing to take risks, I was good at talking to people, and I could deal with the chaos around me without losing



my cool. In essence, I had shown the necessary skills to be an entrepreneur—but my skill set just hadn't been pointed in the right direction.

My next stop proved to be pivotal. Not long after my conversation with Brian, I was sent to Portage, a therapeutic facility for teens. There, my transformation continued. I studied and worked hard at the tasks I was given. Along the way, I befriended a maintenance guy, Rick, who became like a big brother to me. One day, I was helping Rick clean out one of the abandoned cabins when I found a book on Java programming sitting next to an old computer. I opened it up and what I saw shocked me. I had always thought computer programming would look like hieroglyphics, incomprehensible lines of complex math equations. But this . . . *this* read like plain English. And it spoke to me.

So I powered up the computer and typed in commands, following the simple list of instructions from the first chapter of the manual. Minutes later, the program ran and these words appeared:

“Hello World!”

That was it. Something just clicked for me. Here was a way to create a set of instructions that allowed me to get the same reliable and predictable results. Every. Single. Time.

The predictability of software counteracted the unpredictable chaos I had been living with my whole childhood. From that day forward, writing code became my new addiction.

I soon found myself obsessed with design software and systems. Even today, when I teach clients to create systems for their companies, it's a huge thrill to help people turn chaos into predictability.

At the time, I was naively proud of myself—I didn't realize that “Hello World!” is the first lesson in every beginner's programming book. With unfounded confidence, I dove headfirst into this new advent, “the Internet.” I took the same skills that had gotten me into trouble my entire childhood and pointed them full force toward entrepreneurship.

In fact, my chaotic childhood proved perfect for the world of self-employment—the unknown just didn't scare me. I opened my first legitimate business, a vacation rental site called MaritimeVacation, in 1998, when I was

just eighteen. At twenty-one, I started my second business, NB Host, a hosting company for Web applications.

Entrepreneurship had redeemed my life and given me direction. But there was one problem. I knew only one thing: GSD—Get. Shit. Done. Work hard, make money, stay out of trouble. Day after day. Until my first two companies failed, miserably. I hadn't learned how to work well with other people or value my time. But starting businesses was in my blood, and I knew it. So I powered on, starting my third company, a software firm called Spheric Technologies, in 2004. There, my hard work began to pay some dividends—at least professionally. I was working fifteen-to-eighteen-hour days, which produced 150 percent of year-over-year growth—while simultaneously tanking my personal life.

Four months shy of my wedding day, on a seemingly normal day when I'd been working since the crack of dawn, I came home late in the evening to find a very upset fiancée.

"I can't do this anymore," she said, dropping her engagement ring on the counter.

Apparently, my once future wife thought that if I wanted to spend my life with her, I had to actually spend *time* with her.

Although I didn't realize it at first, my two failed businesses and my failed relationship all had one thing in common—*me*. And at the heart of my problem was my GSD mentality, which blinded me to everything else. I knew I needed to find a better way to run my businesses and my life.

Little did I know, the seed to my solution had already been planted.

A few years before my fiancée had left, I'd already started reading more business books. I'd picked up the audiobook version of *Love Is the Killer App* by Tim Sanders. After reading—or rather, listening to—the whole book, I thought, *Wow. I just downloaded twenty years of life experience for \$20 and a few hours of my time. How many more of these books can I get my hands on?*

After that, I started devouring the classics, such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill, and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey. These

books had helped my business run more smoothly, but it wasn't enough. I needed to run my *life* differently. I needed systems that would supercharge who I am—an entrepreneur—while also helping me be a good person. Losing my fiancée was the wake-up call I needed to get serious about finding a true, holistic life solution. I kept reading, searching, and experimenting. I found secrets here and there about how to reclaim my life, live my passion, and own a business that didn't own me. I began to apply principles, tactics, tools, and systems from books, mentors, programs—any source I could find. And I started seeing results:

I began learning how to *do* what I love (lead businesses) and *be* who I want to be (a friend, father, and husband). I learned that I can't possibly separate entrepreneurship from myself because I *am* an entrepreneur. I sold Spheric in 2008 and made my first million, which completely changed my belief in what's possible. Then, I moved to San Francisco in 2009 to start my next venture, Flowtown. I kept building teams and infrastructure that freed up my time and energy so I could reinvest them. Oddly, this time, the more my company grew, the *more* time I had. I'd found a way to grow my company and my time simultaneously. And then I discovered something even more profound.

What brings me real joy is seeing other entrepreneurs find those same truths.

A core principle of mine is: learn, do, teach. You don't learn without doing, and once you've really learned something valuable, you should pass it on. Today, I know from personal experience, amazing mentors, and coaches who've helped me that the *only* way to grow your business past a certain point is to buy back your time and redeposit it where it matters most.

In 2006, I started a blog to share some of the growth tactics I'd learned. I wasn't an expert on buying back my time, but still, I just wanted to pay it forward with the little that I had learned about growing companies. People started commenting on my posts. Then, in 2008, I started giving speeches at conferences. These were mostly directed at fellow software companies. In the beginning, I usually discussed business tactics—like growth marketing strategies I had learned in the heart of Silicon Valley—but I was always more

interested in helping the entrepreneurs and founders *live*. From all my blogs and conferences, I learned that I was not the only entrepreneur struggling with the GSD mentality, and it only strengthened my commitment to service.

In 2012, Flowtown was acquired, and I immediately started Clarity, a marketplace where we connected startup founders with the answers they needed for their new businesses, from startup advice to legal questions to marketing strategies. Again, I knew from experience that I owed all my success to the books I'd read and the advice I'd received. Clarity seemed like the perfect way to bring founders and their quest for answers together: at Clarity, leaders pay a fee to hear advice from experienced entrepreneurs. I knew that there were some real, deep questions that founders had, and when they got the answers they needed, they could unlock magic throughout their organizations. When Clarity was acquired in 2014, I went looking for my next challenge.

By 2015, I'd started SaaS<sup>[\*]</sup> Academy, a YouTube channel for software company founders where I began freely sharing not only business tactics, but more intimate strategies—like valuing energy management over time management, the importance of company playbooks (standardized operating procedures), and, ultimately, how to buy back your time. I was amazed at the feedback—“Felt like succinct therapy,” and “This is the best breakthrough video I've ever personally watched.” Apparently, I had stumbled on a near-universal truth: we all struggle with finding ways to juggle our time and our business.

Born entrepreneurs have to find a way to live fully, in their business and in life.

If you've been eating the GSD fruit for some time now, you've probably found some success. Hard work, even at the expense of your relationships, will pay off, to a degree.

But at some point, success will stall. You're one person, with a finite amount of time. You have a company, family, and friends, who are all demanding it.

If you find yourself dreading work—because you know you have a stack of emails to respond to, new fires to put out, and a dozen clients, customers,

and employees waiting to dump work on your lap—and then dreading coming home—because you’re exhausted, stressed, and still thinking about all that’s left at work—then this book is for you. This book is for anyone who wants to buy back their time to do more of what they love while they grow their company. You won’t be fully alive without being an entrepreneur, because it’s in your DNA. But if your company’s killing you, your family, or your relationships, with tasks that are eating all your time and energy, you can’t go on like this. So don’t. I’ll help you find a better way.

This is the story of how I changed my approach—and how you can do the same.

## **How to Build a Business You Don’t Grow to Hate**

Stephen Covey once said, “The key is in not spending time, but in investing it.”<sup>[1]</sup> Inside this book, you’ll find *exactly* how to do that. You’ll find a systematic approach, with tactics and strategies synthesized from two failed companies, a lost fiancée, reading over 1,200 business and self-help books, running the largest SaaS training and mentoring group in the world, and giving numerous talks on buying back your time.

Not only do I personally use everything taught here, but so have thousands of other founders and entrepreneurs who’ve learned how to buy back their time and energy and redeploy them correctly. As a result, they have more energy, feel excited about the future, and they love their businesses again. At work, their employees are happier. At home, they’re better friends, parents, and spouses. Oh, and their companies have grown exponentially.

Most entrepreneurs think that a profitable business sprouts from hard work. That may be true, but a thriving *empire* only comes when the leader—you—learns how to buy back their time. Take back the reins of your life, enjoy your work again, and reclaim the freedom your business can provide you.

Trust me—I now know not only is it possible to have free time, live as an entrepreneur, and pour energy into your relationships, but that these are all intertwined—a happier Dan is a better entrepreneur, and a better entrepreneur is a better father and a more loving husband.

I've helped hundreds of other founders learn how to redeploy their time: to buy it back and deposit it where it matters most. They've learned that the more time they spend on what they're best at in their company, the more energy they have and the more money they make, allowing them to buy back *even more* time. It's the exact *opposite* approach I had in my first few companies, where the more my businesses grew, the more I suffered, only to eventually lose my company and my relationships.

I found the solution I was looking for, and I want to teach it to you.

Here's a brief snapshot of how this book is laid out:

First, I'll teach you the Buyback Principle, the Buyback Loop, and the DRIP Matrix. These mental shifts will allow you to rethink how you're spending time in your company. You'll learn how to quickly identify what's zapping your time, and why. Just by giving yourself a mirror, you'll see the insanity of how most entrepreneurs—maybe even you—are running their companies. You'll uncover the psychological limitations to your success, starting with your own Time Assassins.

Using the Replacement Ladder (chapter 5), you'll learn how to infinitely scale up your tasks and time with the next most valuable tasks. In chapter 7, we'll talk about creating replicable playbooks to pass on to your employees so that you maintain total control over your business without having to ever touch most of it.

Throughout the book, we'll explore how you can learn to play your own infinite game. We'll dive into the only three time trades that you can make.

There will be some quick tips and hacks along the way. For instance, you'll quickly learn that *every* entrepreneur can afford to start off-loading some tasks immediately (using their Buyback Rate; chapter 1). I'll also teach you how to design your own personalized Perfect Week (chapter 8) around *your* energy. We'll dive into easy tricks, such as the Definition of Done and the 1:3:1 Rule (both in chapter 9), that will help you overcome bottlenecks in

your organization that are stalling your productivity. (Oh, and probably my favorite tip is the Camcorder Method, in chapter 7. This will help you train others without spending additional time. Check it out now if you want a sneak peek.)

By the end, I'll have you dreaming again (using a process called the 10X Vision map, chapter 13). Plus, I'll show you how to create the Preloaded Year (chapter 14) so that you can execute on that big dream. There will be homework you can do along the way, and I've collected all the material for you in one convenient place at [BuyBackYourTime.com/Resources](http://BuyBackYourTime.com/Resources).



**LEARNING HOW TO** buy back my own time has created an incredible life. This week I'll spend six hours growing my eight-figure business. I'll train for an Ironman. I'll volunteer with inner-city youth. I'll write my next book. I'll look for my next investment. I'll give my attention and resources to the at-risk entrepreneurs who give me so much energy and joy. Best of all, I'll spend time with my kids, eat lunch with my wife, and the four of us will enjoy dinner together . . . every night.

None of that has come because I simply grinded harder. All of it has come because I learned to think and act differently inside my company, so that every moment invested *in* it has allowed me to withdraw more energy *from* it.

And none of it came on my own—others guided me, authored books, hosted conferences, hopped on calls. I learned from them, and now I want to share all that information with you, in fourteen chapters.

In the end, this isn't just about you. This is about the future of your business, your employees, and your community. If you burn out, you'll burn down their lives as well.

Let's build a business you don't grow to hate.





# How I Buy Back My Life

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*Goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results.*

—JAMES CLEAR<sup>[1]</sup>

**BY THE TIME STUART FOUND ME**, he was in the fight of his life.

“I can barely leave the house, I can’t take a full breath, and I’m having panic attacks regularly. I’m living a nightmare,” he told me.

A few months before, Stuart had led a major re-architecture of the backend code that powered his company’s apps. He worked fourteen-hour days, seven days a week, to see the project through. They finished by Christmas, so Stuart took a few days off to bring his wife and her sister to Disneyland. After ten minutes of walking through the park, he felt dizzy, his chest was tight, and he couldn’t breathe. He found a bench to rest and assured his family, “I’m fine. Go on. I’ll catch up.”

Stuart wasn’t fine. His heart and mind were racing. *Am I having a heart attack at the happiest place on Earth?* he asked himself. Eventually, Stuart got off his bench and rejoined his family.

But when he returned home, reality came knocking, and his symptoms returned. Medical tests revealed his heart was fine. The real problem? *Anxiety*. This puzzled Stuart because he’d never once had a panic attack, until now.

Soon he was having them twice a week. By March 2020—three short months after his nightmare at Disneyland—Stuart was in bed most days, paralyzed by his body’s fight-or-flight response. His physical state was so low, even joining video calls (which COVID-19 had made standard by then) was impossible. Stuart did everything he could. He studied self-help books,

tried meditation, and even forced himself to exercise, which was exhausting in his condition. Nothing worked.

Before Disneyland, Stuart was a young and enthusiastic entrepreneur: a thirty-four-year-old, well-educated, hardworking businessman. He studied finance in college, worked on Wall Street, and started his second company (which developed a suite of applications that helps small businesses increase online sales) in 2015. Within four years, he had ten employees, a dozen apps, and more than 640,000 active daily users. By most accounts, he was successful.

Like many good entrepreneurs, Stuart was immersed in the details of his company. He tackled most tasks himself because “that’s how you get things done right.” Plus, he had the expertise to back it up. In college, he’d taken accounting, so he knew how to keep the company’s books. He also knew how to code, so he touched every piece of his software developers’ work. He even booked his own travel plans and scheduled his own meetings.

Stuart had built a successful company, piece by piece. Using his intellect and prior experiences, he’d laid the foundation for an enterprise that provided for his family, employed others, and created value in the marketplace. While there were long days and sacrifices, it had all seemed worth it. Until now.

At thirty-four, everything came to a grinding halt. His body had said “Enough is enough.” Now his company’s growth seemed in jeopardy, and everything he’d worked hard to achieve seemed as if it were resting on a crumbling founder who could barely get out of bed.

I’ve been able to work with hundreds of interesting people, mostly entrepreneurs who are passionate about their companies. Sometimes, I’m helping them scale their sales teams, or coaching them on finding top talent or where to spend their marketing dollars. More often—and this is what I really love—I’m helping entrepreneurs find what’s eating up all their time and energy. Once we unlock that together, I can help them get back to what’s lighting them up and bringing them money.

But when Stuart, the founder of multiple software companies, came to me in 2020, he wasn’t just looking for a growth strategy, a marketing plan, or even a way to save time, money, and energy.

He was looking for a way to save his life.

## Breaking the Toxic “Get Sh\*t Done” Mentality

A UC Berkeley study showed that entrepreneurs are significantly more likely to report a lifetime history of depression, ADHD, substance abuse, and bipolar disorder.<sup>[2]</sup> Most of us founders start our companies with good intentions—to provide solutions, to disrupt the market, or to spend more time with family and friends. With all these plans for a better future, why are we struggling with a litany of physical and mental health issues?

The answer?

We’ve subconsciously slipped into a pit of deception: *The more I work, the more productive my business will be.* On the surface, this makes sense. Work hard, stay ahead. That’s the enticing part—the reason we get tricked. But over time, a hard-work ethic can lead entrepreneurs to believe one thing: more input, more output.

Simple busyness can’t be the secret ingredient to business success. A hamster on a wheel is awfully busy. So is a dog digging a hole. I can think of more than one entrepreneur who spends hours a day running errands, being interrupted by team members, processing emails—they’re certainly *busy* all day, but there’s not a lot getting done.

Even *efficiently* staying busy isn’t the answer. Most entrepreneurs are extremely efficient. They can eliminate task after task faster than anyone else. They can make the calls, send the emails, seal the deals—overall, they can *make it happen*. But efficient busyness on the wrong tasks simply creates a faster streamline to Stuart’s situation.

When I met him, Stuart had convinced himself that hiring and training others required too much time, energy, and money. Tackling most tasks himself was easier and, to him, the most efficient way of ensuring things were done right. So he did everything. Why not?

Stuart wasn't just the bookkeeper and accountant; he was also the chief engineer, the lead project manager, the head of fulfillment, the head of customer support, and his own personal assistant.

His high standards and insane work ethic were undeniable, even admirable. But he was working seventy-hour weeks during an average month and hundred-hour weeks when duty called. Which is why he had an anxiety attack half a block from Sleeping Beauty's castle.

He didn't know how to reclaim his time and deposit it where it matters most.

The little-known secret to reaching the next stage of your business is spending your time on only the tasks that: (a) you excel at, (b) you truly enjoy, and (c) add the highest value (usually in the form of revenue) to your business. Likely, two to three tasks fit that description. Every other task you're handling is slowing your growth and sucking the life from you, and you should clear it from your calendar.

*Yes, someone else should be handling about 95 percent of your current work so you can get back to what matters.*

Allan Dib, author of *The 1-Page Marketing Plan*, said it like this:

*You can always get more money, but you can never get more time. So you need to ensure the stuff you spend your time on makes the biggest impact.*<sup>[3]</sup>

If you're stuck in the grinding force of emails, phone calls, and putting out small fires, this probably sounds ridiculous. But stay with me. For just a minute, forget whether or not what I'm saying is *possible*, and instead just consider how you'd *feel* if you were only executing what you're better at than everyone else, what you truly love, and what adds a crazy amount of value to your business.

Chances are, you'd breathe a huge sigh of relief. Your mind would probably clear. You'd probably be a better spouse, a better parent, and a better friend. Your employees would be happier because you'd come into work refreshed, steering the company toward bigger, better, and more