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BY TOM OSSA



**30 DAYS TO A  
BETTER  
BRAND**

*A quick guide to expanding your business in*  
**ROCKLAND COUNTY, NY**



## 30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND

Thanks for reading this advance copy of  
the first 15 pages of 30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND.

In 2017, I wrote my first book “How to Program Your Life”. I’m newly excited to have written this collection of valuable stories and advice for you, the local business professional in Rockland County, NY.

The full version of this book is scheduled to be released on Friday October 27<sup>th</sup> via Amazon.com, and several other easy-to-find locations.

I’ll also have limited copies of the full version at our upcoming business conference on October 18<sup>th</sup>, Work Smart NY, at Rockland Community College.

If you would like to order an advance copy, visit [WorkSmartNY.com/30](http://WorkSmartNY.com/30) and I’ll reserve a copy for you.

Feedback is welcome, so feel free to call or text me!

I hope you enjoy and benefit from this book.



~ Tom

# 30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND

## Chapter list for full book (available Oct 27, 2023):

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# 30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND

## Introduction

From the calm serenity of a quiet post-COVID Rockland County office, to the bustling retail shops of downtown Nyack, to the full-on excitement of a 6000-seat local stadium with live music and sports, the journey of building a brand is as varied as the landscapes we navigate. And in this unique county of Rockland – the smallest county in all of New York State – small business professionals must continually make their brands better. It's not just useful, it's survival.

If you've picked up this book, chances are you're a little past the opening stage of your journey, but also maybe a few hairs shy of multi-millionaire status. Perhaps you're planning a new product launch, or maybe you're seeking to breathe fresh life into an existing company that's been around for a decade or more.

I can relate. I run two companies, a digital marketing firm (2007), and my newest venture, RocklandNews.com. I'm still thankfully excited about both. The entrepreneurial spirit runs deep on both sides of my family, dating back to my Grandfather's bike shop that lasted 44 years in Manhattan, and 18 years in West Haverstraw. But with the spirit comes the challenge.

Whatever your situation, the steps to grow your brand, and meet those challenges ahead are universal, their roots deep and foundational.

I remember the early days of RocklandWeb.com, seated in a small Library in Stony Point, typing my business plan furiously in October 2006 - feeling both a healthy amount of both exhilaration and fear. Over the years, as I ventured into my second company - RocklandNews.com, an industry toward which I can apply my History degree from Ramapo College - the lessons learned only grew in richness. Each business, each

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initiative, held its unique challenges, but the foundational principles remained consistent.

*For more of that history, read my first book, How to Program Your Life. That was phase 1. This book is phase 2, for you that are established, but aiming to continue the challenge of further expanding your brand(s).*

In the pages that follow, we'll explore 30 fundamental steps to fortify your brand. From understanding the heart of Rockland County to harnessing the power of technology, to good ol' fashioned customer services, these steps are grounded in timeless business wisdom that you can find in universities, business boot camps, and your local Barnes & Noble.

But more than just theory, I'll be weaving in tales from my own journey – the highs, the lows, the lessons hard-learned. Because when all is said and done, the path to success is not just about strategies and tactics, but the stories that shape us, our good work, and the communities we impact.

Thanks for taking the time to read this book. With Rockland County as our backdrop, I'll be aiming to weave a tale of a stronger brand on the horizon for your company, organization or cause.

*“Kick ass. Take names.”*

~ Tom

# 30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND

## 1. Know Your Roots

When I started my first venture in Rockland County in 2007, one thing became immediately clear: This wasn't just any place. Rockland has a heartbeat, a rhythm, a soul. And if you're going to run a business here, you've got to sync up with that beat.

But let's first take a brief walk down memory lane, so you understand where I come from.

My family came up to Rockland County from Manhattan and Queens in 1982. My Grandfather had a bike store in New York City for approximately 44 years, but even in his 70s he still had the drive to keep working. So, he decided to semi retire and open up a smaller bike shop in West Haverstraw NY.

After grammar school each day, my grandmother would pick me up and bring me back to the bike shop. I was a nerd, and not that popular. But I enjoyed video games, and had a lot of energy to use up while riding my BMX bicycle around with the few friends that were not mean to me. (Shout out to Emmanuel Vincitore!) My grandfather also must have picked up on this, and encouraged me to learn how to repair bicycles, and by the age of nine, I was performing most of the steps that are required for a good quality bicycle tune up.

He would give me \$1 per tune up. And then resold it to the customer for around \$20. Nice margin. And everyone was happy. I used my earnings to play more video games.

Later, as my Grandfather health took a turn for the worse, my Mom and I took over the shop. I can't say that we ever made a profit during those days. The bicycle business is a tough one. But I definitely learned and leveraged a few very important core ideas, such as keeping the advertising very clear and straightforward (the sign outside said

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BICYCLES | SALES | REPAIRS), delivering a quality tune up or brand new bike to the customers, showing up to work even if I didn't feel like it, and most importantly, treating the customer as if he or she was a friend that I knew for 10 years. Not easy for a 22-year-old. But it was a great learning experience.

Eventually, I realized that my prospects spanned a bit further than working at the bike store. My Grandfather had been immersed in the bicycle culture for over 50 years, but my calling was more along the lines of the rapidly emerging technology industry. Bill Gates had just launched Windows 95, and the Internet was definitely something me and my nerd geek friends were using as an extension of our already vast experiences on video games such as the Legend of Zelda.

In short, it was fun and I wanted to expand myself within that space. I picked up a part time job teaching Microsoft Office at Rockland BOCES, and found a place where my enthusiasm sprung forth.

After a second return to college for completion of my history degree, and a brief stint at a toxic local web development firm (more on that later), I started my first business in 2007. I have never looked back.

One very important point throughout all of these personal experiences is that I also absorbed all the information I could possibly remember, about the people, the places, the events and activities of my local surroundings, as well as the trends that were slowly but surely emerging.

As an example, I noticed that in 2006 there was a growing need for business networking by local small business owners. There was no social media at that time, and in-person meetings were still important. I decided to go to lots of networking events to introduce myself, and learn. It wasn't always smooth. I couldn't tell a joke if my life depended

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on it, but I definitely was able to present myself as easygoing, hardworking and friendly. This helped me grow my contacts and connections in the very early stages of my 1<sup>st</sup> brand, Rockland Web Design Inc. 15 years later, we have built over 400 websites for clients across the Hudson Valley, as well as a few national brands. Even one in Canada! Ey?

While hindsight is 2020, it is always good to take note of the current upcoming developments of the day in the local news. On any given day, there are at least three dozen local events in any of our five towns, our 45 villages, hundreds of not-for-profit organizations, as well as sales, networking events, library events and much more.

Rockland has a rich tapestry of history that has shaped it into the vibrant county it is today. From the earliest Native American settlers to the waves of immigrants that migrated north from Ellis Island with their dreams and determination, to the colonizations established by various monarchs and adventurers... every layer adds depth to its story. Dive into local archives, visit the county's museums, or just chat with the folks who've been here for generations. You'll learn about the good, the bad, and the ugly. When you understand where Rockland has been, you'll have a clearer vision of where you and your business can go.

You don't have to dig too deep into any one topic, but keeping tabs on the ones that interest you will help you to shape your products and services along with the roots that you bring to the table when you establish your brand. In this day and age, when respect for our colleagues requires a higher degree of scrutiny, you need to know thyself, as well as your surroundings.

There are also some unique demographics to this county that creates equally unique market forces. Rockland County is home to one of the largest Orthodox Jewish communities in the entire United States. As a



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flat-out observer of this phenomenon, I find it useful to measure the cultural shift in our communities over the passage of time. This of course is only one of several emerging demographics. I also note that my personal favorite hobby – music - Is continually reinventing itself over the span of several decades.

In my opinion, this presents a unique upcoming unique opportunity for quality tourism in the area, centered around arts and music. And you'd better believe such tourism is part of my companies' long term business plans. It also speaks to my personal lifelong cause, to use our technology and business skills to bring more music tourism into Rockland County. It all seems to work together quite frankly. But only because I have aimed to continually be observant of my surroundings.

Get involved in local events, participate in community gatherings, and immerse yourself in Rockland's way of life. When you align your business with the values of the community, you're not just selling a product or service; you're becoming a part of the community's fabric. This is a core step to making your brand better.

1. Understand Rockland County's history and culture.
2. Familiarize yourself with local traditions, events and values.
3. Commit yourself to learning from everyone you meet.

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### 2. Start Small

You know, there's a certain allure to dreaming big – envisioning your brand lighting up billboards or being the talk of the town. But every skyscraper started with a foundation, and every giant oak tree began as an acorn. It's the same with business.

Back when RocklandWeb.com was just an idea, I didn't aim to serve everyone. I pinpointed a specific group, a niche, that I believed I could genuinely help. Starting with a focused audience means you can tailor your offerings, understand their needs deeply, and build a strong rapport. It's like setting up a small shop in a close-knit neighborhood. As you serve that community well, word spreads, and your influence grows.

In 2019, one year before the COVID-19 crisis, I posed a question to my entire web development team.

“Why are we not doing anything *unique*? There is absolutely nothing that we do that other companies don't or can't do.”

I knew that in many cases we did those things better – web design, SEO and web hosting, but because the web development and social media space began to fill up 10 years after I got into business, I started getting itchy for new opportunities.

That opportunity arose in February of 2020.

The Rockland County Times, an institution of this area for over a century, was sold to a company in New York City, that manages the publication remotely. They still provide quality news articles, but I noticed that some of the more localized stories were not being addressed.

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One day while casually browsing around Google News stories, I randomly thought to myself, I wonder if the website domain **rocklandsnews.com** is available. I did a quick search on the Internet.

It was indeed available. For \$4200.

Not that I am a millionaire yet, but basically this is what happened next:

“F\*\*\* it” {Add to cart} >> {Checkout} >> {Domain purchased}

I know that sounds really obnoxious, but it is absolutely true. And mind you, that was only the website *domain*. There was no website attached to it. There was no actual publication like the Rockland County Times. There was no connection to many of the news stories that could be posted on the nonexistent rocklandnews.com website that still had to be developed.

Also add on the fact that I had no experience in the news industry. Just a History degree, which in today’s market is sadly considered less valuable of a profession than a Starbucks Barista serving yesterday’s coffee grinds.

Still, I started my first business on instinct, and I did the same with this, the start of my second business. I decided to recommit myself to being observant of my surroundings, and taking notes on what new opportunities could be incorporated into this new business venture.

One of the biggest, instantly useful advantages that I could bring into the new opportunity was my thankfully *vast contact list*. For 12 years I had been accumulating an ever growing network of colleagues with who I communicated regularly. So, sending out a few dozen emails or Facebook/LinkedIn message on a regular basis to my closest network of contacts was not a major shift in my routine. Thankfully, it was also not considered spam, because as I mentioned in step 1, I was considered friendly.

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On the flip side, I also realized that not only is it fun for businesses and organizations to promote their products, events and services in the news, it is 100% vital! It turned out that my offer for these well-respected colleagues to post their news stories to our new platform was well received.

I won't go too deep into the web development process for rocklandnews.com, but I can assure you that we aimed to start small. Just a few stories per day.

Fast forward through the pandemic, many phone calls, many emails, many events and promotions, and the bottom line Rockland news is pulling in around 50,000 views per quarter. This number is trending upward at about 15% per month. We're not the only news publication, but we have established a presence – especially with local municipalities that are seeking to communicate many vital issues from their Governments. And to keep it simple and straightforward, our coverage of these and many other stories is rooted in facts-only.

Over the course of time, the trajectory for the news organization is a good one.

You have your own brand to develop. But unless you have a useful add-on for the next SpaceX rocket, you not should spend sleepless nights obsessing over every last detail of the product or service, event or offer. But you should do a little bit each day. Success builds upon itself. As foundations are built, it helps to establish more success. But the foundation has to be laid, brick by brick. It can be as simple as writing a blog post, calling a certain number of customers to ensure that they are happy with your services provided, gathering Google reviews, posting on Instagram, facebook, or LinkedIn. It's a process. One that lasts years, and if you do it right...is never-ending.

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There is a bonus to working on the small steps. As you develop your rhythm in growing the brand one step at a time, you will find that the level of quality workmanship grows on a daily basis. Sure, you will have days where you are stressed out beyond all reproach. If you think it's going to be a walk in the park, go get a job at Blockbuster Video! But the consistency of your approach will help you to reduce the net overall stress levels. And that will still allow you for time to spend with family and friends, which these days I find so important – especially after the COVID19 crisis, one which we happened to report on regularly, courtesy of our local Governments.

I've always believed it's better to have ten loyal customers than a hundred one-time buyers. In Rockland, where community ties are strong, quality is paramount. Whether it's the product you sell, the service you offer, or the way you engage with clients, always aim for excellence. Quality builds trust, and trust is the currency of long-term business success. The small steps matter.

- Begin with a niche market or target audience for your product or service.
- Prioritize quality over quantity in everything you do.
- Aim to develop the small steps first, and build on the ones that seem to resonate with customers.

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### 3. Build Genuine Relationships

Back in grammar school and high school, I got bullied. I'm not saying I got daily beat-downs, it wasn't like that. I also figured out a way of surviving in the mix, by becoming the class clown. While I have matured over the past 30 years since, it worked for the time that I spent in that mindset, and when the road ahead was clearer, I set my sights on pursuing opportunities that were presented to me. I guess you can say that confidence is not a weak point in my capabilities matrix.

But those early days certainly created an unconscious set of social quirks, that I struggle with to this day. When I first got into business, it was really tough to put my ego aside, and simply listen to whoever I was talking with, clients, fellow professionals, and even some of my own team members that handle projects. I was so busy being protective of myself, that I probably missed thousands of cues for business opportunities, connections and profit.

Thankfully my work ethic carried me through those joyful days.

While there are still some remnants of the past deep inside my psyche, it is much easier these days to look someone straight in the eyes, maintain jovial smile on my face, and keep my mind open to whatever the colleague in front of me is interested in telling me. Opportunities spring from those conversations.

More, in networking meetings such as the Rockland Business Exchange (RBE), and the Bi-State Professional Networkers, (BSPN) - The concept of doing continual one on ones with fellow businesses runs very strong. I do admit that it still annoys me to no end when someone walks up to me, introduces themselves, and before I have a chance to respond, goes right into their sales pitch. Rest assured, I still listen, but keep the Apple Pay function turned off. No need to overheat my phone!

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But once we get all past that awkward part, even the most seasoned sales professional that is all business and no recreation has a story to tell. And over these past five years, I have worked to shut up and listen. Two things have happened as a result. First, I tend to humanize that person, and consider even a salesy person as less of a flat out salesperson. Everyone's got a story. I'm now interested in those stories. Second, I take the additional step of learning to find ways to work together.

In several instances, I have completely flipped my interpretation of some people that I previously did not regard. That is my fault. But I am glad that I realized that, especially in this my second phase of business. If you are reading this and are not sure if you will be comfortable in a networking event, a Chamber of Commerce, or a local fundraiser, the only advice I have for you is this: Don't waste 10 years to attend your first event. You are not serving your brand. But if you do, it will give you a much richer perspective on the vibrancy of business and organizational professionals of Rockland County. And it will help your brand visibility to grow by *several hundred percent*.

There are a multitude of events and activities that you can attend on a weekly basis to build genuine relationships. They come from all walks of life, have their own unique stories to bring to the table, and in some ways can increase your business reach exponentially.

This step is easy to start. Contact your local Chamber of Commerce, and ask how you can get involved. Look for a library event that seems to resonate with you. Ask a client or customer of any local organization events that you can volunteer for. You will find a level of friendliness that is both surprising and beneficial for your brand.

Just make sure you bring your business cards, a smile, and a willingness to connect.

## **30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND**

- Engage with local businesses and community leaders.
  - Attend local events and participate in community activities.
  - Make an effort to learn an interesting story about one new person per week.
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Thanks for reading the first three chapters of my newest book,

### **30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND**

Want more? I have 27 more chapters for you to grow your brand!

Visit [WorkSmartNY.com/30](http://WorkSmartNY.com/30) and pre-order the first edition copy of the upcoming full book:

## **30 DAYS TO A BETTER BRAND**

**\$5.99 (digital) | \$11.99 (print)**

20% of proceeds will be donated to Habitat for Humanity Rockland, our charitable recipients for the Stony Music Fest in 2021 and 2022.

Thanks.

~ Tom