

Excerpt of 'Copy This'

By Paul Orfalea

Introduction

How To Succeed in Business Without Really Reading

Not many kids manage to flunk the second grade, but I did. I couldn't learn the alphabet. This code called reading, so easy for other students, I found difficult to break. They read as though angels whispered into their ears. They wrote in graceful curves and perfectly straight lines. I made chicken scratches. To me, a sentence was a road map with ink stains in all the critical places.

Consequently, I became a goof-off. Of the eight schools my parents enrolled me in, four expelled me. In third grade, my frustrated teachers sent me to a school for "mentally retarded" kids, housed in a teacher's residence in Hollywood. Most of my classmates suffered from Down's syndrome or other conditions of severe mental and physical impairment. Fortunately, I was given an IQ test, scored 130, and rejoined the public school system. Still, things didn't get much better. I may not have been able to read, but I could find my way to the principal's office blindfolded. My typical report card came back with two C's, three D's, and an F. A brilliant tutor named Selma Herr finally managed to teach me to read, after a fashion, using phonics. I graduated from high school, with a focus in wood shop, eighth from the bottom of my class of 1,200. Frankly, I still have no idea how those seven kids managed to do worse than I did.

My name is Paul Orfalea (OR-fah-la). In 1970, I started a copy shop in Santa Barbara, California, in an 8-foot by 12-foot storefront next to a hamburger stand. I called it Kinko's after the nickname college friends gave me because of my kinky hair. Today, there are more than 1,200 Kinko's locations across the globe. The revenues from those stores top \$2 billion annually. Federal Express, our former vendor and the new owner of Kinko's, plans to dramatically increase the number of retail outlets. I am most proud of the fact that, before I retired, Fortune named Kinko's one of the best places to work in the country three times in a row. More than 100 of my earliest coworkers and partners are millionaires today because of what we built together at Kinko's. As someone with a condition I now know is called "dyslexia," I could have never predicted I would make my name in what is essentially the "reading business." Kinko's is not only a fixture on downtown street corners, but a fixture in the minds of millions of customers who use it to solve any number of their problems.

Today, I spend most Mondays in an unusual spot for someone with my skill set. I'm back in Santa Barbara, not far from that first Kinko's, teaching economics to college seniors at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Naturally, I use a different teaching strategy than other teachers. I don't use a roster to take roll. I take Polaroids of each student on the first day and scrawl their first names on each one. I keep this stack of photos in my pocket and shuffle through it when I need to. When I ask them for writing assignments (which is rarely), I never want more than one single page of clear and concise prose. I could care less about their grades. (I give almost all of them A's.) Instead, I teach them skills that have little to do with academics or test scores. Among other things, I teach them new ways to think about money and investing, how to present their ideas verbally, how to talk with people from "authority figures" to each other. To this end, I run an exercise to teach them one of the hardest things in the world to learn—harder than calculus, harder than economic theory, harder than fixing a photocopier.

## Chapter 2

### Are You "In" or "On" Your Business?

The night before I opened the original Kinko's, I sat in my bedroom getting ready. I had bought plastic film dispensers (in addition to making copies, we sold and processed film). The work of filling each one with film rolls, one by one, was both lulling and boring. It had to be done. But it distracted me from thinking about more important issues. I reminded myself that it's not the things you do, but the things you don't do that drive you crazy. I didn't have any partners just yet, at this early stage, and that was my problem. I knew that, as soon as I could, I had to turn these tedious tasks over to others and pay them well for doing them. I could not let myself get swept under by all the monotonous busywork that comes along with starting a company. I was already vowing to stay "on" my business and not "in" it.

My dad worked in an inventory-based business and he knew what he was talking about. Managing inventory made it especially difficult for him to stay focused on the big picture. The stakes were too high. The apparel industry in downtown Los Angeles was and is a grind. I remember once a worker made an error while cutting a huge bolt of cloth. That single slipup cost my father's company \$20,000. Dad could only grit his teeth, take the loss, and move on.

At Kinko's our errors cost us very little. We might waste some paper, but our botches were comparatively painless. This freed us to focus on the larger issues at work; it didn't cost us as much to leave daily tasks to others. This was one of the major advantages I saw to the retail copy business. At his apparel company, Dad was overworked—even though there were 500 people working with him, he

didn't delegate enough. He was simply too polite to raise a ruckus or complain. My father reminded me of the 1940s movie actor Ronald Colman—handsome, unflappable, debonair. He was a true statesman. I loved and admired my dad, but I didn't emulate him. (Ask anyone who knows me: I've never been accused of being unflappable or debonair.) Anybody could barge in on him. He got interrupted all the time, even on the weekends. Leo Finkenberg, one of his sales guys, called my father most Sundays. Dad would spend hours on the phone on a precious day off saying, "Yes, Leo. Yes, Leo."

Even though my father was the one who had told me, "The mundane is like a cancer," he knew his life was out of balance. But he didn't know how to fix it. Though he was a tremendous success in the clothing industry and received awards for his work, by the end of his life, he found he'd gotten too bogged down with details. From watching my dad, I learned the difference between "in" and "on." "Drive thy business," as Benjamin Franklin once said. "Let not thy business drive thee." Being "on" your business and your life means having enough detachment every day that you are constantly reassessing your direction, thinking creatively about your overall strategy, and scrutinizing your competitors' tactics. It means relying on others to attend to most of the details of the day-to-day operations and employing a system of checks to verify that you are on the right track. Think of an airplane traveling from Los Angeles to New York. Most of the time while aloft, it is in fact off course while its navigational system continually makes adjustments so that it lands in the right place. Without constantly reassessing our direction to account for changes in the world around us, many companies (and lives) go way off track before anyone notices.

If this is happening to you, you may be "in" your life too much. If you are "in" your business, or your life, you aren't spending much time leading. You're putting out fires or attending to mindless tasks better left to your coworkers. Although I couldn't read well—maybe in part because I couldn't read well—I have a tremendous memory. Or, so my friends say. I don't tend to forget details like coworkers' names, financial figures, or when to send a birthday card. When walking through stores, I always saw the tiniest items that needed fixing—from a tangled extension cord to a messy countertop. The key is that I did learn which details to focus on and which ones to ignore. I learned to turn a lot of busywork over to other people. That's an important skill. If you don't develop it, you'll be so busy, busy, busy that you can't get a free hour, not to mention a free week or month, to sit back and think creatively about where you want to be heading and how you are going to get there.

#### The Paul Orfalea In-or-On-Your-Business Quiz

1. Do you let people interrupt you whenever they want during the day?

2. Do your friends call you more often than you call them?

3. Do you work nights and weekends?

4. Do you take less than three weeks of vacation a year?

5. Do you lie awake at night feeling guilty?

6. Do you spend much of your time doing tasks someone else could do?

7. Do you often find yourself wondering what is happening at home or at one of your stores because you are rarely there?

My goal was always to answer "no" to each of these questions. For the most part I did, though in the years of our most furious growth at Kinko's, my wife, Natalie, says I was so preoccupied with work that, even when I was bodily at home, I was mentally elsewhere. I fought against that tendency in myself. When your mind can break free of all that worry and clutter, you will find yourself coming up with the most improbable and inspired ideas.

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Staying "on" your business and not "in" it is a question of timeframe. Ask yourself where you are right now. Are you living in the past, the present, or the future? One of the most important things you carry with you is your frame of reference. Being constantly busy means you are too wedded to the past. When you're that busy, you can't see the present, and forget about the future. During my senior year at USC, if I had walked into that copy shop too preoccupied with the paper due that day (worrying about a grade!), I would never have seen the tremendous business opportunity staring me straight in the face. Pay attention to what is happening in your life. Do your homework, but don't let it distract you from what is really important in life. Sometimes you can't help getting stuck for a while in the past. Take accountants. Accountants are in the past, managers are in the present, and leaders are in the future.

Know your job and you'll know what timeframe you live in from moment to moment. In the end, we are all the leaders of our own lives. Nobody else can do that job for us.

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