

In Search of the "Modern Classic"



Think You Need to **WRITE** a **BOOK**?

- List five reasons not to. At least the LIST will be easy to write. Just having to settle on the book's title and cover could ruin your health.
- If your beat is current events and coming attractions, settle for a blog.
- Remember that "Book Author" is really two jobs. What people will later tell you is "good writing" is mostly the result of good RE-writing; and rewriting does a job on your ego in addition to threatening your health.
- Scour the Web. If "your" book, or one close to it, has already been published – well, you're still free to produce **something usefully original**.

Not self-centered or kooky, but ORIGINAL. Other editors define the process differently. I sum it up as working toward a **MODERN CLASSIC**.

When it comes to books, a MODERN CLASSIC is...

So rigorous, and also innovative – **fresh without being faddish or flaky** – that it's unlikely to be superseded, in its category or on its topic, for at least 20 years. Sound grand? Actually, it's more like vague. I'll have to define the term via examples and methods...

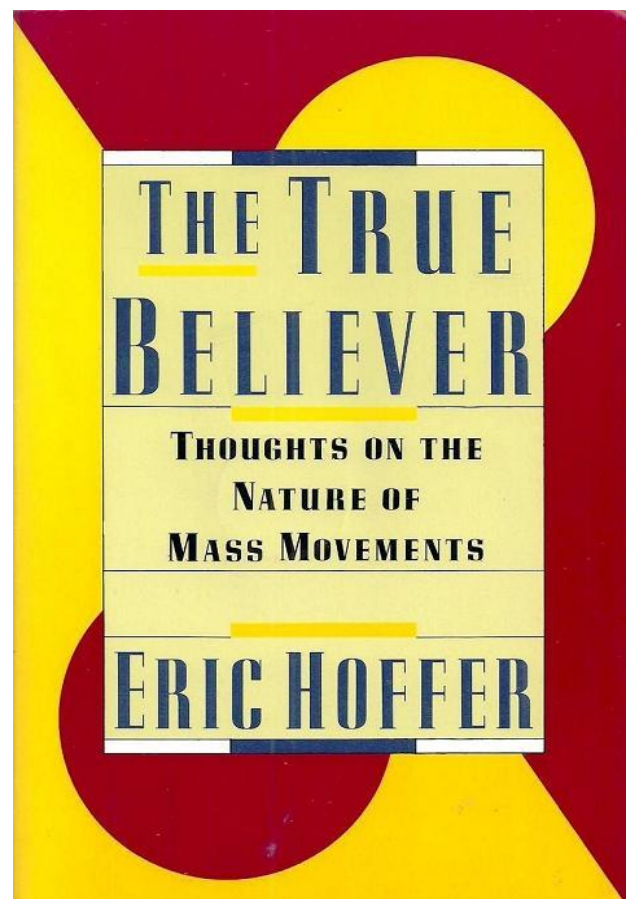
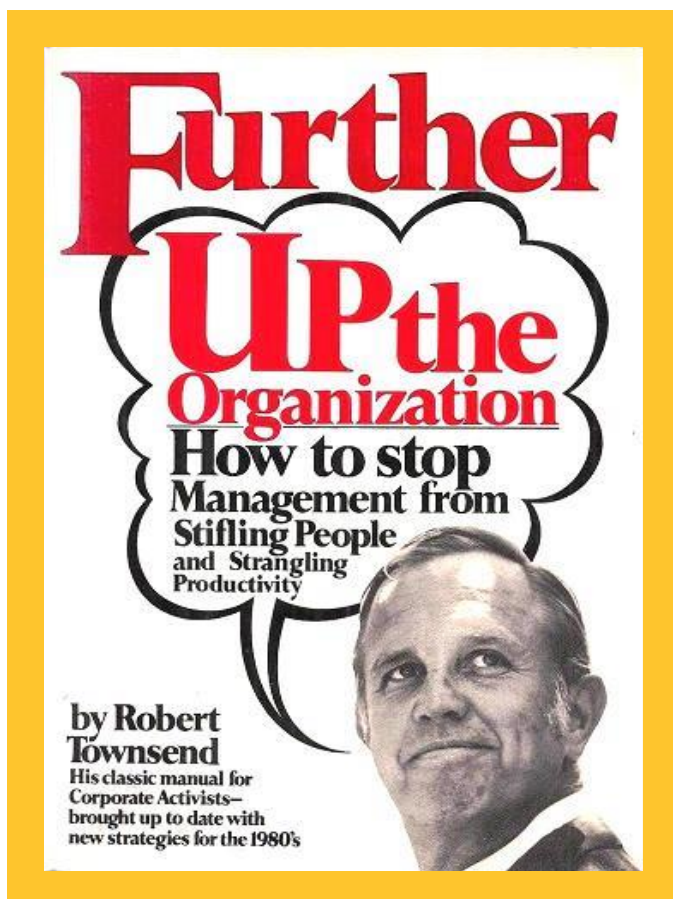
1. We're not going to create a modern classic by using the gimmicks and buzzwords that websites imply are necessary for a so-called bestseller. Rather than rent a room in the echo chamber, you should plan to create the echo: **Endorsement Reinforcement** from your enthused readers.
2. [Up the Organization](#) came out in 1970 and *The True Believer* goes back to 1951. Two other examples, from less far back, appear on page 3. Three of the four are securely beyond the 20-year durability standard; and the fourth one – the youngest of the bunch – so far has no imitators.
3. I've been told that "unlikely to be superseded" is **WAY too HIGH** of a standard. My response is that completing any manuscript – other than a

how-to guide! — is likely to end up being a drawn-out waste. You **NEED a demanding standard** as both yardstick and PROD. Try being open to "unlikely to be superseded" while drafting your opening chapters. The rest of these recommendations become relatively simple to handle...

4. Don't start writing with a fantasy of selling 100,000 books. The sounder aim is to produce something that will transform, rescue, or otherwise elevate an audience of 5,000 to 20,000. If you can't make headway with that many, they won't be able to **be your sales force**.

5. See that audience — two or three different professions, generations, personality types, whatever — watching from the front rows. Serve them, but without pandering; and **expect them to react**. ANY reaction, including throwing tomatoes, is better than blank looks! Seriously, it's better to trigger resistance and counterpoints, because no reaction at all means you're merely being tolerated, as opposed to understood.

Speaking of reaction — my friend Don said that this essay needed visuals, and right here is a good time for the eye break. I already mentioned...

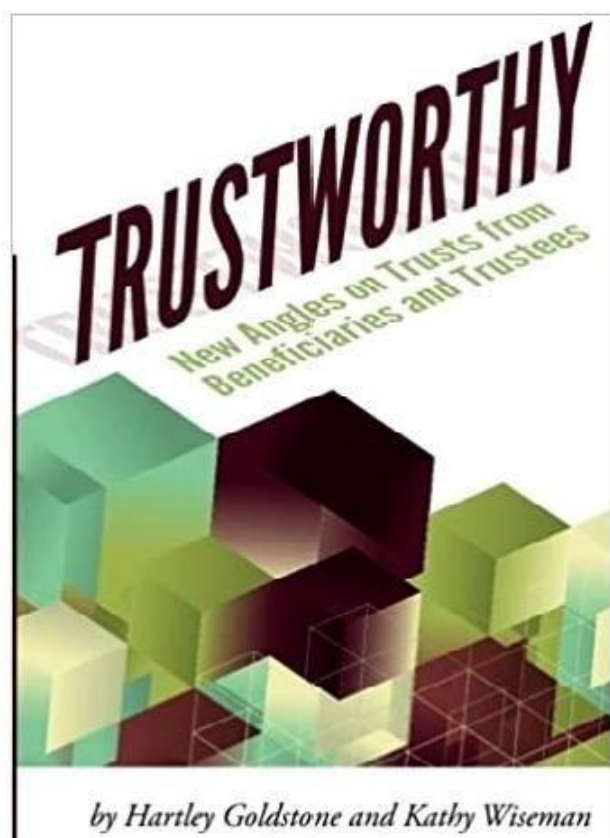
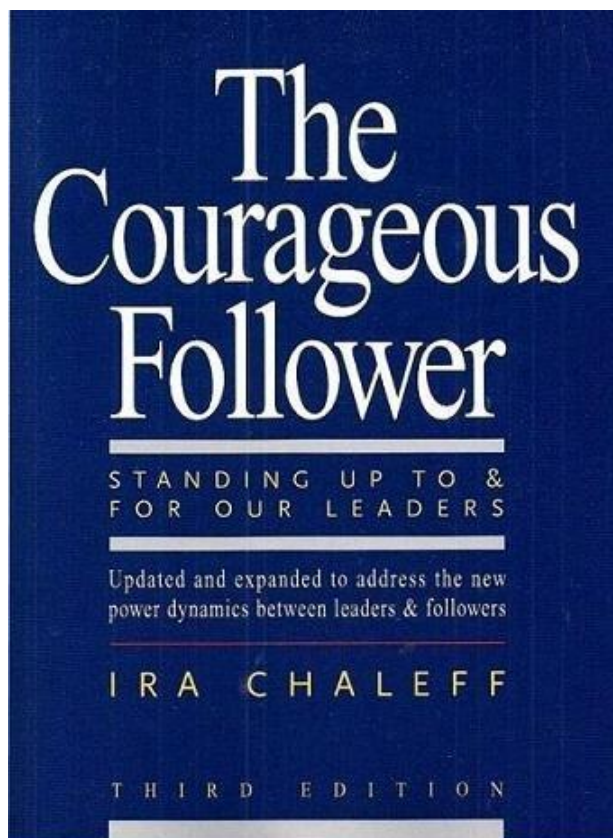


In addition to being great fun, [Bob Townsend's 1970 book](#) (plus two 1980s follow-ups that slightly expand his marvelous title) breezily recast how a book can be used. In an opening "Memorandum," he told us:

This book is in alphabetical order. Using the table of contents, which doubles as the index, you can locate any subject on the list in 13 seconds... Dip into it someplace. If you don't get at least a hollow laugh AND a sharpened need to kick that 200-foot sponge you work for, then throw the book away.

And [Eric Hoffer](#)? His masterpiece showed how cunning totalitarians transform losers, lizards and other lowlifes into "believers" eager for a lifetime of free lunches. The result is mobs and movements that bring carnage and poverty (Venezuela after Chavez being the latest example). When Hoffer wrote, the Free World had beaten Japan and the Nazis and was facing down Red China to keep South Korea independent. President Eisenhower soon gave [The True Believer](#) to each member of his Cabinet.

These next two are more recent and more "granular." They've helped many readers navigate dicey family and organizational situations...



I was managing editor for [TrustWorthy](#) by Hartley Goldstone and Kathy Wiseman and, before that, one of many advisors to Ira Chaleff on [The Courageous Follower](#). Ira brilliantly plays off the non-stop stream of books about "leadership." My [discussion with him is here](#) and Hartley recaps his own path in the Addendum on the next page.

More Markers on the "Modern Classic" Trail...

6. Form a loose group of editorial advisors — ones who can represent the audience(s) sketched in Point #5 — and test chapters on them.
7. At the same time, it's not up to advisors to give you permission on the principles or language of the manuscript. After all, it'll be YOUR name on the cover. Reject all self-interested advice *very politely*.
8. For a book that will still sound current in 2030, develop an allergy to: Optics and metrics, passion and mission, full-spectrum and no-brainer, core competencies and sweet spots. No more going forward robustly by adding value end-to-end, and forget walking the walk while running the numbers under the radar to have skin in the game. Once you forsake all of that filler, you won't need to raise your game with eye candy that's outside the box but in the zone while trying to pull off...the last dance.
9. Clichés and vaporous language stink. More examples: Competitive advantage, the speed of change, transforming the disruption, unbundling the transparency, "envisioning" anything, and that highly unhelpful certitude **NEVER AGAIN WILL** (NAW) every time some activity registers a big drop. As for "forever"? Put it on the shelf for...a long while.

It's true that certain sayings endure for generations. But business-oriented buzzwords — some academic ones, too — will leave your book sounding gimmicky. And it won't be able to win a durable relevance.

IN SUM: A blog might serve you better than a book. The Rewrite Job is a tonic that will sometimes cause cramps. "Original" doesn't mean kooky. See your audience(s) watching from the front rows. Use advisors for some of your chapters, but don't let 'em con you into writing the

book that THEY have been too lazy to start. Tell the buzzwords to buzz off and howl at the vapid and the vaporous. Use the [Author Profiles on this website](#) to avoid sinkholes. And — above all — the Modern Classic will have avoided the publisher's "classic" MISTAKE of trying to be trendy. Timeless is the opposite of trendy.

Perhaps you have generated 80,000 words for a manuscript and don't know which 50,000 to climb the rest of the mountain with? It would be my privilege to be briefed! — [Frank Gregorsky](#), 703 281-1674

ADDENDUM — *TrustWorthy* is one of the rare self-published works to be reviewed by a [top financial publication](#). In his 4/6/2020 e-mail, lead author [Hartley Goldstone](#) reflected on the doors the book opened...

Frank — "What are the players in a FAMILY TRUST doing to make their trust a **positive force** in the lives of the BENEFICIARIES?" That was my original inquiry, and it needed to be thorough. So I collected stories about big improvements in the trustee/beneficiary relationship. The result was *TrustWorthy* — 25 positive stories preceded by a chapter or two to give context. The book came out 7 1/2 years ago, and hardly a month has gone by without at least a few sales (and sometimes a lot more). *TrustWorthy* has led to speaking appearances across the country, a second book, and most importantly client engagements.

ONE MORE EXHIBIT (but no cover): Listen to an author track her book *from start to finish*. The trail runs from first inspiration all the way to having the book on airport stands to greet [visitors to Alaska](#).

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