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Business books: Wise advice or a load of waffle?

By James Melik Reporter, Business Daily, BBC World Service

Walk into any book store and the self-help titles adorning the shelves offer you hope, solace, inspiration, faith in your own powers and a promise of a bright new life.

These are not religious works, but business books which seduce you into thinking that you too can become a top-flight entrepreneur. Some people consider them a valuable aid in running a business, while others look upon them as nothing more than an ego-trip for the authors.

Bestselling titles of the past include *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, *In Search of Excellence*, *Who Moved My Cheese* and *Good to Great*. They might change the way in which business is discussed, but probably do little to influence the way business is done.

Serious or amusing?

The idea of business books was conceived in North America, where, it seems, there is still a big appetite for them. At Posman Books, inside New York's Grand Central Station, a prominent seller throughout the summer has been Donald Trump's *Think Like A Champion*, which has topped the New York Times bestseller list.

Bookseller Greg Logan says: "Lots of people are looking for a leg-up and there are a lot of authors who help those people focus on that." He says there is always a new idea and always a new book for it.

British management consultant and marketing guru Peter York does not share his enthusiastic view. "I started collecting business books nearly 30 years ago because I thought they were weird and funny," he says. He believes there is a breed of business book which is tremendously American and evangelical, which does not exist in the UK. "They agonise about business-related issues in a way that has no place in British life and their language is so hilarious," he says. "They are not supposed to be funny, but the more pretentious business books are, the funnier they are," he says.

As an example, he cites *Glow*, written by an English academic, which he initially thought was a spoof. "The book maintains that if you are a bit lively in a business sense, other people will respond to your liveliness and glow," he explains. "It made me think of spontaneous combustion, where people burst into flames and all you find is a pile of ash - because they have been glowing so much."

Unsuitable markets

Peter York also maintains that around the world, there are lots of books with Western ideas which are not to anyone's great advantage. "You are deluding people if you tell

them to follow a 10-point plan when they don't even have schools or universities," he says.

Ghanaian journalist Bright Simons points out that very few successful African entrepreneurs have gone to business school and it is difficult to find people who fit into the mode of business methodology handed down from the West.

"It is better to look to the evangelical churches and their cash profits rather than reading business books," he says. "Best of all, they write books that change lives and bring hope in the face of despair and penetrate every strata of society - your rendez-vous with divine success," he says. "Transform your life in three miraculous steps and knock out poverty with a packet of redemption," he muses.

He says business books are widely available and can be seen sticking out of fake-leather briefcases.

But, according to Bright Simons, the glossy covers, loud print and empty jargon offer little more than a contributory factor to massive deforestation.

Successful spin-off

Huge numbers of business books end up in discount book stores, whereas the best ones can endure for decades.

One of the most influential books has been *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, written by Dale Carnegie in 1937. It consists of home-spun advice about building confidence and communicating better. The financier Warren Buffett, no less, has often cited it as an inspiration.

Dale Carnegie had been running self-improvement courses for 25 years before writing his book - and those courses are still going strong in 75 countries.

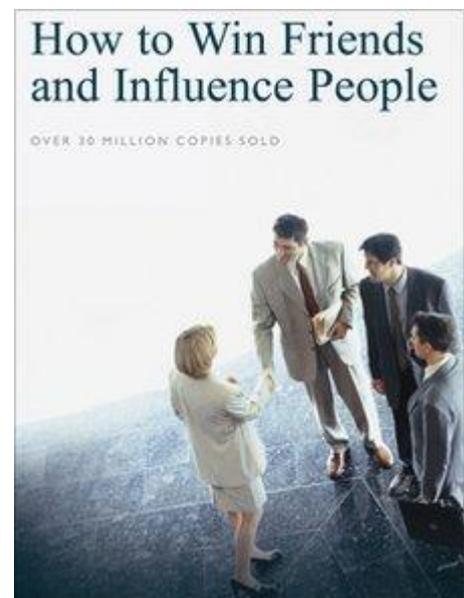
"The key to the success of the book and the training is that it is based on human nature, which is the same all over the world," says Peter Handal, chief executive of Dale Carnegie & Associates. "In this day and age, people are more comfortable looking at a computer screen and they are losing the ability to communicate face-to-face."

The course has to be adapted for different countries and environments because of cultural and social differences. "In Poland, if you smile at someone who has not been formally introduced to you, they literally think that you are crazy," he says. "We encourage people to shake hands in a hearty way, but in Japan we would be bowing."

The courses usually start with cheers and people chanting out loud to get them to feel more comfortable, but in Germany they drop that tactic. "That is something which couldn't be exported to the German culture because it would be perceived as being Nazi-like," Mr Handal says.

However, he finds it comforting and reassuring that people have more things in common with each other than things which divide them.

Now that sounds like a potential title for a new book.



Published in 1936, Dale Carnegie's book has sold more than 15 million copies.