

HOW TO TURN A WORST-CASE SCENARIO INTO A BESTSELLER

1 Have the right idea at the right time.

The original concept for *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* came from a perfect storm of influences—literally and figuratively. In 1998, when David Borgenicht (a writer and editor) had the idea, survival was in the air. Books like *The Perfect Storm* and *Into Thin Air* were on the bestseller lists. The media was starting to talk about the looming disaster of Y2K and the predicted breakdown of the world's computer infrastructure. Borgenicht read a magazine article about a man who'd been forced to land a plane after the pilot had a heart attack, and it made him think about classic action movie scenes and how he would face those situations. How should he react if he were face to face with a shark or if he had to jump from a building into a Dumpster? Knowing there were answers to these questions, he decided to write a book.

2 Develop a killer book proposal.

With a title, a few written scenarios, a rough design (that looked nothing like the finally published version), and an outline, Borgenicht took the project to the Frankfurt Book Fair, where he met with publishers in the hopes of selling the project.

3 Get it into the right hands.

After receiving offers from several publishing houses, Borgenicht selected Chronicle Books as the publisher for the work, because he knew “they’d know what do to with it.”

4 Find the correct co-author.

Now the book had to be written, illustrated, and designed. And Borgenicht knew he needed a good, strong co-author to research and pull it all together. Through a mutual friend, he met journalist Joshua Piven (though they had attended the University of Pennsylvania at the same time, they had never met before). The newly formed team began writing.

5 Don't panic.

Piven spent the better part of six months trying to convince experts that he wasn't just a prankster, and that he actually wanted the real answers to such questions as “How do you safely ram a car?” and “How do you perform a tracheotomy?” Working closely with the team at Chronicle, Piven and Borgenicht revised the manuscript until the tone was right. Next, Borgenicht's company, Book Soup Publishing (later renamed Quirk Productions, Inc.), designed and edited the book under Chronicle's guidance.

6 Be prepared—and when you're not prepared, react quickly.

The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook was released in November 1999 with a first printing of 35,000 copies. With Y2K fears looming, people took

to the book quickly, and booksellers, reviewers, and clerks used this hook to sell more copies. The response from the book and specialty trade (including such chains as Restoration Hardware and Urban Outfitters) was tremendous, and Chronicle immediately went back to press. Soon, the authors were in demand in the media, and Borgenicht and Piven worked the circuit, appearing on numerous radio shows and giving many newspaper and magazine interviews. But they were out of stock over the holiday season—usually a momentum killer.

7 Remember that there's no such thing as small publicity.

Borgenicht and Piven did pretty much every radio, print, and TV interview that came up, and eventually the major media got word of the book. In February 2000, *New Yorker* magazine called the work “the book to have when the killer bees arrive.” In April 2000, *Time* magazine published a feature on the book, calling it “an improbable how-to manual.” In May 2000, *People* magazine published a two-page feature on Borgenicht and Piven, and *20/20* did a segment on the book, featuring experts demonstrating “How to Survive When Your Parachute Fails to Open” and “How to Wrestle an Alligator.” The next morning, Borgenicht and Piven appeared on NBC’s *Today* show, demonstrating “How to Kick Down a Door,” “How to Fend Off a Shark,” “How to Land a Plane,” and “How to Build a Fire without Matches.” The rainy day prevented the fire from actually lighting, and Al Roker handed Borgenicht a lighter. The book went to number one on Amazon that day.

8 Never forget that lightning rarely strikes twice.

The book began to hit bestseller lists, first appearing on the *New York Times*’s list in June 2000. And then lightning did strike again, with the publication of *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: Travel*, and again, with *Dating & Sex*. All told, various titles in the Worst-Case Scenario series have spent more than 24 weeks on the *Times*’s list. Borgenicht, Piven, and their publisher are always extremely careful during thunderstorms, but they are also very hopeful about the lightning.

9 Have a plan.

The Worst-Case Scenario series is now one of book publishing’s most successful and recognized brands. The authors and publisher have parlayed one successful title into a series with more than 15 different books, several successful board games (from University Games), dozens of stationery and calendar products, a video game, a TV series (which aired on TBS in 2002), T-shirts, greeting cards, and translations in more than two dozen languages worldwide. The series shows no signs of flagging, and many future books and projects are in the works.

10 Remember that the best—or the worst—may be yet to come.

The authors have worked hard to keep the series true to the mission of the original handbook—to provide real solutions to extreme situations, and sometimes extreme solutions to real situations. In fact, the best of the worst may still be yet to come—you just never know.