



Episode 841: Libertarian Robert Ringer on Success from Nothing, and on Gurus Who Are Full of It

Guest: Robert Ringer

WOODS: You and I spoke on a program of your own some years ago, and I'm going to confess this to you right here — I did not tell you this before you came on. But at that time, I had read a few of your columns and I thought, Okay, this guy's a pretty good free market commentator; I like this guy. I didn't realize until I kept seeing your name coming up in reference to people who are really top-notch business thinkers that that's kind of your area. People were saying, Yeah, you know, gurus and experts like — and I kept seeing Robert Ringer come up. And I thought, what a dope I was talking to this guy. I had no idea who I was talking to. Now I do, years later. Now I know I was talking to Robert Ringer.

So I want to talk about a lot of things. I want to talk about current events and stuff and what you think about them, but also I want to talk about *Winning Through Intimidation* and your fun business-related stuff. So you ready?

RINGER: All right, I'm ready.

WOODS: Okay, first of all, you have a book. Tell me the history of this book — I think it's published under two different titles now — and it's called *Winning Through Intimidation*. What's the story behind that?

RINGER: Oh, it's too long to tell here, but in 1973, I started writing the book, and I presented an outline, and then I ultimately presented the entire manuscript to 23 publishers, all of which rejected or didn't answer me, which is an old story. If you want to find out whether your book or your manuscript is worthwhile, the last people in the world you want to talk to are publishers, particularly mainstream publishers. So to make a very, very long story short, it got rejected by 23 publishers.

I knew nothing about marketing, nothing about copywriting, and I just kept doing draft after draft, and I started running ads. The first ad I ran I think was in — oh, where was it? San Antonio. Then I ran one somewhere in the state of Washington. And they were a disaster. And I tried *Time* magazine and *People* and so forth. And the long story is that I finally found an ad that worked, and before computers were even around, I developed a system for estimating, based on the first day's returns after I'd run an ad, how many orders I could expect after 3 days, 5 days, 10 days, 30 days. And it was amazingly accurate. I was doing it by hand with a pencil and a notebook, and I made up columns with a ruler.

And anyway, went along like that for about a year and a half, and then one day, at that time – maybe it was before your time – the most prestigious store in New York City – and it had branches in other places like LA and New Orleans – was Brentano's. Do you remember Brentano's at all?

WOODS: I'm sorry; I don't, no.

RINGER: See, they had this big flagship store on Fifth Avenue, and it was really prestigious. And I get a call one day from a woman who said she's the marketing vice president of Brentano's, and she said – she actually said this. She was a very funny woman by the name of Lillian Friedman. She said, "How'd you like me to put your name in lights?" And she said, "If you will run a full-page ad" – and I actually jumped ahead of myself. The way I started making it successful was I started running full-page ads in *The Wall Street Journal* and then eventually started going to major newspapers across the country. And the ones in *Wall Street Journal* worked exceptionally good, so good that running them for two years or more I never had an ad that didn't make money, and that was selling a \$10 book.

So she said, "If you run a full-page ad for us, we'll buy your book." And she bought enough books to fill both windows right on Fifth Avenue, right near Trump Tower – wasn't there at the time – and the thing just – and I ran a full-page ad for her in the New York edition of *The Wall Street Journal* and I think *The New York Times*. The book absolutely exploded, and from that point on, Walden Books, which was the biggest at that time – you probably remember them –

WOODS: I do.

RINGER: – and B. Dalton – which, I guess they've disappeared now. I think they were bought by Barnes & Noble. And that was it. The book just took off. And then somebody called me from a little company by the name of Thomas Crowell, who later was bought by Harper & Row, which later became HarperCollins. And they said they'd like to distribute the book, and I signed a distribution deal with them on July 2nd, 1975, and they put it in bookstores across the country starting in September. And in about two weeks, it was like number three on the *Time* magazine bestseller list and three weeks on the *New York Times* list, and it eventually became a *New York Times* number one bestseller.

That's a very abbreviated version, but that was the long and short of it. Along the way I made what at the time was a huge deal for me, which I use in speeches, the story about how I made the deal with Fawcett, which was later bought by Ballantine, which was later bought by – the name of the company – it's the biggest company. And that really just made the thing explode, and of course then we went on to *Looking Out for Number One*, and that became a bigger number one bestseller, and I basically did it all by myself. Like the guy said, I was going down this alley, and there were a bunch of thugs in the alley and I was screaming for help and nobody came, so I had to do it myself. I beat them all up and came out the other end of the alley. So it gave me some great stories to tell when I'm speaking to audiences.

WOODS: So *Winning Through Intimidation*, that was your breakthrough book then.

RINGER: Right, absolutely. It was the first book I had ever written. I had no idea what I was doing. I always got good grades in English in school, and people used to say, "You ought to write a book. You ought to write a book." And that was a time in my life when I had just — I had been in the real estate business and created quite a stir, and I had a Learjet at those times, which in those times was a big deal. Now you could put it in the back of Trump's plane.

But it was a big deal, and the plane crashed and I survived, but it created all kinds of financial problems, and so I said, Well, I'll just write a book about my experiences, because everybody said, "I've never heard of anybody who's ever done what you've done in real estate." I was basically Century 21 or Marcus & Millichap before they even existed. I was there in the late '60s. And so that's what the book is about. It's an autobiographical story of my experiences in real estate.

It was way ahead of *The Art of the Deal*. I assume Trump — he would have had to have read my book. I've never talked to him. But you know, he was a premier wheeler and dealer entrepreneur in New York City, and I was running full-page ads in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, so he had to see it, and there's no way he couldn't have bought it. So he's kind of Robert Ringer times a million because he took it to levels that were way beyond anything — but I could see — I just got through reading his book again a couple weeks ago, and I could actually see some of the same strategies, but his is also autobiographical. You've probably read it. But he was dealing on a level that I couldn't have conceived of — even though by coincidence, my first big deal and his first big deal — well, I don't know whether you would call it his first big deal. He was working for his father. But they both happened by coincidence to be in Cincinnati, so it's kind of strange world. And here we are today, and he's the biggest name on the planet.

WOODS: Indeed. Now, I want to get into some of the ideas in these books. First of all, *Looking Out for Number One*, which was later, that book is classified as a motivational book, and I want you to do something to redeem the genre of motivational books in my eyes, because I feel like most of the time I pick them up, they're just a lot of fluff and it's just a pep talk, and those last five seconds, and then you go back into your normal routine. How is what you're doing different from that? I can't stand this genre, but I'm sure what you do is good, so tell me what's going on.

RINGER: No, I can't stand the genre either. In fact, I remember one point, I did a lot of television in those days, and I remember I was on a show with — I don't know if you know who Michael Korda is, but he was the editor-in-chief of Simon & Schuster for years and years and years. And he had a book called *Power*, and a guy named Wayne Dyer had a book called *Your Erroneous Zones*, and we were all on the show together. And I remember it was some famous host, but I can't remember his name, and he said, Well, it sounds to me like — you guys all sound just about the same. And that really upset me, and I made a commitment I was never going to appear on any show with either of them again, because I felt what my book was saying was almost the exact opposite of what your normal, rah-rah self-help books say.

And in those days I was a lot younger, so I used a little of the — what today the liberals like to use when they're expressing themselves. And so I used a little foul language, but basically I was saying that all the stuff that you have been led to believe is what

makes you successful is B.S. That was the — and so what I think my readers liked about me and I think the ones who are still around still like even in politics, is that I don't hesitate. I guess I was kind of a miniature Donald Trump in that respect.

WOODS: Well, give me some examples. We want to get into the meat of what you're talking about. Give me examples of — what's some bad advice that people might be given that sounds like good advice?

RINGER: Well, I remember once early in the book — and as we're speaking here I'm pulling the book up now. Early in the book I made a statement that I had this mentor when I was very young, and he was an insurance agent at an agency, and he was a very wise, sage, kind of modern-day Socrates or Aristotle or Plato. And he said, It's been my experience that most successful people, what they preach to their audiences — and that would be all of your self-help and motivational books — they don't know themselves the truth about what makes them successful, so they just preach the same old rah-rah philosophy, positive mental attitude, have goals — I never really had a goal in my life, but many, many people, probably thousands, have written books on goals.

So I kind of broke the whole structure, and most of the things that I said in there — and I was emphasizing — the book was based on my alter ego known as the Tortoise. I don't know whether you've ever seen any of my books or not, but the Tortoise is my alter ego. And he was kind of symbolic, and I was the Tortoise in my books, because the tortoise is symbolically the guy who plods along, the hare gets a fast start, stops to rest along the way, but the tortoise keeps going, and in the end, he wins. So I had these theories throughout the book — "theories" in quotes; they're really tongue-in-cheek. But for example, the tortoise-and-hare theory is it's not important how fast you get out of the starting blocks; it's where you are when the race is over — and little -isms like that that seem to strike a bell with people.

WOODS: I think to me the key part of this story, the interesting thing is not only was your first book a smash success, but you were writing the ads. Now, people go to school and they study to learn how to do things like that, and there are certain tips and rules and things you're supposed to do in ad copy. Did you read any books about advertising copy? Did you learn from the experts? How did you do that?

RINGER: I actually did. The two most important books I read were Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, and another guy, early 20th century — the name slips my mind now, but I'll get it before we're off the phone. And I really heeded what they had to say. But most important, I lived in LA at the time, and there was a guy by the name of Joe Karbo. I don't know if you know him. He's an advertising/marketing legend. And he was running these full-page ads on the front page of the classified section of *The LA Times*. And the headline said, "Most people are too busy earning a living to make any money." And he had this little paperback book, cost 50 cents to print up, called *The Lazy Man's Way to Riches*. And he sold it himself; it was a little paperback, cost him 50 cents to make up, and he was selling it for \$10, and he was running it over and over and over. And it was obvious to me he must be making money, or he wouldn't keep running the ad. So being the persistent, resourceful young man I was, I tracked him down, and he was kind enough to see me, and actually he became a mentor to me.

And I kind of patterned myself after what he did, although my ad for my book was completely different. And I started experimenting with ads, and I said earlier, the first several – more than several – were total disasters. I remember the first ad I ran in *The San Antonio Express*, it cost like \$1,300 and brought in \$300, so I knew that was going to last very long. But ultimately I started writing ads that worked, and I went to full-page ads, and I started running them in *The Wall Street Journal*.

And I think the turning point for me was the headline that said, "What's all the commotion about?" And without having any real professional knowledge or education, I was always kind of a psychologist, even when I was a kid. And it just seemed to me that what I had to do, since nobody knew who I was, is I developed a strategy called the preconceived notion of making you bigger than you are. So I wanted people to think something big was going on. So they were seeing these ads run every week in *The Wall Street Journal*, these full-page ads, and then all of a sudden they see, "What's all the commotion about?", and I had testimonials because I was getting tons of mail from people –

WOODS: But you know, I'm more interested in what did you learn from these guys? Like, what are the things that you learned about the science of selling something? That to me is the interesting thing. What are you gleaning from this, especially given that you're brand new at it? How did you go from being lousy to being good?

RINGER: Well, mine was trial and error. I kept doing the wrong thing, the wrong thing. One of the rules I violated – I think it was Ogilvy's rule – is when you're asking people for money, it's serious business and you don't joke around and you don't try to be funny. That's a huge mistake that a lot of people make. And I think my first ad was an open letter to Howard Hughes, who was all the rage at the time. And it was really – looking back on it, it was really embarrassing. I sell a program now called Million-Dollar Ads, and I actually share with people – as part of the program, they get PDFs of a great deal of my most successful ads, and I also send them some of my most unsuccessful ads, and I talk them through and I tell them why it was unsuccessful.

So right out of the starting bat, it was unsuccessful because it was stupid. It's kind of embarrassing now, but at the time I thought, Oh, I'll be real clever; I'll get people's attention. And I see that on the Internet all the time now, and it's kind of a turn-off to me. So that was one rule that I learned very early on, that when you're asking people to send – and in those days, you were sending in a check – you're asking people to send you money, it's serious business, and all they're interested in is knowing how you're going to make their life better. Are they going to take off weight? Better sex life? Money? Immortality? Whatever, but they wanted to know what you were going to do for them.

At that time I had no name. In fact, the picture of the book that I used to run in the ads, my names was so small nobody could even read it, which I did that on purpose, because nobody knew who I was. Now, later it was totally different. I featured my name. But it's what you're going to do for the person. I think probably most professional marketers, successful ones, would agree that's by far the single biggest, most important thing that you can do when writing ad copy.

WOODS: I don't know if you know Ben Settle, sort of a younger email marketing guy, and he gets impatient with young copywriters who think that what they need to do is learn the latest ninja tactics from some guru online, and they think there are these five steps — like, Identify the Problem, Agitate the Problem, Promote Your Solution — and it's just a cookie-cutter approach. And Ben says it's not like there's no room for that, but if you know your audience, those things will fall into place. If you know who they are, what their pain is, and how you can fix that pain, that's more important than all the latest little tactics you're going to find from some guru somewhere.

RINGER: Right, yeah, I'm kind of turned off by most of what I see on the Internet. Some of these young guys would have you believe they're — especially when they make ridiculous promises. It kind of reminds me of the advertisements on television that basically are saying you can eat pizza and ice cream and anything and you're going to take off 50 pounds. And there's something called common sense. Just common sense tells me that's totally preposterous. So you really have to be careful when you advertise. I think probably the best ads that I've ever run and ads that I've seen that I really like are when you just sound like you're talking to the person, saying, Look, I know this, this, and that.

And Karbo used to say if you're trying to sell him a Cadillac, beat them to the punch and bring up something like, "Oh, by the way, I have to tell you there's one negative thing about this car that I don't like in all honesty." And you're on the edge of your seat. "Oh, geez, what's he going to tell me?" And he says something like, "It has a small glove compartment." And it's a really cute trick, because the person thinks, "Oh shit, I can put up with that." So it's really psychology — there's just a lot of psychology involved, and I think maybe people are born with it. I don't know. Like I said, even when I was a kid I felt like I really understood people and what makes them tick.

WOODS: There are some things that come naturally to me when I'm writing, in effect, ad copy, but there are other things I wouldn't have thought of unless somebody had told me. Like you don't just sit there and say, "This product is so great. Look at all the things it can do." You instead try and transport yourself into that guy's mind, get into storytelling mode, tell a story that he can imagine himself in. You know, you've got this problem, and doggone it, it leads to all these other frustrations. And then you talk about your product as the solution — not about the product really, but about his beautiful lawn that he'll have. Not about your product that can cut the grass in a certain way, but think about him. Keep him front and center. It's easy to miss that, because you think, I have this great product. I can't wait to tell everybody about all the things it does. It's amazing all the things it does. You can eventually sort of get to that, but you have to understand that that takes a backseat to how you're going to fix this guy's problem.

Now, tell me if you think any of these business ideas or, let's say, avenues to success or avenues to successful copywriting — any of this stuff that you've identified over the years, how much of that can and cannot be transferred to the Internet?

RINGER: That's a tough question, Tom. I think the same — psychology, things are the same today, things that Jesus and Confucius and Socrates and Plato — 2,000 years ago, it's the same today, because human nature never changes. That's the real key. Human nature never changes. So the same people still want the same things, and that's why

politicians are always appealing to people's greed. It's, "I'm going to show you how you can get a bigger piece of the pie. I'll steal from your neighbor, and I'll give more to you and my opponent will give."

So I think that the psychology transfers to the Internet. Now, there are obviously lots of technical things going on that have made it a more challenging game, and I have mixed feelings about the Internet. One the one thing, it's wonderful to be able to push a button and you can go out to thousands or in some cases millions of people very quickly. But on the other hand, there's so much noise out there that it's very hard to get noticed today. And I didn't appreciate it at the time, but because I was running full-page ads in newspapers across the country — I think 43 major newspapers — and especially *The Wall Street Journal*, it was so shocking to people at that time — they had never seen a full-page ad for a book.

So I think I took it for granted, which is something you're inclined to do when you have youth. And I thought it would always be that way. Now, that's what led me to start publishing other authors' books. And as you may know, I started that in 1980, and the very first book that I published was a book that sold about 10,000 copies that this unknown author had written, and the publisher had kind of put it to bed. And I made a deal with them and got the rights and re-edited it and started running full-page ads, and it became the — it jumped almost immediately to number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was in the number one position for 15 consecutive weeks and became the biggest-selling hardcover book of 1980, a book called *Crisis Investing* by Doug Casey, whose name you probably know today.

WOODS: Oh, sure, he's been on here several times.

RINGER: Oh yeah, well, Doug will tell you all about it. I sort of — people joke that I invented Doug Casey, because at the time he was just a pretty young man. I met him through a mutual friend of ours, who unfortunately passed away. Actually, he was my best friend, a fellow named John Pugsley. I don't know whether you've ever heard of John or not. And he introduced us, and I agreed to publish his book, and it became just a bigger success really, in terms of numbers, than any of my books had been, and that kind of kicked off his career.

WOODS: All right, wrapping up, you've got books called *Winning Through Intimidation*, *Looking Out for Number One*, *Million-Dollar Habits*, *Action!: Nothing Happens Until Something Moves*, *Getting What You Want*. So you've written a lot of books with themes like this, and I want people to be able to walk away from hearing you, saying, Here are three specific things I learned that maybe run a little bit counter to the conventional wisdom but that are actionable that I can walk away with. And then maybe they read some of your books. But give me in bullet-point, lightning-round fashion three things that are absolute necessities for success that most people maybe don't know about or haven't thought of.

RINGER: Oh, that's pretty rough, but I'll give it a shot. I'm sure I'll leave out a hundred good points. I would say rule number one is if you see a line, don't get in it. That's probably the single most important thing. And what we're seeing in the Trump phenomenon is a classic example of that. If you're doing things the conventional way, you're probably making a big mistake.

Another thing that comes to my mind — and I'm doing this off the top of my head — is I learned a little too slowly over the years that no matter how good the deal, never, ever, ever get involved with anyone if you have reservations about their honesty, their character, or something just doesn't feel right. I feel that life can be so great if you're involved almost exclusively with really good people, nice people, people you feel good about, people who support your ideas.

And the other thing that comes to my mind is something more traditional, but it's all in how you go about it, and that is: never be allowing yourself to be dissuaded from doing what you want to do by people who I refer to in *Winning Through Intimidation* as the discouragement fraternity. You never, ever, ever have a problem finding people close by who will tell you all the reasons why you can't do something, and any successful entrepreneur knows that that should be a trigger to just motivate you to go do it anyway. I'm not saying if you try and try and try and you see with your own eyes there's reasons why your business model won't work, either change your business model or go on to something else.

But never allow negative — the best thing you can do is not allow negative people into your life, because again, this last presidential election, I think people are missing the biggest story. The biggest story is how inspirational it is. Forget whether you hate Donald Trump or love Donald Trump. Forget Donald Trump. What he did is incredibly inspirational. Probably number one in the world next to Jesus. Nobody's ever made an impact and become the most famous person in the world because he stuck to what he believed in, and all those poor people who laughed at him, they seem to have a lot of tears right now.

So stick with what you believe in and never get in a line. Don't do things the conventional way. Don't let anybody put you in a mold.

WOODS: All right, and with that, we're going to say goodbye, but I'm going to of course urge people to check out RobertRinger.com, which I will also link to at TomWoods.com/841, where I'll have several of your books that we've talked about here linked. And I'm glad we were able to catch up after probably five years since I last spoke to you, and I appreciate it. Thanks so much.

RINGER: Thank you, Tom. I appreciate it.