Book 2: Breaking through the ceiling ($2k/month)

How I made $1M from my personal projects - II

Alex West

How I made $1M from my personal projects

From my daily blogs that I've been writing for the last 5+ years.

Book 2:

Breaking through the ceiling ($2,000/month)

(Timeline: Jan 2020 - Jun 2020 | Reading time: 1 hour)

Foreword

Before we begin. A disclaimer.

1. Zero advice

Most advice is bullshit. Or someone trying to sell something.

So I'm not going to give you any advice in this book. I want that to be clear from the start.

You only learn by doing. Not by studying. Listening. Or even reading books like this one.

So when you're done, close this book and go build a business.

Experiment. Try things. And learn.

2. I don't own any of these ideas

If you find that I'm talking about things that you have thought, said, or even written before, I believe you.

Don't be stupid like me, I sometimes get mad when that happens.

At the end of the day, you are reading this. So we are somewhat similar.

3. This book is not to glorify entrepreneurship

This book is not to flex. Or brag. I don't even know you.

And it's not to tell you that entrepreneurship is the ultimate calling in life. Cause it isn't.

It's a realistic, no bullshit walkthrough of my journey.

Full of ups and downs. Crying and laughing. Optimism and nihilism. Mistakes and lucky breaks.

And a lot of luck. Cause it's a real factor. And if anyone tells you it's not, they are full of shit.

4. Not everything will makes sense

I've been blogging daily for 5+ years.

Here I'm just organizing all of my notes into books.

I'm not working backwards and I'm not connecting the dots in reverse, similar to how we do when we wake up from a dream.

Expect me to contradict myself as I change my mind on stuff.

5. Too personal, too much information

Finally, this book might become too personal at times.

You can skip those parts.

If you actually end up reading these books to completion, you will know me better than some of my closest friends.

Which is weird. I know. But hey, at least you can call me your friend. And I mean that.

Book a time and we can setup a virtual coffee.

So now, let's begin, my friend.

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Introduction

At last I did it!

After more than 2 years of launching failure after failure, I managed to build a successful, profitable product and achieve financial independence.

In this book I will explain in detail what happened and how I went from no idea to $2k MRR with CyberLeads in 6 months.

The story of how I found a good B2B idea. How I launched it. How I found a good distribution channel and grew it. And how you can do it too.

Moving abroad. Starting a full time job. Doubting myself. Crying. Finding CyberLeads. Launching it. Growing it. Everything.

Ok, let's do it. Let's go back in time to the beginning of 2020.. January 4th…

The big change. Moving abroad.

I'm getting off the plane. I'm in Milan, Italy.

Going to get the bus to find the place I would call home for the next year. A little room, in a house with four Italian flat mates I've never seen before in my life.

The weather is perfect. I'm excited and nervous at the same time. I keep asking myself, "What the fuck am I doing here.."

The reason I'm here is because of Epilepsy Blocker, a product I built one year before. A chrome extension that protects people with photosensitive epilepsy while browsing the web.

It managed to get the attention of an MIT startup. They offered me a job in their offices in Milan.

It sounded like a dream job:
• They use AI and other cool technologies.
• Build life saving medical devices, also for epilepsy.
• Work with organizations like NASA and MIT.

They also offered cool perks:
• Free lunch every day.
• Free gym membership.
• Free weekly massage.
• Free MacBook Pro and gear.
• Flexible working hours.
• Summer offices in Sardinia.
• A good salary at €2,000/month post tax.

But no matter how cool the job, it still felt like golden handcuffs to me.

But I had ran out of time. I wasn't able to reach financial independence with my personal projects.

So I had to take the job.

And this was definitely the best job I would ever land straight out of uni. Especially with my grades and credentials.

I also needed a change. Moving abroad excited me.

I remember reading this quote:

"When in doubt, do the exact opposite of what you are doing."

A sad moment

So here I am, I've arrived in my small bedroom in Milan, and I'm getting ready to go to "work" tomorrow. At the office. Like a proper grown up.

I set my alarm clock for 07:00AM.

I look at my jeans, white polo shirt and watch on my chair. My shoes nice and clean. All ready to be worn the next day. Ready to make me look professional.

Fuck.. I'm an adult now.

Only my closest friends and family know about this, but at that moment, I started crying like a baby.

I wasn't afraid that I was going to hate the job. The opposite, actually. I was afraid that I was going to love it and forget everything about my goals.

I was afraid that in the blink of an eye, my life will be work during the week, and having fun on the weekends.

Before I know it, three years will have gone by and I'll still be at the same job. I will have forgotten everything about my goals and

dreams.

My side projects would seem like a very distant dream I can hardly even remember.

"Oh, yeah. Back in the day when I used to build little side projects.. Cute."

I promised I wouldn't stop working on my personal projects, no matter how tired I am.

So, yeah.. Picture this.

A grown ass man crying because he would start a comfy job. At twenty five years of age.

It's pathetic. I know. But it's the truth. And in these books, you'll get nothing but the truth.

Starting a full time job

Luckily, reality was different to my expectations.

There were no NASA scientists at lunch break. I wasn't saving lives with my code on a casual Tuesday. And I definitely wasn't discussing about AI, side projects or making the world a better place with my colleagues.

Welcome to reality!

I was tucked in a corner, with my brand new laptop, programming an internal dashboard for the logistics team.

Clocking in eight hours per day, plus one hour for lunch break.

I would enter the building at 10:00 AM and leave at 19:00 PM. That was pitch dark in January.

It was depressing.

Expectations vs Reality

The perks? They weren't lies. But they were true either.
• The free lunch was a salad bowl. I was always hungry 2 hours later so I had to bring my own food.
• The flexible hours were only upwards. There was always an invisible power play going on with people trying to show that they leave late.
• The gym we had a free membership for was a shitty one on the other side of the city. I had to pay for a different gym.
• The Macbook Pro they gave me wasn't new and the keyboard was really fucked up.
• The summer offices in Sardinia were closed due to the pandemic. Not their fault.
• And the weekly massages weren't performed by beautiful women with hot oil at a spa with candles and music. I'm not even joking, there was a guy called Fabio who would come to the office once per week with his foldable bed and take you to a little room to massage you for 10 minutes. What. The. Fuck.

Anyway, obviously I didn't go there for the perks. But it was kinda disappointing. I felt like they tricked me.

But weirdly, it was liberating too.

Things were like I had predicted. It was a golden cage. And I had daily fuel and motivation to change my life.

We're not special

I didn't really connect with my colleagues. All our conversations were surface level.

Maybe cause I was the youngest person in the company. Or maybe cause I didn't give it enough time. Who knows.

Initially I thought that something was wrong with me. That I'm a "special flower" that doesn't like working in an office.

But no.

One day, during lunch break, I overheard my colleagues talking about sleep.

Somehow the conversation ended up in how lovely it is to lie down in bed on a Friday night. Knowing that you don't have to wake up early for the next two days. And how depressing Sundays are because you know you have to go to work the next day.

"Ok, so I'm not the only one."

I'm not the cancerous cell growing inside this company. And I'm not special.

No one enjoys working on a desk for eight hours a day, five days a week. Week after week. Month after month. Year after year. Decade after decade. No matter how cool the company is or fulfilling it's mission is.

Most people don't know you can actually escape. Or maybe they don't have the balls to try.

All I needed was a plan.

Forming my plan

Hindsight 20-20, but three books I happened to read in December helped me shape my approach and strategy.

• **The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho**

This book was short, sweet, and easy to read. It's about a boy that has a dream and works hard for it.
Bullshit, really. Just a bit of inspiration to keep going.

• **Atomic Habits**

The most practical book I've ever read.
It explains how progress happens slowly, then all at once.
All you have to do is focus on your inputs/habits and wait for the rewards.

• **Millionaire Fastlane**

Please ignore the title. It's cringe and I have a hard time recommending it for that reason.

But, if you ignore that and the first twenty pages of the book where he talks about chicks and lambos, you'll thank me.

The principles in the book are timeless and very close to bootstrapping philosophy.

Three concepts from this book really helped me solidify some raw ideas I had in my mind.

They deserve chapters of their own.

Passions

The first concept is that making your passion your job is dangerous.

It can mix up your incentives and make you hate what you once loved.

I had personal experience with this. Again, I'm getting dangerously transparent with what I'm about to say, but fuck it.

I was looking at how many people have photosensitive epilepsy and remember being disappointed that the market was small.

"Damn it. Couldn't I have built a solution for more people? Couldn't it have been a bigger market?"

In other words, couldn't more people suffer from this neurological condition?

Another morning, I was drinking my coffee and scrolling Twitter. I saw a post that said "Miracle drug has the potential to completely cure epilepsy".

"Shit.. Hopefully it's just another clickbait article."

I caught myself off guard. What the fuck. My incentives had started getting mixed up before I had even started.

You start with pure intentions. But then you are incentivized and hoping for the problem to keep existing.

I hated putting myself in this position.

Now, Epilepsy Blocker is completely free and always will be. I'm not trying to make it a business, and never will.

It feels better this way. It feels correct.

So stop trying to build products that are your "passion".

What you want is a business that gives you the freedom to explore your passions and hobbies, without having to worry about making money out of them.

Uniqueness

The second concept is that you don't have to be unique or try to change the world.

What you want is to change your world first, then the rest of the world.

Actually, changing yourself might be the best way to change the world anyway.

Heck. If you are so keen like you say you are, do something more boring, make money, and donate like 50% of your income to charities, every month.

Are you gonna do it? Or are you all talk?

What is better?

Trying to build a romantic, cool, probably B2C idea to help humanity? Struggle to make a profit and build an average product at best?

(kinda like the startup I was working for)

Or build a less romantic, profitable product? One that you enjoy working on? Build a great customer experience, make a lot of money and then give a percentage of it to charities every month?

I mean, honestly, ego aside, how can you be more useful to the world?

This question troubled me for weeks.

Entering a B2B market

The third concept is that you should try to enter a large B2B market at all costs.

There, no matter how many are competing, there is room for you.

Especially if you are a solopreneur, whose costs are low and wants to build a "humble" $5k - $25k per month business.

Of course I knew that already, but I was sceptical about it, since I found it scary competing with companies.

But what I saw at my day job completely changed my perspective on this.

What companies really look like

Spoiler alert. Companies aren't that scary after all.

Employees

When you're against a 50 person company, you aren't against 50 people.

You are against 5 motivated people and 45 yes-men. Forty five people that bored and dragging their feet until they finish the tasks they've been assigned to do.

They don't care about the company. They have their own lives to care about.

They have their own financial problems. Problems with their girlfriend or boyfriend. Dreams. Aspirations. Stress. Insecurities. Health issues. Maybe even sexual issues, who knows. The point is that they are not the company. They are humans. And just like all humans, they care about themselves first and foremost.

In my company people were not "bored" per se, but they were not passionate as I had envisioned them to be.

Me included. I contributed to the company and it's cause, but first and foremost I was thinking about my own life.

I can't even imagine what goes on inside huge, outdated enterprises. Where the work you do is soulless and monotonous.

It's only natural. I actually promised to myself that if I ever hire people, I will never expect from them to care about my company the way I do.

I want them to be cool, to know that I know how they feel.

I want them to take care of their own lives, and that will hopefully show in their work as well.

Speed

Humans caring about their own lives, as well as bureaucracy and bottlenecks in communication between departments are what make companies slow.

Everyone is trying to minimize the work they have to do. And that's only natural also. Throw the ball to another team. Try to explain why it will take too long to implement. Request a change in the requirements.

So don't worry if you are competing with companies. You are faster and you are not even on their radar. They are looking at bigger players than themselves, just like you are.

And their employees are actually on your side. They will try their best to do the least amount of work they can.

They will open tickets. Forward them to other departments. Get feedback. Have meetings. Syncs. Quality Assurance. Go through regulatory. All that just for one feature or even change.

Remember this.

A solopreneur can pivot 180 degrees in one day. A big company has to hold meetings to change the color of a single button.

Company budgets

I also saw what company budgets look like.
I knew that getting money from companies is easier than getting money from consumers. But I couldn't imagine this.

Remember that free lunch perk we had? That cost the company several hundreds of dollars per day.

Yes. Hundreds of dollars. Just for lunch. Every. Single. Day.

And they are not the only ones doing this. Thousands of companies are doing exactly the same thing.

That was my biggest problem in the first two years of building products. I had never succeeded in getting a B2B customer. Not even once. Everything was B2C.

Compare charging hundreds of dollars per day to companies for lunch, to charging $5/mo subscriptions for life saving software to consumers that complain and churn. It's crazy.

Enter a big B2B market and get a small slice of the pie. That's all you need. The internet is not a zero sum game.

If you think the internet is not big enough to handle you and some other guy or gall, you're crazy.

A large B2B market is the way to go.

Greatness is ugly

Last but not least, I saw the ugliness behind a sexy tech product.

Not glamorous. I can assure you.

Building a life saving, innovative product comes with great responsibility. I saw support tickets from people complaining. Requesting refunds. Reporting bugs. The list goes on and on.

What? You thought just because you are trying to make the world a better place, people forgive you?

The opposite. You have more responsibility. And when you charge money to cover your costs, they hate you even more.

Plus, writing critical code and keeping uptime for these kind of systems is scary.
Servers breaking and coming down in the night. Peoples' lives on the line. Ugh.

This experience haunted me, so I didn't want to write code either, if I could avoid it. The last thing I want is to be coding all day or worrying about servers going down.

I mean, does my product have to be SaaS? Why can't it be something else?

Actually, I sort of fell out of love with programming, after doing so for eight hours every single day. I realized that I wasn't in love with coding after all, but creating.

And you can create without code.

My final plan

All the above, as well as writing Book 1, helped me decide and formulate my final plan.

This was my final plan:

I was going to build a non romantic, non unique, preferably no code, B2B product, charge a lot of money for it, and whatever happens, give 10% of it's profits to charities.

I was working for just one month, but I had completely re-structured my business and life philosophy.

I had flipped my priorities 180 degrees and had a clear plan. All that was needed was for me to execute.

Following the plan

Work in the office became my daily motivator. I would look out of the window and fantasize going back home to start working on my side-projects.

Create my escape route.

Inspired by Atomic Habits, I would write down in a small notebook every day the things I had to do.
• In green if I did them
• In red if I didn't do them

That really helped. I subconsciously wanted to make the pages green. But it wasn't that easy.

Mornings vs Evenings

Initially, I was working, or at least trying to work, on side projects in the evening after work. But I couldn't.

I only had the capacity for 2-3 creative hours per day. That's it.

I could get serious work in, if I am in this mode.

But I had it all wrong. I would use up all my precious creative energy every day at my day job.

So, when I got home in the evening, I was toast. I would stare at my screen, pretending to be working, feeling guilty and sorry about myself.

I. Just. Could. Not. Work.

I had a brutally honest conversation with myself.

"If your side projects mean so much to you, how come you are doing them last thing before you go to bed?"

Such a simple, yet powerful question. I was never a morning person so I hated the answer.

But I knew that I had to do it.

I started working on them first thing in the morning.

It was a game changer.

Idea Phase vs Execution Phase

In my opinion, idea phase is the hardest part. The part that calls for the most creativity.

Many people pretend that this phase is trivial. They say that ideas don't matter and it's all about execution.

But I love Courtland Allen's take on this.

"It's very difficult to become a 10 times better executioner, but it's easy to have a 10 times better idea."

Ideas mean everything and nothing at the same time.

They mean everything, because you can 10x your odds of success by simply picking a better one.

They mean nothing, because with bad execution you'll achieve nothing, no matter how good the idea.
So yeah, idea phase is not to be taken lightly. It's the hardest phase in my opinion.

I mean, you could copy any good idea.

Jira. Salesforce. Intercom. Stripe. Shopify. Webflow. Whatever.

Basically anything that exists, is making good money and is not in a winner-take-all market.

The problem is that you have to find the right idea for you. The idea you know how to build, run, and be able to get it in front of potential customers. Again and again. At a good cost.

The question is, how do you do that?

True work vs Pretend work

I woke up every morning at 05:00AM and worked on my own stuff until 08:00AM. I would have a clear mind and get serious work in.

Then I would go to the gym until 09:00AM. Then I would have a shower and get to work by 10:00AM.

When I got back at night, I had no guilt. I had conquered the day already. I would enjoy a book and go to sleep early.

These constraints set me free. I knew that I only had 2-3 hours per day to work on my own stuff, so I made them count.

Honestly, in those two hours, I got far more done that I did back home, when I had the whole day to myself.

I started noticing "Pretend Work" all around me. In myself. In companies. People with their hobbies. Everywhere.

People staying busy, but not really getting anything done.

Some examples for us entrepreneurs:

Pretend work:

• Refactor code and move to AWS (when you have zero users)
• Set up A/B test (when you get 300 visitors per month)
• Redesign landing page (when the conversion is just fine)
• Set up a business email, business cards, business paperwork
• Add feature X (that customers never asked for)
• Improve speed of website (no comment...)
• Set up meta tags (when you have a tiny blog)

True work:

• Send 10 cold emails and get feedback
• Post product on FB groups, Twitter, Reddit, etc

- Post product on FB groups, Twitter, Reddit, etc today
- Build landing page with a signup form and soft launch
- Go to local business, ask for feedback and payment
- Launch on PH

How humans learn

I first started noticing "Pretend Work" when I was reflecting and writing "Book 1".

With every launch, I found another little piece of excess fat that could be cut off.

- From my 1st failed launch, I understood that the ".com" domain didn't save me.

- From the 2nd, that the awesome logo I created didn't determine my success.

- From the 3rd, that those extra features wouldn't make me or break me.

- From the 4th, that the amount of upvotes and positive comments you get don't mean shit. It's about revenue.

- From the 5th, that the faster you launch the better.

The list goes on and on.

By the end of it, I realized that all I needed was a fucking landing page and a checkout button.

Of course, I knew this. We all know this. This is day one stuff. Written everywhere.

But unfortunately, humans don't learn by reading, but by doing. Only when I actually make those mistakes, did I really "get it".

Russian Roulette

Nowadays, I still try to find "Pretend Work" in my daily life. It creeps in and never leaves me alone.

However, I've came up with this bizzare scenario that helps me identify it. Sounds stupid, but bear with me.

Someone holds a gun to your head:

"You have to generate revenue online by the end of the week. If you don't, you're dead."

Extreme. But effective. All the pretend work goes out of the window.

All that matters is that you get someone to pay you.

Do those two or three things you know you have to do, and trust me, you are good. No need to work anymore. No need to feel guilty. Stop pretending to be working and do what you are supposed to do.

Then relax and allow your brain to have new ideas.

Nowadays, I still think the same way. But I frame it a little differently.

Someone holds a gun to my head and tells me:

"If CyberLeads doesn't grow by the end of the month, you're dead."

It helps me identify and quickly kill "pretend work".

Shotgun vs Sniper

There are two schools of thought when it comes to building products and businesses.
The shotgun approach. And the sniper approach.

The shotgun approach is building many products and waiting for one of them to take off.

Sniper approach is building one product and sticking with it for months/years, even though it might not be generating any revenue.

Both approaches have worked for different people.

Once again, a book helped me.

I was inspired by Nassim Taleb who wrote:

"Don't tell me what you think, show me your portfolio."

Instead of listening to what people were saying, I started observing what they actually did.

I went through the entire Indiehackers Podcast archive and started listening again to every single episode.

I noticed a clear pattern:
• They were tinkering and building stuff
• They launched without thinking much of it
• It immediately got some traction and then they kept going

In contrast to popular wisdom and startup culture, that says you should focus on one and only one idea, for as much as needed, all the people I admired and looked up to didn't get there in that way.

And I had seen this from my own experience as well.

In my first year of building products, I built and launched 12 products and had good results. I went from zero experience in building products to almost $200/month.

In my second year, I focused solely on Epilepsy Blocker, but didn't manage to make it work.

Maybe the real answer is somewhere in the middle. Persistence is definitely needed, but you need that initial traction to put your soul into it.

At least that's what happened for me.

Building products, market first

I started building small MVPs like I used to, but this time I went market first.

The goal was to not just come up with ideas, build a solution and then hope that there is a market for it.

It was to go market first and find already validated ideas. I was going idea hunting!

I had 3 markets in mind:
• The Cyber Security market
• The Recruiting market
• The Lead Generation market

There are more markets out there, but these happened to be the ones that interested me and I knew were healthy.

In my opinion, a healthy market is a non winner-take-all market where many players are making good money with products that you could build and market run by yourself.

These are the products and markets I tried out.

Cyberflake

A collaboration tool for pen testers.

I cold emailed several people and scheduled calls. Also went undercover on Reddit and asked questions regarding their pain points.

Something like:

"I'm a student, I want to enter the market, what is the worst thing about your work?"

Or:

"I have time and want to build a free tool for you guys, what do you wish existed?".
Shit like that.

I tried to find ideas in the market.

Eventually, I realized that the Cyber Security crowd is far too technical for me, and I'm not a geek and engineer at heart.

I would suffer in that market.

Scrapcat

An uptime monitor for web scrapers. Website monitors have their place and people pay for them.

It's a bit of a saturated market, but that's not really a problem. We are not aiming to build a billion dollar company.

I built a Product Hunt Ship page. Built a mockup in Figma and posted it on Reddit.

Got emails from the landing page and some comments on Reddit.

No real interest though. Fuck this.

Cyberhound

Lead generation service for startups selling to developers.

Built a Product Hunt Ship page. Also built a landing page with a subscribe button.

PH Ship didn't work at all for me by the way. For any of these ideas. Complete waste of money.

Launched on Twitter. Nothing. Reddit. Nothing. Cold emailed a few people. Nothing.

Bye bye!

Birdleads

Get notified when people talk about something on Twitter, eg. if you sell coffee beans, people that are talking about coffee.

Again, a pretty validated space. I had seen products do well.

The bad thing was that I definitely would have to code.

For that reason, I didn't get to try this one. I prioritized CyberLeads before getting my hands on it.

CyberLeads

This is it. My muse. The product I was waiting for so long. So the big question I get asked all the time. How did I get the idea for it?

Spoiler alert, I didn't. I found it by accident while idea hunting.

Most people have a sexy "epiphany" moment. When they were walking around Central Park. Or lying on a beach in Bali.

Looking at the stars. Smoking a cigarette. And like in some kind of Hollywood movie, the idea hits them.

Nah, my epiphany moment was super boring.

I was scrolling through Reddit and saw a post with a list of startups that recently raised money. The post was doing well, and people were interested. It seemed strange to me, so I started googling around.

I found out that recently funded startups are like the hot chicks in school that everyone wants to date. These startups want to scale fast and since they have a truckload of money, they will happily spend it to help them achieve that.

I had seen this first hand from my day job, so I got the gist of it immediately. It made total sense and I liked it.

I found at least 10 businesses offering this information in one way or another. As a service. As a database. As a one time downloadable list. As a newsletter. As an insight and business intelligence platform. And they were making money. People were paying for this.

They were also selling it to many different types of customers.

Some were selling to investors. Others to sales people. Others to journalists. Others to people looking for a tech job. Others anyone and everyone interested in tech and wants to keep up with the news.

This looked promising. But again, I had felt the same way countless of times before.

Explaining how I "rationalized" launching CyberLeads is dangerous, and can be very misleading.

So let me re-phrase.

I didn't know that it would succeed. It just looked promising. It was just another product idea. Product number 20. I had felt confident many times before and failed.

The big difference was that for the first time, I stopped looking at ideas as if they were fucking bus seats.

"Oops. This is taken! Sorry! On to the next one."

I was actually glad it already existed. That means it's already validated for me!

Ok, so I had a validated idea in my hands. How easy was that?

But the idea isn't everything. Ok, let's say it's validated. Now what?

The important thing is to find a distribution channel and get it in front of people.

I was going to try Product Hunt, as none of those other companies had launched there and I knew the ropes.

I chose the newsletter format, since it reduces friction, makes it super easy to sign up and doesn't require me to code.

So, basically, CyberLeads offered company, funding and contact information for hundreds of startups that just raised money in the past month. You subscribe, and get a new list with all these startups, on the 1st of every month. Dead simple.

I narrowed my focus to B2B sales initially, and positioned myself as a service to help you grow your business. And chose Product Hunt as my launching platform.

Nowadays I have narrowed my focus even more, to agencies. But that's another story for another time. Probably the next book.

Now I was ready to launch.

The launch

There is no epic launch. No epic event. No going viral.

I built the website with a no-code tool and launched it on Product Hunt out of the blue. If people did indeed subscribe, I would rush and create the list before by the 1st of the next month and deliver them the list, as my website stated.

No pretend work this time.

Even those mockups, soft launches, Reddit posts and cold emails had started to feel like "pretend work" now.

Just launch already.

The launch went well, and I got ten paying customers. Just like that. With a $29/mo price tag, I was at $290/month!

Some subscribers had business emails as well. I had officially built a B2B product at last!

All and all, I went from no idea to $290/mo in two weeks.

Or two years. Both answers are technically correct.

I was pinching myself.

Wait, that was it?

So all of this blog post just to tell me that you found a simple, already validated idea, built it, and launched it?

Exactly.

It took me two years of pretend work to be able to do two weeks of true work.
Simplicity hides complexity and understanding.

We need time to build these skills and abilities:
· The ability recognize a good idea.

· The ability to recognize a good distribution channel.
• The ability to kill your perfectionism.
• The ability to launch fast.
• The ability to know which idea suits you, your skills and your resources.

I already knew all of the above. From the first week I started. It's written everywhere. We all know it. At least theoretically.
But there is a huge difference between knowing and understanding.

Alex from 2 years ago would never find this idea. The way to position it. Know what to include in the MVP and the landing page. Have the guts to launch this early before thinking about it too much and changing the core idea. Have a small audience to push it to. Know which channels to use and know the ins and outs of them.

It took a long ass time, but at last, after two years, I had for once played my cards perfectly.

It was time to make the most out of it.

Pure chaos

I'm not even going to go over how I built the first list in 20 days. But the important thing is that I made it.

After all these months and much automation, they still take 50-100 hours to compile every month.

The craziest thing is that I didn't even know how to compile them at that point. This was my first list! I was building my parachute while falling.

Had to find the sources. The tools. Go over everything by hand. You name it.

But when you throw yourself in the fire, magic happens. I would wake up at 04:00 AM, work until 09:00 AM on the lists. Go to work. Come back at 07:00 PM. Work until 10:00 PM.

By far some of the most stressful days of my life. Twenty days of pure chaos. No sleep. But crazy excitement.

I would have never worked like this, if it wasn't for my paying customers waiting for their first list. This would have taken multiple months, I'm sure.

I managed to send the first list on March 1st, 2020.

Some of them unsubscribed. Others loved it.

I was happy, excited, stressed and shattered at the same time. It was crazy.

Ehm.. Now what?

Yeehaw!!!

So you launch and get your first paying customers. Now what?
I had no fucking idea.

Wouldn't it be great if we could launch on Product Hunt every week? We'd all be rich!

Well, that's why you need a distribution channel and a way to utilize it. Repeatedly. At a good cost.

A way to generate traffic so it's essentially like launching every month/week/day.

It was the final piece to the puzzle. Something I had never figured out before.

A small detour

Unfortunately, nearly all of March was spent building a new product.

I know, I know.. What the fuck, Alex?! I was angry at myself too.

It was a similar product to CyberLeads, in a different vertical. Instead of a monthly list of startups that raised money, it was a list of investors that were actively investing. The target market was startups that wanted to raise money by reaching out to investors.

I was acting off of momentum, and was picturing myself launching multiple products in different verticals.

Although this idea was also "validated", it didn't go great at all. I got zero customers, although I tried a lot. It reminded me to stay humble.

You have no magical powers all of a sudden. You have a gift in your hands, CyberLeads, and you have to make the most out of it.

Luck smiled at you. You have everything you wished for.

Double the fuck down and show it the attention it deserves.

Finding my distribution channel

From this point on, I want you to know that things get easier. I was out of the dark ages and had at last changed chapter.

My breakfast tasted better in the morning. The sun seemed warmer. The people kinder.

Literally, the whole world was burning down, going into complete panic mode with a pandemic, but I was in my happy little bubble.

We started working remotely in March.

While working remotely, I found myself having more energy. I actually started enjoying my day job more. The future for funded startups was extremely unpredictable and we were building a new platform for pharma companies to track the spreading of Covid.

Everyone was terrified at this moment, and my work felt super important.

Also, since the future was uncertain, all bureaucracy was gone. We were all working as a team. Getting shit done. It was great. There was no pretend work.

All of my flat mates, but one, fled to their families to stay safe. So it was only me and my one other flat mate who was also working remotely.

I had no problem being stuck at home. I was focused. It meant more time for CyberLeads.

All I needed was to find a way to get new customers in a repeatable and predictable way. A system.

Again, in another alignment of the stars, I happened to read a book that helped me a lot.

I read the book Traction, that's co-authored by the founder of DuckDuckGo. The main thesis is that startups don't die due to lack of product market fit. They die due to lack of traction.

What you want to do is focus at least 50% of your energy into marketing. Try every single traffic channel (they are 19 in the book I think) and when you find the one that working for you, double the fuck down.

Double down, and leave everything else. Focus all your energy on that one traffic channel, until it no longer works or you find a better one.

And that's exactly what I did.

I tried everything. Facebook Groups. LinkedIn. Reddit. Cold outreach. Banging my head against the wall. Hacker News. Direct Sales. Twitter.

Over a month went by. Nearly two.

Revenue was dropping.

That's another thing I didn't know about the lead generation market. Churn is high. You have to keep rowing. You can't really take a break.

Many will come in, copy paste and blast a cold email template to everyone, and then unsubscribe when they don't get results.

I was very disappointed and started questioning myself again. Doubt had started to creak in a bit. I was again at around $100/month. The infamous $100/month, the place I lived in for more than two years.

When I felt down, I would open my revenue analytics and look at where it was after the launch.

"Wow.. I was at $300/month.. Man, that means it's useful. I just have to get it in front of people again."

My habit tracking notebook came to the rescue again.

One of the habits I was working on was tweeting every day, and writing blog posts every day. It was something that I enjoyed and something I knew might help me.

They ended up being my saviors.

On a random day, on April 21st, completely unexpectedly, a tweet of mine blew up!
I had around 600 followers at the time. This was the tweet.

"Got my first $50/mo customer!"

That's it. So stupid.

I posted it and went to bed. Didn't even check it until the next day. It ended up getting 2,000 likes and 100,000 impressions. What the fuck..

It also brought nearly 10 new paying customers!

The next week I wrote a monthly update and posted it on Twitter. Someone shared it and it went straight to the top of HackerNews.

The blog post went viral. People were actually reading my words on air and analyzing them on podcasts. So strange. So cringe.

That brought another 10 customers.
What?! Is this it?! I found it!

It was the least expected traffic channel.
Social media is crazy powerful.

Doubling the fuck down

This is where things got much, much easier.
I had a product and a distribution channel.

Once again, I was tempted to start utilizing the other channels that were working for me. Just like I wanted to build new products.

But this was one of the biggest lessons of this year. Less is more. Focused attention on one thing is far better than scattered attention on multiple things.

So I focused solely on CyberLeads and Twitter.

I would share my progress, just like I did before. The way I did before I even knew it could result in paying customers.

I wasn't promoting it. I wasn't selling it at all.
I was sharing my personal journey, lessons and milestones.

The best marketing is no marketing. No one wants to be sold anything.

I was just being myself.

From artist to athlete

This is where the real fun begins. Things get even easier from here on.

You have your product.

You have your distribution channel.

And most importantly, you have your system to repeatedly get new customers.

Now all you have to do is put the reps in. That's it.

Until you reach this point, you have to be an artist. Be creative. Think out of the box. Do different shit every day. Try to crack this puzzle.

But from here on, you have to become an athlete. Be disciplined. Focused. Do the same shit every day.

The three main things so the guy with the gun doesn't kill you.

I would work 2 hours in the morning for marketing. And 2 hours in the evenings for the lists.

Inside three months, so half way through this crazy year, I was slowly getting within striking range with my monthly salary. CyberLeads was only 4 months old, but was already at $1.5k/month.

Two months later, just six months after the launch, it was at $2k/month.

If I were to leave you with one thing, it's this:

Remember that things get easier after you find that product/channel/system combination. And you don't have to find it many times. Just once.

So don't give up just because you haven't found it yet.

Appendix

What a ride

What a ride. This year was crazy for the whole world, and my world as well. And we are still just six months in.

I'm still at my day job. Hacking away, working remotely while travelling around as much as I can.

I enjoy my job more now too. I love that I'm working remotely. That there is less bureaucracy. That people listen to what to I have to say.

Maybe it's because I feel more confident now, after proving to myself that I'm capable of building a business. Don't know. I am at my day job on my own terms, and I don't see it as a trap anymore.

Actually, I am pinching myself every day. I'm living my dream.

This shit is hard

For now, I want you to keep this.

No one knows what the fuck they are doing. I don't. As far as I can tell, everyone is winging it.

I could easily "forget" and omit the previous two years. The crying. The doubt. The fear. The failures. I could just play smart.

Write about finding an idea and launching it successfully straight away. Building an audience and reaching $2k MRR in 6 months.

How cool would that be?

It would be very cool, but it would not be the truth. I'm not that smart. Maybe no one is.

The stars just happen to align sometimes.

Like randomly getting the idea for Epilepsy Blocker.

My girlfriend at the time pushing me to pursue Epilepsy Blocker although I was burnt out.

That specific company finding Epilepsy Blocker and reaching out to me.

Accepting that job and moving to Italy.

The pandemic happening just two months after starting my full time job and not before that.

Seeing those specific things in the office at work.

Being sick the day I was scrolling through Reddit and finding the idea for CyberLeads. Normally I would have been at the gym at that time.

The idea making sense to me because I was working at a funded startup.

Tweeting that random tweet.

Reading those specific books.

The list goes on and on.

Many people have actually read my blog and tried to do the same things. They build a product identical to CyberLeads. They built a landing page the same way I did. Launched on Product Hunt. Tried to promote it on Twitter.

Some were even talking the same way I talk. But all of them quit after a few weeks. All of them. It's strange.

It didn't work out for them. It wasn't the idea that matches them perfectly. The world is so random, and we have less control over it than we think.

You can't predict these things.

You need luck.

But guess what? If you show up every day for two years, one day you'll get lucky.

What's next

There are so many more things I wanna write about.

Things like:

• Positioning
• Copy
• Features & Design

- Going viral
- Stress
- Fear for the future
- Mentality
- Inputs vs Outputs
- Playing the long game

And who knows what else.

But they will have to go in the next book.

Time travel

Hey. This is Alex from 2025 writing this.
I decided to clean up and re-post these blog posts as books.

Nothing changed. Even if I disagree nowadays with things that I said back then.

These books are for free.

But if you enjoyed them, you can do the following:
- Share it on X or LinkedIn
- DM me on X and we can set up a virtual coffee

Thank you for reading.