

## **Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough** **The story behind the book sales curve**

RBA/OBA Facebook Group: February 12, 2016

### **SALES OF "TRYING HARD IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH" REACH 50,000!**

Thanks to everyone around the world who has helped us get to this milestone. From what I know of the publishing industry, only a small percentage of books get this far. The graph below shows cumulative sales from the book's release in September 2005. I have added a line marking the straight line growth pattern for the first eight years. Beginning in 2014, this rate of growth accelerated (which I think qualifies as a turned curve ;) Who knows what will happen next. But my hope is that RBA/OBA will continue to grow, and will continue to help people improve the quality of life of their communities and the effectiveness of their services. I am posting a longer description of the story behind the sales curve to the FPSI website. If you are interested, go to [resultsaccountability.com/publications](http://resultsaccountability.com/publications). Comments are most welcome. Many thanks again !!

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What follows is the somewhat personal story of writing the book "Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough," including some of the story of RBA itself.

The beginnings of RBA took shape in 1993, while I was still at the Center for the Study of Social Policy in Washington DC. I was motivated by frustration that came with the planning models being used in various foundation initiatives. And this built on frustration with such models over 20 years of work in government. After several years of working on RBA at CSSP, I left in 1996 to create the Fiscal Policy Studies Institute. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Finance Project became sponsors of my work. To make an already long story somewhat shorter, Trying Hard was published in September 2005. After 10 years on the road, teaching and refining RBA concepts, I realized that the next step was to put RBA into book form, both as a way to clarify the ideas and as a tool to teach them. It turned out to be a lot harder than I thought. I started writing the book it at least a dozen times in the years before 2004, with a long succession of abandoned drafts. And then two things happened.

In January 2004, the Casey Foundation helped me convene a meeting about the "Future of RBA." The meeting took place in Scottsdale Arizona over two days. It was facilitated by John Ott and included about ten of my closest friends and partners. The conversation was rich and challenging and sometimes funny. We used RBA to organize the discussion around what would it take to turn the curve on RBA usage. At the end of the second day, we were each asked to declare what action(s) we would take to turn the curve. I decided that my commitment had to be the actual production of a book. The night before the last meeting I drafted an outline that

looks surprisingly like the one finally used. I presented it to the group and promised that I would have a good draft by the end of that year. This was uncomfortable and risky. No one likes deadlines. But it also gave me almost a full 12 months to fulfill the promise. As a way of putting more pressure on myself, I began telling everyone that I was going to produce a draft book by the end of the year. I also began a regime of writing at least 15 minutes every day. This became part of a writing practice that I have shared elsewhere. The 15 minutes could be writing, editing, organizing or just thinking. And if it was going well, 15 minutes was not a limit. It turns out if you write this way for a year, you might just have a book. A not finished book, as you will see. But at least a draft.

The second thing that happened came from my wife Terry Wilson. She is a writer and author, and teaches creative writing at the Santa Fe Community College. I have recently taken her class and she is very good. Terry's book, *Confessions of a Failed Saint* is a memoir<sup>1</sup>. She teaches both fiction and nonfiction writing in her class. One day after the Scottsdale meeting, when I was expressing my frustration at not being able to write the book, she said simply, "Why not tell it as a story?" And this was the advice I needed. The introduction to the book is the story I wrote. After this, I realized that the rest of the book could be a written version of the RBA 101 workshops I had developed over the previous 10 years. Now all I had to do was fill in that structure..... easier said than done.

I won't bore you with all the trials and tribulations. But, in December 2004, true to my word, I sent out the first draft of *Trying Hard* to my friends from the January planning meeting and others who were not able to attend. I thought this first draft was pretty good, but I was wrong. It needed a lot of work. My friend Susan Brutschy, president of Applied Survey Research, offered one of her staff, Deanna Zachary, to be my editor. I wasn't entirely sure I needed an editor<sup>2</sup>. And what a lucky break this was. Deanna was exactly what I needed. She already knew RBA from the work at ASR. And she was an experienced editor who was forceful and thorough. Between January and April, the book went through at least eight excruciating rounds of editing and rewriting.

During this time, I arranged for publication by a print-on-demand publishing company named Trafford. The print-on-demand industry was young at the time, and I had no prior experience with any of it. At the end of April, I submitted the final Word manuscript to the composition technician assigned to me at Trafford. His job was to take the text and graphics and produce a publishable Adobe pdf file. I thought this would take a few weeks and I would have the book back by the end of May. I tried to be patient. In the end, he didn't even start working on my book until July. Those were some of the longest weeks and months. After some back and forth editing of the new composition, the book was finally ready in September, 2005. It was released for sale on Amazon.com on September 19th. Whew!

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<sup>1</sup> Available on amazon.com

<sup>2</sup> If you are writing for publication, take it from me, you do.

In 2009, I discovered a much better publisher to work with than Trafford. Createspace (originally called Booksurge) was a subsidiary of Amazon. It could take the Trafford pdf file and publish it directly with Createspace with no additional work on my part. (I had retained full rights to the Trafford file.) And the new edition would go on sale on Amazon within a few weeks. Even better, Createspace staff service was terrific, responsive and very professional. As an added bonus, the royalty payments were better too.

With the first release of the book in 2005, I began accumulating more or less daily data on book sales, first from Trafford and then from Createspace. The graph below shows cumulative book sales from day one to the present. One way in which Trafford was better than Createspace had to do with providing data on where the books were being sold. Trafford could show sales by state, city and country. Amazon shared nothing about sales except totals, except the currency in which the book was purchased, Dollars, Pounds and Euros. That was it. This lack of information from Amazon has been a continuing source of frustration. During the Trafford years, it was easy to see how sales of the book were spreading to other countries. Now I had to rely on workshop and other data to tell me where RBA was being used. We think it is at least 15 to 20 countries around the world. In the recent RBA companion reader "Turning Curves" (p. 18) I write about the difficulty of defining and counting RBA usage, so I won't go into that here. But I do have highly reliable counts of book sales for more than 10 years, up to and through the publication of the 10th Anniversary Edition in September 2015.

While we're on the subject, the anniversary edition, that was also a harder project than I expected. I had been keeping edits from the beginning in a special copy of the book. In January 2015, I began making changes and expected to be finished by May. I would then have to sit on the book until the actual anniversary in September. I was working again with Deanna, and now with a new very talented graphic artist named Ross Feldner. Adam Luecking had used his work for the Results Leadership Group (another important story for another time) many times and I was not disappointed. Ross is a first rate graphic artist. The challenge was mostly with reading and re-reading the text looking for changes I wanted to make. It became clear that the changes I had accumulated over the 10 years were not thorough enough. I needed to carefully read every word and study every graphic. And I also had to decide on the approach to changing the book. Some people were urging me to completely re-write the book using new examples from the last ten years. This would have been an enormous task. Writing case examples is the hardest thing to do well. You have to get it right. There are seven case studies in *Trying Hard*, and they took the most time of any part of the book. You have to work closely with your sources. If you make just one significant mistake, you could embarrass or offend people. I am still very grateful for all the help I got with this, and have tried to give credit to all the people who helped. In the end I made the September deadline by just a few days, and the new edition was released on September 5, 2015. A word or two about the cover. I was lucky to work with another talented graphic artist from RLG, Justin Miklas. I am

an amateur graphic artist. I did all the composition work on the original cover, and the covers of several other books. I thought I was pretty good at it, but Justin was much much better. It took us a little while to get it right. I wanted the cover to include a fractal. Justin prepared three options with three different fractals in May or June. I showed these options to about 15 people. The first option was the most dramatic. It looked like a spaceship to me. It was a stunning cover. I loved it. But other people didn't see a spaceship. They saw other things, things that were not always helpful. And about a third of the people simply insisted on knowing what the fractal picture "meant." There are a number of reasons why a fractal belongs on the cover of *Trying Hard*. But the particular fractal in question didn't mean anything. It was just beautiful. The fractal was becoming a distraction. So Justin and I took a different approach. We put the fractal in the background. As some of you know, I have been working on fractals for over 20 years and had some on file that were perfect for this purpose. Once this was settled the remaining cover composition went relatively quickly. So in August I had a finished cover pdf file from Justin and a final manuscript pdf file from Ross. That's all you need for self publishing. Two pdf files. The feedback on the 10th Anniversary Edition has been terrific. Thank you!

So back to the question of sales. It is very hard to get information from the publishing industry on what is considered a good sales number. From years of searching out articles on this subject and trying to read between the lines, it seems that the vast majority of books sell less than 10,000 and often less than 1,000. I have authored several other books that fall into this latter category, including "The Little Book of Results-Based Dieting" (2009), and "The Origin of Consciousness" (2012). At the other end of the continuum are the best sellers published by what remains of the traditional publishing industry. A relatively small number of these go on to sell millions of copies. What is in-between is hard to figure out. I was thrilled when book sales reached 10,000 at the beginning of 2008. I expected book sales to follow what I knew to be the sales curve of almost all books. Cumulative books sales would grow for some period of time and then flatten out as new sales approached zero. But TH did not follow this pattern. It was straight line growth for the first eight years. You can see this from the graph below. Straight line growth over such a long period of time is rare and possibly very rare. The usual sales curve is an S shape, strong initial upward curving growth, taking a hard right turn to flat and eventually zero growth. What does it mean that TH book sales followed this most unusual straight line? I am still not sure. But there is something even more remarkable about this line. The growth line is so straight, that if you increase its width as much as the graphics program will allow, still very narrow, the line hides almost all of the points in the daily sales line. If anyone from the publishing industry is reading this, please let me know if you know of other examples.

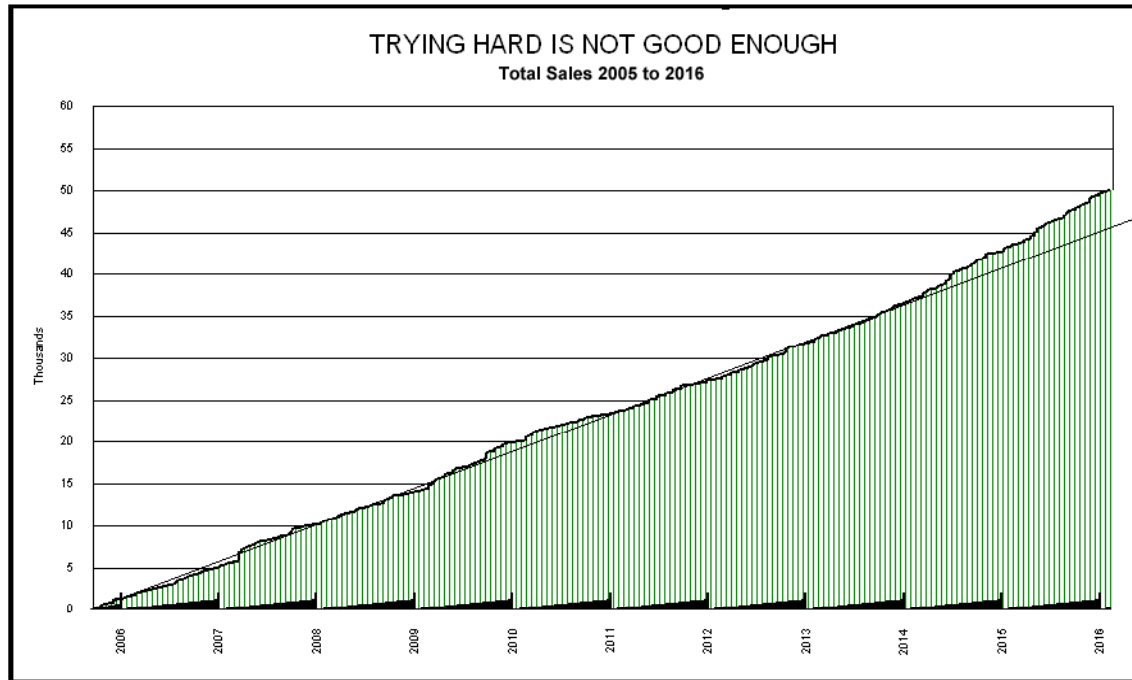
So why am I obsessing with book sales. Well, royalties aside, book sales are among the best data we have on the growth of RBA. And, like attendance rates in schools, it can be updated every day. It is one of the curves we want to turn in spreading the use of RBA around the world. And why is this important? Because I am convinced that RBA really helps people. It helps them organize their work. It helps support

partnerships. And it helps people produce measurable improvement in the well-being of customers and communities (the book's subtitle). I don't mean this to sound like bragging, although some will no doubt see it that way. I worked in government and the nonprofit community for over twenty years. I have seen and suffered through all the wrong ways to do this work. I know what it is like to sit in useless meetings and produce useless documents. If I ever find something better than RBA, I will start advocating that approach. But I haven't seen anything better and don't expect to. All the many methods developed over preceding decades have advantages and disadvantages. From more than forty years of working in this field, I haven't seen anything better than RBA as a comprehensive, overarching framework. Other frameworks, such as Collective Impact are valuable but they only go so far. RBA fills in the missing pieces and shows partnerships how to implement a Collective Impact approach. In the area of performance measurement, there is a hundred year plus history of methods, going back to time-and-motion studies in the 1890's to all the other methods I won't name, proliferating, in and out of fashion for decades. We all know this history even if we don't know it in detail. We have all had to fill out logic model forms. Some of us suffered through a mercifully brief period of zero-based budgeting. Etc. Etc. Etc. Some good has come from these models. But also a lot of wasted effort.

The most important reasons for this have to do with three RBA "innovations." To my knowledge RBA is the only model that clearly distinguishes Population and Performance Accountability. This is the single most important idea in RBA and it has major implications for how we think about and do this work. The second major change is the set of just three plain language performance measurement categories. Take any report from your bookshelf and look at the glossary. It's almost certainly a mess. RBA sorts out language discipline and gives us performance measure categories that everyone can understand. It takes the field from a jungle of jargon to language clarity. Finally, the "turn the curve thinking process" described first as the "leaking roof thinking process" is the most efficient way I know to actually use data to drive actions. It is easy to learn and use. And it works the way learning organizations should work. I am promoting RBA for the simple reason that I think it is the best option available. This is not just about me. All of the thousands, of partners I have worked with over twenty years have taught me about what works and what doesn't, and have played an active role in developing and refining the framework. Special mention must be made of Annie E. Casey Foundation for their early and continuing support. RBA wouldn't exist without this help. And the Results Leadership Group, founded by Phil Lee and Adam Luecking in 2008 has done more to spread the use of RBA than any other single group. I am very grateful for this. Thanks!!

So, let's take one more look at the sales graph. Notice that beginning in 2014 the sales curve turns up. You can easily see that cumulative sales are growing at a faster rate in 2014 and 2015, on a new straight line. I think this counts as a turned curve. Who knows what the future will bring. But just this month, February 2016, total sales reached 50,000. I'm not really sure how to talk about this, but I know it is a

special number. Not many books get this far. And I am so thankful for the support of all those who have read the book and used the ideas. There's much more to say about the development of RBA itself and the history of its expansion in the US and other countries, but we'll stop here for now.



#### Additional Notes:

I regularly track three other measures related to book sales.

- Average books sold per day. Divide 50,000 by the number of days on Feb 1, 2016 and you get an average of 13.2 books per day, every day since September 2005.
- Percentage of days in the last 365 with at least one book sold. This number set a new record on Feb 4, 2016 at 93.7%
- Number of separate purchases in the last 30 days. This set a record on Feb 5 2016 of 151. This means an average of 5 separate purchases per day for the last 30 days. A most interesting pattern within these data is the growing number of one-book purchases. I think this signals that word about RBA is spreading from person to person. In the early days, RBA tended to spread from organization to organization. The research on diffusion of innovation (also discussed in the companion reader) suggests that one-to-one contact is the most powerful engine for diffusing new ideas. And one-to-one growth has the potential to go viral.