

# Coloring Outside Lines

Embracing your inner  
smallness can lead to  
big things.

# g e t t h e

**Seth Godin is a bestselling author of business books and a successful entrepreneur, whose 10 books include *Unleashing the Ideavirus*; *Permission Marketing*; *All Marketers Are Liars*; *Survival Is Not Enough*; and *Meatball Sundaes*. A nationally recognized speaker on marketing and new media, he was the founder of Yoyodyne, a leading interactive direct-marketing company acquired by Yahoo! and, more recently, is the founder of Squidoo.com. His popular blog can be found at [www.sethgodin.com](http://www.sethgodin.com).**



**Jeff Stein AIA is the head of the School of Architecture and dean of the Boston Architectural College and is the architecture critic for *Banker & Tradesman*.**



## Seth Godin talks with Jeff Stein AIA

**Jeff Stein:** Your recent book *Small is the New Big* is written rather like a blog, one riff after another revolving around the world of business and new media. In the physical world of architecture, small is indeed the new big, in terms of cost savings and energy savings. In the world of technology, we see it everywhere: the handheld iPhone does what a roomful of computer equipment did 50 years ago. But you're not talking about the physical reality of being small.

**Seth Godin:** Actually, my point is that thinking small is more important than being small.

**Jeff Stein:** Which might, for example, have an effect on how people are treated: personal service, the kind of attention that used to be available to customers only if they were dealing with a mom-and-pop small business. But new technology has made it possible for large businesses and institutions to act as if they were small. Is that it?

**Seth Godin:** Exactly. Big companies used to search for insulation. Now, the challenge is to search for exposure. Friction. Context. Interaction.

**Jeff Stein:** In one of your books, you write that in the course of simply doing your job, you inadvertently became a bestselling author of marketing advice for what is euphemistically called "the new economy." How did that happen?

**Seth Godin:** It wasn't an organized plan as much as it was a decision to refuse to make something that's mediocre. And to avoid going to meetings. I found I could use that freed-up time to engage with people, discover what they were wrestling with, and try to help them think about the world in a different way.

**Jeff Stein:** How did that outlook come to you? You graduated from Tufts University here in Massachusetts in 1982, with a degree in computer science and philosophy. Then you went to

the other edge of the United States, to Stanford for an MBA. Did those experiences introduce you to this particular way of thinking and of relating to the world?

**Seth Godin:** I learned two things about myself at both institutions. First, I learned that I am impatient and unable to sit still for long periods of time. Second, I learned that mastering the canon of an established field is not as interesting to me as provoking discussion about a new one. While sitting in advanced physics or engineering classes, learning that there were many miles to go before I could be considered an expert, it struck me that my ability to contribute to those fields was going to be very limited. Some people are quite good at adding that one last little nit to something that's been accepted for a really long time, but I found instead that my skill was in looking at a clean sheet of paper and saying, "Why are we starting here? Why don't we start there?"

## Being afraid gets in the way of being remarkable.

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**Seth Godin**

**Jeff Stein:** You're talking now to someone who represents that other end of the spectrum: I'm an architect, someone working within an established canon.

**Seth Godin:** And architects are the perfect example of my point. If we look at the happiest and, by some measures, the most successful architects, they are not the people who are designing the same buildings they designed six years ago. There is a glut of that sort of architect out there, and they are not rewarded for their efforts or their expertise, because they're a commodity. They are replaceable cogs who are doing the same work that 20 other people could do.

When I talked with Michael Graves a few months ago about his career, it was clear that, from the beginning, he was restless and unsatisfied with the status quo. And that is why he is happy and successful, because he refused to see the field as one where he needed to do what everyone else was doing, and understood that by being the best in the world at what he set out to do, he could command the respect of a larger group.

**Jeff Stein:** I had a teacher once who said, "If you're not willing to do what it takes to be remarkable, then I can't be of much help to you."

**Seth Godin:** Right. The thing about established fields is that

there are lots of places to hide. It's easy to look at something Frank Gehry does and criticize it — to say it's not rational or that it won't hold up. There are always lots of ways to argue for the status quo in a field. But it turns out, paradoxically, that the older a field is, the more opportunities there are to stand out by challenging the status quo.

**Jeff Stein:** There used to be more places to hide than there are now. The profession of architecture is a shrinking one. There are about 101,000 registered architects in the US; and for the last decade or so, that number has been going down by about 3,000 a year. People are dying off or simply leaving the profession for other things. And of the nearly 5,000 graduates of architecture schools around the country, only about 1,200 of them are sitting for the licensing exam. So the profession is shrinking, and right now there's a perfect storm of sorts in the building industry: there's the low value of the dollar, the housing crisis,

inflation, and of course there's the price of oil, which almost overnight has made every building that exists obsolete.

**Seth Godin:** But there's never been a better time in history to be an architect than right now. It's almost beyond argument. Everything that you just listed is a reason why it's good to be an architect. The opportunity for the struggling architects I know is to realize that the problem is internal, not market-based. And the internal problem is that you're afraid. Being afraid gets in the way of being remarkable. The way most people deal with fear is by coloring within the lines, because if you color within the lines, you are beyond criticism. I guess the challenge that I propose to someone reading this is, what did you do yesterday for which you could be criticized? If you're not regularly doing work for which you can be criticized, why are you surprised that people aren't seeking you out?

**Jeff Stein:** In the talks that you give, do you have ways of inciting bravery in your audiences?

**Seth Godin:** I think that you can't rationalize your way out of fear; you have to emotionalize your way out of it. And the way that people do that is by falling in love with the goal. If you can fall in love with the outcome, if you can see the light, then you will be able to tell yourself a story that will get you

through the tunnel. What I do for a living, because I don't do any consulting, is to try to paint a picture of what it's like on the other side. I try to tell heroic stories of people who have overcome fear, however irrational it might be, and then went on to build something remarkable, whether they're in the sock business or the architecture business or the consulting business. There are examples everywhere.

**Jeff Stein:** Another of your books, *The Dip*, teaches the reader when to quit and when to stick. In it, you chart the dip on an X-Y axis, where the vertical axis is results and the horizontal axis is efforts. At the beginning of undertaking pretty much anything, results are usually good. Then, after quite a bit of effort, there is a dip where the results diminish. If you can somehow get through this dip, the results are often terrific.

**Seth Godin:** A great example is becoming a doctor. In order to become a doctor, first you have to be pre-med — you tell your grandmother and she's all excited, so there's positive feedback. Then you have to take organic chemistry. Organic chemistry is the dip. Organic chemistry exists for a reason: to get pre-med students to quit. And that's a good thing, because some pre-med students make it through and end up being doctors. And if you end up being a doctor, you make a good living because doctors are relatively scarce. In fact, the dip is your friend because it creates value. The architecture licensing board is another example of a dip.

Quitting is, unfortunately, underrated. Our culture thinks quitting is a bad thing, that quitting is for chickens, for people who don't have what it takes. But in fact, sometimes the smartest thing you can do is quit before you start. Quit something when you know how big the dip is and before you get stuck in it. Don't even start if you can't make it through that dip. So if your goal is to be an architect who builds the tallest building in the world, there's a pretty big dip you're going to have to get through before you end up there. If you evaluate that quest up front and realize how big the dip really is, you might decide not to go down that road. But the worst thing is to invest all the time, all the energy, to make it halfway, then get stuck in the dip and give up, which is what most people do. Most people do what they think they're supposed to do, which is put in every last bit of effort. Then, when they can't give it enough, they quit. If you can look at your career upfront and say, "I have a choice. I can either chart a path where I can get through the dip and be the Frank Gehry or the Michael Graves that people seek out, or I can quit right now" — and then choose one or the other — you'll be fine.

**Jeff Stein:** You also point out that most of us have been the victims of bad advice, some of it in school. You cite one piece of advice as being particularly bad: that it's really important to be well-rounded.

**Seth Godin:** When you think about where you go for dinner, or who you decide to marry, or where you decide to work or live, you realize you never pick anything because it's pretty good at lots of things. If you're going out for pizza, you don't care if

the place also makes pretty good eggplant parmesan, because your goal is pizza. And if I'm hiring an architect to design my house, I don't care that she makes a pretty good office building. I want a good house; that's what I want right now.

**Jeff Stein:** You point out that the list of what's scarce and what adds value has changed pretty radically over the course of this generation. One of the things that's on the list now is time.

**Seth Godin:** That's right. Spare time. There used to be something called pastimes. You could go to a store to buy stuff to while away the hours. It's inconceivable to us now that we need more stuff to fill our time. What we want is things to save our time. That's a shift. It used to be that energy was cheap and plentiful and you designed a building without even thinking about energy. Now the opposite is true. So if you go down the list of the things that you are doing for people and compare it to the things that are scarce, that people really need, you may discover that you are spending a lot of your time and a lot of your activities solving a problem that your customers don't have. And the people who are winning today are the ones who are embracing the new scarcity and taking advantage of the fact that plenty of other things that used to be scarce are now plentiful. I'll give you a simple example. There's a whole generation of tax accountants who have discovered that they can send those shoeboxes filled with receipts they get from their clients to people in India who, for three dollars an hour, lay them all out in beautiful spreadsheets. So the accountant instead gets to spend time working with clients and doing high-leverage stuff.

**Jeff Stein:** There's a sense of this in the recent Hollywood writers' strike. The writer Michael Wolff pointed out that what you have now is a population of writers trained to write for a medium that no longer exists.

**Seth Godin:** That's exactly right. All strikes are unfortunate. This one was doubly unfortunate because it solved the wrong issue. The reason that TV shows used to be 30 minutes long is only because it was important that people be able to remember what time the show was on. You couldn't broadcast the show at 7:54, because people wouldn't remember it. Once you get rid of live broadcast, and everything can be recorded so it's on whenever you want it to be on, there's no reason for shows to be half-an-hour long any more. Suddenly the art of writing a two-minute bit is just as important as the art of writing something that's an hour long. Suddenly it doesn't matter that you have really high production values; now what matters is that it's quick and it's funny and it's free.

**Jeff Stein:** You point out that there are seven million videos on YouTube that are on average five minutes long and that are watched for an average of 10 seconds.

**Seth Godin:** Exactly. Business models are changing, and the way people approach problems is changing. I think that architects

need to be honest with themselves and realize that they have an opportunity. Sure, fewer houses are going to get built, but the ones that are going to get built are for people who don't want to live in a house just like every other one that's already been done. If I am trying to build a green house or a waterfront house or whatever, Google enables me to find the best people in the world to do it, no matter where they live. And if they're easy to find and easy to work with, they're much more likely to get my business than if they just went to the right cocktail party. That's not the way things get done anymore.

**Jeff Stein:** In your latest book, *Meatball Sundae*, you suggest that what many businesses do, and architecture is among these, is make meatballs. Yet, when they look at new marketing opportunities through the Internet and new media, they're in effect putting whipped cream and cherries on top of these meatballs.

**Seth Godin:** Right. If you're an ordinary architect doing ordinary work for an ordinary client, why do you think a website is going to help you?

**Jeff Stein:** Well, because you've heard that that's true.

**Seth Godin:** But in fact, the Web is your enemy. The Web is helping people who are doing extraordinary work for extraordinary clients and charging extraordinary fees if

necessary. The Web rewards the outliers, the edges, the people who are worth talking about, and it punishes the average folks in the middle.

**Jeff Stein:** So we're not worried so much about brand management any more; as you point out, the next model is tribal management.

**Seth Godin:** That's exactly it. If you don't have a tribe of people who adore you and follow you and are interested in what you're doing, then I suggest you go find one.

**Jeff Stein:** What the Internet has fostered is that sort of social network. It's the relationships between people and objects, rather than the objects themselves, that are important now.

**Seth Godin:** Exactly. And architecture as an edifice, as a souvenir, as a process, can be right in the center of that, creating spaces that connect people as opposed to spaces that isolate.

**Jeff Stein:** In all your work, you push for change — in favor of success, authenticity, the remarkable. "I dare you," you say in *Small is the New Big*, "to read any 10 of these essays and still be comfortable settling for what you've got."

**Seth Godin:** Architects who settle are unhappy architects. ■



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