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Building a Business on the Back of Content
Brian Clark, Founder, Copyblogger.com
Michael Stelzner, Founder, SocialMediaExaminer.com and author of *Launch*
Moderated by **Aaron Kahlow**, Founder, Online Marketing Institute

Themes between Michael and Brian's story--

Started "on a whim." For Michael, it was social media, for Brian, it was blogging.

From Brian, a $1,000 design job led to a 6 million dollar business.

Aaron asks: What do you suck at, and how do you overcome that?
Aaron's take: I'm terrible at the content PROCESS

Brian:
Evolving from a one person blog to an online trade magazine, basically,
Brian: "Behind the scenes we're all crazy...we're all writers, and writers are nuts!"
It comes together, we get it done, but behind the scenes it's kind of crazy.
"Yes you do want to think like a publisher, or like media, but you do have to realize that the creative process is crazy, and embrace that"

Michael:
My weakness is that I'm a perfectionist and because I'm a perfectionist I have to have my fingers in everything. He's involved with every single article that comes out, he writes every single headline and opening. His biggest weakness is "me." "You need to find great people and just trust that no one can do it the way you can" but no one can be perfect.

Aaron asks: What are formulas or big takeaways for success?
Brian: Copyblogger teaches blogs, and walks the walk by doing what the're teaching.
If substance of content is good, that should be enough, but it's NOT. It's got to be reader focused and reader friendly in the attention limited economy.

Reader friendly, meaning you have to make bits and pieces of digestible chunks of values leap out w/ subheads, bullets, etc.

When people object to that, he says: "well, do you want to be read?"

Aaron: Understanding usability of content is key, focus on the short bits, not the long forms

Copy is a part of the experience and if you throw blocks of text at people no matter how aesthetically pleasing the experience is they probably won't actually take anything away from it.

Michael:
Formula of success is to give the "Nordstrom" experience to EVERYONE. Employees, readers. All about service.

First involves creating content that people want, second, it's figuring out how it's getting to the brain. For the reader, "you have to go through the eyes to get to the brain"

Michael says " some people say our site looks like the long lost brother of Dora the explorer"
Visual design and layout is essential.
Working with other people is absolutely essential, helped other people.

"Have a servant attitude and make sure you're always lifting people up." Then you create a community and people become raving fans.

"Give give give"

Aaron asks: HOw do I know what to write?
His take: just ask people! Put out a survey:

Brian:
I'm not a big fan of asking directly, he's never done a survey, he's a big fan of observation "social media itself is the greatest market research platform" it's free, it just takes time. That's how he figured out that people needed what he was reading. People were trying to teach copywriting when they weren't schooled in the discipline. So he started talking about applying copywriting to blogging. Then he expanded the focus of the blog to copywriting and content marketing as a whole.

So it's observable that people have problems. You have to know what they're problems are, but also what they desire, so you don't end up feeding them broccoli ice cream.

Copyblogger: initial audience, only business model was, if you have an audience, you can sell them things.

Partner w/ people who can do things that he couldn't do.

Michael:

Created a 2009 social media survey, for results for their survey.
One question: "What is the single biggest question you want answered about social media"

In the beginning it was, how do I use the tools, then it was "How do I find the time"

Give it away, no registration form from SOc. Media examiner.

From the report, team analyzed all the data to decide the topics.

40,000 people read the report, first and foremost it was an intelligence gathering question.

Think about using content to serve your own business and your audience.

Aaron asks: How do you “define” content marketing?
Brian: Giving away valuable information to sell something related.
Michael: The process of developing information that your audience loves. That will either help you develop raving fans, bring more traffic to your site, build a list, or sell a product. It’s gicing people what they want,with no holds barred.

Give away your best stuff, give away the farm. A subset will say, how much more will I gain if I hire that person, buy their book, buy their product.
Giving stuff away is the perfect tool for developing yourself as an authority or a latform to build a business.

Brian: Content is what people share. SHaring content is a form of status. You’re being generous but you’re building your own form of expertise by sharing good stuff. Our initial readers shared our content everyday so that brings new people in.

Aaron asks: People share content b/c they want the authority, and others share for greater good. How do you make sure you’re not becoming an ego instead of a value adder?

Brian: You have to be an editor as well as a publisher. He shared ⅘ posts b/c they’re related. He’s not going t share bad content or content he won’t agree with. It’s always “here’s something good”

Michael: YOu should not JUST be sharing your own stuff. SHare articles from other people. Predominantly looking for outstanding content. If you provide good content, people will stop looking elsewhere.

Aaron asks: What are your biggest metrics?

Brian: If traffic is growing, then you’re doing something right. He dives into content by looking at comments, RTs, email opens. SHARING is clutch.
When you’re selling products, it’s split testing, seeing what’s working.

Aaron: what hits him iss that analytic thought leaders, what always comes out is that you have to go with your gut-- “you can only measure so far” and then you have to rely on intuition.

Brian: I do pay an intense amount of analytical time but then I make a GUT decision.

Michael: We analyze page views, retweets, and comments. 1,000 RTs is the minimum. THat’s content. For business, sales, growth, subscriber goals.

Aaron: people ask, why should I tweet, retweet, and do all of these things. It’s not about the tweet, it’s about getting people to a page and subscribing.

Michael: Don’t get discouraged when you don’t have 100,000 followers. If you have 6,000 subscribers, let your audience know. There’s something in social proof. People make gut decisions on whether or not they think people like them do the same.

Brian: People aren’t actually consciously looking for this stuff, but they do look for comments, etc. With websites and blogs, it’s the social aspect that people are looking for. Wait until subscribers get above 1,000.

Crowd member asks: (I think it’s David Meerman Scott:) How do you leverage your personal brand v your company brand?

Brian: For me it’s about building the BRAND, he was one of the first blogs to have other writers. He always tries to put himself behind the brand but he’s still completely tied to it. For example, Pete Cashmore at Mashable. He has nothing to do with Twitter, it’s all Mashable employees. People want to see a face there. Brian stll runs the Copyblogger Twitter account. Even if he left it up there, they’d still have to leave it up.
Authenticity is BIG. We talk about people what they want, and they want a PERSON. If you violate expectations that they have of you, they’re not going to like it. He’s tried to put content and the product before himself at all times.

Mike: There was a day when it was Mike Stelzner’s writing white papers, got famous in the niche and then realized he couldn’t scale himself. He could only go so big and so far. With Social Media Examiner, frankly most people don’t even know it’s him. He likes that if he wants to he could sell it some day. He wanted to make the spotlight shine on other people.

Brian: He has no plans to sell copyblogger, but if the right offer came along, you’d want the opportunity.

Seth Godin and Chris Brogan said the worst mistake they ever made was their URL was themselves.

Questions from crowd: Is the ability to hand over a lot of process and micromanagement, how do you get past it so you can scale?

Mike: DOCUMENT PROCESS. Put together an editorial guide, not just for writer, but for the team. Why did the article even get to my desk? If it didn't seem right in your gut, don't even show it to me. Mike documented editorial guidelines in a lot of detail. Mike says he spends 3 hours on thursday getting everything ready for the following week. It took a documented process and editorial guidelines.

Brian: He's had an editor working for him three years, but wouldn't let them publish any post. He mentors editors every post. So he finally said, go ahead, set the post to be published. I don't need to see it. And that took 3 years.

Aaron: inherent in this is hiring people. You have to go out there and let people fail to learn.

Mike: Let the failures be internal, not public facing, but yes, they do have to fail.

Brian: it's not the end of the day if one post doesn't knock it out of the park.

Mike: you have to realize that people have gifts. his is writing headlines. If there's someone whose better than that, give them the control.

Crowd question? Google plus? Huh huh?

Mike: Google plus is for him, better than twitter. He likes the fact that conversations are conregated into a little stream. It will be a force to reckon w/ because the little button is integrated into every google app. mark my words, google plus will be essential, and when they come out with google plus for business, it will give facebook a run for its money.

Brian: Twitter is still our main channel, something like 90 thous followers, 10 thous on google plus.

Google plus is a giant data farm for google search. The logical thing for google to do to add social to search is add its own social network. If it does take off, which he things it will, get started now and build your audience there. If you can build a large audience there, then that's a direct signal to google.

Aaron: If nothing else, google plus affects search results. He sat down w/ their spokesman, who said that it has a big effect.

Mike: Twitter will still be big. The networks will rise together and compete.

Brian: I don't want privacy. I'm not big into personal social networking or sharing.

“From a content marketing standpoint, privacy is your enemy. People do want to know you as a human being, they don’t want you to overshare.”

Question: A key metric for you is subscribers. How do you boost that base?

Mike: We use great content. We have a Facebook marketing vid tutorial which we offer for free for subscribers, and it’s a huge source of traffic growth. Great content alone will not actually get people to subscribe got to give them an incentive.

Brian: The first action you should be looking for is subscribe. The content is a cookie that once they’re done eating it, they want more.

Email is NOT dead. RSS did not take off like we thought it was going to. Even in the tech blogging space people focus on email.

Remember, ultimately you want people to buy something.

Aaron: What’s the biggest mistake you see people making?

Brian: Not focusing enough on the audience’s needs. “Well I shouldn’t have to write compelling headlines, or I shouldn’t have to use bullets or subheads or two sentence paragraphs.”
As Mike said, you’re a servant, that’s how you get rich. It’s about serving others needs, not yourself.

Mike: No one cares about yooour stuff, they care about your stuff. Your content needs to be commercial free. That sends a message that you’re not here to serve, you’re here to convert. Instead, give them a message to opt in, and only sell once they’ve opted in.

Aaron: How do they ask you ?s?

Brian: @copyblogger on Twitter.

Mike: mike@socialmediaexaminer.com

Aaron: Twitter, FB, LI