

Announcer:

... The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, episode 536. It's Carey here and well, I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. I am so excited to bring you, or perhaps introduce you to Brian Clark. I got a big backstory on that. Hang on for that in just a second. This episode is brought to you by Overflow. You can empower your donors to easily give stock donations by going to overflow.co/carey, that's overflow.co/carey, to learn more about year-end pricing and download their free Stock Giving Guide and by Future Forward Churches, you can get Lee Kricher's book, Seamless Pastoral Transition and other free pastoral transition resources by going to futureforwardchurches.com.

So Brian Clark is known popularly online as Copyblogger. And those of you who work in the online marketing space, whether that's for churches or in the for-profit world, probably know about Copyblogger. And the fun part is I kind of built a lot of what I do, like this podcast to some extent, but actually, all the blogging I did, I just kept reading Copyblogger over and over again. Well, fast forward to a few months ago, I'm in Cabo for CaboPress with Chris Lema, a conference in Mexico. And who's there, but Brian Clark and we become fast friends. I get to thank him. I'm like, "Man, dude, your stuff changed my life." And so I just had the opportunity to bring his wisdom to you today. So if you've ever wondered about online marketing, if you ever wondered about, well, how do you get noticed online, if you want to know how things are changing, we do a very deep dive in this. This is a 90-minute conversation. It could have easily been three hours.

And Brian and I talk about how to attract and keep an audience, why emails still outperforms social 40 to one. I talk about this all the time. Nobody believes me. So maybe you'll believe Brian, don't ignore your email list, how to write better headlines and war stories from the early days of Copyblogger and also over here at CareyNieuwhof.com. It's a lot of fun. Brian is a writer, a traveler, a serial digital entrepreneur. He's launched and sold quite a few online businesses. He's the founder of pioneering content marketing website, Copyblogger, the Midlife personal growth newsletter, Further and Unemployable, an educational community that provides smart strategies for freelancers and entrepreneurs. He's also the co-founder of Digital Commerce Partners, a content marketing and SEO agency for digital business owners. This guy knows so much. And it's such a thrill to bring them on the podcast.

Well, thanks to our partners as well. Have you ever thought, "Nobody actually gives stock? And why don't we get stock donations?" Well, you know what? That's a huge misconception. Your donors actually would love to give you stock. It's super tax efficient. They just don't want to jump through the hoops and the complexity to do it. Enter Overflow. Overflow is an online software that empowers donors to easily give stock donations to churches and non-profits within minutes, not months. 90% of US wealth is in non-cash assets like stock. So churches that only accept cash donations, they end up leaving a generosity gap. The average cash donation in the US, only \$128. The average stock donation through Overflow, over \$10,000. So visit overflow.co/carey, that's overflow.co, not dotcom, [/carey](https://overflow.co/carey) to learn more about year-end pricing and download their free Stock Giving Guide.

And today's episode is also brought to you by Seamless Pastoral Transitions, Lee Kricher's new book. And I sat down with Lee recently and I asked him this question. I said, "What would few people expect to be a key ingredient in seamless pastoral succession?" Here's his answer.

Lee Kricher:

I really think it's the ego issues that are involved, with both the outgoing and the incoming pastor. And I lived it. I was handing off the church to my successor, Jason Howard, who I had worked with and mentored for 15 years. But when we started to wrestle with the reality of the timing and he was ready earlier than I was ready, and I started to attribute all kinds of motives to him, and I think it all came to a head at what I call the dinner in which we were really wrestling through not whether, but the timing and the hows of doing this. But it almost self-destructed. And to a great degree it was because of my ego issues. And by transitioning at around age 65 instead of 67, it kept him engaged. It became a smooth transition for our church. And it opened up some doors for me that never would've opened up if I would've postponed it two more years.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Man, I love that answer. And you know what? Humility is a big deal. Lee's got a unique take on seamless pastoral transition and it's gone well for him. So make sure you pick up his book. You can get it by going to futureforwardchurches.com. And when you pick up his book, Seamless Pastoral Transition, you'll also get other free pastoral transition resources if you head on over to futureforwardchurches.com. That's futureforwardchurches.com. Well, wherever you are, on a run, at the gym, cooking, I don't know, raking the final leaves, whatever you happen to be doing, I hope you enjoy this conversation with the one and only Brian Clark. Brian, welcome to the podcast.

Brian Clark:

Happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I love origin stories. And give us a brief summary of how you went from lawyer to serial entrepreneur, and maybe even the crazy that got you into law school. I don't don't think normal people go to law school, as a fellow law school graduate.

Brian Clark:

Well, on that one I'll say when you are a psychology major with a sociology minor, you got to do something. And law school was it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

My [inaudible 00:06:16] degree wasn't very marketable.

Brian Clark:

I'm so happy with my liberal arts background, especially for what I do now. Psychology and sociology are amazing. I remind my mother of that all the time. But yes, it was either psychology graduate school, which I entertained briefly, and then figured out once I took the LSAT that I was good at that kind of thing. And that's where it all started. But I did well in law school, really well my first year, made Law Review, all the stuff you're supposed to do. But by the time I got to my third year, I already knew I wasn't going to be happy doing this. And I graduated in 1994. This was the dawn of the commercial internet, literally, what happened that year with the Netscape browser. And some younger people may find it hard to believe, but I bought my first computer then. I made it through college and law school without a computer, because we used to be able to do that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You know what? Law school, it was funny, because that was the first time I did my first degree, my four-year degree, on a typewriter. And then I started dating my wife. Bought a computer. Went to the computer lab. And then eventually, I bought a computer, but finished law school digital. So there you go. That dates us.

Brian Clark:

So I had been a fan of William Gibson. I'm not sure if you read the cyberpunk stuff. He's the guy who coined the term cyberspace in the '80s. And so I wanted a computer, because I could now get online. And that's what I was interested in. So I practiced law in a very nice, big law firm. I can't complain about the terms of my employment, other than I hated it. And every night I would just go home and stare out at cyberspace and go, "I bet there's a way to make a living from this." You can reach all these people. I don't know if it was true for you at the time, but most unhappy lawyers want to become writers. It seems like it's just-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, there's a path.

Brian Clark:

... one of those things. We want to write the Great American novel, or screenplay, or what have you. And I felt the same way, but somehow I got entranced by the idea that you can publish out here and people can read it. And I had no business background, never taken a business class, never read a marketing book. I guess you could say I was naive. But I think it helped to be a bit naive at those times, because the internet did kind of turn some things upside down in terms of traditional business and traditional marketing concepts. So I was a blank slate and just kind of went into it.

And anyway, in '98 I called my mom and said, "Mom, I'm quitting the practice of law to write on the internet." And as you can imagine, that went over really well. They're okay with it now. At the time, believe it or not, email newsletters were all the rage. 2022, email newsletters, all the rage. Some things stayed the same even though everything else had changed. My first business was a collection of pop culture-oriented email newsletters. I was good at writing. I was decent at attracting audiences back then. People would sign up for anything that was... Remember the old days when people would forward emails like crazy of anything?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, it was social media before there was social media. [inaudible 00:10:13] forwards and chains.

Brian Clark:

That was our social media.

Carey Nieuwhof:

A hundred percent. I do remember that. I don't miss that actually, but I do remember it.

Brian Clark:

Right. Well, with the clutter in your email box now, it wouldn't be as welcome. But still I had no real idea how to make money from it. The popular conception of new of a newsletter would be a media format and you made money through advertising. That's the paradigm that we had. And the online advertising space was really just becoming to be a thing. And so, I was-

Carey Nieuwhof:

What year was that?

Brian Clark:

That was '98 and then into '99. And then I happened to read my first marketing book. Do you want to guess what it is?

Carey Nieuwhof:

22 Irrefutable Laws of Marketing? No?

Brian Clark:

It was Permission Marketing by Seth Godin.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, Seth Golden.

Brian Clark:

And that was the book that basically said, "Okay, the internet is a direct marketing medium. It's the greatest direct marketing medium in the world." And I'm like, "Oh, that's what it is." And that's what caused me to learn copywriting. That's what prompted me to study the history of direct marketing. And people tend to think, when you hear that terminology, they think of infomercials and junk mail. And that's true. But by the '90s, every major corporation on the planet was using a form of direct marketing, which just means a direct connection with your prospect and your customer, which when you think about the internet, that's what we do. We don't have to go through intermediaries or retail necessarily.

Carey Nieuwhof:

In other words, you don't have to be in a newspaper or on TV. You can just go direct to your customers.

Brian Clark:

Exactly. And that was fascinating to me, because again... So Permission Marketing basically explained direct marketing. They used to buy a mailing list in order to reach people. But that didn't work online, the whole book, because Seth, a lot of people don't realize, Seth was an offline direct marketer before he became Seth Godin.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Were those his Squidoo days and that kind of thing? He was at Yahoo, wasn't he?

Brian Clark:

No. See, so he took the job as VP of Direct Marketing at Yahoo, because of, or in conjunction with the publication of Permission Marketing. I remember he started blogging at that time. He built his email list by giving away a couple free chapters of Permission Marketing, practicing what he preached. It's funny, because the book didn't really talk about what we now call content marketing. It was very heavy on kind of gimmicky stuff like giveaways and things like that, that came from that offline direct marketing world. But to me, I was like, "Well, the best way to build an email list is to give people interesting stuff to read." And so it all kind of came together with one thing, which is, okay, so with direct marketing you don't sell advertising. You sell goods and services. You have to have something to sell. And I said, "Okay, what do I have to sell?"

I was running out of money and the only thing I had was a law degree. So I started yet another newsletter, an email newsletter, on internet-related legal issues and started publishing that. And next thing you know, people were hiring this kid. A kid attorney isn't supposed to get clients. The older attorneys get the clients and we do all the work. So I became what's known in the legal industry as a rainmaker. And obviously, I took that brand and used it later.

Carey Nieuwhof:

When you started Rainmaker.

Brian Clark:

But this is already going long. But anyway, that was my first business success, was this little law firm that quickly could have become something bigger. But I had the good sense to realize I still didn't enjoy practicing law. But I was fascinated with the fact that I could put stuff out there online and people would give me money. So I was hooked. At that point, I realized that I was going to be an entrepreneur who could write as opposed to a traditional writer. And then I went out and started my next two companies, which were virtual real estate brokerage concepts, kind of proved something to myself, because I started making more money than if I had become a partner in that law firm I left. And I was doing it without practicing law. So those were my two criteria at that time. And that eventually went on.

The total period of time that I did client services was around seven years. And in 2005, I was working terribly hard. I was a great marketer. Terrible at delegation management. In the real estate company, I had other brokers. I had realtors that I had to deal with and-

Carey Nieuwhof:

So this was your own company, right? So you left the big firm. This was your own company.

Brian Clark:

This was my own thing. And my management style was just work harder. No systems, no processes, we can't have that. I learned that that is not my forte. And when I started Copyblogger, we became a viable concern that way. And my first partner became my COO. So I did learn my lesson to do what I'm good at and to let other people do what they're good at. But that was basically the foundation of what led to me starting Copyblogger. So in '98 or '99, I discovered what 10 years later would be called content marketing. But I didn't call it that. I didn't know what to call it. I just knew that if you could attract people and put them on an email list and you had something to sell, then you could build a viable business.

And when blogging, commercial blogging, started to come of age around 2005 going into 2006, I saw these people struggling with the same things I had struggled with seven years before. And that was my motivation to help them out. And that's how it started.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That started Copyblogger. So let's do a couple of definitions, just for people who aren't in the world that you are in or I stick my toe in from time to time, Brian. Permission marketing, what exactly, how is that different from traditional marketing?

Brian Clark:

So permission marketing was Godin's term for what we all do. It is also called content marketing. HubSpot calls it inbound marketing. Everyone wants their own terminology. But we're all basically talking about the same thing, which is that in Godin's terms, instead of interrupting people from what they're doing with your message, get them to raise their hand and pay attention to what you have to say over time. And again, that relates back to the getting them on an email list that they want to stay on, that they look forward to receiving, opening, reading and acting on.

So it's all basically the same universe of attracting people to you as opposed to you going out and hunting for people to buy things from you. And this, even in the early days of Google AdWords and pay-per-click advertising online, the practitioners of that quickly realized that trying to sell someone directly after the click didn't do very well. But if you sold them on getting on an email list, you had time, after time, after time to get them interested in what you were selling. So that's the basic idea.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So that is related to content marketing. And content marketing is the idea that you provide value through the content, rather than, we all get those emails, for example, that are like, "Hey, we got a sale today," or, "Buy my stuff, buy my stuff, buy my stuff." And those abysmal open rates and terrible click-through rates. But if you actually create content that is helpful to people, rather than, "Are you ready to sell your house..." It could be five things that improve your curb appeal or whatever. So can you flesh out just for people who are trying to follow along content marketing? Because they've seen it a million times. I just want to make sure it's crystal clear in people's head what we're talking about before we go forward.

Brian Clark:

Well, I think that the concept of content marketing transcends permission or inbound in an important way as a copywriter. And that was one of the premises of Copyblogger in the first place, that you should apply copywriting techniques to your content to make it more engaging, because copywriters have to catch your attention and hold it in order to sell you something. Well, in the battle for attention online, the same could be said for a tutorial article, how to, like you said, five tips to improve curb appeal, what have you. But the really nice thing about content is it can be incredibly persuasive without people understanding that the sales process has actually started. You're giving them valuable information. But the way you present it, the way you frame it, the way you lead to the next message from you, is really, if you're doing it correctly, part of the sales process.

But, like you mentioned, you're not beating them over the head with, "Buy, buy, buy, buy." They're deciding they want to buy in a very emotional and subconscious way, in a very valuable way, in my opinion. I don't think I could have ever done "sales" without content, because I'm not that guy. You can't

get me to go door to door and be Mr. Sales Guy. I don't think I have it in me. We talked about this when we were in Cabo. When we both write, you can tell we're making a case. And that probably stems back to our legal training, a certain degree. But the idea is that if it's worth writing or producing a piece of content for an audience, you should want them to do something with it, whether it's to take away an idea, to take a certain action, to take the next step in the buying process, or maybe even to buy something. So that is how I think content marketing is different.

Now, there's another aspect of content marketing that for a while was incredibly effective and not as much as it used to be. And that's traffic. That's the other thing. In fact, I think some people equate content with pleasing Google or social media traffic. And it can. For a golden period of time between 2005 and let's bump it to 2015, but it got rough once social media went mainstream and Zuckerberg pulled his famous bait-and-switch and made you pay to reach your own audience.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I remember the day.

Brian Clark:

But there was a time where you could publish a great article and it would go viral on social media. And bloggers would link to it, and that would boost your search engine optimization and everything, it was just magical. And that was the strategy I used at Copyblogger. Unfortunately, it's not as easy as it used to be to use content for traffic. But what I want to make clear is creating useful content for the right audience can still be that amazingly, valuable and persuasive, influential if you will, catalyst for not only people to follow you, but for people to do business with you. And that's where I really see content marketing at these days. Less traffic, but still essential.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We're going to break that into, I think, two categories. And I think that's a really helpful frame. So for those of you listening going, "How does this pertain to me," I think some of you have an audience, whether you have customers, clients, a congregation, that you already have their attention. You can use content marketing to serve them better and to get them to take action on things. Some of you are trying to build an audience. You're trying to get one. And you and I, we did hit the jackpot. I mean, you were a few years ahead of me. I launched my blog in 2007. You started Copyblogger in '05. And really, my blog was, at first, just to launch Connexus Church. It was a way to communicate with everybody. And it was mostly insider focused. But then once the launch period was over, I blogged once in a while, because blogging was a thing.

But it was 10 years ago, in 2012, I really doubled down and was like, "Okay, I'm going to write three posts a week. And I'm going to serve leaders." I needed a hobby. So that was my hobby. And what happened, I realized... We got know each other over the last couple of months since we met in Cabo. And as I've told you too many times, the reason I can do what I do today is because of what I learned from you, Brian and the folks over at Copyblogger. But I realize now in the rear view mirror, I started a very successful content marketing company without any product to sell. So it was a hobby. I had no financial model. And we have figured out the financial model on the backside of that after we built an audience.

But let's talk about the golden days of copywriting, like 2005 to 2015, when you could just post something, become an authority, become a thought leader. If you searched church growth for a period of time, we pretty much owned the first page of Google search results. And we didn't pay a penny for

that. It was just, I wrote an awful lot about church growth. If you searched, and it's still true of Copyblogger, you can still find-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:25:04]

Carey Nieuwhof:

... Who searched. And it's still true of Copyblogger. You can still find me under church growth stuff. But if you searched copywriting or how to create headlines that work, you're going to find your stuff over at Copyblogger. Explain how that worked and how it's changed for people, because there's a lot of frustrated content creators right now.

Brian Clark:

Yeah, absolutely. And just to put it this way, since content marketing went mainstream, again, the term was coined in 2008 and accepted pretty much by the people doing it, and then let's say 2010, it went more mainstream. And now, today, 12 years later, it's just digital marketing. You really can't do digital marketing effectively without content to some degree.

So let's say that in the last decade, more content has been created online than has existed in the history of the world. That is a true statement. And it may be true that more content was created last year than has ever been created in the history of the world, including all the content that came the 10 years before. And that may be true. I'll have to check on that, but it's just a massively true amount.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Probably true.

Brian Clark:

So Google only has so many slots. And have you ever heard the old joke, where's the best place to hide a dead body?

Carey Nieuwhof:

I have not heard this joke.

Brian Clark:

On page two of the Google search results because no one goes past page one.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a keeper.

Brian Clark:

Right. And so what's also happened at the same time is Google has added more and more ads, and more and more of their own stuff, their own content, their own features, so the organic listings that matter have gotten smaller while more and more people are out there competing for those spots. It's just more difficult.

I learned SEO around 2001 or so for my real estate business, and I did really well with that. And then once we got to Copyblogger, I did all of our optimization. I would write it. I would create special landing

pages that were designed to rank for copywriting, and email marketing, and landing pages, and everything I was going after. So I had an entire methodology for it that was cutting edge at the time. But now everyone started doing that. And, again, it's just an incredibly competitive thing.

But the reason why you'll still see Copyblogger ranking well for those terms that I aimed for 16 years ago is because there are millions of links coming into Copyblogger. Number one, because of the time period of its peak, of its powers, and number two, we had an audience of bloggers. If you have an audience of people who don't have websites, they're not going to be people who link to you. And, yes, I knew that going in. So I did genuinely want to help people, and I think that showed, but I'm a strategic person also by nature when it comes to business.

So it's just not the same environment these days. It's very tough, especially if you have a newer website that doesn't have the authority in the parlance of SEO that an older site might have with all the links, and traffic, and audience.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So we'll talk about that soon and how it's changed so we don't sound like a couple of gold miners who got to California in 1849 or anything like that. It's like, well, should have started 15 years ago. And that is something I've told. They're like, "How did you build such a massive audience and get authority in this?" Et cetera, et cetera. And I'm like, well, it helps to have started a decade ago, and with my podcast in 2014. But there is actual truth to that. There is truth to that.

Brian Clark:

There is truth to the way we did it. The problem I see is that people are still trying to do it the way we did it. It's still doable. People are still building audiences right now and having immense success, but they're doing things differently, whether they're telling you about it or not. And I think that's my phase of the mission now is to say, look, I could teach you what I did back then. Part of it. Again, the content creation for your audience as a value and persuasion vehicle, that's still valid. You just have to find a different way to get traffic, at least when you're starting out. So, anyway, we can talk about that later.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think a lot of the principles that you teach in Copyblogger, it's just good copywriting. So if you've got an audience, and you want to serve them better, you want to talk to your congregation on a regular basis, you want to reach out to your clients, you want to build a newsletter for your business, I think a lot of those principles still apply. It's just it doesn't draw the eyeballs of new people the way it used to.

But Forbes quoted you as saying ... I'm going to read this quote at some length, and it's Forbes. I take it's accurate. If not, let me know. They quote you as saying, "I didn't really plan out the business Copyblogger. I built the audience at Copyblogger with the faith and understanding that I would identify problems and desires they have, and then I'd figure out what to make in order to satisfy those problems and desires."

So I want to believe that's still true. Is that still true that that's what the purpose of copywriting is, that you try to identify what your audience needs, and then you go and build it?

Brian Clark:

I don't think it's the purpose of copywriting. It's a purpose of what's called "audience first." And when I did that in 2006, that was a very novel thing. I think if you ask most people how you start a business, it's like you have an idea for a product or a service, and then you make it, and then you find people to buy

it. And that is why most businesses fail at a exceedingly high rate, because a lot of times what we think people want to buy has no relationship whatsoever to an actual market. It's just something that we might think is cool or people should have. There's a big difference between what people should buy and what they want to buy.

So the "audience first" idea is that you don't think in terms of product ideas initially, or some abstract market. You attract a real group of people. You serve them over time, providing them with content or other value. Basically, they're not going to tell you what they want to buy directly, and it's foolish to ask. I always give people a slight elbow to the ribs when they ask, "Would you buy this?" I'm like, "You can't trust that. The only thing you can trust is a credit card coming out of the wallet and being entered into your website."

So when I started Copyblogger in January of 2006, I went 18 months before I had anything to sell. But by the time we launched our first product, which was an online course, I was really quite confident that I knew what the audience was looking for. And we went from zero to six figures in a week, and then I was at seven figures by the end of that first year. And then we did it again every year pretty much after that until we made it to eight figures.

So it's related. If you're familiar with The Lean Startup ideas, this was two years before Eric Rice wrote The Lean Startup, but my first partner, Tony Clark, who became my COO, was a software guy. And he looked at the way I developed content and did the "audience first" thing. Because I would basically write something. If it did well, I would write more things like that. And if it didn't do well, I wouldn't. Just common sense to me. And he's like, "That's lean content development. That's agile content." All these terms I had never heard of. And I'm like, okay, that makes sense. But it basically means put something out there, see how people react, and then adapt your behavior accordingly.

Well, you do the same thing when you are trying to figure out what someone wants to buy. So the whole idea of a minimum viable product, that's Lean Startup terminology. You put it out there. If people actually buy it, then you make the product better. Our only difference was because we had that audience feedback ahead of time, our minimum viable products were pretty damn good, and, therefore, we were able to accelerate a lot quicker from it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I'm curious. In the first 18 months, because I think this principle holds up to today ... You're right, you don't ask people what do you want, because they don't know what they want. It's that Henry Ford quote, "If you ask people what they wanted, they would've set a faster horse, not a car."

Brian Clark:

Right. And Steve Jobs said, it's not the customer's job to know what they want, it's your job as the entrepreneur. But Jobs was very big on what's the pain? What's the desire? That's what you look at. And that actually is a copywriting principle in itself. That is, you don't create desire, you only channel it. So it makes sense that you have to identify what the desire ... And a problem is just an unresolved desire. It's something that you haven't gotten the solution for yet.

So, yeah, that was very influential on me and my decision making at that time period.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So how did you discern in those first 18 months what your first product would be? How did you read the signs, look in the tea leaves, that kind of thing to say, "Oh, I think what my audience wants is X of course on this?"

Brian Clark:

Well, part of it was pretty clear because I was giving a lot away for free. In fact, as time went on a little bit, people were like, "Why are you giving all this amazing value away for free?" They were actually getting suspicious of me. They couldn't figure out what my agenda was. But I was telling people how to write, how to create more compelling content. At the time, that also tied into how to get traffic, how to get people on an email list. So I was giving them the audience component, but what they didn't have was the thing to sell.

Remember, there's two components there. Really, there's three components. There's audience, offer, and copy. They had audience, and they were learning about how to write copy, but they didn't know how to make an offer because they didn't have a product. They didn't have anything to sell. So I figured out, okay, the thing that I will sell will be how to create something to sell, and that's why we focused in on how to create premium content. Whether that be a membership site, an online course, information, products, books, what have you. And that turned out to be generally exactly on the mark.

But what I struggled with was what exactly does this look like, what form is it going to take, and whatnot. But a really great way to validate what people will buy before you commit to creating a product yourself is to do affiliate marketing. Sell other people's products. And when you see something that people actually buy ... In this case, I sold someone else's online course because, people also find this hard to believe, but in 2007, you had to convince bloggers that people would pay for information. Do you remember that whole information wants to be free, and-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, I've had lots of discussions with people who are like, "People will not pay for information." I'm like, "Actually, they will." So say more about that.

Brian Clark:

So I basically had to forecast the entire online education space, and to me that was just so obvious. But you can't do the curse of knowledge thing. Just because it was obvious to me, I just painstakingly made the case in a free report. It was the Teaching Sells report, and it basically made the case using examples ranging from the advent of cable TV. I'm like, look, we used to have free TV. Now, we pay for TV. Why? Because it's better, and blah, blah, blah. Those kind of analogies to explain. And I don't even know what the online education market is now, but it's ridiculous.

And again, that's why I say people who go, "Come on, Brian, you really had to convince people of this." But that sometimes you know things and you have to convince people to see the world like you see it in order for them to go on the journey with you. And at that time, that was the task that had to be done.

But I knew that my audience would buy online courses because they did to the tune of about \$50,000 on this one promotion. That was the only income I really was making directly from Copyblogger were my test cases. But, yeah, so that validated the format, and that's how I decided that that's what I would also offer, and we went from there.

The year after that, we got into the WordPress space, which at that time was very fledgling, and everything was free. Open source always goes through this phase where it starts off as free software, and then someone will come in and create something value-added, and charge money for it. Red Hat became huge by selling Linux, which is free open source software. Same concept.

So I don't want to get ahead of myself, but that's where I went from there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. I want to break that down in two things. Number one, I still, years into the 2020s, have conversations occasionally with people who say, "If I give it away for free, no one will buy my product." And it's true. If it's 100% in the free space, and what you sell behind the paywall is a carbon copy, that's not going to work. But you can give an awful lot of way for free and people will still buy. Explain why that is and how that works. Because most of what I give away is free, right?

Brian Clark:

Yeah. Well, that's what content marketing demands. You give away content. And the way I always thought of it was the content should be good enough that you could sell it in a book or what have you. I've never written an official book, but I've probably written five or 10 of them with all the writing I've done over the years.

So there's different ways to approach it. So I gave one example where I was giving away parts of the puzzle for free at Copyblogger, but without the monetization part, my audience couldn't succeed. So I reserved that part as the thing that I sold. So that's one way to look at it.

Another popular conception of it is your content gives them the why and they pay you for the how. So that's just a distinction between the level of instruction that you are providing.

So at Copyblogger, we were able to do basically what I called tutorial posts. We were doing how-to content, we just weren't telling you how to do the thing that we ultimately were going to sell in the course. But once I moved into software, software providers and client services people can afford to tell you everything because people will still buy the tool or hire you to do it for them. Because if you're not better at it than they are, then there's a problem here.

So this is what I call the content marketing wars really started. Depending on your business model, you were incentivized to give away just amazing free content. So once we shifted to software, Copyblogger really ramped up on the amount of content. We went from me writing two articles a week to bringing guest posters. The team growing to include Sonya Simone, who you know, and the other Copyblogger writers. And it became a big deal, but that's also why the platform has thousands of articles on it and millions of links. Because we were writing book quality stuff and giving it away for free, but making a \$1 million a month selling software.

And there are some books, like our friend James Clear, that can perform like that. But in my experience, it's easier to make a lot of money selling software than I thought the average book would sell.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Just really quickly, what was the software you first got into?

Brian Clark:

So the first product ... So my eventual business partner, Brian Gardner, was the first person to sell a premium theme, which is the design part of a WordPress site. It was called Revolution, and it was paid, but really because it's open source, what you're really paying for is support. Because open source software is not supported because there's no money. It's a community of developers and what have you. So Brian started selling the Revolution theme, and supporting his users and whatnot. And my designer at the time was another guy, and he had heard through the grapevine that Brian Gardner was making \$30,000 a month selling these themes. I'm like, okay, we got to get into this.

And so we created the first design framework for WordPress, which means in addition to design elements, it allowed you to do other stuff without code. If you're a content creator, you're not technical necessarily. And I was our perfect use case. I was a content creator that didn't have true coding skills. So

it would allow you to do things like if you wanted to show one headline to your readers on the page, and then another title to Google, well, then you could do that in the interface. Little things like that.

And so we launched that, and it quickly went from making \$10,000 a month to \$10,000 a day. It was phenomenal. And it was really-

Carey Nieuwhof:

What was that product? What did you call it?

Brian Clark:

It was called Thesis.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. Yeah.

Brian Clark:

And so a couple years later, me and that partner had a ... We'll just say we decided to part ways. And then Brian Gardner had moved from Revolution to Genesis, which is a competing philosophy when it comes to a design framework. So we pioneered it, but he did it differently. I actually agreed with the way he was doing it. He was also a much nicer person than my ... Okay, we're not going to get into that.

But long story short, Brian and I ended up partnering along with other people that were in the Copyblogger universe, and that's how Copyblogger Media was started in 2010. That's the company that made it to eight figures in revenue. And studio press-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And that you eventually sold.

Brian Clark:

Right. And Studio Press was the WordPress division that we sold to WP Engine.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right, right. Which it's so fascinating meeting you. You not only taught me how to write, but we built some of our company on a lot of that stuff as well.

What are some other principles? So for those who are listening who are like, "I have an email list." Some people have a blog, other people are doing social, and a lot of the principles that you teach apply to social, too. How to get people to look, how to get people to like, how to get people to take action. What of those principles still hold up today? If you were to give a 101 tutorial, it's like, "This stuff still works."

Brian Clark:

Well, the fundamentals of engaging copy and content don't really change because human nature doesn't change. Technology doesn't change human nature, it amplifies it. What's changed are algorithms. The Google algorithm, for example, on what pages get ranked ahead of others constantly changes. Sometimes Google makes updates that wipes out entire sites' rankings, and other people are able to benefit from that.

But I think the most fundamental change has been in social media. And you can't escape the much broader impact of social media algorithms on society, human relations, democracy. But we won't get into all that. From a marketing standpoint, the algorithms have changed to the point where they discourage, for example, linking out. And yet we use social media as content marketers to drive people from that platform to our site to read our content.

So if you're a Twitter person, this is why you see those threads all the time now. They put more content in these threaded tweet ... Whatever. I don't know what to call them other than threads.

Carey Nieuwhof:

[inaudible 00:47:51].

Brian Clark:

And then at the end, there's usually a link to then go read the larger piece. So people do that because they're adapting to the algorithm for better or worse. In the old days though on Twitter, really one of the best strategies in say 2009 for getting traffic from Twitter was to write about Twitter. So I had a guy who wrote for Copyblogger, one of the earliest guest posters, a guy named Michael Stelzner. I don't know if you know Mike.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I don't, no.

Brian Clark:

But he was one of our writers. He used to specialize in writing white papers for people, and then he started writing about social media on Copyblogger. It would go viral every time. So he started a site called Social Media Explorer and now runs a conference called Social Media Marketing World, which is a huge, multimillion dollar business. So Copyblogger alumni there, Mike Stelzner. I'm sure someone listening has gone to that conference or visits his site. It's very popular.

So that's the biggest change. It's the context, it's the environment. So I always try to tell people the fundamentals haven't changed at all, because people haven't changed, but the context always changes. And that's why you have to be adaptable and think about, okay, what is the best way to get the traffic that builds the email list? Because once you have the email list, they're yours to lose. That's your asset. That's your business asset. And that's why it's so fundamentally important.

And I cringe to this day when I see people relying on their YouTube audience or their Instagram audience. That is not yours, and it can be taken away. And we see it happen all the time where people get their accounts banned, or their Facebook page gets deleted, or what have you. It's problematic.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Don't think this was you, but I think I read this recently just about the changing-

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:50:04]

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think I read this recently just about the changing face of TikTok and the line was... Maybe it was you. It was like, "TikTok needs content creators like social media needs content creators, but content creators don't need social media," and I thought that was brilliant. Was that you?

Brian Clark:

I think it was.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Good. Okay, it was you. Yeah, genius.

Brian Clark:

They can't function without us, but we could all go and survive with our own sites, but I think the prevailing mentality and mindset out there is that audience is social media. And people like you and I know audience is your email list.

Carey Nieuwhof:

One hundred percent.

Brian Clark:

I imagine it in concentric circles with the coldest audience relationship is actually out there on social media, and it goes inward to your own email list and your customer list, then your repeat customers. I mean, that's just business sensible, but we live in a crazy world now where people look at these Silicon Valley platforms and not only trust them, but put reliance on them in a way that is unfounded given the behavior of the owners of these platforms. Zuckerberg in particular.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So let's talk about that because I get way more comments on the blue check mark I have on Instagram than the size of my email list, but I would give up that blue check mark in a heartbeat if it was exchange. Yeah.

Brian Clark:

My kids... The only thing my kids find impressive about what I do is that Barack Obama follows me on Twitter, and I have a blue check mark. And I'm like, "That is not meaningful."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Yeah. But a lot of people are going, "I don't get what you're saying." Can you explain because email has such a bad reputation? Nobody likes it. Everyone's like, "Oh, I got to do email." I mean, when we were in Cabo together, I was in on one of your sessions, and you were like, "Email outperforms social 42 to one in economics."

Brian Clark:

Yeah. Right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can you explain that because I feel like I'm beating a dead horse? I need you to breathe some life into that horse. You said that over and over again.

Brian Clark:

Okay, happy to help.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, help us out here.

Brian Clark:

So email is not only the first killer app of the internet, it remains the killer app of the internet, and that's from a sales conversion standpoint. People say, "Oh gosh, I hate email." And yet, email usage, time spent using email keeps going up after a decade of people saying, "Social's going to kill email and email marketing is dying," and that's because we buy things through email. We like getting offers from brands we trust through email. We like getting content from people we trust through email. Now, trust is the recurring theme here. We hate getting spam. We hate getting annoying messages that don't seem to understand who we are or what we care about. And I think that is the problem with email. But as a communications medium and a transaction medium, like you mentioned the stat, 40 times more likely to make a conversion.

People aren't on social to be pitched. When I see people pitching affiliate products or their products directly on social, I'm just like, "That just makes people want to unfollow you." So there's a lot of understanding who you're talking to, giving them the right sort of value for them, and making the right kind of offers to them. But if you do that, they're still more likely to buy by a lot through email than they're going to purchase through some other medium. That doesn't mean it's impossible, it just means that if you're a business person, and you'd like to increase the effectiveness of your efforts to bring in revenue and profit, then you're going to want to do that through email. And it's not even close. So I hope that helps you in your own efforts to convince people.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It does. I'm going to play this clip over and over again. And for those in the nonprofit space for church leaders, they're like, "Oh, we got to post to social. We got to post a social." It's like, "Don't not post a social," but would you say email is still the best channel to talk directly to a congregation? Our church has, I don't know, 2,000 email addresses, and our lead pastor sends out a couple of notes a week. And it's not just, "Oh, we want you to come to Sunday," it's like, "Here's what I've been thinking about." Explain how content marketing can work for an existing audience, as well as... Well, I guess all of your email are you got permission marketing where we started.

Brian Clark:

Right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They said, "I want to hear from you." "Yeah, I want to hear from you."

Brian Clark:

Once they're on the list, they are... Yeah, they are audience. Right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So how do you nurture an audience like that? Rather than just, "Hey, give here. Buy this. Buy that." How do you nurture them?

Brian Clark:

Right. Right. And again, that goes back to content, which is, "What is the value that I can provide in between," it sounds a little mercenary, "but in between making offers," so that if someone's not ready to buy... And nurture is the right word, by the way, I think that's very descriptive because there are some out there who are much more aggressive that will basically pound you during the first 30 days. And if you don't buy, they don't care about you. But the latest data I saw, usually, you'll get the largest amount of purchases from a new email subscriber within a 90 day window, and sometimes it can go on for much longer, but it's not just the first 30 days. Now, it is true that you do want to let people know that you are in the business of selling things, or you are a nonprofit or a church and that you need financial support, and you shouldn't be shy about that.

With a church, you have to get people into the pews, and then you've got the sermon, which is your content. And only then does the collection plate come around.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah,

Brian Clark:

So to me, yeah, church leaders should understand what we do intimately because the mission or the movement, if you will, that a religious organization goes through is much more meaningful. And I try to convince marketers that if you're not providing, I'm not going to say the same exact amount of meaning, but meaningful interactions with people in that lane, in that context that you're serving them and the problems you're solving for them, then why bother because you're not inspiring anyone. You're not really stepping up.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And that's a tremendous challenge I think for church leaders or for anybody who's got a captive audience. Think about a restaurateur who's got clientele. It's very tempting to only email your list with a CTA, "We want you to come on Sunday. We've got a special. I need you to donate. We got open tables on Tuesday night." In other words, subtext to fill them up so we sell out. It can be very self-oriented, but there's no problem sending an email on a random Tuesday morning just encouraging somebody, offering them a word, in a restaurant case, giving them a great recipe and saying, "Hey, we'll see you soon at blank church or blank restaurant." Is that what you mean by nurturing? Can you do things like that? How would you break that down?

Brian Clark:

Yeah, we encourage people to take it what I call media not marketing, which is you're producing a publication that serves your marketing needs and allows you to make CTAs, or calls to action, which means please buy, or please donate, or please take whatever this action is, please come on Sunday. So if you are a church or a business, instead of random messages with offers and random messages with content, you have a consistent structure like an email newsletter. And again, 20 years later, email newsletters are all the rage. Some of the biggest content publications in the world are curated email

newsletters that... We've gotten to the point where there's so much content out there that we can build audiences by just sharing interesting stuff that has been published elsewhere. So that's what I mean. And a lot of people, again, I think they think of email that way, which is, "Oh, I'll just send a message when I want something," or "I'll send a message here with a little tidbit because I want people to stay on my list."

But if you make email the thing... That's why I see the resurgence of standalone email newsletters. Not that there still aren't blogs and podcasts and video blogs and all of that stuff, but all of those formats still have to get someone on an email list if they're going to truly maximize their business, so why not make email the thing, which is why my site Further, it's an email newsletter. That's it. Now, is it more than that? Of course it is, but that's the value proposition. I'm not pitching you on anything else other than, "This is for people who are at midlife, who are interested in being healthier, who are interested in improving their financial situation, who are interested in personal development, and maybe self-actualization. This is the kind of stuff," and people are into that. And then that is our audience vehicle that allows us to sell our membership community and sponsorships to other people and whatever we come up with next, if that makes sense.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You and I talked quite a bit when we were together about content creation versus curation. And when I talk to leaders, some of them are like, "Oh man, I'm writing the sermon every weekend," or in the case with business person, it's like, "I'm not a writer," and that's where curation... We're going to get into a curated newsletter. As you and I record this, we are designing it as we speak and developing it as we speak. It'll launch in 2023. I'm pretty excited about that. And Brad Lomenick, I don't know if you know Brad, he's been a long proponent of curation. But talk about why curation is so powerful, and then how pretty much anyone with half a brain can do a decent job of curation even if you're not a great writer.

Brian Clark:

Well, there's a lot of reasons here. The first one I already touched on, which is we've gotten to a point... When I started Copyblogger, bloggers were kind of self-absorbed, they're talking about what they had for lunch, whatever random opinion popped in their head. That was what blogging was. And then I come along and I'm like, "No, it's not," and I'm writing 1,000-word educational articles, effectively book quality chapters, and giving them away twice a week for free. And that was the right move because, at the time, the quality and quantity of content was not there. Now, fast forward, whatever it's been, 16, 17 years, and we're drowning in content, so the curator, which... And this trend really started maybe five, seven years ago, the curator has become an authority under themselves, like "I have good taste, I have good judgment, I have your best interest at heart," and just finding the signal and the noise.

So now, it's not that there's too much content, there's actually too much good content. Forget all the stuff that's terrible there. There's just too much actual quality stuff out there, and that makes the curator kind of an indispensable role, but that does not mean that it's just a collection of links or some dry regurgitation of other people's stuff. It's a chance for you to take on the role... The term comes from the museum industry, I'm sure this, where they would put together different pieces to create exhibits for a particular type of person or a particular type of audience, and that's effectively how it's translated to online content, but it's incredibly persuasive at the same time. Because people don't realize that when you're selecting what other people read and think about, and then adding in your two cents in the forms of commentary and using your own unique voice and in your commentary revealing your worldview and your core values, you're connecting with people at a very strong level that people, I don't think, take into account without being the person creating all that content.

Which brings me to my final point, at least that I will mention in this answer, which is incredible amount of useful data comes from being able to see what people click on in an email. And you either can write 10 articles a week, or 10 pieces of content, or you can curate them. You get the data regardless without the work, you still get to interject your personality, your voice, your values, but you're figuring out, back to our earlier conversation, "What do they want to buy? What are their pain points? What are they interested in? What's keeping them up at night?" That's the kind of data you can get from this. And sometimes it surprises you, sometimes it validates your hypothesis, sometimes you're completely wrong, but wouldn't you rather know than not?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Brian, that's so good. And I think you're right about curation because we talked about this. You know, look at this podcast, it's basically curation.

Brian Clark:

Yeah, I've always argued that interview podcasts are curation. You're choosing your guests, you're pulling from their expertise, you throw in your perspective and commentary, and through your questions and your follow ups, but, yeah, it's a form of curation in itself.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you're right about learning from the data. You might be really, really interested in stamp collecting, and you link to all kinds of stamp collecting articles for a period in your curated newsletter, and you realize not even your mom clicks on that link, but everybody... I'm passionate about church growth, but I can tell you, no posts I've written, I'm 1500 posts in, I don't know, over the last decade a lot, church growth, church growth, church growth. So I know it's a pain point. I just know that. And when we get into this curated newsletter in 2023, I'm going to be super excited, not in a creepy way to see where people click, but I'm going to get reams of information from content I didn't write. It's like, "Oh, this is close to the heart of my audience, and I can serve them better if I talk more about this, if I send them more of this, if I can do that."

And I think that's great. It's not like you can just put a garbage list together, but you're reading anyway theoretically. You're watching things anyway. And in many ways, I've used this analogy, so feel free to tell me if it's a bad analogy, but I miss the... Again, I don't want to sound like the guys in the 1849 Gold Rush in California, but I kind of miss... When I was in college, I had about 400 vinyls, which made me cool then and cool again now. Everything old is new again. But it was great because I didn't have... if you didn't have a song, you didn't have the song period. There was no unlimited playlist. But I would sit down there and say, "I'm kind of in a down mood. I'd really like to listen to this," or "Man, I'm feeling really happy today. This would be great music to play," throw on a vinyl and away you go.

And then Spotify comes along. It sounds amazing. You can get any song in the world, but now I get paralyzed by choice. I almost feel, and actually I've started subscribing to other people's playlists, I'm like, "I need someone who knows more about music to tell me what kind of music I need to listen to." That's the power of curation. It's a good DJ. It's a good playlist maker who goes, "You ever heard of this band? You'll like this band?" Is that kind of it? You become a taste maker, you become a guide through the maze.

Brian Clark:

I think so, but it's also augmenting your own expertise. It's not necessarily that you're curating things that are completely out of your wheelhouse. Say for example, you find an article on a certain topic, you could have written it, you just didn't and didn't have to, and you share it, but because you think "This is an important topic here. This article gives the why about this. I'm considering creating a course that gives them the how," and then when you find articles like that, and you include them in your newsletter, and everyone always gives extra attention to that, you've just validated a product idea. So it is that, but it's also coming back to you in a way where you can make decisions about where you invest your actual time and effort in a more meaningful way. Instead of, "I want to do this. They should buy this."

Again, that mentality. "We know best." Actually, the audience knows best. You don't have to pander to them because they don't understand necessarily the expression of how you can help them with this or even how they need help, that's your job, but it is... And the whole thing is actually, it's kind of like when you drip out content in pre-launch or before you're about to launch a product, you're almost hinting, you're almost teasing a little bit, "Here we're going. We're going here. We're going here. We're going here." Curation allows you to do that with other people's content. Then when you've decided on a course that you're committed to, that's when you take over. And then all of a sudden, they've been warmed up for the main guy, in this case, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I see so many applications for this. I mean, even for church leaders, it's an opportunity to test out different subjects, to prepare the way-

Brian Clark:

It seems to me a perfect thing for a pastor to share news with reflection and perhaps meaningful articles that aren't necessarily from a competing church, but they either reinforce or they present an opportunity to lay the groundwork, for example, for an upcoming sermon. Where again, at that point, you're then taking over as the "authority" on this and also delivering it in the right engaging format for... I guess it's kind of the coup de grace at that point. They've been warmed up to the issues, and now you're giving them the full course.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think we have to talk about headlines too. People talk to me all the time about the headlines I use. And a lot of what I learned about headlines I learned from you, Brian, and from Copyblogger. What is the key, even today, to a great headline? Because is it still true that 80% of people read the headline, and then they decide if they're going to read the article? So that could be the subject line in your email, that could be the titling to your next sermon series, that can be your caption on social. What is in the power of a headline and how do you write a good one?

Brian Clark:

Yeah, it's probably worse than that old 80/20 rule, which was basically 80% of people will look at the headline, but only 20% of the people are actually going to read beyond that. So to increase your odds, you write a better headline. But now, with the level of information overload and the competing information sources with social and search and our inbox and what have you, it's rough out there, so it's important to pay attention to. And I'll tell you something that's more important than a headline in a bit, but it really depends.

For the longest time, I would write email subject lines that were effectively the same as my blog post or article headline, they're supposed to be useful, ultra-specific. You've got to have a curiosity element. You've heard that numbers in headlines or that lead to what we call the dreaded list posts, but a lot of list posts are fantastic, and the headlines actually are great because... Eight Ways to Improve the Curb Appeal of Your House, I think that's the example you gave me earlier. If you're in the market to sell your house, you're going to want to do that, and the specificity-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you know what it's about.

Brian Clark:

Yeah, and the specificity gives you an idea of the amount of value that you're going to get out of it. David Letterman used to have stupid pet tricks. A lot of copywriting is stupid human tricks. We have shortcuts called heuristics, how we make decisions. That's why we look to others, which is called social proof. We look to people with expertise or... Authority is the influence term for that. We have all these shortcuts that we take, but our biggest shortcut we take these days is, "Do people like me pay attention to this?" which is the unity principle, and its worst case is tribalism, as unfortunately we see quite a bit of. Okay, so the general copywriting rules about very specific, enticing, basically giving someone as much information that, "This is for you," while also making it curiosity driven enough just so, "Ah, I just have to click on this," and that's unfortunately where the term click bait comes from. It's only click bait if the value promised in the headline is not delivered in the content.

Carey Nieuwhof:

[inaudible 01:14:42] I've been accused of clickbait headlines, and I'm like, "I don't know, I think it's high value. It's 1,500 words that really help."

Brian Clark:

No, they're just misusing it. They think any compelling headline is automatically clickbait. You think you've got it bad. I literally got blame for BuzzFeed. Back before BuzzFeed existed, Copyblogger was teaching people how to write these headlines and then Buzz.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:15:04]

Brian Clark:

Just that Copyblogger was teaching people how to write these headlines, and then BuzzFeed comes along-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you created a monster?

Brian Clark:

And mastered it. I'm just like, you can't blame me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Their headlines are killer, man. They get me. They get me sometimes. And often the calories don't justify the headline.

Brian Clark:

A good headline is not clickbait, a good headline paired with shoddy content. You've got to not only deliver on the promise of the headline, but I'd say over-deliver. That's a safe way to avoid that, but some people will say what they're going to say because they have a misunderstanding. Generally they're not sophisticated in business. I can tell you, anyone who is well-versed in digital business these days writes good headlines, or they have people on their team who do it for them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can you give us a couple of examples other than the listicle? I just wrote one today. What did I call it? Three Trends that are Changing Sunday Morning for Preachers and Communicators. That's a B-level headline list thing, but it tells you what it's about, gives you a number.

Is it true that the psychology of numbers is, numbers make it really specific and it sort of triggers that idea, well, I think I know what he's talking about, but I better make sure I have all three? How does the list work? And then what are some other formulas?

Brian Clark:

Well, the numbers work because of specificity, but so do other numbers, like how I increased my church attendance by 33% with this one weird trick, which you've seen the weird trick.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a good headline.

Brian Clark:

I'm not encouraging you to use the weird trick thing. That's kind of a joke between Carey and I.

Carey Nieuwhof:

This one weird trick.

Brian Clark:

A lot of the great headline structures date back to the years of David Ogilvy and even direct mail and stuff like that. One of the classics that sold just a ridiculous amount of piano instruction home study courses, it was, They All Laughed When I Sat Down at the Piano... But Then I Began to Play.

It's storytelling. It's the promise of not only a story but something that satisfies an aspirational need within the reader to, "I wish that could be me." That's one element there. But you mentioned earlier, I think I know what they're talking about, but I got to click to see. Of course. Right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Brian Clark:

And sometimes you're disappointed that you were right, and sometimes you're happy you were wrong.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Sometimes they didn't deliver.

Brian Clark:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Then it's clickbait. There was one I heard you casually throw out, Have You Already Screwed Up Your Blog? I'm like, "Oh, that's a great headline. That's really fascinating." But it could be, Have You Already Screwed Up Your Life? Because people ask that question. You're sitting there, you're reading people's mail, and they get that. Any other points on headlines you want to touch before we move on?

Brian Clark:

I would just say that there's a lot of different structures to headlines, but numbers you'll see a lot of. How to is a winner as long as what follows how to is on target for the audience you're trying to talk to.

Read any good copywriting book. I don't care if you're a business executive or a pastor or you never intend to write a word of content or copy, you're going to let someone else do it. Studying copywriting makes you a more persuasive person in general. It also makes you a better business person, whether your business is a nonprofit, for profit, what have you because it's really about human psychology and motivation as expressed in the context of attention and action. We need to get people's attention so they'll pay attention to us, consume our message, and do what we want them to do at the end of it.

And why do they do that? Because we convince them it is of benefit to them. It's about them, not us. Best business lesson, best person lesson you can learn is expressed through copywriting, which is weird because a lot of people think sales is sleazy or just untoward, but in reality, sales is just an expression of persuasion. And dating back to Aristotle, persuasion is about the benefit to the listener that is congruent with the desires of the speaker.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Man, we could get into podcasting, video, et cetera, but the principles are the same. It was a lot easier to start a podcast a decade ago than it is now. Not impossible, stuff goes to number one that's brand new all the time. People blow up on TikTok every day. It is still possible to get noticed on Instagram, et cetera.

But I get this question from a lot of young leaders. They're like, "I want to build a platform, I just don't know where to start. I mean, I'm on all the channels, I'm not getting any momentum." What is your advice for people who would say, "I want to build an audience"? We're starting today, we're not starting in 2006 and 2012, we're starting today. What's your advice for people starting today who are like, "Great, I didn't start 15 years ago, but I want to build a platform." What do they do?

Brian Clark:

It's interesting. The content creators created all this content, both again as a persuasion and value vehicle and as a traffic and audience building vehicle. And that's a lot harder than it used to be. During that same period, there was a different camp of people, which I'll call the internet marketers, and they had a more direct lineage to the offline direct marketers. That's where they learned how to write headlines and copy and all of that because they were performing return on investment advertising.

So your copy, your headline, it had to work. We're not dealing with free traffic here. You're paying money to advertise, to attract a prospect, to hopefully attract a customer, which you generally have to sell something else to in order to make a profit because you basically broke even on the advertising spin. Those two worlds have kind of merged together now in the digital marketing space.

But more and more of the creators are advertising to attract audiences. And some of them don't have products yet so they're not doing return on investment advertising, they're just coming out of pocket. But the benefits of having an audience, I mean the magnitude, it's life changing. I mean, no investment, no real estate, no stock, nothing I've done, no angel investment has given me any kind of return as building that audience in 2006. There are people who are willing to come out of pocket to build an audience.

I still would advise anyone who wants to build a platform to find a way to get your money back as soon as possible and not go into debt. Ironically, the people with the most leverage these days, like young people starting out, and I don't know if you ever had a freelance or client services phase after you didn't practice law, but I did for seven years, and I did early return on investment advertising until my SEO efforts kicked in to get the business started.

So I would basically with the real estate business, would spend \$1,000 and I'd get \$10,000 in commissions back. You would do that. If I could scale me, I could do that all day long, right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Brian Clark:

Now, I'm not saying those numbers hold up today. The one thing the internet marketing crowd found is that Facebook ads don't work like they used to. Google is outrageously expensive now, but the new thing right now, especially when you're building an email list, is sponsoring other email newsletters, which has not had the ease of use of the programmatic aspects of a Facebook or a Google where you just fill out the thing and you're off and running reaching millions and billions.

But that's changing, and it makes sense because if you want to get someone on an email list, it helps from an ROI standpoint to target people who are email people and they're on other email lists subscribed to things like that.

So if you are a service provider, which most digital entrepreneurs go through a freelance consulting client services phase, and at that point you are selling something that is relatively expensive and therefore it makes return on investment advertising much easier to do, you don't have to nail it perfectly in order to make a profit doing things like that. But what the client service providers don't do is think in terms of audience. They think in terms of leads and clients and that's it. If you're a lead and if you don't become a client, you're nobody to me. And I think that's incredibly shortsighted.

So what I would do, if I were starting out again today, I would do client services to start again, but I would build an audience that I would nurture beyond those who actually sign up to work with me one on one. And then from there I would develop courses or coaching, things that you're able to, in my terminology, scale your personal enterprise. Because once you have an audience, it's counterintuitive.

I saw someone on Twitter the other day and they're like, "It's much easier to grow one product than it is to launch several." I'm like, "Maybe, but not with the audience first model." The reason why we launched a new product every year is because we had... Oh, okay, so I know you've heard of Kevin Kelly's 1000 True Fans concept. 1000 Fans is short for fanatics. We forget that's what fans means, but people are really into your work. So I said we had 10,000 Maniacs, little '90s indie band reference there,

but they bought everything we bought, hosting, software designs, courses, paid membership communities. And through that process we were able completely bootstrapped without ever advertising to make it to eight figures in revenue.

It's a different way of thinking about it, but the personal enterprise concept basically says you need to develop solutions for the various price points in your broader audience because not everyone's going to pay five grand to work with you one on one, but they may pay \$1,500 for a great course and they may pay \$500 for a self-paced course that you derive from that. That's kind of a long but brief answer to the question. That's what I would advise people to do these days.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And by client services, just to clarify, you mean everything from, could be web design? The closest thing I ever got to client services was consults where I would fly in and meet with a leadership team. I don't do that anymore for the most part. I'll be getting into some more niche stuff, probably some masterminds, some very small things. But basically I'm going to be focusing on digital courses and so on.

Brian Clark:

Here's an example. The freelance writers, and there were a lot of those that have come out of Copyblogger, these were the type of people that we were instructing and we were teaching them make content, make content, make content to get traffic, get clients, what have you. But when you're a freelance writer and you're writing for clients all day, how much energy do you have to then go create all your own marketing content? And that's what happens, that's the first thing that falls apart. And yet writers rarely seem to advertise in order to get clients, build a broader audience, and then from there develop additional solutions.

This is actually how Tesla built the company. They did this upside down thing where they sold the highly, highly expensive Roadster to the super rich people, got a lot of press for it. Not scalable, most people can't afford it, most people wouldn't buy it, but they used that brand recognition and revenue to develop the Model S and the Model X. Still upper end, but more affordable to more people so they gained scale. And then the revenue from that and the buzz from that, they developed the... What is it? The 3?

Carey Nieuwhof:

The 3.

Brian Clark:

Right. And now they went in this market. There you go.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, because they wanted the cool, rich people to have and want the Roadster. And apparently it was a terrible car too. It just didn't do much, but it looked cool.

Brian Clark:

A lot of Teslas are kind of sketchy for hearing, but from a marketing standpoint it was quite brilliant.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Any other advice to people? Because where I see most when I have that conversation with people under the age of 35, they're not thinking email, we didn't even touch on SMS, like text message marketing, we didn't talk about products. They're like, "How do I blow up on TikTok or Instagram?"

They're kind of looking to Gary V. because he's so big to other influencers. But I mean, Gary V. has a huge media empire and wine library and the whole deal that nobody thinks about anymore. So, any other final words to people who are wanting that online traction but looking to social media to get it?

Brian Clark:

I would say first and foremost, I love Gary. He's not a normal human being.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He doesn't sleep, man. He doesn't sleep.

Brian Clark:

When I would give people advice on writing compelling headlines and they're like, "Seth Godin doesn't write headlines like that," and I'm like, "You're not Seth Godin." Oh, the thing I promised I was going to tell you that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh yeah, better than email headlines.

Brian Clark:

With email, the from line becomes the most important thing. I've gotten to where I write these really obscure pop culture reference subject lines, but it's from me. And people are like, "I'm going to open that. It's Clark. He probably has something to say." I earned that. In the meantime though, when you're starting out, write the best subject line that you can that's specific and compelling.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The principle behind it, let me sure I get this right because I might have it wrong, is once you've earned the trust, if they see it, don't send it from Carey Nieuwhof Communications, send it from Carey. Right?

Brian Clark:

Generally.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Is that what you're saying?

Brian Clark:

I mean, you can have a trusted brand. I mean, Further comes from Further, even though it's Brian at Further. Unemployable stuff comes from Brian Clark. When I email the Copyblogger audience, it's Brian Clark. So it's about trust, whether it's a personal brand or a media brand, what have you, do people equate that with this is worth my time when I receive messages from this person.

I think the word we've said more than any other during this conversation is trust. If you can get true trust, then you can succeed. It's not about tricks and hacks and all these other shortcuts. Sonia used to say, "Don't take shortcuts, they take too long." It's true.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So good. So good, Brian. I think it's one of those things too where if you just deliver value, and that's what I tried to do long before this. This was a hobby for me. It's like, I just want to bring great conversations to people and here are all the problems that I've wrestled with in leadership. Hopefully this helps you. That was my whole website.

I still do a lot of that. I mean, we're still going strong on this podcast now. We just have sponsors because of the size of the audience who are like, "Yeah, we'll do a little bit at the beginning at the end." In the meanwhile, it hasn't changed since day one.

I always encourage young leaders just add value, add value. Where are you making a contribution? How does this stop being about you and start being about your audience. As you said, audience first, audience first. How can I serve them? How can I add value? Brian, have I got you talked into writing a book?

Brian Clark:

You did convince me. I believe it was in the car to the airport when we were leaving that conference in Mexico. But actually, you know what really convinced me? Because I was thinking about the book I wanted to write in a way that I think turned out to be incorrect. So you helped me with that. And then I read your book as an example of a different approach. And I'm like, "Yeah, this is really good, and I think this may be a format that can work for me as well."

So yes, my strategy, if you look at my bio, I list all the books I've been mentioned in and I'm like, "This was my strategy." Ben Franklin said, "Either write something of value or get other people to write about you." I took the second one.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I texted you a screenshot because I'm rereading Atomic Habits, and you're in the first or second chapter. I'm like, "Dude, you see you are in other people's books," and you really are. But I'm excited to see that, and we'll have you back on when that book comes out. That'll be great.

Brian Clark:

All right. That's a deal.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Or [inaudible 01:33:54].

Brian Clark:

That's motivation right there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hey, and just a huge debt of thanks from everybody who has ever loved a podcast or an article I've written. I'll get emotional. I mean, it was such a thrill to meet you, to say thank you. I didn't know that our paths would ever cross, but it's nice that we got the spark of an initial friendship as well.

But Brian, thanks for everything you've done for me personally, for the people we get to serve through what we do now. You've made just a huge difference in my life and in everyone who's listening life indirectly, whether they knew it or not. Just thank you, thank you.

Brian Clark:

Well, you're welcome. And as I've said many times, I'm pretty sure it's mostly you, but I'm just glad I was involved somewhere.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You totally were. Okay. People are going to want to connect with you. I want them to check out Further, Unemployable, Copyblogger. Where's the easiest place to find all things Brian Clark these days?

Brian Clark:

Well, I guess I used to say Twitter, but who knows what's going on over there?

Carey Nieuwhof:

You know what? I decided I'm going back in on Twitter personally, and then everyone's bailing. I'm like, "Okay, I don't know."

Brian Clark:

We'll see what happens. It's got to shake out. But it really depends on who you are. So if you are a person, say in your 40s, 50s, early 60s, you're going to want to check out Further because I'm very proud of the work we do over there that serves that audience.

It's basically about there's a good chance we're probably going to keep going a little longer than people used to go with advances in longevity. What does that mean for meaning and purpose and work? How are we going to pay if we live longer than we generally do? Those are some of the issues, but basically it's just about living the best life you can and becoming the person you want to be at this different stage of life. That's further.net.

Unemployable is basically for solo business people. A lot of freelancers, coaches, consultants, and content creators follow us over there for that personal enterprise approach I mentioned. And then Copyblogger is all about creating content that serves as a marketing function and builds your business as it has helped a lot of people including you over the years. So I'm still very proud of that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So am I, really glad that you did it. I could talk about that stuff all day long. I hope you enjoyed that conversation as much as I did. You can get show notes and transcripts if you really want to do the masterclass version of this for free over at careynieuwhof.com/episode536.

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book, Seamless Pastoral Transitions. If you go to futureforwardchurches.com, you can find the book there, and you'll also get free pastoral transitional resources. That's at futureforwardchurches.com.

Well, next episode kind of feels like holy ground. Man, my conversation with Tyler Staton from Bridgetown Church, oh my goodness. We talk about succession between him and John Mark Comer. It is so beautiful. What we talk about, three kinds of biblical discernment and then, well, it's just, I don't know that we've done a lot of interviews like it, but here's an excerpt.

Lee Kricher:

John Mark just called me out of nowhere, and I feel like when someone calls you, if you're a millennial or younger, you're like, oh no, there's been a death or something. And so I get a call and a voicemail from John Mark and I'm like, oh my word, what has happened to him?

So I called him back. It was a Sunday afternoon. He said, "Hey, I've thought about this forever. I've talked with you about it, but I feel like now is the right time for me to step away pastorally. And on behalf of our elder board, I want to see if you're interested in my job." I just started laughing and I said, "Not at all."

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's coming up next time. Also coming up, we're going to kick off the new year with James Clear and Chris Anderson from TED Talks. It's going to be amazing. Also coming up we have Adam Duckworth, Sean Cannell, Annie F. Downs, Mark Sayers, and a whole lot more.

Thank you so much for listening. And if you liked this episode, please leave a rating and review. Share it on social, maybe hit that link button and text it to a friend as well. All of you who listen to the end know about the freebies that I like to give away at the end of the podcast, so thanks for doing that.

If you like this episode, after leaving a rating and review, go and check out influencekickstarter.com. It is a free mastermind that I'm offering right now, everything I've learned about growing a presence online, some of which I learned from Brian Clark actually, but I give you a whole session on so many things over at influencekickstarter.com.

This was a hobby as we talked about 10 years ago. Now we serve millions of leaders a year, and we got a team doing this. If you want to figure out if you've got ambitions around that, check out my free mastermind. Go to influencekickstarter.com, that's influencekickstarter.com, to register for free. Would love to help you out. Thank you so much for listening to everybody. I hope our time together today has helped you thrive in life and leadership.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:39:42]