

Announcer:

The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. It's Carey here, and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. Very excited to have Annie F. Downs back on the podcast. Today we are in a talk about building fame versus building influence, podcasting tips, tricks and secrets, how to handle leadership pressure, and the massive growth that she's experienced over the last two years. It's a deep-dive into all things behind the scenes. Today's episode is brought to you by He Gets Us, do you know the Super Bowl's coming up fast? And if you want to get in on what He Gets Us is doing, go to [Hegetsuspartners.com/fans](https://hegetsuspartners.com/fans) to get your free resources and join over 15,000 churches who are part of this movement. And by Serve HQ get their simple video training courses to help you equip volunteers and develop leaders by going to [servehq.church](https://servehq.church).

While Annie F. Downs is a New York Times bestselling author, a sought after speaker and successful podcast host based in Nashville, Tennessee, she makes readers and listeners feel like they're longtime friends. She does that so well. She's co-founder of the That Sounds Fun Network, which includes her aptly named flagship podcast That Sounds Fun, and author of multiple bestselling books, including Chase The Fund, That Sounds Fun, The Hundred Days to Brave and Remember God, Annie is the friend who will shoot straight with you, remind you that God is good and still managed to make you laugh in the process. For more about Annie, you can head on over to [anniefdowns.com](https://anniefdowns.com), and we are gonna do that deep-dive as I promised on all things behind the scenes because I'm fascinated in the stories of success and the stories of struggle. And Annie brings it today. So he gets us as a national campaign all about raising the respect and relevancy of Jesus.

And they've got ads at this year's Super Bowl. So the question is, are you preparing your people for Super Bowl Sunday? He gets us. We'll be running ads during the game, reaching well the millions of people who are planning to tune in. So whether your church is hosting a viewing or you know of people in your church who will be having parties, it's a great opportunity to start a conversation about Jesus. Go to [Hegetsuspartners.com/fans](https://hegetsuspartners.com/fans) to download resources to prepare your church for those conversations with curious viewers. You want to check that out. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity and every leader knows that having trained and engaged volunteers is essential to accomplishing your mission. But you also know it's really hard to do well. What if there was a resource that made it easier? Serve HQ is that resource for you.

They offer a series of simple video training courses that help you equip volunteers and develop leaders. You can create your own training or use their video library. You can even automate next steps to onboard new people. Survey HQ also tracks progress for each person, and they provide basic email and text messaging for team communications, giving you a central place to equip your ministry and communicate with them. They're easy to use. Automation tools, make onboarding new volunteers and church members fast, easy and consistent. And you can create automatic sequences that enroll learners and online courses. Send time messages and alert church staff members of follow up tasks too. So check it out, head on over to [servehq.church](https://servehq.church) that [servehq.church](https://servehq.church) because the volunteer crisis is something you need to resolve this year. So with all that said, let's dive into my conversation with Annie F. Downs. Annie, so good to have you back on the show. Welcome.

Annie F. Downs:

Carey this is exactly where I wanna be, so I am just so happy to get to talk to you. I love, I just feel like when guests get to come on your show, when I'm listening, it is like people are just chopping it up about what is really going on and how to, how to do this our faith as part of our job and part of our career and keep 'em separate and put 'em together. And so I'm just thankful to be a listener first and then I'm thankful when you, you and I get to chat too.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I'll tell you, it's fun and a half and we're gonna go in a different direction. There's no book this time, but I wanna talk about Annie, the a I'm gonna call it entrepreneur, you can gimme a better phrase, but I was I think the F stands for facet as in all the facets of your life and the multiple endeavors that you're involved in. So one podcast turns into two, it was, you know, Eddie and Annie keep talking. Then all of a sudden there's more and there's a network, and now there's almost 20 shows and you're launching a daily podcast, but you've also got this massive brand that, That Sounds Fun Network and this presence and all of that's happened in the last few years. Yeah. And so I would like to start by just unpacking what on earth is going on.

Annie F. Downs:

Sure. I, I mean, I'm tired. That's part of it. I'm tired. I joked with you before that, that whenever we launch new things, I, I get about six weeks in and everybody's working really hard. And I think why didn't you just keep your mouth shut? This y'all had plenty to do before you said this out loud, so mm-hmm. Oh. But I, I, entrepreneur is a very kind word. I usually associate that more with people who think up, build and then sell the companies they want to keep doing. You know, like to me, a lot of times entrepreneurs are building to, to then move on to the next thing they want to build. And so the word we use around here more is that we're builders because we aren't building anything to at this point to sell it, to move it off, right.

So that we have space to do it again. We just are building the companies that we think God has invited us to help meet a need that we are hearing about or seeing in our audience and in our culture. And so right now there's three companies here at the office, there could end up being five and we never sell any of them, or we could end up getting an offer that makes sense to partner with someone else. And one of the companies ends up being with someone else. But as of right now, we're more builders. Though I do have an entrepreneurial, I mean, you know, me, my, my build is entrepreneurial. I like building things. I'm not as good at maintaining them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's an interesting distinction, you know, because I think you're right. If you look at what's taken over the popular culture in the last 15 years, entrepreneurs generally do build and sell.

Yeah.

I, in my head, entrepreneurs, people who start things. Yeah. You know, and you're a starter.

I am

And you know, I plan on doing a version of what I'm doing until I can't do it anymore. So I, I'm hoping for decades ahead and that will morph from time to time. But I'm not building a company to like scale it, sell it, and go sit on a beach. Yes. That's boring to me. But, you know, it's interesting. I don't know whether you, you, you see this parallel or not and the theologians will correct me, but I see entrepreneurship as a gift. Like apostleship and entrepreneurship are very cool.

Annie F. Downs:

Cool. Mm-hmm. Yeah. That's a cause

Carey Nieuwhof:

You think about, pastors tend to be very shepherding, but apostles go forward and they create, they, they expand, they create things out of nothing. So I think of it as spiritual entrepreneurship and I would definitely put you in that category.

Oh, I love that.

So let's let's break that down because you say, okay, I'm tired. Yeah. <laugh>. And six weeks after launching something, I'm like, what did I get myself into? Yep. Right. What are you learning about capacity and scale and time management Yeah. In this really huge season.

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. You know what, one of the things we talk a lot around here at our companies about is currency and what currency matters most to us. And so we d we have to make decisions every day of are we gonna focus on the money as a currency? Are we gonna focus on time as a currency? Are we gonna talk on focus on influence as a currency? And so I think what, because everything is gonna cost you something, right? Yeah. And everything you're trying to, so when I even think about building companies, Carey, what the reason we're building these is not to get rich financially, but to get rich with influence. Because that's what I mean, we need the money to move the machine. Of course, of course. We're thankful for all the ways. Yeah. That's ex and the people, right? Like, I wanna make more money because I want more people to be sitting in here because I want to have more influence. I want us. So that is my favorite currency, is influence. When I'm thinking about what we're building, when I'm thinking about what it's costing us, time is the one I worry about the most. Are our people working over hours? Am I working too many hours? Are we not using our time well? Like, so time is the currency I worry about. Influence is the currency I pursue. Money is the one we just have to need.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-Hmm. Mm-hmm. . It's a means to an end. Yes. Okay, well let's unpack that a little bit because, you know, building, I hate the word empire cuz it makes it sound like

Annie F. Downs:

Fun. Pire, will you say fun pire, right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Fun pire. You say fun fire. Yeah. Okay, well let's use that. Building a fun pire is one thing, but I don't know whether you know Les McEwen or not. He's been on the show a few times. Fantastic Christmas read for you is called Predictable Success. Okay? It's a great book. And if you want the cheater version, couple hundred episodes backed, Les will give you the 50 minute version of a 200 page book on my show. First time he was on. But when I read that, my life flashed be through my eyes. And so one model is very lean, you know, Annie Desert podcast, you have a producer, you have a sponsor to, there's profit, margin, et cetera. But what you've done, and to some extent what I've done on a much smaller scale as I've scaled up Yep. And I got a payroll every month.

And you've got offices and you've got studios and the whole thing, unless McEwen says what you have to get to is predictable success. And it's the tension of an entrepreneurial spirit with the systems you need to sustain it. Yes. Yes. So think about your church, right? It is a large church. It's that entrepreneurial spirit, that spiritual entrepreneurship plus the systems. Cuz without the systems, the whole thing just falls apart. Yes. You can't even get to Sunday. Yes. And he says that very few companies ever get there. Most people will stay in what he calls. It's funny, you'll love this. He calls the stage of, of startup where you're profitable, but you don't have a big structure or system yet. He calls it fun. Oh

Annie F. Downs:

Yes. Think about that

Carey Nieuwhof:

<Laugh>.

Annie F. Downs:

Cause he's, he is

Carey Nieuwhof:

Back then. It's fun because I don't have to worry about it and everything. Ah, and he says it's okay to stay there, but then you scale up and it brings complexity and whitewater and challenges. So as you've scaled up, what have some of the challenges been for you? Yeah. And then what has some of the, the good times been for you?

Annie F. Downs:

You? So let me, let me outline for everybody so that they can get a picture in their mind of what we're doing. So at Down's Books, which is my company, we have got four full-time and two part-time at our management.

That's Premier Books.

Yeah. Well, yeah. And it's, I mean, my company is called Downs Books because my grandparents used to own a bookstore called Downs Books. And so when I started

That's so cool

That was just my inspiration. So, but under Downs Books is all the Annie F. Downs things. So that is my podcast. That Sounds Fun. The Let's Read the Gospels podcast that launches in January. All the books and all the traveling and speaking and all those things. So everything I do as an, as an Annie for lack of a better word for my brand, is under Down's books. So there are four, four full-time employees, two part-time, and me.

Wow.

My manager who is with us has four full-time, including her. And then she and I together own the That Sounds Fun Network and that That Sounds Fun Network, we have four full-time and two part-time. And so,

Carey Nieuwhof:

And babies. Babies are having babies. Wow.

Annie F. Downs:

Yes. Yes. And so that's how many people we have. So I'll tell you the challenges.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What's the total now?

Annie F. Downs:

So 16, 15. Yes. 6, 16, 15 or 16. Yep.

Okay.

And we actually have, have opened up, we have, we have probably two spots that will look to hire in quarter one or quarter two. And so, which is wild, Carrie, I mean I, you know, I, it was eight minutes ago you and I were talking and I was in my living room and it was me and one assistant. You know, like I know the, the rate of this has been supernatural and extraordinary, but also the weight of it has been supernatural and extraordinary. I mean, the, there have been massive challenges inside of this. I mean my COO Ashley Warren truly is, you know her well. But Ashley is a I in a lot of ways, she's the glue for our company because she sees challenges even before I do. And, and will often cut them off.

And I'll tell you where she sees the challenges, Carey, she sees them for the staff and she also sees where I'm about to cause something and she will say,

wow,

Hey, hey, hey, that's not how we need to do that. That when you brought that up at that meeting, that wasn't the right time. I mean, she keeps me from screwing this up more often than anything. Our, that's probably her number one job description. But the challenges of we've run into is how do you care for 16 people in that have come on board in two years? Right. Like, how, how do you know, how do you help the culture? Even like how do we make sure the culture that we have so carefully constructed the first nine years of me doing this job full-time multiplies across three companies where I can only be in one place at one time.

I can't be in all the meetings I can. And, you know, I mean, so that's a challenge. And the other big challenge for me, Carey, personally, is not being in every meeting. Because there are times where I will read an agenda after a meeting and I will be mad that I missed the meeting because I won't have, I will have done it differently. But one of the things Ashley reminds me a lot is, and her, I think her husband Matt said this first, he is a, a coach and a just an incredible leader. If someone else in your company can do it 80% as well as you do it, let it go. Hmm. And so, but that 20% Carey at 20% is about what sends me over the edge sometimes. But it's not because I'm good. That, that is, that is not because of an excellency in me. That's because of a weakness in me about control. And I know that. I, I know the difference. I'm, I'm, I am I have problems with control. And so, okay. I have to work on it a lot. I get to work on it a lot. What's the language? What would Brewster say? , I get to

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, I'm in Enneagram eight as well and I think my whole life can be explained through the lens of control. Yes. And that's not good. Yes. So let's break that down a little bit because one of the challenges for what you do and what I do is Yeah. If it's a book, it has your name on it. Yes. If you are voicing it, it has your name on it. But as your company grows, I mean, you've got shows within the network you can't physically listen to every episode of every That Sounds Fun Network show. You just can't do it. Decisions are being made without you. And yet we're in the age of personal influencer branding. Yeah. So if, you

know, you go to most people in our space and say, that sounds fun. Who's behind that? Yeah. People will go, oh, that's Annie F. Downs.

Annie F. Downs:

That's right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So your name is inextricably linked

Annie F. Downs:

To the network

Carey Nieuwhof:

To the brand.

Annie F. Downs:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yet you don't have ultimate control.

Annie F. Downs:

Yes. It's an interesting

Carey Nieuwhof:

What do you do with that tension?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. Cause we've made a real one of the things that sets our, That Sounds Fun Podcast Network apart from some of the other networks that are in our world, is that we don't own the content and we don't edit their content. Our, our request of the, of the hosts is that they are faith-based. Like that's what we're looking for. We only sign host that we know are walking on the same path. We are walking using the same map of life that we use, but we don't control their content. And I don't agree with everything people put out. I don't agree with everything my guests say, on a That Sounds Fun episode. Right. And so, so you're right Carey, it's one of the things we are, I mean, if you really wanna know about making the sausage, one of the things we are really working on for 2023 is how do we build the brand and the, the visibility of the, That Sounds Fun Network separate from Annie F. Downs because the other side of it, Carey, is I don't wanna make a mistake or make a decision or make a stand that hurts any other show on our network or hurts the network in general.

And so we have to separate Annie F. Downs to some degree from the network so that the network can grow farther than I could have taken it when it is attached to me. The, the hard truth is there are probably hosts who would love the business side of what we do and how good we are at the business side of the network that would love the, the community we've built, but don't wanna be associated with me. And so if we can separate me and them get the experience that the network, I mean, I'm a nice

person to be around, but not everybody agrees with me. But they may really like the network but not necessarily wanna be my friend. That's okay. We, we wanna make that attainable for people and optional for people and at the same time have it represent what we believe and what we "believe" is born out of what I believe first.

Cause I was used to be the only one at that network because it was in my head. Right? But then now it's out. And I have a co-owner who's brilliant, Kelly, you've met Kelly. Kelly Haywood's brilliant. And so Kelly and I running that together and she really is a lot of the CEO brain behind the network now at this point. And I'm kind of the, the face a little bit, but we're working on that because we want that to make a bigger influence than I could have as an individual, Annie. So we don't want, I don't wanna hold it back at all.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What is the internal dialogue that happens inside you at those release points where you see control slipping away, where you see, and I know it's a good thing to have the brand be bigger than you. But I mean, that does generate an internal tension at times. So Yeah. What is the self-talk, the self dialogue Annie has with Annie Yeah. In those moments where if you do you feel tempted to swoop in and go, hang on just a second. Ooh, bring that back here, what, what do you do with that?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. That I, to me it is, what I say to myself is, I would so much rather the Lord and I deal with my pride in this setting that is an office full of people that love me than in any other setting. He would have to choose if I wouldn't pay attention here. Right? And so to me, a lot of it, when I feel it and I feel, I mean they do, I, if you knew how much I got to apologize for, I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry for how I handled that. I mean, I, I I'm a frequent apologizer around here because I am, it's from you sorting out how things make me feel and what it's like. I mean, I've had to say to Ashley multiple times, I think I'm having this response because I've never not done this part of the job before.

I've never had someone else do this. And so I'm not used to someone else handling it and I would've done it a little bit differently, right? And so for me, in a lot of ways, the internal conversation is, okay, God, if you're dealing with this here in front of people I love, I'll take that over doing it on the internet or on a stage or somewhere. Because God, as you have said, a lot, God cares a lot more about our character than our careers. And, and so if he, if I can hear the Holy Spirit checking me early, I would like to, cause I miss it enough times, right. Then I'd like to hear it when I can hear that check. But I also I mean I'm so proud of the network and everyone who works at Downs books at KCH Entertainment and That Sounds Fun, network, are just incredibly good at their jobs.

I mean, we have people that we do not deserve. I I cannot believe the quality of the people I get to work around every day. So the 94% of the time I am just in awe of my coworkers. And I, Carey, I cannot believe that this dream that I had sitting in my living room looks like this. I, I can't, I cannot believe it. I cannot believe it. And if, and, and the Lord trusting me to steward that is more than I deserve. I mean, I, I have perfect attendance to my sins. So I haven't missed a single one of them. I know the kind of person I am. And so the, the kindness of God to, to let me be a part of a job like this, much less be one of the leaders and a founder at this, these companies is really generous.

So the challenge is there and the internal dialogue is there, but I'm often, often reminded that I'm surrounded by people that are so incredibly good and they're bought in Carey, they believe in the vision of what we're doing. I said to Craig, our engineer the other day, I said, this ship that we are on, I'm tied to it. Like I I, this is me. My name is everywhere. I'm tied to this ship. If the ship goes down, I'm gone.

Y'all can get off and get on a lifeboat that takes you somewhere else. But, but the thing Carey, that, that blows my mind is all these friends of ours that are in this office, in these three offices have all chosen to get on this ship. And when we drive through storms, I don't have a choice. They do. And some of them, everyone will leave except me at some point. Right. But, but they, they stay and they weather storms with us and, and weather, weather desert seasons with us. And so I, I, I feel super honored to get to work with people who buy into a vision like this.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Finding great people is hard, finding great people fast. Cause you mentioned Yeah. Last time we talked, you know, which I think it might have been the last time. Yeah. You were still pretty much a solo operation. You and an assistant. And there's an awesome episode of this show will find it where you're like bunkering at your house in lockdown. Yes. Recording in not even a studio. You don't have building, you don't have anything. You're just doing That Sounds Fun from the lockdown bunkers. Yep. So hiring good people is hard. Hiring them fast is really difficult. Yeah. So what has been the process? Have you found these people what has been attractive for them? How are you figuring staff at scale quickly?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. first of all, Ashley, again, Ashley Warren gets a lot of credit for this Because she's built such a robust interviewing, hiring, onboarding, off onboarding process for us. And we have hiredcoaches to

Carey Nieuwhof:

But where'd you find Ashley? How'd that happen?

Annie F. Downs:

She and I were at Crosspoint together.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, okay.

Annie F. Downs:

So when I, I mean we were, we were in Jenny Katherine's small group of women leaders in 2012 together. Right. So Fantastic. And then she was on in charge of staff things at Crosspoint Church for a while And then when she left there she came on just part-time with us cuz I was like, "Hey, I need help with a couple of things". And then literally over the last two years, she's just worked her way into CEO because she's brilliant. Or COO, she's brilliant. Yeah, and you know, Jenny Katrin says Hire slow and fire fast. And we have done that. Right. And we have done that wrong. And on both sides we've hired fast and regretted it. We've fired slow and regretted it. And so when we fire fast, we're grateful.

When we hire slow, we're grateful. So we've hired a business coach that usually helps us with hiring that kind of does a lot of the first few steps before someone gets to us. We also tell our friend, like when, when we have jobs come open, the first thing we do is say to our staff, do you know anybody who might want this job? They will still go through the whole process. They do not skip a line, but we put a little tag on their, on everything that says, this is someone who's friends with someone that already knows the culture here and they think this person would be a good fit. So we're very interested first in, in who's a hinge to this new person that could get us someone. So, but hiring slow really is and slow to me, Carey is



two to three months, you know, kind of a core from when the job comes available. I want someone in that seat in a quarter.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. You know, I'm very similar. It's funny because we have an opening on our team and they were saying, is there any way to speed up the process? Like it took two months to hire last time. And I'm like, well, yes. And yet, and I've done that. Yeah. I don't know. That's it. It's not always good.

Annie F. Downs:

You sure do it faster. You're, you're taking some risks that I, that I personally don't have time to take. Like we don't, just don't have time to take the risks of hiring fast.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You gotta dance a few times before you get married, you know? Yes. Couple times. Anyway. So let me ask you this question, and again, nothing specific. Sure. But you mentioned hiring and offboarding or firing. Yes. And that happens. Yes. I know a lot of churches are very reluctant to do it. A lot of businesses do it too fast. Too slow. Yep. When you think about cultural fit, and just think about top line qualities that work in your company And then is there a pattern in those that you've had to say, Hey, thanks so much, but this didn't work out. Yeah. That you're like, yeah, this wasn't a fit because I find that there's often qualities, traits, characteristics that define the people who do well and the people who don't. Yes. Do you have any top of mind?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. I mean, one of the first ones that come is we are, we are pretty flexible. We're kind of an ameba when it comes to our daily schedules. Like we, we know everything that's gonna happen that day and we have some, some pillars, but there's a world where things, I mean, you and I just did it because I had written down the wrong time of what time we were doing this interview. And so we, we bumped up by an hour. We'll, well my engineer Craig moved his life around to sit in here with us and we, you know, like we, you gotta be a little flexible to work here. And, and not only flexible but flexible and like joyful in it. Like, okay, that's what we'll do next. Because that's how our job

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh really? I gotta go and record this.

Annie F. Downs:

Right. Totally. Yeah. Or like oh, I, I mean, well this is what we had to do last week too. You know, like, none of that kind of stuff really flies here. Everybody's gonna have off days. I'm the queen of 'em. But, but you know, they're, in general, the, the flexibility within a day is a pretty important because also the reason we're in an office, and the reason we aren't virtual as a team is we, we like being able to pop in and go, Hey, can we think about this for just a minute? Can we d can we just look at the calendar real quick and figure out what the flights will be? And, and this podcast host called and need some help with this thing. Can we circle up for 10 minutes right now? And so we, we, that flexibility really matters to us.

And I mean, I'll say the other thing that has coming to the top of my mind, Carey, is I want people working on our team who have a robust personal life that they care to prioritize. And so, cuz I I I, what will not fit in our culture is someone who gives their life to our job. Because we don't believe in that.

And I mean, our four pillars are work hard, play hard, rest hard, and pray hard. And, and we really live by those. Like, when we're right now planning, I, I'm, I'm sorry, I don't know when this comes out, but when we right now we're,

Carey Nieuwhof:

It'll be early '23

Annie F. Downs:

Think. Okay, great. Yeah. So we're, so pretend Christmas just happened now as we're we're recording this, right? I mean, days before our Christmas break and our, one of the big conversations on Monday in our staff meeting was, what do you need from everybody else to make sure you aren't working over Christmas?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh yeah. We have that conversation regularly. That's such a good conversation. Yes, yes. It's like we're a week out and I'm like, okay, what has to get done? Yes. Are you gonna get time off? Yes. Are you gonna be like sneaking a computer open? So that's an important value. Which is interesting cuz in that kind of rapid growth curve like you're describing often that is not the culture, it's startup culture. So it's like, we're on 24/7 guys, like, this is it, this is what you do.

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. No, I just don't think that's modeled anywhere healthily in scripture. It doesn't seem like that. And, and what I have seen in my own life, and you and I have talked about this, but John Mark Comer is a bit of my guru on this. But what I have seen in my life is that our company has increased and influence at a pretty rapid pace. And the two things that have not changed but have in, but have actually increased and become more important are tithing in Sabbath. And, and so what I am seeing and what we're modeling for our staff and hopefully for the friends on the other side of our work is that when you actually give away a piece of what you feel like you can't give away, God gives you back way more. And so we really, I mean, I, I don't wanna come into work Monday morning and everybody have sent emails all weekend.

I, that just does not work for me when, I mean, if someone comes in on Monday and says, well I was working this weekend, the faces of everyone else is kinda like, what? Wait, why? What did, what did you, did you need help? Yeah. What was happening? And there are times obviously when we launched, we did a huge advent series. There was extra hours worked in there. Of course, we're launching a brand new podcast that's a daily podcast for 2023 that is required some extra hours. So certainly, I'm not saying there's never times we don't, don't work after hours, but we are just very careful about it and, and really communicative. And every Friday, I mean, and we send an email every Friday and say, "Hey around lunchtime or before, will you respond to this?" And the third, it's four questions. And the third question is, "what do you need from Annie or someone else that will help you have a weekend?"

Because if somebody's waiting on me, but I'm getting ready to go get my nails done at three o'clock on a Friday, and that means they work on a Saturday cause I didn't know what they needed, then I failed as their leader. And so I try to do a touchpoint at the end of every week that says, "Hey, before you go and before I go, is there anything you need from me so that you aren't working this weekend?" And then that just gives every manager permission under me to, to double check that with the people that are working under them and say, "Hey, is there anything you need from me before?" Because we don't want

anyone at any level of our company to be working on the weekends because someone else didn't get them what they needed.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's so healthy, so fluid, fast paced, but clear boundaries in a real life. Any other deal breakers or deal makers on the people you're

Annie F. Downs:

Recruiting? I mean, everybody here shares a faith. We, we believe in that We think that because of the center of our work is bridging people to Jesus. That has to be a core part of the lives of people who work here. We're, we all have very different faiths. No one, not everybody goes to the same church by any stretch, but but that is a core value. We interviewed people who, who did not match our faith. And we found, even in the interview process that I, I honestly think it would've been harder for someone who doesn't believe what we believe to, to go through some of the challenges we go through. And I mean, just, just last week, Carey, we had kind of a wild thing. My entire podcast went down on Spotify. Whole thing, whole thing's gone.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Ooh, that's a fun day, Uhhuh.

Annie F. Downs:

Holy cow. And we had already had a couple of weird run-ins of things going sideways, technology. And, and we just knew, we knew that this was, our battle is not against flesh and blood. So we just kind of opened all the doors to all the offices and we said, everybody, come on. We're praying and we all, people got on their knees, people raise their hands, people pray. I mean, we just prayed. And so someone who isn't comfortable in that, in, in an environment where prayer is not the only thing we do, but it's the first thing we do as Pastor Kevin Queen says they would feel they would not fit in our culture. And so we're looking for people who, and we, we want their lives to flourish and spiritually flourishing as a part of, that's how I'm gonna know I'm successful at my job, is not actually the numbers on the other side of the work, but whether the lives of my staff are flourishing doesn't mean everything's easy. I've had a tragic year, you know, we've had loss and sadness in our, in our in community. And I had a family, my, my nephew passed away. And I mean, it's just been a tragic year. That's not that God's God's story in your life can still flourish in tragedy. So I'm not looking for everybody to have perfect lives. I'm just looking for their lives to be flourishing because their workplace helps them have a better life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You mentioned influence a few times, and I want to go back there and I think you've given a partial answer in something you've said, but I really wanna explore that. Okay. Like, tell me about the drive for more influence, because on the one hand that can be super healthy. On the other hand it can be like shallow and empty and influence Yeah. For the sake of influence. Yeah. So tell me for you, Annie, like what drives the quest for more influence?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. I am very not interested in being more famous. I don't see that serving anyone. I keep seeing that. And so I, I keep seeing that actually be what takes people further from who they wanna be. And so my

prayer for my personal self as an Annie is, Lord, I don't want one more follower than my, than my character can handle. I don't want one more follower than my integrity can handle, then my health can handle. I'm not looking for Annie to get famous. That's not interesting to me. In fact, especially as a woman who's not married yet, it adds a lot of complication to my life to have a public life when I don't have my partner in place yet right? So, so truly the level of whatever you would call this, that I have this fame level, whatever it is, has probably added more complications than joy and felt like a more of a sacrifice at times than a blessing.

Though I sometimes get free tickets to things. Right. Okay, great. So there, there are certainly payoffs to it, of course. When I'm thinking about influence, what I'm thinking about is ears and eyes that we can reach with the products that we make. So even the, let's read the Gospel's graphic does not have my face on it because Okay. I'm, I, I it is gonna be my voice because I know a lot of our friends that are coming along are are friends of mine that want to hear me read the gospels, but what I actually want is, I mean it when we launched it, Carrie, I I I think you'll enjoy this and I'll , this is, this'll be fun for our friends listening who have podcasts. One of the things Apple is caring a lot about right now when you launch a podcast is how many people go to the page and how many people subscribe the reviews that come in. But they also care about the listen through rate. Okay? So when you launch a new podcast, if you will just launch it with a trailer, your podcast will shoot up in the rankings because it's getting a hundred percent listen through rate. Does that make sense?

Carey Nieuwhof:

The two minute trailer you mean?

Annie F. Downs:

That's right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

90 second trailer.

Annie F. Downs:

That's right. That's right. So if you launch with a trailer in two episodes, your audience may be thrilled and the audience may actually be big. And there's, and you know, this is a bell curve, so there's always exceptions to the rule. But, but what we are seeing across the industry is that if you, the higher you can get to that a hundred percent listen rate, the higher you're gonna rank. So we launch a trailer, we announce it across all the platforms in November, and we reach number 17 globally in podcast and stay in the top 20 for all of Thanksgiving weekend. Why that matters to me and why I'm glad my face isn't on it though, father Mike Schmidt, who is incredible. Have you had him on yet? Carey? I just think

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, I have not. Oh, I saw you had him on recently.

Annie F. Downs:

He's just amazing. I've learned so much about Jesus loving Catholics that I did not know because of Father Mike. I just think so highly of him. He has pastored me for two years from a distance through his podcast. His is the Bible in a year, and you see his face right there. It's

Carey Nieuwhof:

One of the top podcasts in the world.

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. All the time. It's unbelievable. And it says right there, huge for anybody who can read the Bible in a year. And what I wanted with our little mini is I wanted it to say, let's read the gospels and I, because the majority of people who may see that floating in the top 10, the top whatever, when we launch in January, they don't know who I am, but they know what the gospels is about. Or they wonder what the gospels is about. So that's what I'm thinking. I'm telling you all that Carey to say that's what I'm thinking about when I'm thinking about influence. I, I recognize that my face goes along with a lot of things. But the beautiful thing about the podcast network is the majority of the 22 million listeners we had last year didn't know me and didn't you know, like the people who are listening to Hannah Mooney's podcast may not know who I am.

The people who are listening to Imagine Faith Talk may not know who I am. The people who are listening to Dad Build to the Snapchat, you know, they may not know who I am, but they're, but because of our team and what we've built, we've been, we've enabled those shows to exist along with the podcast host and their teams so that they reach more people. I want that to keep growing and growing and growing. And I will, I will take whatever amount of public life that requires of me. I will also not invite any extra public life that I don't have to invite. Because I, I don't wanna drink my own Kool-Aid. I, I can do that. I've done it. I had, I spent about a year, 2013 ish drinking my own Kool-Aid and thinking I was kind of a big deal.

And the Lord humbled me. I'm, and I'm grateful and it was gross and awful, and I don't wanna do that again. And so, so that's why I'm chasing influence, Carey, because in the end we wanna bridge people to Jesus. Like yeah, that's, there's that famous quote that I can't ever say the German guy's name has said it, but he said, "preach the gospel, die and be forgotten". That's my dream. Can we build a thing that preaches the gospel? And someday when I die, I do not care if they remember me. I don't, I mean, I genuinely don't care. I'm just like, let's get the work out there. Let's get this network bigger. Let's get this podcast of the gospels in front of as many people as we can next year. I mean, day one, Carey, in January we started reading it. We read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

And then I, I just felt this this thing in me. You know, that thing where you're like, God's telling me to change something, something's gotta shift. I don't know what it is. And I said to his team, I was like, I'm not sure. Sure. We're supposed to start with Mark, I mean with Matthew, because I think the most listeners will have the whole year are the new year, new you people who listen in January. And, and the first chapter of Matthew is a bunch of begats. Right. And so I said, what if we started

Carey Nieuwhof:

With Matthew started with a Genealogy.

Annie F. Downs:

Matthew, come on my guy. Geez, come

Carey Nieuwhof:

On. Mark gets to the point.

Annie F. Downs:

Mark gets to the point. But we ended up actually starting with John because you get, the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. I'm tearing up saying it to you cause we read three chapters a day for 30 days. And then in the first day we also say, for God so loved the world. Wow. Right. And so we get to do that on January one. So if they never come back on the first day, they heard that Jesus was the word made flesh who told among us, and that God sent him to die for our sins because of God's love in Jesus's sacrifice for us. That's, that's why I want more influence, Carey, because on the first day of the year, I get to tell anybody who will listen about Jesus. And, and my name isn't anywhere except on the bottom of the graphic.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hmm. I I really appreciate that by the way. I did check. Oh and emotional. That's good. That's good. Annie. January 12th, this episode releases,

Annie F. Downs:

So, okay, good. So y'all go back and listen to January one

Carey Nieuwhof:

For all. So let's compare 2013 Annie to 2023 Annie, and just full comparison. Yeah. I try to do a motive check on the regular because I think you know, the line between good and evil Alexander Schultz and Eaton goes directly through every human heart. We always think, oh, you know, evil resides somewhere else. It's like, no, actually it hangs out here on a semi-regular basis And so I'm doing, I'm doing, you know, motive checks for myself. What does that look like for you when you're thinking about Okay, influence for the right reasons. And you're right. Like nobody 50 years from now is gonna know who I am. And if you doubt that, it's like name your great, great great grandfather can't do it.

Annie F. Downs:

Right. Right. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well you're descended from him. I am. But I, I, I don't know. I'm probably have five of them. I have no idea who they would be. Yes, yes. And my great-great grandchildren will have no idea who I am, nor will anyone else. Yeah. and that's fine.

Annie F. Downs:

Cemeteries are full of people who matter deeply to other people and we don't know any of them. Right. Yeah. So Yeah. Yeah, yeah. That's exactly

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right. So how do you do your motive check? How do you make sure that most days the compass is pointing toward Jesus, not toward yourself or otherwise?

Annie F. Downs:

Most days is a kind, is a kind hope. Thank you. That is because it's not all days. It's certainly not all days and it's not every hour of the good days either. I think having people around me now, so, so I will do a direct comparison of Annie 2023 and Annie 2013. Cause I actually see this, Carey, I wonder if you see

this too. I actually see this in all of our friends who have any version of a public life is when you're, in, in 2013, I had two books out and I had been traveling and speaking on the weekends every other weekend on a tour for two school years. So I had been, I I, this was a full-time job. I had not even started the podcast yet. This podcast started in 2014. So the interesting thing about what happens when you start having a public life is you kind of don't know what to do when people recognize you that you don't know.

Yeah. But an even harder thing is in people is when people who have known you care more than they used to care. And so that's kind of, when I say drink your own Kool-Aid, what kind of happens as you go? Yeah. You, you used to think I wasn't important and now I now you do. Maybe I am and, and now these strangers who, who didn't know me at all think of me somewhat. So maybe they're right too. Like, so and I, and honestly, I, I think we see it a lot in people. And, and when I hear it or I see it in someone, or when I hear someone chirping about someone else who's drinking their own Kool-Aid, I just often can say, I did too in 2013 into 2014. And it is a God willing, it is a season that passes. It is a season that passes because something happens where everything crashes.

Maybe not financially, I hope not for anyone, but where the internet gets mad at you for a minute. Or a product that you put out and put your heart and soul in doesn't do as well as you thought it would do. Or you get a bad review after a speaking event or a bad review on a book, or people don't like your podcast and you rise that after a year of doing it, you've spent more money than you're able to spend the next year. And you have to stop. Things bump into you that give you this opportunity to remember why you're doing what you're doing, who you're doing it for, and whether it matters outside of making you more important to yourself. So honestly, 2013 is when I started counseling and when I started being with my therapist pretty regularly, who I still see.

And, and so we got to work out why are I, I, I wish I could remember who said this. I'm so mad if I think of it, I'll tell you, but oh, it may have been Mike Donahue was in the podcast Stadium Stadium, no studio with me. And he said when you don't feel loved, you wanna feel right. Ooh. And I think that's some of the, the pride I was dealing with in 2013, as I thought my friends aren't around as much. I'm traveling a ton. I don't feel connected, but all these people who don't know me love me. So at least I'm right in what I'm doing. At least I'm right. And, and now my, and and I'll tell you the other thing, you probably see us a lot too, but I see this in leaders often is the reason we get into secret sin is because we go, this, this calling is so hard.

I deserve to fill in the blank. Well I deserve to watch that. Yeah. Or I deserve to say that, or I deserve that relationship. I deserve to text like this. This is not, this is not bad. I deserve to make this phone call. I deserve to be unkind to this person because they don't know how stressful my life is. The the I deserve thing is the drink in your own Kool-Aid. So that's 2013 Annie, who felt like she deserved a lot because she was sacrificing quote, quote a lot. Now I have more people up close that tell me the truth. And, and I think I've come, I've reckoned with the sacrifices that this job requires on a more, I, I reckon with that on a more regular basis. So I think they feel smaller than thinking about it once a year and being like, well, I'm gonna go on a bender with Oreos because this year, you know, like, or I use Oreos as an example because it's benign. But there are a lot of things we go on benders on that are absolutely not,

Carey Nieuwhof:

Not as benign

Annie F. Downs:

As benign. That's right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Was there a moment in 20 13, 20 14, was there what tipped you over to the Huh, maybe this isn't the thing. Maybe I need to change. Was there my mine was burnout. I mean, yeah. I kind of cruised through my thirties believing my own press quietly. Yeah. Yeah. Because I'm Canadian. You don't wanna do that.

Annie F. Downs:

Yes, that's right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But, you know, burnout kinda destroy.

Annie F. Downs:

And you're Christian, both of those Canadian and Christian. Yes, that's right. Y'all can't prideful for one stitch. No.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So was there, was there a moment or was there an incident or was it just a gradual realization that made you go, I gotta rethink

Annie F. Downs:

This. Yeah, I totally don't wanna tell this story, but I'm gonna tell you because I love you. Up to you. And now I'm gonna have to call my pastor at home in my hometown and tell him this story too. I remember being embarrassed one time when I went to my hometown church. I was embarrassed that I felt like I, like too many people wanted to talk to me. And, and so at one time I thought, oh, all these people wanna talk to me because of my job. And I immediately felt embarrassed that I felt that way and that I, I don't know, I honestly don't remember what my behavior reflected, but I remember immediately being like, this is such an embarrassing thing to think Annie. These people love you. You've grown up with them. This is like so sideways. And that is the, that's the the moment.

I don't know why that was the moment that I thought, this is this, the way your attitude is, is super embarrassing. And, and if other people were in your head, you'd be embarrassed that they heard what you were thinking. And so I think that started me on a journey of like, what are you doing sis? Like what are you doing? And, and I, I'll tell you Carey, I think everyone, our friends listening that are leaders, all of us can, can relate to this, I think. But it is after you reckon with God in those moments, it is after he breaks your hip, like Jacob, that you actually see the growth and the beauty of the work that you've been wanting to do show up, or he adjusts what you really want because now you have a broken hip. And so in a lot of ways I, we would not be able to have the first part of the conversation we had if I wouldn't have been so mortified at my own soul that day at my church. And and I'm, I mean, embarrassed to, I'm embarrassed talking about it. I feel the embarrassment in me talking about it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you for sharing it. I mean, no, very similar thing in my thirties, you know, we, we had some success in ministry, but if it had gotten a lot bigger, it could have been a train wreck for me. Like it had all the seeds of a train wreck in it. Yep. And then, you know, my life grinds to a halt 17 years ago. Yeah. I burn out and if I had, had even a fraction of what I have now the responsibility and the opportunity. Yeah. I think I would've blown it. Same. I totally, I'm like, I would've just, I would've been, and I might



not even have been, you know, a headline cuz Yeah. It was just starting out. But I would've just been off to the side, gone.

Annie F. Downs:

And, you know, what's, what is probably true about God? I don't, I I, I think what's probably true is, is he may have let me have more visible success earlier and I blew it. And so it, it, we had to do some character work before we got here. Right. So the good thing about God is he doesn't remove your dreams when pride gets in the way. He may just hold them closer so he can hand them back when you can actually hold them. Right. And I hope that's what he did for me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You know what I see that as So merciful, merciful just can give you a taste and you know, okay, you've always wanted to eat this cookie. It's a bit of poison in it. Yes. Like that's that's right. How do you feel now? That's right. You're throwing up it in bed, that's

Annie F. Downs:

Cookie. And then he can you the cookie and go like, now you won't eat the whole thing, will you? No, but you would have in 2013. And so now the cookie sits here in the middle of the office and it, and everyone sees whatever the cookie is. Right. It sits in mail the office, and everyone knows, and everyone has permission. And, and we all, particularly my manager, Kelly, particularly Ashley, have these permissions to say, "Hey, you, you took too big of a bite here". Hey, this is, you know, and I mean, I, I'll tell you, we have a lot of gates in place for me. We have a business manager who looks at every dollar so that I, I, I mean, I don't get to be sneaky anywhere because I could be sneaky everywhere. I just know me, right? And so, six staff members on my team have access to every bit of my social media. And so isn't

Carey Nieuwhof:

That I liberating, oh my gosh, what a dream my team has access to my dms, my texts, yes, my email, private, public, same, everything. And it's so liberating.

Annie F. Downs:

Everybody doesn't need to know everything, but someone should know everything, right? Like some there is, there shouldn't be anything that someone doesn't know. And so I think that helped. That's the another difference in 2023 from 2013, is I was just keeping so much of, of my pain and my sin to myself because now that I'm a public person, how do I, how do I be a person who's not perfect? And so you have to work through all that too, right? And, and now I don't, I don't believe in, in fileting yourself on behalf of the work you do. But I do believe in having accountable places in your life that make your public world more robust and more vibrant because you're not trying to hide anything. Because we think if we can, if we hide our sin and we hide our problems, that, that our joy and our purpose can be really loud and really vibrant, but it actually dolls everything when you're hiding anything.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hmm. Hmm. Oh, that's worth the price of admission. So, you know, you probably get this question even a lot more than I do, but I get it regularly. Young leaders who want to have influence. Yeah. So they want to be podcasters. They want to write a book, basically, Annie, they wanna speak, they wanna do what

you do. They want to, yeah. They wanna have a meaningful social media profile. What are some top tips you would have for young wannabe influencers or people who are just starting out and getting a taste of the cookie, so to speak?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah, I mean, I, I would encourage people always tell the truth. Always tell the truth. Tell the truth to yourself. Tell the truth to your agents, your managers, your teammates, your anybody that's around your family afraid. Like, do you just don't wanna give the enemy any kind of foothold. Now you don't wanna be unkind or say too much, but just like, you've gotta always tell the truth because that is going to set you up for long-term success. And, and sometimes Gary telling the truth is saying, Hey, I have this dream of something I think we could build. So let me tell you the truth of what I'm actually dreaming of. It's not just here's sin. Right? It is, you're

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right. Because there's a fear of success. Okay? Yes. I had, I had a good friend of mine say to me, once you're afraid of success, you're afraid of

Annie F. Downs:

Influence. Did you ever

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wrestle with that?

Annie F. Downs:

Yes. Shelly Giglio said it to me early. She said, everybody plans for failure, but nobody plans for success. That's good. And that has, that has stuck with me forever. Forever of just going, yeah. So often when we are building something like Let's Read the Gospel's Podcast we aren't actually talking about failure because there is no failure to reading the Bible every day for 365 days unless we don't do it. Oh. So the only failure is if we quit. And so that's our only concern, is how do we set it up so that, so that every piece of this finishes at the end of 2023. So what we are more talking about is what do we do if this does really well? , What do we do if this needs more of Annie's time? What do we do if this reaches people that we did not expect it to reach?

You know, so, so we are thinking through that. So we, pretty much everything we build, we ask ourselves. So luckily over at the network, some of the problems and challenges we are having right now, Kelly and I said, what if this really works and fill in the blank? And we're seeing it happen because it's really working, but it isn't the first time. We aren't like shocked and awed that we're having we're having challenges, right? Of how do we get all these shows to have as many listens as we want them to. We wanna have a robust, varied group of podcasts, but not everybody listens to everything. So how do we do that, right? , We predicted that we predicted when we have a lot of shows on here, there will be some shows that do better than others. How do we help the ones that want more listeners, which is technically everybody?

So yes, there's a fear of success. So some other things I would say for young, younger or anybody who's wanting to have a public life of any kind or a or, or build things is you gotta pick your currencies. You've got to remember that time is a currency. We can make more money. We cannot make more time. And so making sure that you and the people you work with are using their time well is almost to me more

important than if they're using the money. Well, we want high integrity in every currency, high integrity and every currency. And that starts when it is just you by yourself. I do you have time for me to tell a quick story about this? Because it is totally you So funny. I had an intern that was a Vanderbilt, you remember I had those Vanderbilt baseball players, they're like little brothers to me.

A couple of them interned for me because during their senior years they only had baseball in like three classes. But they're brilliant cause they're Vanderbilt guys, right? And so a couple of them interned for me. Well, one day I've come home from a speaking event and my intern Connor is in, who ended up playing in the Detroit Tigers Organization. I mean, just an incredibly good baseball player, great guy. One of the highest integrity people I know. Connor's. I hand him the merch money and the count and he is counting and counting and he is like, Annie, we're a hundred dollars off. And I'm like, oh my gosh, that's kind of big I to come home, \$15 off for \$5 off. Maybe someone took a book or maybe I miscounted or whatever. A hundred dollars is a lot. He counts the money again. He counts for over an hour, not because it's a lot of money because he is counting, counting, counting.

And, and I was like, in my heart, I was going, Connor, we can let it go. It's okay. I'm go back out this weekend, I'll make up that a hundred dollars. And he says, no, we are counting until this makes sense. And he pushes back from the table and he says, where is that \$100? And he looks down and there's a hundred dollars bill at his feet. That had just fallen at some point during the counting. But it was such a good reminder to me that we keep pushing for integrity and we do not give up because we're tired. Right? And so that, and that's what Connor taught me that day, is if he, if we would not have held on, we'd have eventually found that a hundred dollars bill sitting at his feet. But I was willing to give up the integrity of our books matching because I was bored with him doing that.

He was not willing. This was 2013, to tell you the truth. I'm laughing as I saying, it's 2012 or 13. And and so I'd say pursue truth and pursue high integrity and pay attention to the currencies that you and your team are making and spending because it's going people, I I don't consider people a currency. I feel like that's not the right language. But how your people are being treated and how they're spending their their own selves is a currency in your company. Like, you want them to be healthy as humans and so you pay attention to that. But time, money and influence are the three currencies we care about the most. And I would say keep a robust personal life. That doesn't mean a busy one if you don't wanna be busy. But have friends outside of work have, I mean, when we have people get engaged or fall in love or get pregnant or have, you know, climb a new mountain.

We have a mountain climber on staff when he climbs a new mountain, he is never climbed before. That that is a win for me as a leader. I didn't have anything to do with him climbing that mountain. But, but we have built a place where he knows we prioritize him getting to the top of mountains as much as we prioritize him selling out a show for the podcast. And and so that matters I think as people are building, build what you wanna build, pay attention when you drink your own Kool-Aid. Cuz it, it's a season it'll happen. Just get out of it as quick as you can. Make it as short as possible. And, and, and I, the other thing I'd say, Carey, and you can disagree with me on this, but I think when, when I'm standing in front of God and he is probably not going to ask me how many books sold, he's gonna ask me about the people I worked with and how I treated the people he trusted me with. Oh yeah. And, and so that when I'm going to bed at night and I can't fall asleep, I'm not trying to hit a goal financially. I'm trying to solve any problems we have where our staff's lives aren't flourishing.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hmm. So I'd love to shift gears a little bit in the time we have left Okay. Because we do have a lot of people who have podcasts. You've had tremendous success. Thank you. And what are some podcast secrets? Like what are some things you've learned that really help? Because I think you're right.

Anybody who starts something, any church leader would love to have more people this Sunday than last Sunday. Yeah, of course. Every podcaster would like to pick up a few more listeners. Yeah. Every author would like to sell a couple more books. Cuz you have a message you're excited about, you think it's gonna make a difference. What are some podcasting secrets? Tips Yeah. And tricks that you'd love to share?

Annie F. Downs:

I mean, the launching with a trailer is, is 2022/23 tip of the year. I mean, that is what everybody is seeing. And so you'll, because then what that allows you to do if you so choose is take a screenshot and show everyone and say, you're the only one not listening follower. Have you not subscribed? Look, you're the only one not listening. God's got something for you here. And you will see, as you see people launch and see people post that your friends listening and you and I will know, well they had a pretty high listen through rate. So for our friends who already have podcasts, what I would suggest is to create a new trailer at some point in 2023 that either launches a series or is almost a state of the union or is something that is two to three minutes that tells people they're hearing this early January. So you could still do it this month and say, Hey, here's where we're going this year. If you have any thoughts on that, here's how you can email us. If you can launch a trailer this year, that is something to send people to. And you can get a high listen through rate that's really gonna serve you getting in front of people that you will not get to influence. Otherwise, we're not doing it cuz we're trying to get famous. We're doing it cuz we're trying to get in front of ears that we won't find otherwise.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So if you listen to the trailer that may or may not come out on The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, January 1st. I I, I came up with that idea all by myself. Yes

Annie F. Downs:

He

Carey Nieuwhof:

Did. You know what? That's a great idea. Never thought about it.

Annie F. Downs:

Yep. We,

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's brilliant. Okay. We

Annie F. Downs:

Noted, in fact, we relaunched a set, we did a second trailer for Let's Read the Gospels because we wanted another push and because we had new information to share. And so we would not have done it just for a push, I don't think. But because we switched up and at the end of our first trailer we said, we'll see you on January 1st and Matthew, and then we ended up seeing you on January 1st. And John, we thought we should tell people that switching and we created a Let's Read the Gospel's guidebook for people to download. And we didn't know that, that that's what the audience wanted when we made the first trailer. So we need do it again. So I would say, oh, that's cute. No matter how old your podcast is, as

soon as you want to make a new trailer and tell people you need to go listen to this whole thing because it's telling you where we're going next year.

Or it's telling you about a series now series, Carey, as you know, well series are the other thing. If you can imagine your listenership going up into the right, what happens a lot is there will be a bump and then you'll just plateau for years possibly, right? Because you've reached everybody you can reach. The interesting thing about series, and by series, I mean maybe for a week you do a show every day or maybe for a month you do a theme and there's your normal weekly shows, and then you do one bonus around that theme. What we have found across the network, but also that sounds fun, is series increase listenership. What does not increase listenership is famous interviews. Because what? It's not crazy. It's crazy. I if I, if we had time, if this was a whole class we were doing, and I can just show you all my stats, we are blown away.

What happens when you have a very famous person on is your audience that does not listen to your show comes and listens to that one episode. So you have a spike and then they leave again. What happens when you do a series that people are invested in is they share with their friends. They come and they listen and they stay. And so have your famous people on as much as you. I mean, if you can get famous Hollywood actors, I love having those people on because I like talking to them. And I think, and a lot of times they have something really important to say and it's cool. Right? I mean baseline, having Matthew McConaughey on that sounds fun, was cool. That was just cool.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That was pretty cool.

Annie F. Downs:

It was really cool. It did not change the amount of ears I get to influence on a weekly basis.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And probably, I don't know, I'm gonna guess not your top most listened to episode

Annie F. Downs:

Of the year. No. Do you wanna know the most listened to episode of my 2022 was would love to me and Jim Crest, who's a counselor talking about singleness.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Annie F. Downs:

By, by like tens of thousand, I wanna say it's almost a hundred thousand more than our next highest show.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And so, you know, if let me, let me play this game cuz our podcasts are about the same age 2014 right? Is when I launched this one. I am still horrible at predicting what is gonna drop. Horrible,

Annie F. Downs:

Horrible,

Carey Nieuwhof:

Terrible. I'm like, oh, this can be slam dunk, you know? And I'm like, Nope. And then there's this one, I don't know, should we do this one or not? And, you know, a hundred and some odd thousand downloads later. It's like, yeah. Oh, okay. That did a, that did great.

Annie F. Downs:

Hilarious. It's hilarious. The things you can bank on is you can bank on a high January, you can bank on a low July. Those are two things you can bank on that is like industry across the industry. Yeah. And so you can, and so doing series, not in July, don't do a series in July, do a series in August when everybody's back to school and they, I mean, the rhythms August, this is a big month, your August, is it a big month for your show? Yes. The rhythms of your life reflect in your listeners' lives too. And so

Carey Nieuwhof:

August for us is the second January.

Annie F. Downs:

Yes. We probably we do that EnneaSummer series in June . So that's usually our biggest one. Our biggest month. Yeah. Yeah. But yes, as far as if you remove that series, but again, that's a series that brings a bunch of listeners in. A good chunk of them stay. We see a new plateau every time we do a series. So we did Advent in December, a new se, a new plateau, we'll do EnneaSummer in July, in June, a new plateau. And so we, we try to plug in two to three series a year.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's really good.

Annie F. Downs:

Really good.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Any other tips and tricks?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. The sentence we say a lot is do not bring a guest for their audience. Bring a guest that blesses your audience. Because even Matthew McConaughey, I don't know that he told his wife he was on my show, much less put it on his social media, right? Yeah. Like, don't, don't invite Carey Nieuwhof on your podcast because you expect Carey to tell the people who follow Carey that he's on your show have Carey Nieuwhof on because he is the expert in the thing you want to hear about and your audience wants to hear about. So, because that's, that's a lot of pressure we get to remove from our guests that they are not here because I want their audience. They are not here because I expect them. Because normally for you and I, this, this conversation's an anomaly of this. But normally you have a guest on because they have a book coming out and that means they've done 10 podcasts and there's no need for them to tell their audience about 10 different conversations. Right. Their audience will find that if they want it, what they need is for those 10 podcasters to tell their audience about the new book right? So

do not bring a guest because you want their audience. Bring the guest that blesses your audience and just work on building your audience. And, and that is the win versus expecting Matthew McConaughey to change your future.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do you determine who you invite on your podcast?

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. Our, our phrase is, it's someone that I'm already friends with or someone I wish I was friends with. And, and so that's what happens when books come in or albums come in, or an actor reaches out from Hallmark channel or you know, whoever. I, I look at what they're talking and we know our audience really well. Carey, you do too. I mean, before we started you said, Hey, just rem just a reminder, here's who you're talking to cuz you know m and we know, I mean, we have names for our three people that we talk to and, and, and what their characteristics are. And so I'm thinking about those three characters that most of my audience is similar to one of the three. And I'm going, I, so here's a great example. When we get parenting books, about 50% of my audience is married and about 50% of them have kids. And then about 50% of my audience isn't married and about 20% of them have kids. So a, a a series on parenting is not going to matter as deeply to my audience as it would to Jamie Ivey's, right? Or to Jen Hatmaker or to Jenny Allens cause they are, and also they're all moms and so, right. So they draw. And so for me, when an, when parenting two or three books come in, I go will maybe do one of those if I think there's a reason for my audience to hear that. But we're not a parenting show and we don't lean on that very hard. Does that make sense?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So two questions. Sure. I I mean, one is just an observation. So our mutual friend Jon Acuff, who I know you love, love John gave me the best podcasting advice. He says, your show do you want, that's it. And he got that from Brian Kapelman. That's a, are they my friend? Do I want to be their friend? Yes. That has been so helpful. So I'll pass that along to listeners. Yes. And you might say, well that's like capricious or weird or, but no, it's my, if I'm not interested in the guest Yeah. Like that's why when I said, okay, the listener knows and I'm like, okay Annie, this is where I want to go. And you're like, yeah, I'm game for that. Well I'm totally like an hour's gone, but an hour and 10 minutes. Oh my gosh.

Annie F. Downs:

Whatever. I can't, I can't believe I know.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know. I can't believe it. It just flies and I'm not, I'm not bored. Are you kidding? But if it was like, you know, in chapter four of a book I didn't read. Yes. yes. You know, that's, that's, that's boring.

Annie F. Downs:

Which that also triggers me to say to our friends who host podcasts, if you're going to have an author on read their book, if you're going to have a musician on listen to their album, it changes whether you've known them for 50 years or you are meeting them, it changes their experience as a guest on your show. If they know that you've cared about the content they've created.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I can't tell you how many times at the end they're like, you actually read the book,

Annie F. Downs:

Or Oh, every time

Carey Nieuwhof:

You you did, you did your research. Whoa. Yes. Like, whoa, your questions aren't just the public, no offense publishers, but they're not just the publisher's questions Yes. That get sent out with the press. Yes. Right? Yes. So and

Annie F. Downs:

I had someone say, say to me last week, and, and this, well, I'm just gonna say I had someone say to me last week, thank you so much for reading the book. My publisher told me you were one of the ones that actually reads the books. And I was like, the idea that publishers know who reads and who doesn't read. Cause if they have that list, you know what else list they have, Carey the list of hosts that will not read the book. And I don't wanna be on that list, because I also write books and I want to sit down and have these conversations with people after they've read my book. It feels so different on the other side. And so if you're having authors on read their books, if you're having musicians on re list their album, if you're having a movie star on make sure you've watched their movie. Do do on my calendar every week, Carey, we've, we've decided, we've made this like official, I have about a 30 to 45 minute window before every podcast to prep. And I didn't used to do that, but now it feels like, man, when people are coming in here, you, it feels different when, when the host has not prepped well right before you see them. So we've, we're changing our

Carey Nieuwhof:

Rhythms. What are you doing that 30 to 45 minutes?

Annie F. Downs:

I'm reading, I've hopefully already finished the book. I can read every page, maybe not every word. I can read every page of our friend's books in about two hours. Usually I can get the real gist of the book in about two hours and take my notes in that 30 to 45 minutes. A if anybody's early, we're not like bumping up right to it. And a lot of people show up early, which I appreciate. And also I'm just, I am reading through the papers that the publisher sent over or the record label sent over. I'm looking at their social media. Yeah. I'm looking at their social media to make sure I know what happened in their life today. Right. Because if they're posting about something exciting or tragic that's happening right now, I wanna say, "Hey, before we get started, I saw that your wife is pregnant. That's huge. Congratulations." Yeah. Yeah. And it takes eight seconds to look at their Instagram, you know, and so so that's what I'm using with those extra minutes we've set aside

Carey Nieuwhof:

Super smart. Okay. So I wanna talk about angles for guests. So Okay. Think about, I I know we have a, the vast majority of people who listen to the show create content. So whether you're planning a weekend service



Annie F. Downs:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

On something that everybody else is talking about or you need to make a comment or you're writing an article. But for example, for those of us who do guests who are on the circuit, cuz podcasts are, are the new talk show circuit. Right? That's right. Let's be honest. Yes. Often what I'll do is I will see if I'm like, oh, I know they're gonna do 30 interviews, I'll, I'll often go to your show and like, I did that with Jon and McCrae Acuff and I listened to your take with them and then I listened to them on Jon's show before I got ready for my show. Yeah. Because if you're just spitting sound bites that everybody else has done, basically the same interview gets popped onto 15 different podcasts. Right. How do you make sure that you get an angle for your unique audience? Yeah. What is your tack in developing questions to make sure that when you get the Acuff's, when you get Lysa TerKeurst, when you get Matthew McConaughey, it sounds different than the other 42 podcasts

Annie F. Downs:

Yeah. So part of it is before I look at the resources that come from the publisher or the recording label or whatever record label, I I read the book and write my own questions. So first I'm I mean the, the the sentence that came to my mind when you were asking is I just chase my curiosity. I chase my curiosity more than I follow the path that the publisher has handed me with the questions they've given me. So I read the book and chase my own curiosity about what matters. And, and then sometimes I'll look at the questions and very often go, you know, cause they'll send over eight or 10 and very often go like, yeah, I bet they'll answer. Here's what I say. I bet they'll answer all those 15 times. Is there're one of 'em that I'm really interested in.

Because if I'm not, and and, and if I will chase my curiosity for the whole episode, a lot of times what I, the feedback I get, so it's just anecdotal, but I think this, and then I get so a little bit of feedback that says the question you asked next was what I was wondering. And so often I think if someone explains, you know, and so then we stop at Cracker Barrel and you go, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Tell me, when you walk into a Cracker Barrell, what, what do you go to first? Right. Because the audience on and listening in their car or listening while they're doing their dishes is thinking about when they go to Cracker Barrel and they're going, I do wonder what Carey Nieuwhof. Right. When he walks in a Cracker Barrell, and then I ask it. Right? And so I if you will just chase your curiosity and know the, know the work that the guest is bringing. Those two things lead to unique conversations.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh. Do you know the pressure that that takes off of people? Because you feel I have to do and I do for guests mountains of research, but like, you know, I I worked on these questions for you. Yeah. I think I've asked you two. I love

Annie F. Downs:

Them. 'em. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Like this has just been, we've seen

Annie F. Downs:

A few of 'em.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. You set me up for this and you didn't do any of your questions.

Annie F. Downs:

That's another reason I don't send questions very much. Cause I'm like, I don't know where we're gonna go.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I do it. There's some guests like, I don't want to name names, but there are some guests who are regulars on my show who will show up with pages of notes and I'm like, oh, you know, like that's great. Oh yeah. Yeah. And that's great. That's the way they, they prep, but I don't like surprise people. Yeah. But yeah, follow that curiosity trail and if you're genuinely interested and that could be for a preacher and a subject or whatever great things can happen.

Annie F. Downs:

I mean that's why on Father's Day we had a local guy here in Nashville who has like the best barbecue joint. Cause I was like, I am so interested in hearing about someone who does barbecue for a living. That sounds awesome. And so why

Carey Nieuwhof:

Have I never had that guest?

Annie F. Downs:

I know. Oh, he's great. His name's Pat Martin. He is awesome. And he had a cookbook come out and I thought, this is it. He will come and talk to me because he had a cookbook come out. But I just chased my curiosity. Now sometimes Carey let me tell you where it, it fails me sometimes because I love soccer and the, the vast majority of my audience doesn't. And so about once a year I'm gonna do a soccer show with someone that I am like sweating. I'm so, I think is so cool that they're here and my audience may not love that show. And guess what? It's my show. I, I am gonna talk about soccer because I love it. I'm gonna have Kirk Herbstreit on talking about college football because I love it. And that's okay if the majority of the audience doesn't want to hear that one that week that I got another one coming in three days. Y'all be fine.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What is the power of podcast networks? Because I am, we have one too, The Art of Leadership Network, but I look at That Sounds Fun and it's just exploded and like huge shows, big shows with millions of downloads. And I'm curious what you see in the power of podcast networks moving forward

Annie F. Downs:

Well part of it, you know, for a lot of people is the, it's the only way to have an income when you are doing podcasting is to have advertising. And what networks offer is in-house sales teams that make

advertising something you don't have to negotiate and you don't have to because we, you know, even me as a podcaster, I don't know what my CPMs are and I don't even know what cost per million exactly. Means. Like I don't know any of that. I don't need to be negotiating that. Yeah. And so I'm grateful that that's one of the gifts of podcasting networks that are happening. Now the other gift is that a lot of listeners share share amongst network shows. So The Art of Leadership, the, those of us who listen when you launch a new one, we're gonna give it a go because it's more leadership.

And, and it is more of, we understand it's just like an amusement park. We use this example a lot on the network. It's like an amusement park where you're not gonna love every ride and the rides aren't all the same. There's gonna be a couple you love and a couple you really like and if you don't get back on one okay. But you'll probably try it because we put it in our, in our amusement park. And so that's, to me a lot of the power of it is a shared audience that that invites that for a show brand new launching or for a show that is launched for a while and but needs a new exposure to new audience, a network can do that for you in some really important ways. And community-wise, there's very few, there's very few lonely podcasters on our network because we all know each other and we're in a Slack channel together and we talk to each other a lot and we jump on each other's shows a lot. I mean at Christmas, every podcast host and That Sounds Fun Network was on my show in one way or another. Like we are just, we all jump around with each other. We have a quarterly round table where our, That Sounds Fun Network staff will plan a an hour of professional development pretty much for all of our podcast.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We do the same for our network too

Annie F. Downs:

It's so helpful cuz then we all see each other and we go, oh man, by the way, that episode was so good and oh I, I keep trying to, why are you not responding when I text? I want you to come on my show. You know, like we have moments where we connect to each other and, and that happens at the round table. And so to me a lot of the power of networking, of having a podcast network and being on a podcast network is you just don't feel lonely anymore. It, it helps you make a little income. You are in community and your audience grows. And those are kind of the three things that I need for a successful portion of my job.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think part of it, and I'm a bit obsessed with it these days, the last few months, but curation, right. It's like I know if I go to That Sounds Fun Network. Yep. oh Annie in some at some level has vouched for these people, vouched for the show and there's a certain expectation that comes along with it. That's right. Which I think is really important cuz now there's like two or 3 million podcasts out there. Yes. Not episodes, just different shows. Good luck sorting through that.

Annie F. Downs:

Right. You know, the interesting thing, our, our team went to the podcast conference in the summer in August. And they came back and the stat was between, I think I'm gonna get this right between 2019 and the end of 2020 and went from 750,000 podcast two and a half million, which is insane. And it is why we saw our shows, whether we have more or less listeners not ranking like they used to rank because of the amount of new shows that launched. Now what the newest stat from this summer is, of those two and a half million, almost almost half of them do not release episodes anymore. So the bell curve happened and everyone launched these shows and then they abandoned them. Right? Mm. And

so, and so longevity is the win for podcasting. Building an audience and showing up for them or being very intentional that you are doing a s a short series or a limited run podcast.

Either plan to do this for a long time or call it a limited run from the beginning. And, and we have two of those, we have two shows that, that do seasons when they want to do seasons, but they are not a long podcast. A long, long tail podcast. And then we have Carlos Whitaker who just is doing incredible shows every week that follow his life. He just kind of does a podcast about whatever he is living that week. So Carlos and there's Yeah. You know, millions of people are listening and so the both of those are fine, but it's, it's interesting with the amount of podcasts, how many of them could not hang and chose not to hang And some of that is right. Yeah. Some people did what they meant were meant to do and stopped and some didn't have the community or the income or the, you know, audience to keep going. And we hope that that sounds fun, network that we provide all three of those so that our podcasters keep going as long as they want to.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, and I find too like the, you know, we had good success outta the gate as did you with back in 2014, but like 2022 hands down, best year ever. Yeah. Like it just keeps growing and it's like compound interest

Annie F. Downs:

And, and it's your network, right? Because what you actually have done is you've spread your influence and allowed it to grow. So it may not look like quote Carey Nieuwhof numbers, but it is, it is spread and that a enables enables it to do more. So I'm thrilled that the That Sounds Fun Network had far more downloads than That Sounds Fun the show. That's what I want. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah. Wow. Annie, I'll tell you, time flies and

Annie F. Downs:

I know I

Carey Nieuwhof:

Love it. We have to do a round two. This is so good. . Tell me, is there anything else you wanna share with

Annie F. Downs:

No, you're so generous. Thank you. I I, you know, I I guess I would say take everything that we talked about with the grain of salt and take it to you and the Lord, right? Like

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Annie F. Downs:

We we're, we're just two people doing the best we can and we are still in 10 years we're gonna look back and realize how much we still had to learn. And I know it's sitting here, but I also know that I have a

decade of doing this job and so do you, so we bring both, we bring experience and knowledge that we have a long way to go

Carey Nieuwhof:

Enjoying the journey. I think that's really important. I'll picked that up in spades from you every time I talk to you, but yeah, it's busy, but it's fantastic and that's, that's a wonderful thing to be so people want to track with you your Annie F. Downs on all the socials, but if they want to get into the network or find the show. Yeah. What's the headquarters, what's the

Annie F. Downs:

Website we do? Yeah, so it's [thatoundsfunnetwork.com](https://www.thatoundsfunnetwork.com) on Instagram where TSNetwork. So you can go find us there. The Let's Read the Gospel Show has launched. So you can find that wherever you love to listen to podcast. And I'll tell you the, the thing, the one piece we didn't talk about as much when it comes to podcasting is the way you grow your audience is you get your audience to tell their friends. Cause you can't get to their friends, but they can. And so , my request of all of our friends is tell your friends about Let's Read the Gospels because we want people to hear the gospels this year. Hmm. And so just, you know, one Inta story could put it in front of someone who's never considered Jesus before. Wouldn't that be cool? Wouldn't that be cool? Wow. Preach the gospel, die and be forgotten. That's my hope.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Annie as always, thank you so much.

Annie F. Downs:

Oh, thanks Carey. You're one of the best. I love getting to talk to you and I'm thankful for how you lead me, so I'm really grateful.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you Annie.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well I love Annie so much. She's got such a great heart and I just am excited about what's going on over at Annie F. Downs Inc. And if you want more including what we linked to, you can go to [CareyNieuwhof.com/episode545](https://www.CareyNieuwhof.com/episode545). Yeah. And a little Easter egg. For those of you who are listening closely, guess what I did? Well January 1st, the little trailer for this podcast came out. I will know by the time we get to the other side, I'm, we record months in advance whether that actually had an impact or not, but I'll let you know. Anyway, Annie, thanks for the tips and I know all of us are better for it. Make sure you check out. [Hegetsuspartners.Com/Fans](https://www.Hegetsuspartners.com/Fans). The Super Bowl is coming up. You don't wanna miss out. Be one of 15,000 churches to get in on this movement and Serve HQ has got everything you need for your volunteers to equip them and develop them. You can go to [servehq.church](https://www.servehq.church) to learn more next episode. I love having Mark back and I don't know whether it's a tradition or not, but he's been on a few Januarys and I thought I'd have him back this year cuz we're gonna talk about the future the future of cultural disruptions. The decline of civilization. Yeah, just really cheery and the rapid acceleration of the Overton window that is change and how to sleep at night and cultivate a non-anxious presence in the midst of it all. Anyway, here's an excerpt from the next episode,

Mark Sayers:

But I think the big thing in 10 years, which people aren't recognize, reckoning is that if you go to any western church, you got a, a church in Canada, the United Kingdom Northern Europe, New Zealand, Australia, whatever, America, the predominant, largest group is people who are in the baby boomer generation who probably in their seventies and that generation is gonna pass. They're either gonna be less involved or they're gonna literally pass. And we overwhelmingly people have not prepared for that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Subscribers. You'll get that automatically if you're new. We welcome a ton of new listeners every January. Make sure you subscribe if you've enjoyed this and if you would be so kind, please leave us a rating and review when you share. We get to keep doing this and I love doing it. It's one of my favorite things to do. And we've got a killer lineup of guests coming up, coming up on future episodes. Bill McKendry, Andy and Sandra Stanley, Carlos Whittaker, who else we got? Caitlin Beatie, Richard Blackaby, John Mark Comer, John Lee Dumas. Everybody has to have two names, I guess to be on this year. Gretchen Rubin, Andy Wood, David Platt, Nathan Finochio, JP Pohluda, and a whole lot more. And for listening to the end if you enjoyed this, I think you'll also enjoy something brand new. I'm doing the On the Rise newsletter.

You can go and subscribe for free for my brand new newsletter ontherisenewsletter.com. And here's what I'll do. I'll give you a curious mix of really interesting things I've found on the internet, on tv, although not a lot of TV shows, but once in a while if something's really outstanding, I will let you know. And also I will send you books I'm reading and links to some things that sort of go into the mix of what we do here at careynieuwhof.com and into my life. A decade ago, it was super easy to find stuff on the internet. Now we're drowning in content and we'll go way beyond the latest viral TikTok video, give you some in-depth articles that we'll link to. And it's a curious mix. So if you're interested in receiving that, you can use it for sermon research, research for what you're doing, or frankly, just because you're an interesting human being, go to on the rise newsletter.com. I'd love to see you over there. Thank you so much for listening and I hope our time together today has helped you identify and break a growth barrier you're facing. We'll catch you next time.