

PODCAST 18: USING A NONFICTION BOOK TO CREATE INCOME FROM ONLINE COURSES – WITH NICK STEPHENSON

Speaker 2: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a bestseller. Join James Blatch and Mark Dawson and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living tell stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer. Transcript of Interview with Nick Stephenson

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to podcast number 18 from The Self Publishing Formula.

Speaker 2: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a bestseller. Join James Blatch and Mark Dawson and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James Blatch: Hello, here we are again with you and we have a good little mini-series embedded within our podcast for the next three episodes and we're quite excited about this Mark because we talk a lot about novels, we talk a lot about fiction, but we've decided we are going to do a mini-series on non-fiction.

Now, before we get properly into talking about non-fiction and why we're doing this, we've got to flag up something that's going to be of very great interest to, I think, novelists as well as non-fiction people, principally probably fiction writers and that is writing copy with adverbs.

People have heard the fantastic podcast with Bryan Cohen. I said fantastic, it's my podcast, our podcast but I think it was fantastic. I learned a lot from Bryan. He was brilliant.

You and Bryan are doing a specialist webinar live training which is going to go into a lot more detail about copywriting and we've got some details about that now, don't we Mark, which we're going to get right.

Mark Dawson: We will try to get it right, yes. On Wednesday, the 29th of June at 9:00 PM UK time, which is 4:00 PM New York, James?

James Blatch: That is correct. 5 hours difference. You are the king of the time zones. Do you even know about the big time zone cock-up you made? You probably don't know. I think John and I hid it from you.

Mark Dawson: Oh, no.

James Blatch: We didn't want to dampen your spirits during the launch, but I should tell you some other time. Okay, let's move on.

Just to set this up a little bit before I hear why you think it's so important, I do remember very early-on we had a guest Johanna Penn - one of our very early guests on the podcast. I remember we asked her, "Is it easy to make non-fiction work in the same way it is fiction?", and she burst out laughing saying it's much easier to make non-fiction work. And partly that was because she went on to explain that the range of different things available to you, not just books.

It's a big part of quite a few people we associate with in this area, a big part of their income, non-fiction, isn't it?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it is, and it's going to be a big part of plenty of the businesses of our listeners as well. It's something that I've wanted to do for a little while. We've obviously got a lot of experience now in doing this

ourselves. We've built a non-fiction business over the course of the last 12 months, so we've learned a lot of things during the course of that time that I think will help a lot of people.

What we're going to do is we're going to look at something that goes beyond just how to sell a non-fiction book. We'll talk about that a little bit too and the usual things we talk about with regards to making books physical, building a mailing list, all that kind of stuff is as relevant to non-fiction books as it is to fiction books and novels and things like that.

But, what we're going to look at in a bit more detail over the course of the next three episodes is how you can take a non-fiction business or an expertise you have that would qualify you to write a book on non-fiction and how you can go beyond that and actually build something a bit more substantial and specifically build a course.

James Blatch: Okay. Courses are very hot at the moment. Obviously people will know that we have a course which is a non-fiction income for our company as you say. I suppose a bit of a spoiler ahead of our first guest is that you've got your non-fiction book, and I noticed a few people signing up for the course recently who have non-fiction books, and what they might be surprised to learn is that it's very possible the book is not the money making aspect of their non-fiction income as you say.

It's possibly even a loss-lead they give away to turn into income through other streams such as an online course. And depending on what area of non-fiction you're in, that's something that really can be leveraged. And, we've got the perfect opening guest on this, haven't we? We've got somebody who was ahead of the curve in many ways and is a great mind on these matters and has a proven track record of building a business out of non-fiction. He's somebody who's very familiar I think to lots of people in SPF and lots of people who are in our community came through him. He is a fellow Brit, just 20 miles up the road from me, and that is Nick Stephenson.

Mark Dawson: Nick's been doing courses for longer than I have. I originally came to know Nick through a non-fiction book that he had out on supercharging your Kindle sales; that was the name of the book. He found out early on he could use that as effectively a loss-lead as you say, and introduction to potential new customers who might like to learn from him. He turned that book - which was very successful - he turned that into an entrée for Your First 10,000 Readers, which is successful flagship course. I knew when we looked at this particular subject and how people could make money from non-fiction, I knew one of the people that we had to speak to was Nick. Fortunately, as you say, he's a good friend of mine now, he's a good friend of yours, James. He was the perfect first person for us to talk to.

James Blatch: Yeah, and because online courses are turning out to be a very good way of creating an income stream for you with your non-fiction knowledge if you like, we're going to really focus on them.

The next 2 interviews - they'll make up parts 2 and 3 of this mini-series - will be with David Siteman Garland who's a man who understands how to get a course from an idea in your head to something that's going to be a profitable venture for you. Finally Ankur Negpal who's based in New York and is one of the founders of The Teachable Platform which is a platform we use and it's quite widely used in this area as well.

Lots of good, valuable information to come for the non-fiction crowd. Even if you are now currently a novelist, David's interview in particular is quite inspirational. He basically says anybody has it in them to create an online course that other people will want to buy. That's a really good interview to listen to even if you don't think necessarily it applies to you first up. As Mark says, let's start with our friend, Nick Stephenson.

Nick Stephenson straddles the twin areas of fiction writing and actual selling ... Do you see what I did there? ... He's the author of the Leopold Blake thrillers, but within our community perhaps best known for his non-

fiction work which aimed to helping fellow authors turn their hobby into serious income-generating professions. To that end, he's written books such as 'Reader Magnets: Get your readers to come to you', 'Supercharge your Kindle Sales', and best known of all, perhaps, his online presence, 'Your First 10,000 Readers'.

Our interest today is not just the advice on selling books, but how Nick has built a small non-fiction empire. So, welcome, Emperor Nick.

Nick Stephenson: Thank you. I like the idea of being an Emperor, and also straddling stuff; I do love straddling. Thank you for having me.

James Blatch: You're very welcome. Welcome to the SPF podcast. We should say also, geographically, you and I at least are quite close because we're in the same English county of Cambridgeshire.

Nick Stephenson: I think you're basically around the corner. I should have just done this at your house.

James Blatch: Well you're further north, and obviously we don't go north from here.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah, you shouldn't. It's grim up north.

James Blatch: Yeah. And Mark's across in the west country, or heading that way, but the magic of electronics, we're all in the same place for this podcast. Nick, I know Mark and I have both followed you for some time now, and Mark when he's having his more honest moments will say that you are quite an inspiration to him to perhaps open a new avenue of income stream for himself.

Is that fair, Mark? That I think you were quite inspired by Nick?

Mark Dawson: Absolutely. I think Nick put the course out and I watched endlessly as he put it together and launched it really successfully. I wouldn't have been interested in doing the Facebook ads course if it wasn't for Nick's example, so that's absolutely true.

James Blatch: There's a lot of people grateful for that. Nick, let's start with that, then, because this is an area ... I mean, people look at you and they look at Mark and think, "Well, this is very special. They've got this very specific talent or knowledge in an area that they could monetize."

But actually, you're teaching people who write books that there are ways of making money beyond the book-selling itself, aren't you?

Nick Stephenson: Definitely. I think it's a similar worry a lot of people have when they think about courses in general. They think, "Oh, I'm not an expert." Or, "I don't have a PhD or a doctorate in something, therefore I can't possibly be a teacher," but in reality, if you've got experience that other people will benefit from, then I think it's up to you to share that experience with people if that's what you want to do. Courses is a great way of doing that.

James Blatch: When did you first migrate from writing a novel to writing non-fiction?

Nick Stephenson: It was a couple years ago when, I had written 6 novels and only really recently figured out how to sell them. I think a lot of authors when you write your books and you put so much effort into them and you release them out into the world and nothing much happens, I think the common wisdom - I hesitate to call it wisdom - is that all you need to do is just constantly write more and more books all the time and then somehow magic things will happen and you'll become a success.

In reality, it's a lot more difficult than that. When I figured out that the real key was instead of building a huge backlist was focusing more on building

up an audience to my existing backlist. Then things started to get a lot more successful a lot more quickly. I'd been documenting everything on this little blog that I have which I decided to set up right from the get-go and write stuff about what was happening, and I was getting more and more followers and people were asking me to put out a book that would do the same thing, so I did.

First of all I wrote a book called 'Supercharge Your Kindle Sales' which is all about key words and categories and lovely stuff like that. And then I released a book called 'Reader Magnets' which is about how to turn random traffic into e-mail addresses and then follow up with people. It was great, people loved the books, but I still found that people would download these books and then they would e-mail me questions that were specifically answered in the books. Or they'd tell me, "Hey, I love your books. I'm just getting started as an author, how do I sell more copies?" It's just like, "Did you read the book? Did you take any of it in?"

I realized after maybe 6 months or so - bearing in mind that the books are selling well and that there were affiliate products in there that I was recommending. I'd say I used a particular e-mail program and I really liked it. I'd send people a link, and I'd earn a commission if they bought it. It was earning a decent income for me, but it was still frustrating because people weren't really investing in the information in there. They were kind of just reading it and then forgetting about it.

I was researching what other companies were doing, and I came across online courses; people selling really in-depth training - way more in-depth than you could go into in a book - and the students who were taking these courses were actually using the information and getting results and just being over the moon about it. I thought, "That's the response that I want from people following my strategies. I want them to actually go out and do it, invest in themselves, put it into practice, and then get results. That's what I want." I then decided to put together a course, and it all came from there, really.

James Blatch: Why do you think a course gets results or gets people motivated and actionable rather than a book? Because you can put a lot of detail in a book.

Nick Stephenson: You can, and I think there's a few reasons. The courses, for a start, they tend to be more expensive. That immediately disqualifies the people who aren't really serious about it. You've all the courses that are \$5 or free and they have thousands of students and very few of them actually do anything with this information. But when you have a premium training, it's more like an education.

You know, you go to university or you go to college and you're investing a lot of money and a lot of time to learn something specific, and people are happy to do that. But if it's a free evening class, people just tend not to really go or get relaxed about it. Having that course, having that kind of formal structure where students can come and learn something specific in a lot detail - often with videos to go along with it as well. I think the price barrier's helpful as well, because it means that people are physically handing over something. They've become more invested in the outcome. They tend to work harder and get better results as a result of it.

That's the main difference, really, is you can't charge more than about \$10 for a book. Even that's kind of at the high end, and even at that sort of level, people are just sort of downloading it out of curiosity, reading it, and not doing a whole lot with it in a lot of cases. The course structure was perfect.

James Blatch: There's an expression wasn't it, about free money? "Nobody plays well with free money." So, if you give somebody \$1,000 and buy them into a poker tournament, they'll play rubbish. If it's their \$1,000, all their focus and attention is there. I think that kind of backs up the theme that you've become invested in something and that in itself means you're more likely to make the most of it.

Nick Stephenson: Absolutely.

James Blatch: Well let's just dwell on giving away things for free and people not being invested in it, because conversely that is actually an important part of the strategy that both you and Mark advocate and it's a running theme on almost every interview we do on this podcast. I noticed that, is it the Kindle supercharge book is perma free now?

Nick Stephenson: 'Reader Magnets' is, yeah. That one.

James Blatch: Oh, 'Reader Magnets'. That one is perma free now. This is something you use both with your novels and with your non-fiction; that permafrees element.

Nick Stephenson: Definitely. Free is a wonderful way of getting attention and then figuring out who are the people you want to target going forward. Take for example the fiction side of things; I offer a free book as a sort of starter - Mark does as well - and we use that to encourage people to sign up to our mailing list. We're still not going to get 100% of people going to buy something. But it's a way of getting those people through the door and then figuring out who the buyers are.

Because something is free, you're going to get a lot of people interested in downloading it. Not all of them are going to be perspective buyers, so then your job is to follow up and figure out who your target audience is and then to also convert those people who are on the fence into buyers.

Free is a wonderful way of building an audience and getting attention, but to get people results in terms of the percentage of people that are going to do something with it, it's kind of lacking, so you have to have something else to work towards as well.

James Blatch: It also pre-qualifies people as well. Let's say if we move out of the kind of thing that we do, Nick, and let's say we were doing a book about electrical engineering; something really esoteric. If you had a free book and somebody downloaded it and then they signed up to your list

after reading the book, you know at that point that they are at the very least interested enough in electrical engineering to download the book. You're getting a different quality of potential customer that would be the case if you just put up an advert to a wide spectrum of people.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah, or offer cash. Here's \$5 if you sign up to my list - the worst idea in the universe. It does give you that great way of getting attention from the right people and then further qualifying people as we go.

Mark Dawson: Can we just drill into a little bit of detail?

I'm interested in the post-mailing list work that you do to then work out who your customers are going to be? Could you give us 1 or 2 tips or tricks at that stage? Once you've gathered the names how you then do the detailed work afterwards?

Nick Stephenson: Sure. Everyone on your mailing list - let's say there's 100 people on your list. You're going to have maybe 10% of the people are going to be buyers already. They love what you do, maybe they've read your previous books or seen you speak or whatever. They're going to be the people who are your super fans; about 10%.

There's going to be about 5-10%, maybe more, who are never going to buy from you. They just wanted the free book or the free gift and they're not interested in anything else and they will eventually ignore you or unsubscribe.

It's that 80% of other people who are on the fence or not quite decided yet that we then have to target before we offer anything for sale.

This is a big frustration for people. They build up a mailing list and they immediately start sending out sales messages. You've all seen them where you see an advert that says "1 weird trick that can lose belly fat in 3 days,"

that kind of stuff, and you maybe sign up for this and then immediately you start getting sales messages through and most of the people will turn it off. But there will be a small percentage of people who will buy it; otherwise, why are they doing it? But the vast majority – that 80% – might buy, but haven't yet decided. It's our job to then follow up with people to try and get those people who are on the fence to buy and commit.

So, what we do after someone signs up for our e-mail list is we send them more e-mails, and depending on what it is that we're going to sell, that's going to have a different focus to it. The idea is to convert those people who aren't sure yet or don't really know who you are, haven't quite built up the trust yet to build that trust, that brand recognition, and then lead people up the mountain, so-to-speak, towards the purchase.

We might do that by sending out more free content like blog posts or videos or podcasts or maybe more books, and we do it in such a way that we're telling people that this is what to expect from us, this is the kind of quality I am, and I've got some more cool stuff coming your way soon, but it's going to be more premium-based.

Where, fiction, this would probably be a good example where you have someone sign up for a free book and then you might offer them teasers and previews of your upcoming launch and get people excited and ready to buy. And then when launch time comes you've hopefully converted some of those 80% into the buyers. That's really what the idea of getting people into the mailing list is all about, is converting people who have never heard of you into people who love you and want to buy everything you've ever put out.

James Blatch: I think it's 2-fold. The first thing, as you say, Nick, is you're introducing yourself to people so they get to trust you and feel that they have a relationship with you and you're really good in your e-mails; your personality comes through very strongly in your e-mails and that works really well. Let's go back to my horrible example of electrical engineering.

Nick Stephenson: I love that idea. I'm doing it.

James Blatch: No, I'm doing it first.

Mark Dawson: So competitive, you two.

James Blatch: We've talked about it; if it's a particular problem that these people have, you're demonstrating that you have the solution to this problem. As you say, you can give free videos which is something that we both do. You could give out books or podcasts or all that kind of stuff, but the end game is to demonstrate that you are qualified to offer advice to help them solve their problems.

Nick Stephenson: Exactly. Even if you're not a PhD in something, you're showing people that they can trust you and that you have the expertise in other ways. That's part of converting those people into buyers, definitely.

James Blatch: And we should say that there's a little Nick in the environment.

Nick Stephenson: There is. He's really noisy, isn't he? He's a much smaller and more ginger form of me.

James Blatch: Aww, that's very sweet and it's absolutely fine. People will love to hear a family environment. In fact, one of the things that people are working towards when they invest in your course, Nick, and they talk to Mark as well, is this lifestyle that you live.

Let's talk about that for a second, because obviously you're up north from Cambridgeshire, but it's still a nice place. You work from home, you spend time with your children; both of you do that. This is the end goal for a lot of people that will be listening to this podcast.

Nick Stephenson: Definitely. I think Teddy's handcuffs might be too tight. That's probably why he's screaming.

James Blatch: Is the radiator starting to come off the wall?

Nick Stephenson: Exactly. It's really kind of rattling the chains there.

The lifestyle has been amazing, and it's something that I've yearned for for so long. When I finished university, I graduated into the recession; the world's best timing. I think the day I graduated was when they had the news stories of all those guys in front of the banks with their cardboard boxes, so I was forced to find ways to find work and income through it.

I had such a great time being my own boss and doing various sorts of things. I mean, I made no money whatsoever – just enough to pay rent. But then when I eventually went into a full-time corporate job, I just found it so frustrating because you could never get anything to happen and you were always kind of constrained by what the business wanted to do, you couldn't experiment, and everything was very slow.

I realized I wanted to go back to that idea of being my own boss, but preferably one where I could afford to eat as well as get the bus on a daily basis. It eventually transitioned into fiction and then non-fiction and then the courses. There's other experiments going on as well to see what's working, and it's been great fun. It's allowed me to pick and choose my hours and to work from home or from wherever. The key being that I don't have to be in a specific place at a specific time in order to earn revenue. Apart from recording this podcast, of course, which is awesome because it's not based on a U.S. timezone. Most of mine are at like, 9:00 at night. Generally speaking, you have this system, this funnel, this business that's built up that can earn revenue for you without you having to physically be there to run it. People throw the word 'passive income' around a lot, and it's not really passive. You do have to do stuff, but you don't have to do it from 9-5, 5 days a week. You can pick and choose how you do it, and that's the real freedom for me is getting to see my kids grow up and not having to

worry about getting into the commute and traffic every morning. It's just been amazing.

James Blatch: That's one of the key differences there between fiction and non-fiction is that with non-fiction, you're using a book as a lead generator and then sending prospective customers to a course, for example. The course still needs to be updated, you still need to do the promotion and finding new customers and all that kind of stuff. It is less intensive than continuing to write novels. The key difference is that once the course is done and the funnels are operating, you can take your foot off the gas a little bit, but with fiction, if you want to be successful, unless you have a break-out hit, you do have to keep producing content.

Nick Stephenson: Especially with publisher deadlines, Mark.

Mark Dawson: Yes, tell me about it. Very much the Tim Ferris, the 4 hour work week approach, and it's an important point to make. I'm setting out on the fiction writing things, and so I'm soaking up everything that I hear from you, Nick, and everyone else. I'll tell what is so difficult; because we all take ourselves seriously as authors and we all think we've got this novel and it's nice to be a journalist, I should be able to write, but ...

Nick Stephenson: You make stuff up, don't you?

Mark Dawson: I make stuff up, exactly, for the BBC. Now I do it for myself. The BBC was not privy to that statement. The important thing is I'm starting to understand this is a commercial venture, this is a business venture, there's going to be a laser focus to it.

A real awakening to it for me actually was sitting down on a sofa with Adam Croft a few weeks back, listening to him who's written 7 or 8 books in a row, done a lot of the stuff that we talk about and made some income, and then he just reversed it. He started marketing Facebook ads that really started working for him, and he reverse-engineered his book. He sat down and

wrote a book that would work for the ads, not the other way around, and that was his golden 'hello moment' to the Tim Farris dream.

That's what I'm starting to get around to; this idea this is not a pretentious thing, I'm not trying to win a book prize, but I'm trying to change my life. I need to have that relentless focus on the commercial aspect of the writing.

Nick Stephenson: Definitely. I think there's still a degree of snobbery in the literary world that we have to try and overcome and you will see this. Any indie authors listening to this, we all know that within the indie community there's snobbery about people who write 'How-To' books, for example. If you look outside the indie industry, there's snobbery from the traditionally published people about people writing indie books and selling on Amazon. There's snobbery about snobbery about snobbery, and just like you said, the goal here is to create something, change peoples' lives, and change your own life as well and we're all kind of in the same boat. The idea that it's a commercial venture is what we've really got to get behind here and try and let go of these slightly snobby approaches I think.

James Blatch: Let's go back a little bit for more detail because it's the stuff I'm interested in and I suspect a lot of listeners as well. If we go back to the e-mails, I want to talk to you about 2 aspects of them. 1 is frequency and the other is tone.

We've spoken to a few people - Marie Force was a really interesting one on tone. She has a very friendly 'you're part of the team and this is an exciting adventure, we're all going on this adventure together' sort of atmosphere that she creates for her readers and that works tremendously well for her. I read your e-mails, you're quite witty, you're quite personable in the way that you write; quite edgy I think as well in some of the things that you do. How much do you think about that tone and how important is that in terms of getting you to where you need to be with the mailing list?

Nick Stephenson: For me I find the less I think about tone and the more I just write what comes naturally, the better things go. When I first started

out, I was writing extremely generic e-mails. You could sign up for someone's mailing list and get a dozen e-mails just like the ones I'd written through. They were quite boring. They were still effective, but they weren't very interesting.

Then I started working on trying to let go of the idea of offending people. Not going out of my way to be offensive, but not self-censoring too much. I would write about an opinion on a certain marketing strategy I'd heard about and I will talk about it and I will tell people what they should be doing instead. I'll write it as though we're in a conversation like we're having a conversation right now, and I won't hold back.

I'm not going to be releasing f-bombs or anything, but it's just trying to figure out what your own voice is and not restrict yourself too much. That was a turning point for me because it became actually quite fun to write the e-mails and people would respond to them and they would get really excited and love them, and then some people would hate them of course, which is equally amusing. Then I would take screenshots of people sending me hate mail and I would put that in an e-mail and explain to people why you can't please everybody.

It's just this idea of having a little bit of fun, trying to be yourself, and trying not to make yourself so generic that everybody finds you boring. They'll either turn on the sleaze - usually because that's what they're used to reading - or they'll write something that's so middle of the road and so bland because they're terrified of somebody unsubscribing that then everybody else just finds it a little bit dull.

For me, having that tone and having your own unique voice makes a big difference and you can see that in the amount of interaction that I get in my e-mails now is a hell of a lot better than it was when I first started out. That's natural; you learn as you go.

My big tip is to try and let go of what you think you should be writing and just be yourself and try to get your voice to shine through. You're an author. You're a writer. You should have that ability to do that in your books, just

apply the same process to your e-mails as well and it'll make a big difference.

James Blatch: That's the thing that you said there that I sometimes struggle with is worrying about unsubscribes. At the end of the day it doesn't really matter that much. I think the thing that bothered me was when I thought I found out what MailChimp thresholds were, and I was actually catching myself getting the calculator like, "Shit. I've had 20 unsubscribes and I've sent out 10,000 e-mails. Does that mean I'm above the threshold?" Of course I wasn't, I'm not even sure how firmly those thresholds are administered. I don't think I know anyone who's had their accounts shut down for those kinds of reasons. I think you look at unsubscribes and that's a pretty visible way to judge whether people have been offended or not by what you've written and it's very easy to let yourself be bothered by that and you have to let go and almost ignore it.

Don't be spammy, obviously, but don't be afraid to be yourself. If people don't like your message or the way that you speak, then they can unsubscribe. It's probably best that they do because you're never going to be compatible to them, anyway.

Nick Stephenson: Exactly. I found when I changed the tone of my e-mails to be more like I'm talking today, that my unsubscribe rate stayed exactly the same. Every e-mail I send out, it's the exact same percentage unsubscribe rate. I can't remember what it is, but it's below the danger zone. And I found that while unsubscribes stayed the same, people clicking and opening and replying got a lot higher, so it's been that benefit of trying to let go of that fear a little bit and just be yourself definitely helps.

James Blatch: That's something that when it comes to fiction, I find that when you enjoy what you're writing, other people will enjoy it more too. I've tried to write fiction before to market without being in a genre that I particularly enjoy and that stuff was awful to write, and I imagine it was awful to read.

Nick Stephenson: No, I like the John Nelson series. What's that about f-bombs? You're about to get one. No, no, it's kind of way back when I went from traditional publishing to trashy continuing to try and get a deal and I wrote something because I thought it would sell a lot, and it was like pulling teeth. It's similar; I've tried to write e-mails before and tried to make it sound like someone who isn't me. They're awful. It doesn't work. They're awful to write, they're probably awful to read, and no one wins. It's just better to be yourself.

James Blatch: People spot insincerity very quickly I guess, is the thing. Although, for some people I suppose their voice might not be exactly them. What is it we always used to say on radio? That you have to go away from yourself and then come back, but not all the way back. It's not quite like the way you talk in a pub to somebody. It's somewhere between being a little bit protecting and a little bit yourself. I think that's probably the same with your e-mail voice.

Nick Stephenson: Definitely. It's probably not exactly how I talk to my kids, for example, but we have different tones for different circumstances. As long as it's authentic and it's you, then I think that's all that matters.

James Blatch: Okay. Let's talk about frequency. You're quite prolific with your e-mails I think, Nick.

Do you have a formula you follow in terms of frequency, or do you just judge it by responses and what you've got to say?

Nick Stephenson: For non-fiction, for the courses, when someone signs up for the first time - depending on where they've signed up, if they're going through kind of like a pre-launch sequence for example I'm sending them lots of free stuff and I'm excited, then they'll get an e-mail from me every single day. And then once they've gone through that, I might only e-mail them once or twice a week. It depends if I have anything interesting to say. What I'm actually doing right now is I'm building up a backlist, for want of a better word, of e-mails that have performed well in the past - that are sort

of evergreen - so that when people are finished going through a particular sequence, I can move them into what we call an engagement sequence where I have nothing to sell, I just want to give them valuable stuff and that will automatically send them an e-mail once a week or twice a week with something really cool with what I've written in the past.

This can work amazingly well because if you e-mail too often for too long ... Like, I wouldn't e-mail someone every day for a year, for example. If you e-mail too often, you're going to turn people off, and if you don't e-mail enough, people are going to forget about you.

I found this out last year after I launched my course for the first time. It was so exhausting and there was so much work to do afterwards, I didn't e-mail anyone on my list for like 4 months, and by the time I got back to emailing again, the engagement had just dropped through the floor, so I had to work really hard to build that back up again. Now I'm trying to send at least one e-mail a week to people with something useful or inspirational or educational or entertaining or something for them to really keep up with me and the brand.

Frequency, there's not really hard and fast rules. For fiction, I think if you tried to e-mail someone twice a week, they'd probably complain. Everyone would probably unsubscribe. Fiction's a bit different; it's a lot broader. With something very specific like electrical engineering or belly dancing for plumbers, it's a lot more specific, so people tend to have a higher threshold for how much information they get because it's useful for them. It all depends on your audience, but frequency is whatever feels right for you and you've tested on your audience. There's no kind of standard answer for that one.

James Blatch: Plus, relevancy is much easier when you know what people are interested in. For fiction, for example, I know that people like my books, but there's only so many times I can write and say, "Writing went well this week. I wrote 10,000 words yesterday. It was great."

Nick Stephenson: Exactly.

James Blatch: That's pretty much the end of the conversation for me, at least. Some authors will have a different approach to that, but not me. When you're talking about how do you get more readers, or for us, how do you use Facebook to sell books, you know the people aren't interested in selling books or building their mailing list and there will always be something new to say about that. A different approach or a different strategy that is or isn't working, so you can always say something and you know the people are interested in that particular subject.

It's easier to craft those e-mails and make them interesting and relevant. It is different between the genres.

Nick Stephenson: Definitely. And fiction readers as well. They might love your books, but may not care the slightest how you wrote them or how many words you've done, so it can be more tricky. Which is why for fiction if I don't have anything to say, I won't say anything or I'll e-mail out about another book I've read that isn't mine that I think people will like. But I try not to e-mail too often because like you said, it's not going to be relevant to most people unless it's specifically about a book I know they'd like, and if they get those too often, it's going to turn them off.

Mark Dawson: The way I've gotten around that problem is on the fiction side of things I only e-mail when I've got something that they might be interested in reading; like a new book or maybe a deal. Occasionally I might let them know about a deal. For their kind of lifestyle stuff, the writing process or news.

I did a Facebook live video which is very engaging because you can field questions in real time, people can have a look in your study while you're recording, all that good stuff. It's just great for them and it's great for me because I don't have to sit down and write a bloody e-mail, so it's good all

around really. People work different, but that's working pretty well for me right now.

James Blatch: Let's move on a little bit in the time that we've got left, Nick, and talk about the split in your life between the 2. I'm interested to know which one you enjoy doing.

Do you ever kick back and think, "If I was just writing novels or had this one focus, I'd be happier, it'd be a clearer life," or vice-versa? Is it the non-fiction side?

Nick Stephenson: It comes and goes, really. I think my goal in life is to work on what makes me happy. I spent 3 years writing fiction and loved every minute of it, but then that story came to a close. I tried writing a new series, I tried a couple more books, got quite a long way through them, and then just decided that the passion wasn't there for that story.

So, I decided that instead of releasing something that I wasn't 100% happy with, that I would focus on something else instead, which was building up the course, building up the teaching, helping other authors build up their audience as well. It was becoming more and more fulfilling for me. Especially as we said earlier because people are investing in the education, getting results from it.

I get e-mails from people for whom it has literally change their lives. They've quit their jobs, they've hit the top of best-seller lists, they're finally getting to where they want to be. This is very fulfilling to me and that's really what drives me to do more on this side. But, I also know that I will go back to fiction, but I'll go back when the time is right, and that's an option that is thankfully open to me, so I'm very grateful for that.

James Blatch: Okay. List building. We're to go back to the beginning part of the conversation. Your list was essential with novels. It's absolutely

essential; it's the golden way that people innovate and commercialize on the internet.

Talk to us perhaps about the difference between those 2 areas and how you initially built your list, what techniques you used for the non-fiction side.

Nick Stephenson: The way I built my list - and still do - is a big chunk of it comes from having free books on Amazon and the other e-book platforms. As we said earlier, free is a great way of getting attention, and if you're doing something smart with that attention like converting that attention into e-mail addresses and following up with them, that is a really great way of using revenue.

I still use that model today because it just works in the background once you set it up. It just continues to work. I also did some guest posts and guest blogs have been very successful as well. Joint venture partnerships have been very successful, giveaways have been great, and Facebook ads have been good as well. There are many ways to build an e-mail list. The key is focusing on what's giving you the best bang for your buck.

James Blatch: How much paid advertising do you do?

Nick Stephenson: Not a huge amount at the moment because I'm still getting a lot of people signing up through other revenues, but this is something that I'm working on this year. At the moment, I might spend a couple of thousand dollar on Facebook advertising, but the goal is really to 10x that this year.

Now that I have the opportunity to focus on that, that's something that I'm going to be looking at very closely, because it's a great way of scaling up. Because when you've got permafrees, books are great, doing guest posts, guest blogs on popular sites is great. Joint venture partnerships are amazing as well, but if you want to literally have touch of the button control

over how much traffic you're getting, Facebook ads are definitely the way to go for that.

James Blatch: In terms of approach for this, there are going to be people listening who have the vestiges of ideas of non-fiction for building up courses and material and they've got something to work. There's lots of nuts and bolts. It's obviously very valuable listening to you on this subject and Mark, but in terms of the kind of attitude and approach that you need, is there any tips you can give people? It can be a bit discouraging working by yourself, can't it? We can all self-doubt quite a lot about this. Is there anything that you can talk to people at the beginning stage of opening up a non-fiction element to their industry?

Nick Stephenson: There's a lot of things to think about when you're just starting out, and I think you mentioned that idea of getting overwhelmed and feeling a bit lonely is definitely something to work around. I think one of the ways around that is to objectively test what it is you're planning to do.

If you've got a vague idea of what you want to do in any business, if you can test it and you can prove that the market is there and the desire is there. Then that should hopefully give you the confidence to move forward which is starting to build the framework of what your business is going to look like and how you're going to get people to notice it.

A really simple way is Google keyword analysis and Google trends, looking on Amazon to see what kind of topics and areas are getting the most attention.

If you have a list already, then sending out surveys is a great way to find out what people are interested in as well. I did one at the end of last year which was really helpful for me because I basically redesigned all of my free content around the results of this survey. This was to authors, asking them what's your number 1 struggle, and their results were really quite interesting. I was expecting people to say things like their number 1

struggle was selling books or their number 1 struggle was getting reviews, and while people did say that, overwhelmingly, the number one struggle was building an audience.

My course had been, luckily, focused on audience building right from the start. But obviously, I was going to do a course specifically about selling or specifically maybe keyword optimization or something like that. But having done the survey and looked at the actual results, that would have been an absolute disaster.

If you can test your ideas, make sure that people are going to be interested enough in them to pay, then that's a really effective way of overcoming that doubt because you know that objectively the market is there and that all you need to do is have the right product and get it in front of those people. That really helps you move onto the next stage which is actually doing the work.

James Blatch: And keep believing it while you go along, because that's the problem. I think people may start out with that enthusiasm and they can do some research and they've got the idea and they think it's going to work. It's 6 weeks down the road. It was with our business, I'm sure with yours; there's quite a long period before there's any income, before there's any tangible results, and they're the moments that I think you and Mark have been successful in in keeping that focus.

Nick Stephenson: It was 4 months for me from the date that I started. Even longer actually. It was more like 6 months. But it took me 4 months to build the course and launch it, so all the time I was building this course and I was getting everything ready, there was always this nagging doubt in the back of my mind that no one's going to be interested and no one's going to want to buy this. But I knew from the e-mails I was sending out, the research that I'd done, the surveys I was doing, that people were very excited about it, so that kept me going and really pushed me to finish it.

James Blatch: I remember that quite well because we'd met each other before you started doing the course and you came over to do a session where we did a chat. That didn't work because ...

Nick Stephenson: Yeah, I forgot to to turn the microphone on.

James Blatch: ... so we met up again in London to do that again, and this was, there was nothing coming in at that point. It was basically an investment. Even things like fuel and renting a space in London where we could record and the not small matter of the time-investment that was required.

You were putting all that upfront with just the faith that it would eventually produce something that other people wanted to buy, and you completely knocked that first launch out of the park, but you had to see that through.

Nick Stephenson: Exactly. It's that belief. I remember feeling the same belief when I started writing novels as well because I had spent hours researching other people like Joe Konrath and Blake Crouch and others who had kind of started off the Kindle revolution.

I knew that theoretically it was possible, so there was no reason why I couldn't do it as well. If someone else can do it, I can do it, I just have to figure out how.

It was the same with courses. I was seeing other businesses releasing courses and doing very well with them, so I knew it was possible, and I knew my audience was interested in it because they were telling me. My research said that the market was there, and it was that belief that really pushed me through.

It wasn't an insignificant investment. It was a lot of time and it was a hell of a lot of money to put into something that may have fallen flat on its face, but that belief really did get me through it. I'm sure you felt the same, Mark, when you started off with John Milton and his Beatrix Rose series; that

belief that it was going to work and it pushed you through to get them written. Otherwise it may not have happened.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, a bit of that. I'm always surprised at how well it's gone. I don't think I'd ever get over that element of surprise and I knew people would enjoy reading them. I think self-doubt is natural for creative people generally. I still get that today putting a new book out. I still kind of think, "Well, I think this is quite good, but maybe it isn't." And you'll get good reviews coming in and e-mails from advance-feeds ...

Nick Stephenson: That's a great launch e-mail there, by the way, Mark. I think it's pretty good. Here's a link.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, exactly. But, I think that's normal. Sometimes it's not a bad thing, either. It keeps you on your toes.

Nick Stephenson: I still get the fear. I re-shot all my videos last month and put them out in time for my latest launch, and I was terrified. I'd taken all this research, and I'd been doing filming for a year and I kind of had this process nailed, and the video was amazing, the content was structured, it hit all the points I wanted it to hit, it followed the research. I was still terrified that people would hate it.

I was refreshing the Facebook comments every 5 minutes just to see if people hated it. Of course you get 1 or 2 people who go, "Yeah, this is absolute bollocks," but the majority of people really like it, and the fear was still there, exactly the same way it was when I would release a new fiction novel.

I knew that it was my best one, but I still thought people would hate it. That fear will always be there if you authentically invested something of yourself into a product or a book, you're always going to have that fear. I think it's a sign that you're doing the right thing.

James Blatch: If I could make an observation here; I think both of you - in fact, I include myself here - are quite competitive in life. And I think in all seriousness, I think leveraging that competitive part is the important part of driving a business as well, and that's where some of your belief comes from.

You said it yourself that you saw other people doing this and you thought, "Well, I can do that." Actually, it's more than that. You think you can do it better than them and I think that's what drives you and Mark.

Nick Stephenson: I think it's doing it as best you can and hitting what you want it to hit. It's a bit of a subjective test as to what's better than something else, but I always put out the best quality that I can possibly do, and I think the person I'm in competition with the most is me. Having looked at what Your First 10,000 Readers looked like a year ago and what it looks like now, the difference is huge and I'm always going to be trying to beat myself like I did last time.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I think that's important. Comparison I think is a dangerous road to go down. I could compare book sales with somebody I'm writing in a similar genre to and they could be doing better than I am, and it's quite easy to get discouraged by doing that, especially when you're starting out, so I think it's absolutely right. It's just put out your best stuff, compete with yourself, make sure that what you release tomorrow is better than the stuff you release today, and you'll be on the right path.

Nick Stephenson: Yeah, and be aware of your competitors as well because it always helps you keep focus.

James Blatch: Great. Well Mark, I'm about to wrap up, so is there anything else that you think we've missed or that you'd like to inquire about with Nick?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, and I'll just frame this real quick, and we haven't mentioned it in the interview with Nick yet, but the framework for this series of I think 3 podcasts is going to be how to make money with non-fiction, so this will be the first of the trilogy, using books as introductions to selling something else.

The second one will be with David Siteman Garland who we've both taken a course that he put out on building a course, and then we're going to speak with Ankor from Teachable, I think, to talk about actually how to technically structure and focus the course.

But, just sort of spinning back a little bit further, we talked about surveys earlier and I've done that too; with books actually, and non-fiction, and one of the questions I get quite a lot ... One of the answers I get when I'm asking, "What is your problem? What would you like to solve?" is how to make money with non-fiction.

I think there are 2 ways to do that. You can put out a book in the traditional sense and try to make money off the book, and that is a perfectly valid way of doing things. Obviously people do that very successfully, and we're going to be talking to Pat's friend later about his recent launch of his book, 'Will it Fly', which did really well.

The other way, which I think is the more interesting way, is what you've done, Nick; is using the book as the entrée to something else.

If you were answering that question, would you be looking more towards the sort of traditional sale or the upsale or the back end?

Nick Stephenson: The mantra I like to remember is "It takes as much effort to market something that costs \$5 that it does for something that costs \$5,000." Literally.

What you've got to do is figure out what your audience size is. If you have non-fiction and you're doing something really specific and there's maybe

only 50,000 people in the world interested in it, if your product is \$5, that's not going to go very far. But, if your product is a lot higher-end, the opportunity there is much higher.

This is completely different from fiction because fiction is so broad that you can get a lot of people onto a mailing list relatively easily with fiction and then sell them books and they all buy them by the bucket load.

But with non-fiction, the market is generally a lot smaller, so you have to think of other ways to bring in revenue. Because the market's smaller and more defined and more relative and specific, it is a lot easier to lead people towards a more premium product which is why in my opinion, I think it's actually a lot easier to make revenue from non-fiction; because of that.

The fact that you are much more targeted just on the basis of the fact that you're targeting a specific group of people who want a problem solved or have a very specific interest. It's a lot easier and like you mentioned Pat Flynn. Pat Flynn had a very successful book release, but he makes \$80,000 a month from affiliate hosting fees.

Does his book launch come close? I don't know; I would imagine not. I think that books are an amazing way of reaching new people, of building an audience, building authority in the non-fiction space, but in terms of the revenue potential, I think there's an opportunity to move people towards other things; things that will eventually do better for the customer and the student as well, in my opinion.

Mark Dawson: And of course, they don't need to be mutually exclusive. You could very easily build a list, have a course available for them to solve a problem, and then in the future produce a book and sell the book in the traditional fashion to the existing list that you know are interested.

Nick Stephenson: Exactly. Pat has his paid books on Amazon and other stores, he has free books available from his site. He has courses, he has other sites in different topics and niches, he has lots of stuff that he can help people with. He's got this really diversified portfolio of products, so he's got

a broad spectrum of people signing in in one end and then he's figuring out what they're interested in, and then he's pointing to things that he has available.

Same with Johnny Dumas as well. He has free books out as well using those as audience builders, then he's got a variety of different products and services available as well through entrepreneur on fire. 'Digital Marketer' is another example, James Altucher ... There's hundreds of people that are using their books as a way to grow their audience and authority but aren't necessarily making the bulk of their income from book sales. I think that's perfectly fine. I think that's a great way of running a business because the book gives people an opportunity to learn something and then if they want to take it to the next level, that opportunity's there as well but it's not going to be forced on them.

James Blatch: Nick, it's been very valuable. It's been a pleasure. I could have leant out the window and spoken to you, but we decided to do it this way. Your son has gone quiet which I'm slightly concerned about, but I'm hoping everything's okay.

Nick Stephenson: I just locked the cellar.

James Blatch: Yeah, okay. Good. We should say that you can visit Nick at yourfirst10kreaders.com is the site for the non-fiction stuff, and you've got a good lead-magnet there, should we say with your free video training. Your books are available at all good book sellers; Amazon.uk ...

Nick Stephenson: Even some of the terrible ones.

James Blatch: And even some of the bad ones as well. You're a great friend to the SPF podcast. Thank you very much indeed, Nick, for coming along. We will speak to you in the future without doubt, and we will of course follow closely the meteoric rise of the Emperor.

Nick Stephenson: It's been a pleasure, thank you very much.

James Blatch: Nick Stephenson. If I was going to be polite, I'd say he's full of wisdom, and if I was going to be rude, I'd say that he never shuts up. But he's a good talker, isn't he?

Mark Dawson: He's a great talker. He knows an awful lot about this and has taught me plenty. He was the perfect first person for us to go to. Still thinking about general principals about how you can take something that you're good at and then turn it into something other people would be interested in learning about.

James Blatch: I have to say, the closer I see Nick's business and his operation and his approach, the more impressed I am with him. He works a bit like us, I hope; quite compassionately as well. It's about the community and not just about running a profitable business, but the heart of it is a profitable business and he's very good at that.

Okay. We are going to move on. Next week's part 2 in this min-series about making money from non-fiction sources, and that's our interview with David Siteman Garland. We hope you can join us for that, and we'll see you next time.

Speaker 2: You've been listening to the Self Publishing Formula podcast. Visit us at selfpublishingformula.com for more information, show notes, and links on today's topics. You can also sign up on our free video series on using Facebook ads to grow your mailing list. If you've enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on iTunes. We'll see you next time.