The Reach Podcast Episode 1 with Brian Clark

Val: A lot of our listeners know about you from Rainmaker because we have that beautiful ConvertKit Rainmaker integration, a lot of your customers are also our customers and vice versa but there’s more to your story than Rainmaker. Rainmaker’s maybe the most recent part of the story. Can you take us back a little bit to … Gosh, I was just listening to an episode of Unemployable and you were talking about the early days of Copyblogger and bootstrapping and starting your website with a thousand bucks.

Brian: I’ll just summarize the pre-Copyblogger era. I was an attorney. I quit in ’98 to write on the internet which my mom did not understand. I don’t think she understands what I do now but she knows I’m not in the street. Long story short, the first business I started failed. I figured things out. My first business involved creating content, building audiences and trying to make money with advertising. I read Permission Marketing by Seth Godin and said, “Oh, I’m doing everything right except I need to sell products and services.”

That’s what I did. I built three businesses that way. In 2005, I was not entirely happy with those businesses and wasn’t entirely great at managing them. I was really good at marketing them. I took a step back and decided I was going to share what I did to build those businesses which everyone thought was weird in the “normal world” which was what we now call content marketing. Copyblogger was launched in January of 2006. If you look back at the early post, it’s clearly content marketing but we did not call it that until 2008 when my friends, Joe Pulizzi convinced me that for better or worse, this is the brand that is sticking. As you know now, it’s like a 40-billion-dollar industry. Even though I never really took to that title, I think it was the right thing to do.

Anyway, I built the audience of Copyblogger really quickly. It was interesting because everyone always thinks that they’re too late for whatever new thing that is happening. Blogging, if you didn’t start in 2001, then you are late to the party but I started in 2006 right really when commercial blogging, blogging FOR business, all of these things are really taking hold. Initial advice for people, never think you’re too late. You may be just perfectly timed depending on what you’re doing. It was still a kind of Kumbaya movement, kind of anti-commercial, suspicious of anyone who would say you should sell things
with a blog which is what I was saying. I spent a year and a half building the audience, building trust almost to the point where people are like, “Go ahead and sell me something.” That's a good place to be.

2007, what we figured out was these are people who can write, they can create content. They’re not coders, developers, designers necessarily. We thought the best thing we could do was teach people effectively the intersection of marketing in the instructional design which is now what we call e-learning or online courses or whatever. The funny thing about that is in 2007, I had just convinced people to sell stuff other than advertising. Now, I had to convince them that people will stay pay for information. Believe it or not, back at that time, there were very popular bloggers who were like, “No one’s ever going to pay for anything again.” I'm like, “Oh, God. You're so misguided.” Last year-

Val: They were saying people wouldn’t pay for e-courses or anything like that?

Brian: Yeah. It was a ridiculous notion but people believed these people. Now, what 23 billion in e-learning alone in the United States last year, I mean come on. To me, it was obvious but it was funny that you have to recognize where your audience is at and accept that and embrace that instead of saying, “Hey, dummy. How could you believe that?” I see people make that mistake all the time.

Anyway, that launch, we went from zero to six figures in a week and then seven figures within the year. Then, the next year, I got into software which is something I didn’t think I could do because I am not ... Beyond basic HTML, I can’t code but I was good at product development. I was good at recognizing pain points because I think I am somewhat representative of our target customer. I create content. I'm a business person but I don't want to mess with technology.

You can see the thread that started in 2008 all the way up to Rainmaker. Each year, we're trying to solve that problem better. That was really the beginning of the WordPress premium market. Up until that point, everything was free but everything was also unsupported. I had the recognition that number one, these features will make people’s lives better. Number two, people are really paying for support. They want to know someone’s there to help them.
In 2009, we launched our first SaaS. Let me back up a little bit. The online course we did was with one partner in a company that was launched off the Copyblogger. The WordPress design framework in 2008 was another partner in a separate company launch off at Copyblogger. In 2009, another guy, Sean Jackson, and had architected a kind of simple but interesting SaaS product that helped writers be SEO friendly without killing the content. By the time we got to 2010, we’ve got all these separate companies. All of them are in seven figures, smart people but they’re not talking to each other because I’m the only thing in common. I’m in the middle and I’ve got this constellation of companies that we all launched off of this platform through this audience.

Val: Through the partnerships?

Brian: Yeah. I had the audience and in each case, they had either the ability to help me or a skillset I didn’t have such as coding. By the time we get to 2010, I’m like, “Wait a minute. I want to do something bigger than this but the only way we’re going to be able to do that is to all come together.” We got together in Denver. It was the first time these people had ever met each other. In two hours, we had worked out what is now called Rainmaker Digital. We merged all the companies together. I actually exited one of the partnerships and then Brian Gardner StudioPress took that space which was a great move because Brian is an excellent partners and that’s been very beneficial for helping us bootstrap because we never take investment. We didn’t advertise until this year.

That’s an incredible proof that you don’t need to look outside for investment or even advice for that matter. We all have mentors and people that we consider are our go-to’s when we have questions but really, you looked at what people … You said you recognized where your audience is and go from there. That takes a lot of looking inside and looking at those partnerships you are building and saying, “Wow, I am the link between all these things. How do I bring it all together?”

Val: Yeah. The interesting thing also is that all of those people came to me out of the audience. Now, it looks like too perfect but I said to 98 things in order to say yes to three things. I think Steve Jobs said saying no is more important than saying yes and I believe that. The also interesting thing is, we did 12 million in revenue last year. Again, bootstrapped so it’s just us and again, just now getting into advertising but also, our 65 virtual employees all came from
the audience too.

I'm spoiled rotten but this is why I preach audience because you know like you have your core values up on the wall or the break room or whatever? Our core values were shared in the content. Likeminded people naturally migrated to us so the culture is awesome. All we really have to manage is working together all over the world. We're an internet company. These are internet people. I just feel really blessed but I owe it all to at least the initial insight based on ‘98 to 2005 that if you build an audience, you can figure out how to build a business.

That's an interesting point and something we, as content marketers, don't really think about that we are out there writing content and putting it out there for our intended customer but at the same time, we're really positioning our businesses, our blogs, ourselves around a particular theme and core values whether we call them that or not. That actually attracts people to us who could become part of our company and part of our business. Reach goes beyond the reach that you have with your audience, with your customers but also, to the world at large and people who might partner with you and even join your ranks one day.

Val:

Yeah, I agree. I've never used the words core values but because it wasn't necessary, because by educating people in the way that I thought was the proper way to do marketing in the 21st century, it's all about providing value to others, solving their problems. Your needs are secondary but you do end up getting what you want if you live by that code.

Brian:

You said that when it was all separate companies and you had all those parts and pieces and people coming to you left and right probably with some partnership opportunities, you said they came to you because you have the audience and they had the expertise. What was building that audience like? Was it through Copy? Was it through direct outreach? Can you say a little bit more about building that audience to the point that someone recognize you as valuable?

Val:

That's interesting. When I first launched Copyblogger, like I said, we were just coming out of the very idealistic ways of blogging. Here comes this guy saying, first of all, teaching them to apply copyrighting principles to their content so it's more engaging, gets more readership, gets more traffic,
actually accomplishes what you're trying to do which is build an audience and then, obviously, either sell them what you have to sell or figure out what they want to buy. Like half the world was ready to hear that in a little blogging microcosm and the old guard did not like it at all. They were critical of me and said I didn't get it and I was an idiot basically but they linked to me. Their audience said, “No, I think he’s pretty smart.”

Val: It worked against them.

I’m not a guy who believes that no PR is bad but in those cases, it didn’t matter if you liked what I was doing or if you didn’t. As long as you linked, your audience got to decide. That was part of the early catalyst that allowed Copyblogger to grow really impressively that first year and then obviously keep going but it was just creating … It was like an escalating sense of … not warfare, but we were trying to out-value each other during those years, what we now call long-form epic content, we invented that because we’re just like, “Hey, watch this. Your post went viral. Well, watch this one go viral.”

Val: Like word battling.

Yeah. In a sense, it was a different time and yet, at the same time, the principles remain the same which is give more value, give it in a unique way more than your competitors. Now, in our space, blogging, content marketing, whatever, it’s very competitive but even today in other spaces, your competitors probably aren’t doing anything great so there’s always this room to go ahead and outdo the competition. That’s your mindset. Outdoing them is not some cutthroat thing. It’s how can I give more value to my prospects than they do and that’s good for everyone.

It’s that bold stance of this is what I believe in and I know people are going to disagree with it and I’m okay with that because I think a lot of people take the tactic of, “Okay, I’ll outdo my competition. They wrote a, 11 ways to whatever. I’m going to write 12 ways to do that thing.”

Val: That’s not necessarily what I mean but I get you.

Brian: That’s what a lot of people think it means to provide more value and that’s not
necessarily what it means. Say more about that.

Brian: It means being more empathetic actually. It means understanding the problems that your prospects have and how they’re trying to solve them and then, being able to put yourself in their shoes, first of all, but also see the journey that they have to go through to get where they want to go. A lot of times, it’s not that they chose to buy from your competitor. It’s that they chose not to buy at all because they felt like they couldn’t do it. Some obvious examples of that might be weight loss or fitness or something like that but it really applies to any problem that is not mandatory. If you’re going to sell your house, you pretty much have to choose a realtor or you have to choose to sell it yourself so a choice is going to be made. In other instances, they might decide just not to do it at all.

Val: There is that element of the bold stance of what you stand for but there’s also the element of the bold stance of what you’re against. Did that come into play as you were growing your audience even in some of these rap battles on blogs that you were having of, “No, I’m definitely against that”? Did you find people rallying around you with that particular side of things or was it more in the, “This is what I stand for and forget everything else”?

Brian: No. I generally say there’s four types of persuasive content. There’s the traction authority content, the final’s action, of course, what you want them to do but one of the most important pieces and the one people shy away from is aspirational. You have to attract people that share your world view, that agree with the way that you view the world and the way you choose to live your life, run your business. It’s essentially what makes people like you.

You hear the old term people do business with others that they know, like and trust. The like comes from value and from the fact that you know what you’re talking about and provided good service and all that but you know how it is. You could say anything online and someone’s going to say you’re wrong. Yet, that’s what scares people off. It’s what makes their content whitewashed, wishy-washy, completely bland to where no one hates you but no one loves you either. That’s the worst thing, apathy. You need to stand for what you believe in. You need to express it. I don’t try to go out of my way to be controversial. All I do is tell people what I think and what I stand for. The haters come but you got to ignore them because the ones who love you, that’s who you’re talking to, not them. Don’t fight the haters. Embrace the lovers.
Val: That’s a tweetable if there ever was one.

Brian: I will be happy to allow you to tweet that.

Val: Everybody, tweet that. Tweet @brianclark. Are you @brianclark? Are you @copyblogger?

Brian: I am, yeah, @brianclark.

Val: Since we just touched on Copyblogger, you did make a transition at one point though when you went from Copyblogger being one of the many businesses under this umbrella that’s now called Rainmaker Digital, what was that transition like in moving your blog into a bigger part of something greater than you?

Brian: It started that way even with the individual businesses. I was making a lot of money. I could have just been happy and not done anything but again, we merged all the companies together to form one company that again, has 65 people, to build the Rainmaker Platform because it’s just that was my vision if I have one, that we needed a very powerful, integrated online marketing solution that non-technical people wouldn’t feel overwhelmed by. It’s a hard problem to solve especially when you’re bootstrapped. I know you guys are the same way. You just have to buckle down and build.

Val: What we did was interesting in the sense that, okay, if you’re building an all in one integrated SaaS, you have to build the parts one at a time if you don’t have a war chest of venture capital. What we did is we would build the individual technology component. First of all, we would build the tech for ourselves because we do have very high traffic sites. We’re fairly sophisticated marketers. That was our thing. We built this for ourselves and hopefully, it’ll be good for you. We did that with WordPress hosting with Synthesis. That started because we were frustrated with hosting providers. We brought our hosting in-house. We refined it to our needs which are pretty demanding. Then, we launched it and said, “Hey, this is our hosting.”
The thing people don’t necessarily understand is, though, we weren’t trying to become a WordPress hosting company. I think Synthesis makes us three million bucks a year but we don’t even promote it really because we had to build infrastructure for Rainmaker. We’re like, “Okay, we need to sell this in the meantime to make money to keep going.” We did that with our membership software, our landing page software. What else have we got? We basically sold everything that we had built until the point of 2014 when we launched 1.0 or Rainmaker. Then, we quickly evolved that to a … That was like a pilot program. I think it was only four months later, we were at version 2.0 and a public launch. Rainmaker Platform is only two years old. We just added our integrated e-mail solution. All the pieces are there now but of course, as any software company knows, especially SaaS, you’re never done.

Val: You’re never done.

You’re always, always making it better. I think that benefits everyone’s customers who has that philosophy. You get burned by the guy or anyone who says, “Okay, I’ve got this recurring revenue and I’m just going to kick it at the beach.” Eventually, that goes away. Unfortunately, that mentality is all too common.

Brian: That’s not only true in the SaaS world but for bloggers in general. Everything you just said applies to building any kind of business, that you have to go piece by piece and you have to know what your priorities are. You are really building a solution for yourselves and then, turning that around and selling it in order to provide for the next piece. All too often, we see bloggers and business owners trying to do all the things and build all of the pieces at the same time. They’re trying to establish themselves on all the different social media channels and grow their e-mail list and write on their blog every day and serve clients and build a product. They’re doing all of it at the same time and none of it really well.

Val: I see an incredible lack of patience especially when people will see where Nathan Barry is today and not realize all the work, I know from talking to him, all the work he’s done for years to become an overnight success. You know what I mean? Everyone always forgets that it’s a methodical, step-by-step process. If you try to think of your end goal all at once, you will be so overwhelmed. I don’t care if you have that war chest of venture capital. It’s still methodical. My primary philosophy is when I wake up in the morning, I’ve
already identified the most important thing that has to happen that way to keep the ball moving forward. Now, stuff pops up but that thing has to get done. Sooner or later, you're in the future and you're like, “Wait. I got there.” If you suffer from overwhelm or impatience, you get to that same day in the future and you have nothing.

Rainmaker Digital did not have a podcast network, did not have the hosting, the e-mail marketing. Do you have WordPress or you have just general themes and things like that that you guys do within Rainmaker?

Val: We're in two worlds. It's like if you want WordPress, here we can help you with that and if you want the platform, then that's what you graduate to, I guess.

You didn’t have all those elements at the beginning or maybe even in your mind at the beginning. They came through a need for your own business and a need from your customers because you were busy listening.

Yeah. I think that’s fair to say. Also, when we say we built stuff for ourselves and then, sold it, all our sites are now on … Not all of them. We have some legacy. We built all our own technology and sometimes, you realize that moving technology over, you have to find time to do that but Copyblogger's on Rainmaker, Digital Commerce Institute’s on Rainmaker. Rainmaker FM was conceived first and foremost, even though we’re really into podcasting and we can talk about why given that we’re historically a readership type audience, but that was first and foremost … We said we can justify doing this alone because it's a demonstration of the Rainmaker Platform.

Let’s talk about that, Brian, because it’s probably a question you get quite often. I know even myself as someone who has read Copyblogger for a long time, to see Rainmaker come out with a digital podcast platform and there’s so many amazing shows on it too, it’s quite the breadth of options that you can go through on the podcast platform and it almost is like, “Well, wait a second. I thought this was a Copy world and what's the deal with podcasting?” Obviously, we started a podcast here at ConvertKit. We know the value of podcasting but what did it mean for you and why did you decide to go so wide with it and have so many fingers out there with podcasting?

Brian: First of all, just to touch on something you said about Copy, Copy drives radio
ads, radio programs, scripts, television, videos. It’s all about words. There’s that but you make a fair point in that we have, I don’t know, 400,000 people who subscribed to Copyblogger in some form and they’re primarily readers. When we first did our first podcast in 2010, we had a small core audience but most people didn’t seem interested. That was a mistake I made that I didn’t see beyond that.

We went back to infographics and articles and things like that. When we eventually decided to really go into podcasting … I mean I had a podcast in 2014 that we literally launched the pilot program of the platform off of … That’s interesting because we are a written word type company but it worked. It was amazing. Later that year, serial happened and we’re like, “Okay, finally, 10 years later, podcasting is going mainstream.”

Here’s the thing. Here’s why. This show is called Reach, right? We have a really good size audience for our text content but most of the world doesn’t read. Statistically, it’s a fact. Most people don’t read more than one book a year, if that. A lot of people just don’t like to read. A lot of people like to listen. Video, obviously, is even more popular than that. When you talk about reach and you talk about the mainstreaming of social media marketing and the mainstreaming of content marketing to where it’s just marketing now … I think Scott Brinker said, “There is no digital marketing, we market in a digital world.” I totally agree with that.

If you’re only producing text, your reach is severely diminished despite the audience that you have. We’re a very ambitious company and we do want to reach anyone that we can and help them out and hopefully make them a customer someday but here’s the thing. We also love podcasting. I mean really love it. I often tell people in 2005 … That was the first year of podcasting and it was also the beginning of commercial blogging. I’m a writer and I actually considered starting a podcast instead of Copyblogger. How monumentally stupid would that have been?

Val: Wow. I’m really glad that you waited.

Brian: Yeah, exactly.

Val: I probably wouldn’t be a writer at all had you started a podcast and not started
Brian: Thank you.

Val: I'm glad that you did get into podcasting because the podcasts are fantastic. I know from being on the other side of the mic that there is something really special about it. From being a longtime podcast fan, several of my favorites are on the Rainmaker Platform. You just feel such a connection to the person that they're in your ear, literally inside of your ears.

Brian: That's an important point because strong writers develop a distinctive voice. I like to think that I did that especially during the early days of Copyblogger but there's nothing like it being your actual voice. Like you said, you're in someone's head. It's an honor to be invited into someone's head. I try to give the most value that I can obviously while also trying to make sure that we grow the business.

Val: The value is across the board, really the standard, I suppose. The standard of the value is really high on all the shows. I just wanted to say that to you personally. Just like Copyblogger, I think there’s a moment in everyone’s business building and when they are ... Maybe it comes up when they are trying to do all the things at once, that it's like, “Oh, well. I just have to post something today. I just have to ... I've got a podcast so I'm just going to podcast. Everyone’s doing that so I’m going to start a podcast,” and there’s not really attention to the level of quality and what you put out being consistently valuable.

From the sound quality on every single podcast you put out to the quality of the posts on the website, everything has to have that same level. Like you said, you have your voice so everything needs to go with the same voice too. When you're busy putting your hands on all the fires, it's hard to say, “No, let’s stop and look at quality and make sure that that’s where we want it before we just put something out for the sake of putting things out.

Brian: I think that's a core value, to use that term, that started with my attitude at the very beginning and it just carried over with everyone, that quality matters. Number one, I don’t ever want to do something just because I feel like I should or because other people are doing it. It has to help me meet my objective, my
business goal. The second driving force in my life is I don’t want to be embarrassed. I don’t ever want to put anything out there that is subpar. If we had crappy audio quality with great content, data shows people won’t listen to u. Audio quality matters. It just does.

When that’s the only thing that you have especially on a podcast, it’s number one. Do you feel that podcasting or starting a podcasting network and having all those shows, having all those ears that are welcoming you in, has that contributed to the reach that you have today as one of the biggest contributors or is there another big contributor?

Val: When that’s the only thing that you have especially on a podcast, it’s number one. Do you feel that podcasting or starting a podcasting network and having all those shows, having all those ears that are welcoming you in, has that contributed to the reach that you have today as one of the biggest contributors or is there another big contributor?

Brian: The podcast network is a long game. We’re actually cutting down the number of shows a bit because we realized that each show brand is more important than the network brand. I don’t think we were thinking that way at first but hey, live and learn. That’s great. We did three million downloads in our first year which wasn’t bad.

Val: Which is incredible.

Brian: We know we’re resonating with people. They’re a different type of person than might be over on the blog. We briefly took away transcripts and everyone hated on us. It really happened because of a mistake. It was really weird. It’s not like it’s that expensive so we brought them back. I think Rainmaker FM is going to be really valuable in that sense but the transcripts are great too. You might do this as well because you get that transcript whether it’s an interview or more of a lesson and then you turn that into an article or a SlideShare. The repurposing aspect of starting with audio is pretty amazing as well.

Val: I actually have done that. I’ve gone back to your transcripts. I was listening to an episode of Showrunner. I was listening to it while I was out walking and I heard a part that I thought, “Oh, that’d be really great for an article that I’m writing for the ConvertKit blog.” I went back to the transcript so I could pull up the exact conversation and pulled it into the blog. Transcripts are useful for more than just on your side, repurposing-

Brian: You’re saying that they promote links as well?
That’s right. They do, yeah. It gives the people an opportunity to pull content from your podcast and quote it on their blog and their site. The opportunities are endless with something like a transcript. You just don’t know what is happening until you put it out there.

Val:  
I think the initial cost when people start off with podcast, and a lot of podcasters don’t do transcripts, but it is incredibly useful to site visitors in that it is important but it’s probably not the best reason to spend the money when you’re just starting out. The best reason is I can make five pieces of content instead of just one.

Brian:  
Where else are you duplicating content? I mean not that it’s … I hate the word duplicating because it makes it sound like, “Oh, it’s just a carbon copy,” but it’s obviously used in very different ways, like you said, side shows and blog posts and things like that.

Val:  
Here’s an interesting example where someone else … We’ve got Digital Commerce Summit coming up in October. I, in the course of the last season of Unemployable in spring, interviewed several of our speakers. Then, Sonia Simone of our company went to the transcripts and wrote articles, original articles. It’s her that she’s quoting just like you did but she’s internal, to do written profiles on Copyblogger that are selling tickets to the event. That’s a great example. Sonia is a gifted writer. Give her some material to start with and she’s off to write-

Val:  
Yeah. She’s like, “Thanks, Brian. I will take this and turn it into …”

Brian:  
Yeah. Instead of having to interview the speaker again, there’s content there. Then, if she had a follow-up question or something like that, then, she just e-mailed them.

Val:  
That’s genius. It’s not only having that place within your own house of ways to duplicate content but then, who … I think it’s Corbett Barr that talks about this on the Fizzle Blog. He talks about ways to duplicate content. Even he’s played around in his podcast with doing it on video too and having it on YouTube and then, also having the audio, and then having the transcript as a blog post and all the different ways that you can reuse.
Here's another thing, because we're really big on not building on other people's land, syndication is find but you don't want to build your blog on Medium. The mistake that was made with Facebook should have thought everyone don't do that. Again, let's say my goal with Unemployable specifically as my podcast and newsletter, I take some of that transcribed content and assemble really fascinating articles. I'd have quotes from guests or pull from lessons or whatnot. Of course, I can publish that as a new article that goes into my Unemployable newsletter for people who maybe didn't listen to those episodes or whatever but then also, then you can actually take that content and post it someplace like Medium that has its own community.

Let's say it catches on there, you're obviously pointing back to your e-mail list and your podcast. That type of syndication is incredibly smart because it's like guest blogging to a certain extent. You're reaching someone else's community. It's just that Medium has a really large community. Here's a tip too. If your largest social audience is on Twitter, log into Medium with Twitter and everyone who follows you on Twitter who's in Medium is part of your audience immediately. That's cool.

Val: In Medium. That's a great hack. I hate that word but it's what it is.

Brian: I found it by accident.

Val: I know that Paul Jarvis, Jeff Goins, they both do that but then, you do have the case that 37 signals moved their blog completely to Medium and they only published there.

Brian: Yeah. I disagree with that.

Val: It's fascinating to me.

Brian: That's Bill Simmons from ESPN. Here's a great example. Bill Simmons got canned from ESPN basically because he's volatile. He didn't control the platform so he lost it. What does he do? He goes to Medium next. Now, maybe that's not as authoritative and whatever as ESPN management might be but he hasn't learned his lesson that the technology ... Again, this is the problem we're trying to solve with Rainmaker which is you have to make it easy
enough for non-technical people to manage their own property so they’re not convinced to go to someone else’s. Then, when the rules change, they’re like, “Wait a minute. How could you do this to me?” What did you expect? You don’t own that.

Sure, Medium is way easier to write on than WordPress for a blog post but again, you don’t own that content once it’s only on Medium.

We looked at Medium and we’re going to have the frontend admin interface, that really cool effect and all that. All that is doable. That’s a perfect example of affinity type, standing up for this, don’t build on someone else’s land. We’ve been saying that since 2007 and every time Zuckerberg helps us out by pulling a bait and switch on people like, “See? Told you.”

Yep. That’s something we talk about over and over again with building your e-mail list. It’s the one place you can always contact those people. If you’re only building a Twitter following-

Yeah, e-mail still. E-mail is still the thing. I tell people the whole purpose of content marketing is to sell your stuff, right? No. The whole purpose of content marketing is to build your e-mail list so you can sell your stuff because it’s the conversion channel.

That’s right. To build your e-mail list so that you can build trust and then, sell your stuff, right?

Yeah, of course. It’s not an automatic spam process. That’s exactly the definition of spam. No value. I got your address. I’m pitching some crap at you. That’s the worst.

There’s human beings on the other side of the computer screen.

If you do it right, e-mail still converts 40 times more than social media channels. That’s monumental.

It’s incredible. With those human beings that are a part of your e-mail list, is
there a particular post on your blog or maybe even an episode of one of your podcast that you wish all those humans on your e-mail list would know about and would get their eyes on?

If there is, then we generally send it to them which is the beauty of it. I was reminded of something, something you said earlier when you said, “Oh, I got to post something.” Fun memory. I think it was 2007 or late 2006. On Copyblogger at that time, it was just me and I always committed to two articles a week but high quality. They had to be super useful, educational, not just something to post. I think it was Tuesdays and Thursdays that I posted. I remember it being 7:30 or eight or nine late and tired on a Wednesday night. I’m like, “Oh my gosh. I’m so tired. I don’t know what to write. I’ve got to post something tomorrow but it can’t suck. It’s got to be useful. Maybe it’ll be boring but I’ll do five grammar mistakes that make you look dumb.”

You may find this funny now but at that time, I had no idea what posting about grammar does on the interweb. I posted it. It wasn’t super long. It was simple and I went to bed. Next morning, I don’t know if you remember those days when digg.com was social media but it’s on the Digg homepage and people are fighting like it’s a Civil War over grammar Nazis versus grow up, language evolves. I’m like, “Wow. I’ll just grab some popcorn and watch.”

Val: Talk about taking a bold stance though.

To me, that was the most … That’s the closest I ever came to what I thought was dialing it in. Of course, after that, we routinely did grammar posts just to watch the traffic and the arguments start. Here’s another funny thing. I think it was 2010 or 2011. We did an infographic when infographics were all the rage then. We kind of aggregated the best tips from all our grammar posts over the years. That infographic is the single most popular post in Copyblogger history by an order of magnitude. It got something like 300,000 pins when Pinterest was new. It’s just ridiculous.

Here’s an important lesson. That’s popular content. Is that content that is probably best suited for driving our business objective? No, but it gets us exposure. You think about that in terms of, “Okay, I got people to the site. Now, we can start teaching them things that are a little more down the funnel, if you will.” Some people confuse popularity with effectiveness all the time and you have to be very disciplined not to do that.
Val: At Unbounce, they call it ToFu or if you’re on Unbounce or Buffer refers to it as ToFu, the top of the funnel and that you have to balance your ToFu post with-

Brian: That’s funny. I didn’t see that. I like Buffer. I like all those guys but I’ve never heard of that before.

Val: That’s what they refer to it. I love that just because it’s a great acronym but you do have to balance them with ... They say you have to balance your ToFu with your meat. You have to balance it-

Brian: Nice analogy. Let’s steal it.

Val: I know, right? The ToFu, the top of the funnel posts, those more popular posts, whatever it is, maybe right now, it’s periscope and in 2011, it was in infographics. Whatever it was at the time, you balance those more popular pieces with the meatier pieces that retain the people you want to keep communicating with once they go to your site.

Brian: Serving an audience over time like we have tells you that you know what is popular but you also know what takes people to the next level and ultimately converts. That’s the benefit of doing the job. Some people start off and they want all the answers. Now, the audience has the answers. It’s up to you to pay attention and keep trying different things and making accurate observations.

Val: That’s right. Brian, now that you have built this audience at Copyblogger and brought it into Rainmaker Digital and you’re building out this platform and it’s growing, and who knows where it’ll go, do you know what you want to do ultimately with the reach that you have today?

Brian: We have a couple other things in the pipeline. We’re such a build and launch company. It’s like we get nervous if we don’t create something new and launch it. Now, a lot of that just happens inside the platform now and that was the goal. Goal number one, maintain our existing lines of business according to priority. Make sure our support takes care of our existing customers and
not just off chasing new ones. In fact, you should take better care of your existing customers for retention than hunting and gathering all the time.

Val: For sure.

The priority is keep improving constantly, keep iterating. Just never be satisfied. Fortunately, that’s not a problem because I’m never satisfied in a good way though, I think. According to reach, as in I’ve never heard of Copyblogger before, that just means we’re stepping outside of the content marketing ecosystem because within that world, we’re still the largest content marketing blog in the world but you can get so easily bewitched by your existing influence. You need to take a step back and have some humility and realize … This is true. I live in Boulder, Colorado. It’s a tech town. I walk down the street. Most people don’t know who I am. It’s rare for someone to go, “Hey, you’re Brian Clark.”

I like that actually but it lets you know that we operate in niche communities. The only way to reach beyond, you can expand the community that you have but you can also develop other ones. That’s why we started Digital Commerce Institute because that’s a kind of company we actually are but we’re known as a WordPress company or a content marketing company. Look at what we actually do. We sell digital products and services. That was the next step in the evolution. I think the only valid advice I can give for people when contemplating expanding reach is what makes sense? What’s the natural next step? That’s where we’re at right now. I think we’re on a good path.

Yeah, not forcing it and just to tie back to what you said at the very beginning, looking at where your audience is and how you can better serve the existing audience that you have and that will naturally impact your reach overall. As you continue to keep your current customers or clients or readers, whatever level of business you have, keeping those people who are already with you really happy will only serve you in the long run.

Yeah, that’s the most important business asset, your customer base and your audience. Audience is often reflected best by e-mail. It pains me that some people are still surprised that e-mail’s not dead but that’s okay. We’ll keep preaching, right?
That's right. We have a recent blog post all about that on the ConvertKit blog, about is e-mail dead because it’s still a conversation that happens. There’s the whole conversation of is blogging dead and that comes up a lot too. Things just go through cycles.

That’s been going on since 2005 every year. It’s just that there’s so many new people in the industry and that’s fantastic but they don’t have any historical perspective. We have to keep repeating these things to make sure no one’s confused.

I mean if fashion has shown us nothing throughout history, that is very true. Thank you, Brian, for coming on the podcast today and sharing everything that you did. We know that Rainmaker is only going to do great things with the reach that you have now and the reach that you’ll get as you continue to grow. Thanks for being here.

Thanks for having me. I really enjoyed this conversation.

That was Brian Clark of Rainmaker Digital. You can find out more about Brian and the Rainmaker Platform at rainmakerdigital.com. Grab your free action guide from this episode to help you impact your own reach today. Head to convertkit.com/reach or simply click the link provided right in your podcast player. It’s time to expand your reach. We’re so glad you started here. Thanks for listening.