



SPI 282

How Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls Rocked the Kickstarter Scene

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Pat: This is the Smart Passive Income with Pat Flynn, session number 282. Your kids are going to love it.

Announcer: Welcome to the Smart Passive Income Podcast, where it's all about working hard now so you can sit back and reap the benefits later. And now your host—his dream is to start a *Shark Tank* for kids without the crazy—Pat Flynn.

Pat: Hey, what's up everybody? Pat Flynn here. Thank you so much for joining me in this session of the Smart Passive Income Podcast. I appreciate your time today. We've got a really exciting interview with an amazing woman who is part of a team over at RebelGirls.co. You may have heard that before. Maybe you've heard of a book called *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*. Maybe you've seen it when you've walked into a Barnes & Noble or just all over the internet, or making headlines because of their amazing Kickstarter and Indiegogo campaigns. We're going to be speaking with Francesca Cavallo, one of the co-founders over at RebelGirls.co and also Timbuktu Magazine, which you'll hear about.

You know how sometimes, when you see these things come on board in the world and they just come out of nowhere, you're like, "Wow, what an amazing overnight success story that is." And of course, there's such an amazing message to along with the Rebel Girls stories and who it's for, but when you hear just all that was put into this and just how much actually they relied on these Kickstarter campaigns to actually keep their company afloat, you'll hear that this is definitely not an overnight success story. Actually, far from that. I'm not going to make you wait anymore, here we go. This is Francesca Cavallo from RebelGirls.co, here we go.

Hey everybody, what's up? Pat Flynn here. I'm so excited to welcome Francesca Cavallo, one of the authors of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, an amazing success story that I cannot wait to unpack. Francesca, thank you so much for being on the show with me today.

Francesca: Hello Pat, thank you for having me.

- Pat: Yeah. Absolutely. I appreciate your time, because I know you and your teammates there are very, very busy, Patricia and Elena as well. I cannot wait to learn about how this all got started. Before we get into *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, I'd love to know before that happened, Francesca, what was life like for you? What were you doing?
- Francesca: Well, Elena Favilli, who is my life and my business partner, and I moved from Italy, which is our home country, to California in 2012 to co-found Timbuktu Labs, which is our children's media startup. We moved to San Francisco to look for funding. We got accepted into 500 Startups, and started building our company there. We started from digital media. We created the first iPad magazine for children on the market when the iPad came out, Timbuktu Magazine. Then we created a number of other mobile apps for kids. But after a while, the app market began to show that it wasn't the promise that we all thought it would be.
- We started wondering how we could fulfill our mission of creating more products that could inspire children to use their imagination, to know the world, in other media—other than apps I mean. We started experimenting with books. We took the IP that we had created for our 12 mobile apps, and we worked with a traditional publisher to create a first series of six picture books for kids. That was an interesting experience where we learned a lot, but it was also not as successful and as rewarding as we had hoped it would be. But we understood that we really liked making paper books, so we started to try and find other ways, other than the traditional publishing deal, to create innovative books for children.
- Pat: I love this, because it goes all the way back to . . . you said 2012, you said it started, Timbuktu Labs?
- Francesca: Yes. Yes.
- Pat: We don't even realize that often, when we see success stories like this, we think of this as an overnight success, but I can obviously tell this was a journey for you and a long process, and a lot of learning

along the way. I'm curious, before we get even into *Good Night Stories*, what was the inspiration to focus on children to begin with as you were getting into the electronic media?

Francesca: It was a combination of different things for me and Elena. Elena, who is, by the way . . . she's the CEO of Timbuktu, she was incredibly passionate about picture books, which is a very important tradition in Italy and France. She had worked as a journalist, and she had worked with small publishing houses that were doing incredibly high-quality picture books for children. At the time, I was a stage director, and in between tours I was teaching acting to children whose parents wanted them to become professional actors.

I find this ethically challenging, because I had learned that many times, my role was to steer the kind of conversations that parents were having with their kids about the future, about the world, and that this was not something that I had expected. Elena and I found that we were coming from different places but very interested in creating products that could help parents have meaningful conversations with their kids about the world, about what was happening around them. That is why our first idea, the idea of Timbuktu Magazine as a news magazine, an interactive news magazine for children, came up. We started working on that, really with the goal of creating interactive stories that could make learning about the world enticing for kids.

Pat: I love . . .

Francesca: And for their parents.

Pat: Yeah. I love that. That's the beauty of this book: It starts conversations, absolutely. What were some of the challenges related to the digital stuff, the electronic magazine? Why . . . You can get into more detail, break away from that and go more toward paperback?

Francesca: Yeah, sure. One of the challenges, that wasn't specific to us but to basically all of the app developers that were specialized in children products, was that the app store set increasingly tougher limitations

for monetization on children's apps. Which is very cool on one side, because there were cases where parents were concerned that their kids could spend too much money on the app store, but on the other side, by progressively impoverishing the industry of children's app developers, what happened was that, basically, children started to use apps that were marketed to grownups. They were still exposed to the kind of gambling behavior that some of these apps enable, but simply because those apps were not specifically designed and marketed for children, they were allowed to do things that other app developers could not do. Because our apps were specifically designed for and marketed to children, we faced a lot of limitations in terms of the analytics, in terms of the monetization strategy. That was one of the problems. The other one was that the app store is very strict in terms of what they decide to feature.

It is very hard, borderline impossible, I would say, to have any possibility to rely on any relationships. If somehow the editorial team doesn't think that your app is the coolest in that week, you spend months, maybe years, on an app, and then you are stuck because there is no way that people are going to discover your work. The other thing is that, because of the struggles with monetization, despite the fact that we had a user base of about two million people all around the world, and we won a lot of awards for the design of our products, but it was still very hard to monetize what we were doing. I would say that to these external obstacles, the increasing body of evidence that screen time is not very good for kids is something that discouraged us from keeping on trying to get a breakthrough in the app store, because we started questioning what we were doing and if we wanted to play a game where, basically, we had to find a smart way to circumvent the limitation and make kids spend money on our apps.

That was ethically challenging for us. It wasn't part of the reason why we were working so hard to build our company. We understood that remaining in the app space would bring us in a direction where we didn't want to go, but we still wanted to create inspiring products for children. We thought, "What can we do using the skills and the competencies that we built over the past years to create a product

that can be appealing with a very clear business model and that can be inspiring without making children addicted to what we are designing?” Of course, books are a very simple thing that we could apply this to. It was very, very interesting because we came to work on books but from a very digital perspective, which is extremely rare in publishing. That allowed us to use all the experience that we have in user experience design, and in designing funnels, but instead of applying all of that knowledge on the actual product, we applied it on the journey of the user to discover our product. That was a bomb.

Pat: Can you expand on that? What does that mean exactly? What were some examples?

Francesca: Well, we knew from our days in the app store that it was very important to create a community before launching an app. We had learned early on that to launch an app and pray that people will discover it didn't work.

Pat: Right.

Francesca: We knew that before publishing a book, our first book, a paper book as publisher, we needed to make sure that there was a community that was interested in using the book. We had learned early on the concept of rapid iteration, for example, so testing sketches with people, the quickest prototype that you can build, starting getting feedback very early on. Which is another thing which is extremely rare in publishing, because usually authors are very wary of sharing any portion of their work before having completed the book. Another thing is that we had learned a lot about building a network of illustrators from all over the world, which then became part of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*.

We knew how to think in terms of digital advertising, Facebook advertising, in a way that most publishers don't because usually the traditional publishing model is that you have a gazillion of titles and you hope that one of them will fly. That means that you usually don't have a huge budget to spend on the marketing of one single book.

We were in a position where this was our first book and we needed this book to work, because if it didn't work, it meant that we needed to close our company. We were like, "Okay, let's try to make this right and let's try to build a community first." We did giveaways, we used a mailing list, and we built a specific mailing list of parents who could be interested in girls' empowerment.

Then we started sending emails to them and we started prototyping early, because we would send them a story a week about an incredibly inspiring woman that they could share with their children at the dinner table. Then we would receive feedback from them on that story, and we would fine-tune the style of the story. After a few weeks, we created a book proposal on a Google Doc, very simple, and we asked our list if they would buy it. We said, "We want to make this book. If we make it, will you buy it, and would you be able to put \$35 dollars upfront to buy this book?" Five percent of our list put the money upfront just based on a very ugly Google Doc with a few pictures and the description of the book.

Pat: I love that.

Francesca: And five percent, we knew from our digital days, that was an interesting conversion rate. It may seem very small, but it's actually a very good conversion rate, especially for a product that doesn't exist yet.

Pat: Right, right.

Francesca: We thought, "Okay, this sounds like a perfect product that we could take to Kickstarter." We had been thinking about Kickstarter for quite some time, but we hadn't found yet the right product, I guess. But when this idea, the idea of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* came about, and we had started seeing that people were giving us great feedback and that they had started giving us money for it, we said, "Okay we have to create some momentum and build a campaign and see if we can actually turn this into something big."

Pat: And big it did go. I love everything you said there. You said you

built a community beforehand, you created prototypes, you started sharing early version of it with people to get feedback. That, you're right, is totally not traditional. You've built a network of illustrators. You've done advertising digitally and have even honed down specific kinds of people in your audience through the email list that you've been building. You've been running giveaways, and this is all even before the book was out. Then finally, you had mentioned and touched on validation and had sent emails out, created essentially your prototype for your book, sent it out, got payments upfront. You have, more than anything, the motivation to make sure and do whatever it took to make this work. That's a wonderful story. Okay. You get the validation from your audience and you get a little bit of money upfront, obviously, because you've asked them to pay, which is the only way to really truly know if it's something that they want.

Francesca: Yes.

Pat: Go through the timeline then. How soon from that point, and what did you do until the first day that you launched on Kickstarter?

Francesca: I wanted to specify something that I think may be very interesting . . .

Pat: Please.

Francesca: . . . for your audience.

Pat: Thank you.

Francesca: Which is that by this point, this was our last attempt at making our company work. We had \$8,000 in our bank account and we were like, "Okay, this thing will make us or break us."

Pat: Wow.

Francesca: I always like to specify this because a lot of people think, "Oh, I don't have the money to do a Kickstarter campaign." We didn't have any money, and this simply meant that it took us a little more time to put together a very beautiful campaign, but it was just the

two of us by that point, because we didn't have a team anymore. We had to let people go because our previous model wasn't working. We just sat at the table and we said, "Okay, let's try this one last thing, and if it doesn't work we will figure something out." Just to give you the context.

Perhaps this sense of urgency, paired with the fact that we really, as female entrepreneurs, we really, really believed in the idea of inspiring more girls to have more confidence in themselves and to grow up surrounded by more female role models gave us the strength to make a plan. We worked on the Kickstarter campaign for about three months, on top of the six months before when we had worked on the community. The most crucial part of putting together the Kickstarter campaign was the script of the video. We talk to a lot of people every day that working on Kickstarter campaigns, and most of them think that the shooting will be the most important part, but we always say if you have ten dollars, put nine dollars on the script, one dollar on the shooting.

Pat: Nice.

Francesca: Because to get the messaging right and to make sure, first of all, that people understand what you are proposing and then to make your passion shine in a very authentic way. Given the theme of female empowerment, we spent a lot of time trying to adjust the messaging so that it didn't sound like it came from a place of anger or negative feelings. Which of course, if you are a woman in tech, part of that is there. There is anger sometimes, there is a strong desire for the current situation to change, but because this is a book for kids, we wanted to make sure we went right at the heart of why this was an important, inspiring, and constructive way for us to create a better world. To fine-tune the messaging took 13 drafts of the script. We worked on it, we fine-tuned it, and then we shot it with an iPhone.

The only investment that we made was in a microphone. Actually no, in the first campaign, we didn't even have a microphone—it was an iPhone, and that was it. In the second campaign, we invested in

a microphone. Our resources were very limited. We didn't have any money to run advertising for the first campaign, so what we did was we knew that media was going to be important, so we researched all the campaigns that before us had had some similar themes. We looked for journalists who had covered those campaigns. Basically, instead of trying to get our hands on those huge lists of PR that you never know who you're going to email, we wanted to have maybe less email addresses, like even as little as 50 to 100, but we wanted them to be highly targeted, so that we had a bigger chance for these people to actually be interested in what we were pitching to them. We looked for people, we compiled a list of people who had written about similar topics and about Kickstarter campaigns. Because a lot of journalists don't cover Kickstarter. This is also something that creators often don't understand. You have to find the sweet spot of people that are not only interested, in our case, in female empowerment, but that also covered Kickstarter campaigns before.

When we found those journalists, we started to email them one week before the launch of the campaign, because we wanted to try and build a relationship. We wanted to give them a heads up and possibly to find someone who would cover the campaign on the launch date. And then we had a lot of small tweaks. We installed a plugin in our Gmail accounts called FollowUp, which basically told us every time one of the whom journalists we had emailed opened our email, so that we knew even if they haven't responded, we knew that the email had been opened. We would email them again and again, up to five times before letting it go.

We were very, very persistent, and this was crucial to get the initial press coverage for the campaign. The other thing, the only marketing thing that we did was we bought an email on a newsletter of moms with whom we had collaborated before, for the launch of one of our apps. We knew that they were reliable; we knew that they had a highly targeted audience. We asked them to feature us in their newsletter the day of the launch. The newsletter is called Apparoo, in case some of your viewers are interested in the same market. That was a very, very, powerful thing. The other thing that we did was we ran a campaign on Thunderclap.

We basically privately messaged all of our friends, and friends of friends, asking them to support us on Thunderclap, so that the day of the launch, the moment we hit the launch button on Kickstarter, lots of people would tweet or share on Facebook and post about our campaign, thus generating some kind of social media storm.

That was the very, very powerful and in fact, we did it again for the campaign number two, for even bigger results. We launched the campaign with the goal of \$40,000 dollars, which was the bare minimum that we would need to print the first thousand copies of the book, with the secret goal of becoming the most crowdfunded children's book on Kickstarter. This was our secret goal, which would require us to raise \$360 thousand dollars. But in fact, we closed the campaign with double that amount of money.

Pat: Well, congratulations. I've seen it.

Francesca: Yeah.

Pat: It's \$675,635 thousand.

Francesca: Yes, yes. Becoming the most crowdfunded book of all times. That was a very nice record that we broke. And that, of course, gave us even more press coverage.

Pat: Of course. Well, congratulations Francesca, to you and Elena for that success. What did it feel like to see all the support for it and to see those numbers climb every day until the close?

Francesca: We cried. I remember the first day when we saw that . . . You hit the launch button and you really don't know. We had worked a lot, and as I said, the stakes were very high. You don't know if all the things that you did are going to work, because that was the first time that we launched a Kickstarter campaign. We hit the button, launch, and we saw the contributions starting to arrive. I remember that when we reached, I think it was 30 percent of the funding goal in the first six hours, something like that, we hugged each other and we cried.

- Pat: I can understand why, 'cause you knew you had something special on board.
- Francesca: Yes.
- Pat: It has become very special for a lot of people. I'm now seeing it in bookstores. I take my kids to the bookstore and I see it there, displayed right front and center. It's just amazing to now know where it came from.
- Francesca: Yeah.
- Pat: This is a self-published book, is that true?
- Francesca: Yes. That is true. When we started . . . because as I said before, we had a less than ideal experience with a traditional publishing deal. We wanted to try something different, so that is why we turned to Kickstarter as opposed to go to publisher and ask them to buy our idea for the book. Then later, we realized that something that we had not expected, when the book started to be very strong on Kickstarter, raising more than \$250 thousand dollars, we started receiving calls from literary agents and publishers, which is something that we really hadn't thought about. But the more we moved forward, the more it was clear that we were able to do this thing without a publisher. We said we think we can do it, and it was very exciting because it was like the nature of the content, so a book of rebel good night stories matched the nature of the production.
- Pat: Right.
- Francesca: Which was very rebel as well. We started working on the book. We were on the heels of this crazy successful Kickstarter campaign, and then we transitioned the campaign on Indiegogo and basically doubled the money that we had raised on Kickstarter, but at that point we really said, "Okay, now we have to not disappoint our backers." We let the campaign go, and we stopped taking interviews and we focused on the creation of the book. We said a lot of no's to very, very important people that wanted to talk to us

about movies, about all sorts of these things that are very flattering but we felt were distracting from, because at that point, so many thousand people had put their trust in us, and we didn't want to disappoint them. We worked on the book, which went to print; we found a printer in Canada. The book went to print, and we kept receiving huge offers from very, very important publishers. At one point, we turned down one million dollars from one of the biggest US publishers.

Pat: Wow.

Francesca: At that point, we had already sold \$1.2 million dollars in books, so we were like, "Why should we sell this even for one million dollars? Why should we sell this book to a publisher? We are already doing this ourselves. And it looks like we've done all the heavy lifting already." This was a defining moment for us, because what were told by people who had way more experience than us in the publishing world was, "You should do the deal because you will never become a New York Times bestseller if you don't." When I see this week that we are number four in New York Times bestseller . . .

Pat: Woo.

Francesca: . . . for the sixth week in a row.

Pat: So good.

Francesca: And to see Timbuktu Labs, the name of our company as the publisher of this book, it's very, very rewarding. Because we kept believing that we could do it, and we kept working every day and focusing on what was super important. We spent the whole month of December . . . I remember, like, for Christmas, answering frantically customer service replies, because we didn't have a customer service team yet at the time. But we did it, and not only did we not sign a publishing deal, but we didn't even sign a distribution deal. Then we were like a company of, at the time, we're four or five people, shipping out 40,000 books a month. It was incredibly powerful because no one thought what we were doing

was possible, and they kept telling us that what we were doing was impossible, and we were like, “But we’re doing it, so it’s not impossible because it is what we’re doing.”

Pat: For the next version of the book, you’re going to have a picture of yourself and Elena as one of the stories, right?

Francesca: No, we are not, because we always feel it’s very . . . one of the most rewarding feelings for us is that there is a little piece of us in each of these stories. I did say that, I would argue that, to work in company of such powerful examples of strength and resilience and such confidence was a very crucial component of giving us the needed confidence to believe that we could build this project in a different way.

Pat: I love that. Okay. You did a Kickstarter campaign, you raised \$675 thousand dollars there, and then what made you decide to then do another crowdfunding campaign for Indiegogo, which like you said, raised double that? \$1.2 on there.

Francesca: Because at that point we had done the Kickstarter campaign, but we didn’t have a e-commerce website. When we knew that we had driven a lot of momentum on the Kickstarter page, and we didn’t want to shut it down when the 30th day of the campaign came. We wanted to be able to keep the momentum going, and at that point InDemand had been acquired by Indiegogo. They gave Kickstarter creators the possibility to keep raising funds on the Indiegogo platform.

Pat: Okay.

Francesca: That was . . . for us, it was very easy. An easy set up. It was very easy to import the campaign there, and Indiegogo also helped us tremendously with email campaigns and featuring us on the homepage. They really did a great job helping us maintain the momentum that we had built with the Kickstarter campaign.

Pat: That’s fantastic. Did you use the same video or did you use a

different one?

Francesca: No, it was the same video.

Pat: Same video. And then I see a couple other videos where you and, I think, your partner here talking about, or maybe these are just updates during the campaign, but you said the only difference was, really, you had a microphone this time.

Francesca: Yeah. Well, that was . . . the campaign was *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 2*, which we did this year, and which raised \$863 thousand dollars in 29 days. We did a second campaign for volume two, with the funding goal this time of \$100 thousand dollars, which we reached in the first three hours of the campaign.

Pat: Amazing. Well, tell us, what's next for you and Elena and your team?

Francesca: Right now we are 12 people, and we are working to build an organization that embodies the same values as the book, so diversity, mutual respect, openness. That is a very exciting part. It's a very exciting benefit to having kept being the publishers of the book. We see the first two books of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* as the stepping stone of a bigger series designed to inspire girls and women all over the world to dream bigger, aim higher, and fight harder, as we say in the first page of book number one.

Pat: Love that. Now, you had mentioned earlier that there was potentially movie deals or shows or things outside of the book world. Is that something that you never are going to do, or is it just you put that aside because you wanted to focus on the book and the distribution first? Is that going to be a possibility down the road for you?

Francesca: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. We see this as a full-fledged media company, so we produced, so far, a short series of videos on our Facebook page, Rebel Girls. We have more than 100 million visualizations with the first three videos that we made, so we're definitely interested in video production, and we'll keep not creating just books but also other media. In fact, the second campaign that

we launched a few months ago was for volume two of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* and *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, the Podcast. As soon as we finish working on volume two, and we send that to press, we will start working on a podcast. We really see this as a multi-media approach to creating different kinds of content that can make more and more women grow up surrounded by inspiring female role models, and that can feel truly empowered and respected for who they are and what they want to become.

Pat: Well, thank you Francesca for what you do and what you've done and what you're going to do to, and Elena as well and the rest of your team. Where would you recommend all the listeners out there go to continue to support what you do?

Francesca: On our website, which is www.RebelGirls.co.

Pat: [RebelGirls.co](http://www.RebelGirls.co), and we'll be able to see the latest developments there?

Francesca: Yes. Absolutely.

Pat: All right. Fantastic. Francesca, thank you so much for your time today. I know you've been super busy with all of this and have a lot more books to send out and all that stuff. I appreciate you so much, and I look forward to doing whatever I can personally to support you and the cause. It's just amazing what you've done. I already know after speaking with you here, you've inspired tens of thousands of people with this last half hour, so I appreciate you so much. Thank you.

Francesca: Thank you very much, Pat. It was great to talk to you.

Pat: You as well. Take care.

Francesca: Bye.

Pat: All right. I hope you enjoyed that interview with Francesca over at [RebelGirls.co](http://www.RebelGirls.co). And Elena, thank you so much; I'm sorry you couldn't be on today as well, but just congratulations to you both. We'll put



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links to the books and your upcoming campaign for Rebel Girls 2 on the show notes. You can all find that at SmartPassiveIncome.com/session282. Again, that's SmartPassiveIncome.com/session282. You can go to the same link as well if you want to leave any comments. I'm just incredibly excited and just honored that Francesca, you came on to share your story with us today. Thank you so much. I'm inspired. I hope those of you listening are inspired as well. Look out for next week's episode. Subscribe if you haven't already so you can get that automatically uploaded to you, and I'm just looking forward to serving you in the next episode. Thank you all for the support. I appreciate you. We'll talk soon. Bye for now.

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