

SPI Podcast Session #35 - Standing Out in an Already Crowded Niche Success Story Interview Series - 1

show notes at: <http://www.smartpassiveincome.com/session35>

Hey, hey, what's up everyone, and welcome to the 35th session of the Smart Passive Income podcast. I'm Pat Flynn, and I just want to give a quick shout out to Mr. John Melley. He's the voice guy behind the podcast intro here, and I've been getting a ton of people asking me, 'Who does your movie guy voice? Who can I hire to do something similar for my podcast?' Well, that's your man, Mr. John Melley. You can find him at johnmelley.com, and no, he didn't pay me to say this. In fact, I hope that the way he finds out about this is from getting a bunch of people sending him emails and requests for his services. So if you do go to johnmelley.com, be sure to mention that Pat sent you.

That's my random act of kindness for the day, and so I'm asking you, what's yours? Do something nice for someone today, like if you're in line at Starbucks or something, just buy the person behind you their drink. I mean, I seriously think we need more of this in the world and as you know, I always say this, the more you give back, the more you get back in return. Just random acts of kindness, that's all I'm asking you. Just to do one random act of kindness today to someone you don't know, to someone you know, your spouse or your kid, whatever. Just do it. Tell me about it if you want, I'd love to hear from you.

Today we have session number 35, which starts a back-to-back-to-back series of success story interviews that I'm going to be sharing with you in a few sessions. These success stories are from people who are making a living online, who are not making a living online by talking about making money online or blogging or social media. These are people doing awesome things in all kinds of different niches and industries and fields. I'm actually not going to tell you what they are, because it's all over the board and super-inspiring, so I'm going to let you get to know our guests in the next few episodes.

I did this about 10 episodes ago. I had also another series of success stories, and it was a major hit. The only difference this time is that instead of sharing three or four success stories in each episode, I'll share one. The episodes might be a little shorter than usual, but I think each person deserves their own episode here so I'll just post more episodes a little more often during this series, which I know a lot of you have been asking me to do, have more frequent shows, so hopefully this helps you a little with your craving for the SPI podcast, which is awesome. I really, really love that. Thank you.

Today, the first success story we're going to hear about comes from Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, two totally down-to-earth, totally humble guys who left the corporate world to

start a blog that just took off. The crazy thing is it's in a field or industry that I thought was totally saturated and sort of overdone really, but I guess I was wrong. So I think this proves that even if there are a lot of other people out there who are doing what you want to do, that's actually a good sign. You just have to do it differently, and well, better, of course.

So here's the interview with Mr. Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus from theminimalists.com.

I'm happy to have Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus from theminimalists.com. They started a website at theminimalists.com to show people how to live a more meaningful life with less stuff, and it's crazy the amount of success they've had in such a short period of time. In about a year's time, they gained about 100,000 monthly readers and they've left their corporate jobs. They've been interviewed for the Wall Street Journal and one of my good friend's site, Zen Habits, with Leo Babauta, and many other popular sites. They've written three books, all of which have climbed to the top of Amazon. It's just an amazing success story, and I'm happy to have them on the show today.

So Joshua and Ryan, thank you for coming on the Smart Passive Income podcast today.

Joshua: Thank you for having us.

Ryan: Thanks a lot.

Pat: And seriously, congratulations on your success so far. It's very inspiring and very amazing. I'm really stoked to share your story today.

Both of you have been able to make a name for yourselves in a very popular niche. Some would even say a saturated niche, the whole minimalism, live a better life with less stuff, niche. Personally, I know dozens of people who own blogs and businesses around the idea of minimalism. So the first thing I want to ask you guys is what made you both decide to start theminimalists.com?

Joshua: You know, it's kind of funny, it was somewhat out of ignorance. I don't say that to be flip, but it's the honest truth. A few years ago - this is Joshua by the way - my mother died a few years ago, and I just started looking for I guess meaning in my life, and I was looking in all the wrong places. I knew that because this topic of happiness kept coming up, and Ryan and I, who have been best friends for a really long time, just decided we weren't happy. We had achieved everything we were supposed to achieve from a corporate standpoint, from a societal standpoint. We had the big houses and the nice cars and all the gadgets and all the stuff, but we just didn't feel fulfilled, we didn't feel satisfied with our lives. Then when my Mom died, it really started making me question a lot of stuff. I was 28 years old at the time - I'm 30 now - and I realized that maybe I needed to stop pursuing meaning in things and find what was really meaningful in my life. I stumbled across a website just sort of accidentally, called Exile Lifestyle .

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Pat: Colin Wright, right.

Joshua: . . . by a guy named Colin Wright who has become a really close friend of mine over the last couple of years. I just stumbled across this thing, and he said he was a minimalist. I had no idea what the heck that was, but I was so distraught at the time, I just sort of said, 'Hey, I don't know what that is, but I'm in,' and it just sounded right.

I was looking for answers, and I was able to find some. I discovered that when I got rid of a lot of the things in my life that were sort of in the way, I was able to find out what was most important and then focus on what was most important. I came to Ryan with this concept and said, 'Hey Ryan, you've got a lot of stuff, too, and maybe we could document our journey online'.

We really didn't know anything about blogging. In fact, if you go to our site, everything we write we labeled under the term 'essay'. That's because we didn't know any better at the time. When we started this thing, we didn't know - this is sort of my bad misconception of blogging - but at the time, I kind of thought blogging was for 83 year old grandmas cataloguing pictures of their cats. It was a horrible misconception and I know that's wrong now, but at the time I just didn't know enough about it. So I said, 'Hey Ryan, why don't we do something online,' and he said, 'Great, I'm on board.'

Ryan: It wasn't quite that easy, but that's eventually what I came to.

Pat: All right, great. I mean, that's really cool. So the blog was more of a way to document the journey that you have been taking into minimalism. Now would you mind defining in your own words what minimalism is for the audience who doesn't know exactly what that means?

Joshua: Depending on who you ask, I think everyone's got their own kind of version of minimalism. Overall, minimalism to me is paring down on the unnecessary things in life so you can focus on what is necessary and what's important. So for me personally, that meant finding a different career path and getting rid of some major bills, paying off some debt. But like I said, for everyone it's a little bit different, but at the core it's paring down so you can focus on what's important.

Pat: Right, right. This is a very personal sort of journey for you guys that you're documenting on your blog. How do you create a business out of something like this, so personal and so in tune to what is happening in your life? How do you do that?

Ryan: That was kind of accidental. At first, our intention was not to go into this thing and make money from it. We both worked some pretty 'well-respected' - I say that with vocal quotes there - 'well-respected' corporate jobs, but by age 28, 29, we had climbed the corporate ladder over the past decade and we had these supposedly great jobs that we didn't hate, but we weren't

necessarily happy with, either. When we started the website, we were still doing those corporate jobs and we were just trying to figure out what was important in life.

What we found over time is a lot of people started reading what we were doing, and we were really surprised by that and really grateful. We didn't start selling anything on our website at all and people always ask - that was the first thing they asked - how do you make money off this thing? And we said, 'Well, we don't'. But then after a while the demand was there, and we published three books last year. That's been our primary source of income. We've done a few other things, too, speaking gigs, and things like that. But we have sort of accidentally turned it into a business based on the content that we've created.

A lot of people found a lot of value in it, so if I were to radically attenuate that answer, I would tell you that by adding value to people's lives, they're willing to support anything that we offer if we charge money for it.

Pat: You said the demand was there. What do you believe that demand is for? Is that for information about how to live this sort of lifestyle, or is it just demand for more stuff from you guys and people are just happy to pay you back for the information that you've already given? Or is it a mix of both?

Joshua: I think it's a mix of both. I think that right now, we live in a society where people are looking for something different. I think that the American dream is broken. I think it's become radically changed, and people are seeing that and they're looking for answers. I think minimalism is something that people will stumble across as one of the answers. I don't think that minimalism is the answer to everyone's problems. Well, of course, I do, but realistically speaking, it's not going to answer everybody's problems. But it does for a lot of people, and that's what we're finding is that it is helping out a lot of people kind of really grasp what's going on around them and what's important in their lives and what they need to focus on. It's helped them do that.

Pat: Very cool, I love that. So how would you say that you guys and your blog have become so popular in such a short period of time? I mean, you caught my attention obviously because I've seen you guys around and your growth and success from your blog is what interested me and that's why I have you on the show, and other people, like Corbett Barr from thinktraffic.net had you on the show for the same reasons. But before all that growth happened, when you were first starting out, how did you capture the attention of your audience and get noticed?

Joshua: Well, we just started writing stuff and putting it up online. I don't think anyone was really reading it at first. I remember about a month in, I called Ryan and I was looking at the traffic - I just figured out how to do, actually, and I said, 'You won't believe this, man. 50 people visited our website this week'.

Pat: Nice.

Joshua: And to be honest, probably 40 of those were like Ryan and I and a couple of family members, so we didn't really have any real traffic. But if I were to sum it up, I would say that the biggest thing that has helped us out is adding value. I know you actually hear that term a lot from us. It tends to come up. Once some people started reading it, something amazing happened, it was that snowball effect. If they find value in what you do, they're willing to share it. I know when I find something that really resonates with me, if it's a movie, if it's music, if it's a blog post, whatever it might be, I want to share it with people because it made an impact on my life.

So what we've found is a lot of people started sharing what we were offering to the world, once they sort of discovered it. And by sharing it, they shared it with other people. There's so many ways to share online now. Obviously your audience is familiar with that, whether it's Twitter, Facebook, Google+, and all those other ways that you can share. We found that people started sharing a lot, and then we started meeting a lot of like-minded people.

You mentioned Leo from Zen Habits earlier. We've been able to develop a good relationship with him and a bunch of other people. We never approached anyone and asked them, 'Hey, can we be put on your site right away?' That wasn't sort of what we were into. We were into establishing relationships. So a lot of the sites we were featured on at first were people we had actually established relationships with over the prior months, whether it was Colin Wright, or Joshua Becker from a website called Becoming Minimalist, it's a fairly popular site, and Leo, and a bunch of other folks. We connected with them, found out ways to add value to their life, and then if there was a fit and we could be featured on their site, that was great, too.

Pat: Okay, great. So just to sum that up a little bit for the audience here, really it comes down to the content that you posted on your blog which adds value to people's lives. People are actually connecting with your words and you, and as a result are happy to share that with anyone that they know, or followers on Twitter or Facebook or whatever. Then secondly is the relationships that you've built with other influential people in this industry which just happened as a result of the content that you posted on your site, not necessarily going out and seeking to write a guest post or be featured. It just happened naturally because of what you have written on your site.

Joshua: Yeah, I would say we sought relationships. We didn't necessarily seek a reciprocal sort of transaction.

Pat: Great point, perfect. Now that you're monetizing your site, I'm still kind of in the dark about how you are able to monetize something like this about minimalism. I mean, you're talking about taking things away from people - not taking things away, but decluttering people's lives, but then you're asking people to buy stuff at the same time. So how does that work? I mean, are you doing anything other than ebooks or is it just an ebook and why are people buying it?

Joshua: Right. I think decluttering is sort of the initial bite at the apple. That's sort of the

first thing. As I mentioned before, we had to figure out what was in the way so we could figure out what was important. So figuring out what is in the way and getting rid of it is sort of your first step, and it's a very important first step, but we tend to take it a lot further than that.

We published three books this year, two of which were about minimalism. One was actually a fiction collection of mine - my passion for the longest time has been fiction - so it's utterly different than the other stuff. But the books that we published, we were really lucky to have the audience. They've done really well on Amazon and have reached number one or number four, depending on the book in their respective categories, and they continue to do really well for us. I think the first part is about decluttering, but then it's what do you do after that, because you can get rid of all your stuff and just sit in an empty apartment and be totally miserable. That's not our intent.

Pat: I mean, as far as monetizing, it's the ebooks, that's really the core of your business model there?

Joshua: Absolutely.

Ryan: Yeah.

Pat: And that's all through Amazon?

Joshua: It is now. We've tested a lot of different things. I mean, we've done PDFs, we've done Barnes and Noble. The nice thing about Amazon is that their algorithms provide sort of an audience that's outside of your own audience, so while your own audience will participate in purchasing your stuff, if your books sell well and they're reviewed well, other people have the opportunity to see them that may have not visited your site in the first place.

Pat: You just came out with a new book just recently called 'Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life'. This is your second book about minimalism, third book overall, and it's exclusively on Amazon. Is that right?

Ryan: That is correct. We actually just, like Josh said, we just signed a deal with Amazon for exclusivity for all three of our books.

Pat: Nice, awesome.

Ryan: The newest book, it's on there, and we just lowered the price, too, so it's available on there for \$7.99. It was \$24.99. We were kind of doing some price testing and we just lowered it to make it affordable for everybody. We just did that Sunday.

Joshua: It's been out for about two months, and we found when we lowered the price, I think in the last week, less than a week, we've doubled our sales from the last two months by

lowering the price pretty drastically.

Pat: Awesome, that's great. I don't know much about the Amazon Marketplace. It's something I plan to get into in the future. Do you have maybe one or two tips as far as getting exposure on Amazon, or how to really utilize that platform?

Joshua: I would say - what I would do first - is people tend to shy away from it if they don't have a Kindle. But the nice thing about Amazon is if you don't have a Kindle, you can still read all of their books using the free Kindle Reader app, which you can use on iPad, iPhone, your web browser, your Mac, your PC, whatever, your Android device, your Blackberry, and they all sync up, too. So I wouldn't allow the fact that someone doesn't have a Kindle to be a barrier, as long as you state that on your website. For me, we've had a ton of people now that have actually converted and bought our stuff from Amazon because it's been really easy for them to read it wherever they are on any device that they have.

Pat: Right, that's a great tip. As far as getting onto the platform in the first place, is it pretty easy to convert like a Word document or a PDF into something that can be sold on Amazon?

Ryan: You can. We actually worked with a guy named Chris O'Byrne who does editing relatively inexpensively. I don't get paid any money to tell you that, but he's a good guy, ebook-editor.com, and I believe there's a hyphen in there, but he's relatively inexpensive. He'll format for any format that you need. Also, there are software programs out there that you can use that are relatively inexpensive, \$40, \$50. Scribner is one that I've played around with. So there are different programs that will allow you to format so that you're not paying anyone to format.

Pat: Okay, gotcha. And then the last question about Amazon, really quick. I hear that it's really important to kind of structure your launch of your book when it comes out in a certain way so that you can get into the top lists at Amazon. Is that really the best strategy to use? How have you kind of done that with the particular launches that you've had for books?

Ryan: You know, we actually, Pat, don't really have any advice on that because we haven't really done any type of strategizing as far as keywords or getting our book to the top of the list. I mean, in all actuality, our work, it's become popular I think because we've been so genuine about it and we haven't really - it hasn't been all about the sales. It's funny you bring that up, because now it makes me want to figure out how to do that. Do you have any advice on that?

Pat: Again, I'm not very familiar with the Amazon Marketplace, but I'm sure people have strategized about how to get more exposure for their book. So maybe that's something to look into from this point forward. I mean, you're already crushing it with just naturally putting it out there and having it naturally be exposed through word of mouth, so maybe it's time to take that next step and really do some keyword research. But maybe you don't even need that. We can maybe talk later about that.

Ryan: I was just teasing, that's funny. But I do have one tip that I've noticed that has helped us on Amazon, though.

Pat: Great.

Ryan: With our Essays book, we actually had about 30 to 40 reviews left on there and they were really, really positive reviews. They were genuine reviews, but we really went to our audience and said, 'Hey, if you like the book, please do a review on Amazon'. We really pushed for that, and we were able to get a lot of reviews and that was able to get us into the algorithm and popping up on the recommended, you know, readers who bought this book also like this book. So we were able to come up with the recommendations that Amazon has for its readers. So a lot of reviews, good reviews.

Pat: That's a great tip, thank you. Go ahead.

Joshua: I was going to say while we're talking about Amazon, a nice little benefit - and we just stumbled across this accidentally - a nice benefit of Amazon is you sort of get accidental reader feedback. It's almost like standing over the shoulder of someone who is reading your book and seeing what resonates with them because they highlight passages from your book. The most popular passages, the Essay book that Ryan just mentioned, there are a lot of passages in there that 50, 60, 100 people underlined, and you can really see what resonates most with the people who are reading your book because they're underlining different things. It doesn't track it back to a particular person, but that's okay. You can see by and large what resonates with your audience so that you have a good feeling moving forward.

Pat: That is really cool. I did not know that was happening, but that's really, that could be really helpful to get that instant feedback and see what resonates with people. Maybe there's a certain passage or a certain essay that stands out as always being highlighted that you could then break out into a certain post or create maybe a product coming from that. That's really cool. I didn't know that, so thank you.

I have a couple of questions before we finish up. The first question, and this is kind of an interesting one, minimalism and leading a meaningful life without all that extra stuff and finding happiness is definitely something I can tell both of you are very passionate about. Now how would you respond to this statement? Not all passions are profitable.

Ryan: Oh, I would say that that's not true, and I'll tell you why. I think you can make money off of anything. It just matters how much money do you want to make.

Joshua: If you're passionate about something, probably the better question to ask there is is there someone making money off of what I'm passionate about? If the answer is yes, then it makes the question sort of void. But it seems to me that there are at least some people making

money off of what you're passionate about most likely. I can't think of an example where that would not be true.

Ryan: It's funny you ask that question, Pat, because it really resonates with me. When I first started this whole venture, that was my first question because we had these really good corporate jobs and these really nice, big salaries, and that's the first question I asked Josh is, 'How much am I going to make?', and he was like, 'Probably not as much as you make now'. It took me a while to accept that. I shouldn't say it took me a while, it didn't take me too long. But regardless, eventually I finally decided yeah, I might be making a little bit less money, but I am doing something that I love and it doesn't feel like work to me.

Pat: Right, right. That's huge, and a lot of people get so into 'I need this money and I need to climb the corporate ladder and do this and that,' and they forget about what truly matters and what makes them happy. So I definitely can resonate with that as well.

The last question I want to ask you before we close up shop today is what are the top two or three things to consider when getting into a niche or a market that's already heavily occupied? Like I talked about before, the minimalism kind of industry online has been around for a long time. If someone asked me, 'Hey, should I get into the minimalism industry and sort of blog about it,' I would recommend no. But obviously, you guys have been very successful just recently getting into it, so what are the top two or three things to consider when getting into a popular niche? Or is it even something you should consider doing?

Joshua: Sure. For us, I think, like I said, we were kind of ignorant. We didn't know how popular it really was. We just saw a couple of guys doing it, Leo and Colin, and maybe a few others, Joshua Becker. But what I would say is two things. One, add value. If what you're doing can add value to that space, then great, there's room for you. If you're not adding more value than what's already there, if you're regurgitating information, then it's probably not a good fit. The second thing I would say is do it better than everyone else. If you can come in and do it better - I'm not saying we came in and did it better - but what we see, as you mentioned the number earlier, 100,000 people a month visiting our site, and that's great. It seems to be more than that now, but the nice stat that we have is people spend over six minutes on average on our site, so it's 11,000 hours a month, so we're not TMZ. It's not people coming there 30 seconds to look at pictures. People are spending hours and hours on the site because of what's there. So if you can add value to people's lives, people will come, they'll stay, they'll share your stuff. I don't think it matters what the niche is as long as you're adding value.

Pat: Perfect. So one, add value to make it better, see what else is out there and just take it to the next level.

Joshua: Yeah.

Pat: All right guys. Thank you so much. Again, Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus

from theminimalists.com. Thank you guys so much for coming on the show. I really, really appreciate it, and this is some great information, some concrete advice as well as some stuff that's very inspirational for people. So if people want to contact you and get in touch with you from this point forward, where should they go?

Ryan: You can go to our website. It's theminimalists.com, and you can actually find all of our contact information on there. Pat, we really appreciate you having us.

Pat: Hey, thank you guys. I appreciate it so much, and hopefully we'll talk again in the future.

Joshua: Thanks, Pat.

Pat: I hope you enjoyed that interview with Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus from theminimalists.com. Before we wrap up today, I just wanted to plug my free ebook really quick. I don't do this in each episode, but every once in a while I like to drop it in there just in case you haven't heard about it yet. If you go to ebooksthesmartway.com, you can enter your name and email address there and pick up a free copy of my 'How to Write an Ebook Guide'. It was an ebook that I wrote way back in 2008 for GreenExamAcademy.com that turned into a six figure business for me, and that's where I got my start online. I owe a lot to the ebook format, so I created this guide to help walk you through how to create, how to publish, how to market, and even how to sell and automate your own ebook. So check it out. Like I said, you will have to enter your name and email to get access to that, but you can unsubscribe at any time. I encourage you to at least wait until you get that first follow-up email tip from me from my newsletter. Let me prove to you that it's worth it to stay on my list. I don't sell anything, there's no offer every four emails in my auto responder or anything like that, just pure content, so you can enjoy that. Again, you can go to ebooksthesmartway.com, 100% totally free, just for you.

Thanks again, and we'll chat again in the next session with another awesome success story. Thanks, take care, and all the best.

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