



**SPI Podcast Session #40:  
How a Space News Site Generates 5,000,000 Pageviews a Month  
with Fraser Cain**

Show notes at: <http://www.smartpassiveincome.com/session40>

**Pat:** Hey everyone, I'm happy to have another success story interview to share with you today.

On the line with us is Fraser Cain, who has definitely a very interesting story. He has a niche that's waaaay outside of the "make money online" sort of blogging space and I guess you could say it's way out of this world to Fraser. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**Fraser:** Thanks for having me, Pat!

**Pat:** So let me ask you, and for everyone listening out there, what is your business and how did you get started?

**Fraser:** Sure. So my website is called [Universe Today](#), and it is a space and astronomy news website that has peaked at about 5 million page views a month. I've got about 70,000 RSS subscribers, and a big mailing list. All of the numbers that you guys all talk about.

**Pat:** 5 million page views!

**Fraser:** Yes, about 3 and a half million unique visitors a month sometimes.

**Pat:** Wow! Keep going, keep going.

**Fraser:** It's monetized entirely by AdSense and has done very well. I have a team. At various times, it rises and falls over the course of the year with how many people are doing research and education and things like that. I've had upwards of 15 people on my team writing, reporting. You know, I'm a publisher.

**Pat:** Right, right. So tell us how it got started. Did you start with 15 publishers, or...?

**Fraser:** Absolutely; I started from birth with a huge team!



No, actually, things started about 12 years ago or so. I've been doing Internet development right from the beginning essentially, back in '94, '95, and I joined a web development firm out of Vancouver called Communicate.com. We were creating websites for our clients, had a lot of bank customers and things like that.

I was giving all this advice to my clients but I didn't really have any direct experience in running a website on my own, so the advice that I was giving was very theoretical and not really practical.

So I decided I was going to take one of my hobbies and just create a hobby website on the side, and that would in theory teach me a whole bunch of lessons about what it means to run a website.

I have a whole bunch of interests--video games, role-playing games, and technology, and one of the ones is space. I've been an amateur astronomer since I was a kid. I've been looking through books about space and astronomy, so I decided that I was going to pick that as a site to just maintain, and it would teach me a little more about this thing that I was interested in, and at the same time would teach me a lot more about how to be able to provide better information to my clients.

When you work on something that you really enjoy, that you're passionate about, it takes on this life of its own. Now, I was able to come back and within weeks had immense new information, practical information that I could give to my clients, but I think the biggest lesson I was learning was that I wanted to do this full time. I don't want to be helping out clients anymore; I want to publish a space news website.

But, you know, obviously you start out with nothing, and you have to build it up bit by bit by writing articles and building a following. It took a long time. It probably took 5, 6, 7 years before the income on the site had gotten to the point that I was actually able to do it full time.

**Pat:** Right. I mean, that's a long time and I think that a lot of people don't want to put in that amount of time to get to that point.

**Fraser:** Well, that's great. Yes, if you don't, by all means do it quicker. [laughs] That's how long it took me.

**Pat:** Yes, I mean it takes a long time. Especially for a news site. I'd be interested to



understand your thinking about why your site is starting to take off so well, and especially because I know there's a lot of space websites out there. Why are people coming to your site? How are they finding you?

**Fraser:** Right...I'm really good at SEO is the bottom line.

**Pat:** I'd love to pick your brain about that.

**Fraser:** Sure, yes, absolutely.

Up until about three years ago or so, we were doing pretty well, and I had been full-time for a couple of years and the traffic was maybe a million visitors a month. A million and a half page views a month. And it was all social.

So it was from my RSS subscribers, it was from my email distribution list, it was from the various kinds of social stuff that existed before then. Forums and things like that. But not a lot of search engine traffic. I was maybe getting about 1500 search visitors a day.

I was driving in the car with my daughter, and she asked me, "What's the biggest star in the universe?" and I actually didn't know the answer to that question, and so I said "Well, I'll look it up and I'll write an article and research it and then I'll tell you, and I'll tell my audience as well."

Turns out it's VY Canis Majoris which is 1800 times the size of the sun. And it was a really cool article and really interesting information, so I put it up on my website.

Anyone that's in the kind of blogging or journalism business knows the cycle; that it's a machine and you always have to feed it. You constantly have to feed it just news and news and news, and then the readers show up and they consume your news and then they go away again.

But when I had accidentally targeted a keyword, essentially, that there's an evergreen group out there that will always be searching to find out what the biggest star in the universe is, that I was suddenly getting 3, 4, 500 visitors a day to my website.

**Pat:** Just for that particular article?

**Fraser:** For one particular article. I'm sure you've seen this on your website too, and



I'm sure a lot of the webmasters out there are nodding and thinking about the articles that have had that same kind of thing.

So for me it was about what was the secret sauce there? What was going on? Why was that article happening? And it was sort of a blend of my personal authority, the website's authority, the quality of the information, and how often I add content, so there was a lot of these pieces of the puzzle.

The reality was, it opened up my mind to the idea that I don't have to just write about news, I can also add the kinds of information that's evergreen, that people in my niche are going to be looking for, and that will help bring in regular search traffic that I can then use for all of the regular methods.

So it's just this multiplier. You get all of the search traffic in, and then you're able to get people to subscribe to your RSS feed. You're able to get them to like you on Facebook and Twitter and all of that kind of stuff, and it all just multiplies.

So for me over time I've just added a lot of information that's relevant to the kind of stuff that people are going to search for. In addition to what I think as good news coverage as we can possibly provide with the team that we have.

**Pat:** So you're kind of combining news, and your feeling about what's hot in the industry or the field along with actual keyword research data?

**Fraser:** Yeah, exactly. That's exactly it. Some of it is very static; why is Pluto not a planet? And how long does it take to get to the moon? Things like that. But some of it is also very fresh.

You want to use the keyword research as these events are unfolding. And so SEO plays this role. Whenever there's the name of a new hurricane or whenever there is some new, big event.

Like, I don't know if you remember when Bigfoot was discovered on Mars. It was really just a rock, but a lot of people were searching for "Bigfoot on Mars." Well, that's an opportunity for us to jump in there, and knowing how people are going to be crafting their search queries, we can create a series of articles that cover this in a way that we can get a lot of that search traffic.

So it's using these experiences to then inform the new content as we create it. And yes,



it's been very, very effective.

**Pat:** Great stuff! And I think that just shows the importance of being on top of it in your industry, and just understanding what's going on and looking for opportunities like that to write posts about.

**Fraser:** There are patterns, right? I mean, we know that every time come mid-August people are going to be searching for the Perseid meteor shower and so we prepare our information long in advance.

We have an editorial schedule, and when that event rolls around, we make sure that we do a full core press and we have great information on our website that gives people everything that they need to know about this meteor shower. And every year we see a huge number of people searching for the meteor shower, and lo and behold, they come to our website.

**Pat:** That's great. And I think anyone with a news site--and I know there's a lot of people in my audience that have news sites that are struggling with the content that they should write, or how to get it to go viral--that's a very, very smart strategy to notice the patterns in your industry. And it's going to be different for every industry.

**Fraser:** Yes, absolutely.

**Pat:** Now I want to rewind a little bit. Back before you started getting into SEO, you said even before SEO optimization happened, you were getting a million page views a month. How did THAT happen? How did you get to that point?

**Fraser:** Well, I think I made a couple of really lucky decisions very early on.

One of the first decisions that I made was that the backbone of my entire service was going to be an email mailing list. And literally, in 1999 I started to gather an email mailing list. And so with every interaction that I had with people, I was always thinking "Get this person on my mailing list. Get them on my mailing list."

Over the years, it just adds up and adds up and adds up, and so every time I send out my newsletter, I was sending out once a day and I had 10, 20,000 people who were subscribed to the newsletter, and that is one of the biggest things because then it has this multiplying effect.



You send out the newsletter, these people will receive it in their inbox, they click on it and many of them are bloggers. They link to it, they report on it, they use it in incorporating to other places, and everything just gets this building and building process like a snowball. And so I think that that was the thing that I did that was really fortunate.

I think the other thing that I did really early on that was really fortunate was that I treated the people in the industry as a community. Even though there was starting to be people who were my competitors, I reached out to them all right away as they came on the scene, and you know, connected with them and helped them out. I did that right from day one.

It's amazing how many of these people have just progressed and they've become very established and very recognized bloggers in their own right and it's great to have all of these friendships. And so I can rely on this huge network of people, this community, whenever I want to do something.

I might write an article and Allen Boyle over at [MSNBC](#) is going to pick it up. And I even have people at [NASA](#) who sometimes pick some of the articles up. So, you know, for a lot of people who are going "Oh, I wish I could get links from NASA! They have a PR9!" You know? It's totally possible, right? And it was never my intention.

Again, I was doing this before Google even existed. So the concept of links and the value of links and any of that, didn't matter. It was just about the value of community.

**Pat:** Yeah, and that's what's always going to last all throughout time. Anything can change, Google can go away, Facebook, whatever, but it's the community that you're setting up that's always going to be there for you and that's how you're going to grow your business and keep it there longer.

**Fraser:** Yeah, your email address and your reputation will follow you to the grave. You know, if you've got an email list, you can always reach out to people, and if you've got a good reputation and a lot of good friends then you can always get their help.

**Pat:** Absolutely.

One thing that I want to cover really quick that you mentioned before was the importance of your email list. And in the industry that I'm in, we always talk about how important the email list is, but mostly because it's a great way to make money, to sell



to people.

Now I take a different stance, and I don't sell to people on my email list. I get them to learn more about me or to just read more of my content, and also bring them back to my website.

You made a great point that you're constantly pulling people from your email list back to your website, and that's how you're driving traffic to your website from your existing audience. And I think that's really important because that's something that's very underrated is the idea of using your email list to just get returning traffic back to your site which can have a number of different effects.

It's not just those single people visiting and coming back to your website, but also the fact that they're going to be there and see those share buttons and read the articles and be inspired by them and then also share it with their people and their friends and followers. So, I'm really glad you said that.

**Fraser:** Yes; I personally don't see my email list as a sales tool.

I know that a lot of people when they hear that I have 70,000 RSS subscribers, that they're calculating in their mind what that would be worth as an email list, but the reality is that the only reason that I have a large number of people who subscribe is because I try to put as much value into the email itself.

And every time you try to sell, it's like a bank account. You're thinking about yourself. You know, what's in it for me? You know, if you could align everything together where you have something that's really going to help people out and it's able to make you money as well, then it's all fantastic, but I think a lot of people put more emphasis on what's in it for them, instead of what's in it for the reader.

**Pat:** Right, absolutely. And then the other thing you followed up with was the importance of relationships, and building relationships, even with people who may be seen as competitors. And that's something that a buddy, Corbett Barr from [thinktraffic.net](http://thinktraffic.net) and I have discussed many times on the podcast and on videos before...

**Fraser:** Me, too. Corbett and I talk quite a bit too.

**Pat:** Yeah. I mean, it's just the fact that, you know, you never know how big some of these people are going to grow. So that's why connecting with people, the B and C-



listeners and some of the people like you said who are just starting to come into the same field as you and befriending them.

That can turn into a very, very important relationship, and then that way they're not going to see you as a competitor either, but also as a colleague, and then you'll just help each other out.

**Fraser:** Yes, absolutely.

**Pat:** Let's talk about income really quickly. At the beginning you mentioned that you were only using AdSense to generate income on the site.

So let me ask you, the first question, which I know everyone is dying to know. How much are you making, exactly from this website?

**Fraser:** Sure. So the biggest month that I've ever had was about \$24,000 from AdSense.

**Pat:** \$24,000 from AdSense...

**Fraser:** Yeah. From space. From talking about space, yes!

**Pat:** Ridiculous! That's crazy! Has it been pretty consistent or does it fluctuate?

**Fraser:** Oh, it absolutely fluctuates, so I gave you the biggest number.

Part of the problem that I have is it's a very cyclical thing, so it drops to a fraction of that over the summer. So that's sort of the highest point during finals and things like that when a lot of people are looking for research.

Also, recently I've actually had to scale back the advertising on the website because I've been a little nervous about the algorithm update that was posted back in January by Google saying "We're going to come after people who are posting a lot of ads and stuff above the fold" and I absolutely had a very aggressive AdSense placement recommended to me by my AdSense advisor, but...you know...

**Pat:** Wow, really?

**Fraser:** Yeah. Well, you know, we've got these two arms that don't really talk to each





other. But, so, I've sort of voluntarily made that much less distinct, and so it's sort of reduced the income significantly, which is kind of painful, but at the same time it's more about the long term than the short term.

And of course, I have a very big team of people. I've got three full-time people plus a lot of freelance people who work with me, so, you know, there's a lot of mouths to feed on that revenue.

**Pat:** Right, absolutely. Understandable. Now, have you explored any other options as far as generating income in addition to AdSense?

**Fraser:** Yes, absolutely.

And you know, there are ideas about creating a membership version of the site and selling some of the photographs and artwork that's featured on the site and writing books and creating apps. There's definitely a lot of that.

Actually, my efforts have been really focused on the software that I use to manage the website itself. And this is a software called Keyword Strategy, and so that's been primarily the effort.

And that's the whole second business. Essentially I target 30,000 keywords on my website and that's complicated and requires a very big database and so we've created this database on the side that lets people do the same thing. Follow my methods; we've created a tool that lets anyone do that.

I absolutely want to advertise the site in other ways, but I'm focusing my efforts on this other business as well.

**Pat:** Okay. It's great to focus on one thing at a time. You don't want to spread yourself too thin. Maybe we could talk in the future about Keyword Strategy. Very cool.

About your site and the design of it; you are on WordPress, is that correct?

**Fraser:** Yes, I'm using WordPress and I'm using the Thesis theme.

**Pat:** I can see that when I go to your site. Now, it's very out of the box, the way you use Thesis. There aren't too many customizations to your site as far as the design. It looks very Thesis out of the box, with just the header.



Have you thought about changing the design at all? Or, obviously the whole point of me bringing this up is that the design has to be functional in order for it to be successful but it doesn't have to be fancy, it doesn't have to be amazing. It helps if it's amazing, but there's a line that you can cross where it becomes too amazing and it starts to detract from...

**Fraser:** Well, yeah. It's not necessarily about the design. It's about maintenance and management.

I've been doing this long enough that I've probably gone through 15 different redesigns of my website from the original HTML to a better version of the HTML using server-side includes to an old content management system called Article Manager and then WordPress.

So I've moved through all of these iterations, and then moving to various themes and then moving to Thesis.

And what I've really learned is that many things out there make your website a lot more fragile. So, when you have really complicated JavaScript implementations and CSS and you're running a lot of plugins and all of that kind of stuff, that things break in unpredictable ways, and the more you hack, the more you have to drag along these hacks from version to version.

And I just got to the point where I was just completely sick of having to try to maintain this stuff from version to version and try to keep it all limping along.

And Thesis is perfect because you don't actually, you can't actually mess with the CSS and really break it. WordPress is what it is. Thesis is a framework that sits on top of it, you can customize it with some menu options, but you don't try to get in and really muck with the code and that has just been this guiding principle that has gotten me to the point now where I finally don't have to constantly be babysitting my web server.

You know, it's a ton of traffic. I get spikes. I'll get spikes from [Digg](#) or [StumbleUpon](#) or [Slashdot](#), and I'll be seeing 20, 30,000 visitors in an hour. And so the website's got to be able to withstand that.

You might think it's really cool that you've got this great little picture viewer, but under the hammering that that can take with a lot of people, it turns out your site can't



handle it. And I'd much rather the site always be up.

So, yeah, it's more about simplicity. It's about me not having to think about that aspect of it. I don't care if it doesn't look super-fantastic. I like the header, it's kind of cute. And I like big pictures on the site. But beyond that, it's really simple.

**Pat:** Yeah, I think keeping it simple is a good point. And a lot of people before they even start to generate content for their new site, they'll try to make their site look incredible, and they're just wasting time in my opinion. I always say you should work on the business first before you create the business card.

**Fraser:** I love it! That's the same advice I give, yeah.

**Pat:** That's great. So it's really cool to hear that you're using Thesis like I am, and I think it's important for people to understand that you should really work hard to get to a point where you can just walk away from the whole designing the site thing and trying to upkeep it.

It was at that point in my life with my site, [GreenExamAcademy.com](http://GreenExamAcademy.com) when I was just done with the design, I didn't have to do anything else. I just started pouring content into it is when I really started to see results and started to get more comfortable with my lifestyle and how things were working.

**Fraser:** Yeah. I mean, it's so sad when you hear all of the people who are so scared to jump forward and move into this kind of business because of the all of these technical constraints. They think that all of this stuff is important, but...maybe it is, I don't know.

Maybe I would get a lot more traffic if I had a much better design. But it's just like, don't let that stuff hold you back, you know? It's so easy to get a WordPress site up. Many webhosts have a one-click button and then you install the Thesis theme or Catalyst or--there are a lot of free themes as well, and your site can look fine.

It's the voice behind, it's the words on the page, it's the relationships and the connections that you make that really sustain and grow your audience from version to version over time.

**Pat:** Yeah, absolutely. I could not agree more.

I've got just a couple more questions before we finish up and Fraser, so far this has just



been awesome, so thank you for all of your wisdom and information.

Now, you obviously have a ton of traffic, and you have huge spikes here and there. What posts that you publish are some of your most popular posts? Or what patterns are you seeing, with the types of posts that you're publishing that seem to draw the most attention?

**Fraser:** Well, the stuff that works best for us, the stuff that will go really, really viral; there's two kinds of things.

One is if we can get our hands on a really amazing video or image that maybe no one else has really found yet, and we can get it first. I really love, there's some great time-lapse stuff.

Did you ever see that time-lapse that was from the space station and you could see the earth underneath, you could see these thunderstorms on the planet? I don't know if you saw that.

We actually broke that story. The guy who created that animation emailed me and said "Hey, check out this thing that I've just done!" and I was like "Whoa!! I've got to put this on the blog RIGHT NOW!" And I think he ended up getting 5 million views on YouTube for it.

**Pat:** That's crazy.

**Fraser:** And we're able to sort of trace it back to us...being the first people that posted it. So I'm always on the hunt for that kind of stuff, because it has such a high viral capability.

And then the stuff I really like is to find the really interesting research that nobody else is really talking about, that nobody else has really uncovered yet. But really hits a lot of hot buttons all of the same time.

It's evolving black holes and time travel and warp drives and it has the possibility of "What would it be like if we tried to communicate with aliens?" and especially when it's like REAL research that people are doing that merges these various genres together I find does really, really well and we're focused on that.

**Pat:** How do you find that stuff, though? It seems like you have to just know people.



**Fraser:** Well, yes; it is a complicated job and it's getting even more complicated and you're absolutely right. You need to build sources. You have to be a journalist.

Whenever I see a story that I missed, then I always chase it back to the source, and then I incorporate that source into my feeds. I use an RSS reader to actually keep track of all of the sources that I'm watching and it probably builds up--it probably has about 500 to 1000 feeds in it.

And I have a YouTube channel. I have a certain hack, [If This Than That](#), scripts together, filters things like that, and I've got it all pouring into this one location, so I never make that mistake twice.

If someone's scooped me on a story, I'll find their source and I'll incorporate their source into my list of feeds, and then next time around when I see that thing, I'll be like "Oh, I'm going to get on this right away!"

The more you work in this industry, in any industry that has news, you realize that everyone's getting their news from the same source. And it's why you might read it in the newspaper at the same time that you see it on the television and you're seeing it on the blogs as well.

Or you might see the same story posted five times to [Reddit](#), is because it's coming from one location. And you can get right back to that location and you can report on the news as well as any journalist.

**Pat:** Interesting. Just to finish up, I want to ask you...do you work from home? And if you do, just as far as working on this full time, what do you enjoy most about it?

**Fraser:** I do work from home. I'm at my kitchen table right now. The kids are at school, so...and that's a big part of it.

I love that you can work from home, you can wear whatever you want, you can work whatever hours you want. I love that you're rewarded for your cleverness, not for the amount of hours that you spend. I love the fact that I can work with the kind of people that I want.

I've built the dream office with a virtual water cooler so...you know, Corbett Barr, for example. I'll reach out to him and throw some ideas past him and he's a really smart



guy that you can talk to.

There's a guy named Gary Arnt who does [Everything Everywhere](#). He's a travel blogger. Really smart guy. Sometimes he's in the Dominican Republic and other times he's in Australia. And you can kind of reach out and talk to him.

My co-host for Astronomy Cast, Dr. Pamela Gauge was a PHD Astrophysicist. So I'm able to connect with all of these people and run ideas past them and I really enjoy that building this virtual community of people.

I feel really sad for the people who get into this business and they value their privacy or they value their anonymity, and they don't reach out to other people and really engage with the communities that are already there. They're really hampering their future growth.

I think the one thing that's really important to understand is that I don't see this industry as passive. And that's why I think I have a bone to pick with your--the whole, you know, your whole philosophy is that it's all these things, but it's not passive.

I work hard and anyone I know works really, really hard. And the money that we make does show up; the work I'm doing today is going to pay me a year or two years down the road and hopefully for a long period of time. But if I ever took my foot off the accelerator, things would start to dry up again.

And when I think about the changes that have happened--you know, Google only barely existed 10 years ago. Facebook only existed 5 years ago. That everything is changing, and it's changing faster and faster and faster, and I just find, for me anyway -- and maybe I'm not that organized or clever about it -- I need to stay in it. And I need to keep changing and improving and building.

**Pat:** Yeah. Well said, and different industries call for different amounts of time, and I work really hard too. I think the whole idea behind what I'm teaching is the fact that you can invest your time now for things that will continually pay you off in the future.

But it's not--and I drill this into people's heads, especially in my monthly income reports, the fact that it takes a lot of work, and you do have to upkeep these things.

**Fraser:** Mhmm. And it's not about putting in a bunch of content into a website, optimizing it for whatever, for search, and then laying out on a beach and enjoying the



residual income for the rest of your life. I don't think that's possible. Unless you buy real estate or something, I'm not sure with your proceeds, but...

**Pat:** Even that's not passive.

**Fraser:** Even that's not passive either, right! And that's a lie. I think that once you get past that, once you can appreciate all of these other things like the fact that you can meet people that you like.

I get to meet astronauts and watch space shuttles launch. It's all great, you know? That's what life should really be about. Getting a chance to be able to do what you love, being able to have time for your family and being able to hang out with your kids. That's what it's all about.

**Pat:** Awesome, Fraser. Way to close it up! That was perfect. So thank you so much for your time on the show today. If people want to learn more about you, where should they go?

**Fraser:** Sure. The main website is [universetoday.com](http://universetoday.com). And that's where we post all of the space news. I also do a weekly astronomy podcast called [Astronomy Cast](#), which is a lot of fun, and then the Keyword tool that I mentioned, that's at [KeywordStrategy.org](http://KeywordStrategy.org). I blog more there about web mastering and traffic and things like that.

**Pat:** Very cool! I'll make sure to include those links in the show notes and I hope we can connect again in the future, and I wish you and Universe Today even more success.

**Fraser:** Well, thank you very much! You too!

**Pat:** Alright, take care, thanks!

**Fraser:** All right. Bye.

**Pat:** Bye.