SUBSCRIPTION ENTREPRENEUR

HOSTED BY ERIC TURNNESSEN, FOUNDER OF **membermouse**™

EP 117: Proven SEO & Web Optimization Tips with Ryan Murray

"People that are getting started, what I've seen in terms of successful projects, is they either take an original idea that's a bit too complex to handle on their own or with the scale of team that they have, and they transform it into something that's manageable. Being able to steer what you're putting together is a big difference of people who get the initial analysis paralysis or people that actually hit the ground running."

INTRO:

Welcome to episode 117 of the Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast. Our guest on today's show is veteran web developer Ryan Murray of 3200 Creative. Ryan's career as a world-class developer spans over 20 years. During that time, he's worked with Fortune 500 companies, solopreneurs, and everyone in between. Ryan has special expertise in building powerful and profitable WordPress sites for online business owners and we're lucky to have him on the show today.

You see, Ryan rarely appears on podcasts because he's usually too busy helping his clients achieve incredible results online: like obtaining the highly coveted top search rankings in Google for incredibly competitive search terms. We've seen the results of Ryan's work and can confirm that he knows his stuff!

Ryan joins us on the podcast today and shares his best practices for building an online business in 2019. He goes far beyond the regular "tips and tricks" you may be used to seeing and dives deep into a topic that is rarely talked about: How to create an online business that you can, and more importantly want to run. He shares specific strategies for how entrepreneurs can build a profitable online business without creating another job for themselves.

In this episode, we also look at important topics like how to pick a WordPress web host, SEO best-practices and overlooked strategies, website design, and more. We hope you enjoy and benefit from Ryan's valuable advice. I'm your host Eric Turnnessen, and this is episode 117 of the Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast.

Eric: Hey Ryan. Welcome to the show

Ryan: Hello. How are you?

Eric: I'm doing great. Thanks so much for joining us. I really appreciate it. You and I have actually been talking pretty regularly for the past couple weeks or so as you're helping me and MemberMouse with an SEO project. We've gotten a little bit of time to spend talking to each other and that has been great. As a result of that, having you on the show, wanting to share some of your knowledge and experience with our audience. Just to get started, can we talk a little bit about your background?

Ryan: Yeah. I started early off with Photoshop. Just to date myself with version 2 of Photoshop. That quickly led into web development. I designed a book cover for a gentleman. He said, "I have between $700 and a $1,000 to have a website built. Do you know of anybody who I can get in touch with?" And I said, "yes, me." I took the $700 directly to Barnes and Noble. I bought about $300 in web development books and just trialed by fired it. That was my introduction. Fast forward a few years later and I went through the whole college process of getting a formal education in web development which lead into being an instructor in video game development in my early twenties. In college a really important factor was I met my wife and we started off as partners in college on projects and whatnot. That led into working into business stuff together. We've been working together for 14 years.

Eric: I want to jump back to the initial thing. When you said that guy first contacted you. That's a really interesting start where you were willing to bet $700 on yourself without having any knowledge? What was it about that situation where you just knew you could do it?

Ryan: Well, I figured I could give him his money back. The incentive at that age was if I don't give him the money back my rent is paid. I thought, well this could be a really good opportunity for me. I was very upfront about it that I hadn't built one yet no, but I could give it a go. I also cut my price down to next to nothing to pay for the education to learn how to do so. The person was okay that I did both on their dime. Basically, they helped educate me. I'll do that today occasionally with projects that are cutting edge enough to where I haven't put it together yet. I will offer a reduced rate because I just haven't done it before.

Eric: I had a similar experience in college too when I started doing contract work, which really, I feel was a big part of my major success after college. There's so much to be said for that practical experience. You can't really replace it with school or anything.

Ryan: No. They are two different walks of life. One is street smarts and the other is book smart. People coming up to you and needing to accomplish a goal on their end. It takes a lot of iterations of being successful in that to really figure out how to do it well.

Eric: I think that that spirit that you showed early on of being able to dive in and do something in the excitement of working on a project. Maybe being in the deep end and seeing if you can swim yourself out. I feel like that is a really important factor. If you learn all the tools and you don't have that underlying interest and enthusiasm to really dive in and do something, you can't really apply it.

Ryan: Also asking for instruction too. I feel in this day and age technology is changing. That's a very powerful attribute to have.

Eric: So, over the course of your career you have worked with Fortune 500 companies and you've worked with solopreneurs and everyone in between. You've worked with

MemberMouse and a lot of our customers. From all of your experience, is there some advice that you could give to people listening about building an online business?

Ryan: People that are getting started, what I've seen in terms of successful projects is they either take an original idea - that's a bit too complex to handle on their own or with the skilled team they have, and they transform it into something that's manageable. Being able to steer what you're putting together is a big difference of people that get the initial analysis paralysis or people that actually hit the ground running.

Eric: Something I think that you have - you're in the position to have a really unique perspective on, you're both steeped in the technology and you also see different business models that people put together. Do you see any patterns in terms of what works and what doesn't?

Ryan: People have their own lanes in terms of how they think. If you're a developer, then you develop. If you're a marketer, you market. If you're a designer and an artist, you design. Then you take the current day entrepreneur, someone who is wanting to do something on their own by themselves. These people aren't trying to get out of their office job into another office job that they're also a part of too. They want to do it themselves. The marketer goes out on his own, the designer, etc. You'll find that the developer will develop perpetually. Then when the development is finally done there's this giant drag on the marketing because they're not a marketer and there is no one to do the marketing. So on and so forth the marketer, the developing doesn't really come through to fruition as much. As a solo entrepreneur you need to bite off these tiny little pieces of each of the puzzle so that you can put it all together in unison. I think that is a common denominator for individual success. I think that that's one of the attributes that Kathy and I had early on. I was a developer that worked freelance. It was up to us to find work and market our services in order to find work. We had to do the marketing, the design, the development and basically consulting ourselves as far as assessing if we're doing it the right way and staying fashionable in an industry that changes.

Eric: What are some of those strategies over the years that you've learned on how you operate on a day-to-day basis?

Ryan: Set a goal for what you want to take on - making sure to take on as much work as we needed and then get that work done. There's a lot of opportunities that we passed on and a lot of times where we just said, "you know our plates are full. Let's clear this stuff off and then let's do some more." I would say that there really a big part of it. Also, having a method where you can rinse and repeat in a way that's still interesting to you, but at the same time is practical to come back on. You can't start everything off 100% unique. Each iteration of what you give to somebody, it shouldn't be the first time you've done it. You should already have a product that you can offer them. I think that's a really important part of it. Also, where do you want to be in terms of work? You hear people talk about verticals. You find out very quickly that if you build websites in the food industry - we have a ton of food bloggers that we work for and it's just because we happened to take on projects or for a really well-known food blogger. That just

causes a whole channel of food blogging. Take on jobs that you can see doing a dozen of. Personally, I don't work in the pharmaceutical space. I'm temperamental about universities and what not. I have a couple of universities that I work for, but just the business process of it is mildly difficult.

Eric: Right. Basically, having a familiarity with the types of clients that you want to work with, what you can see doing multiples of …

Ryan: That's where it tends to organically grow. That's an important thing to really keep in mind. Most importantly thought is offer something of value.

Eric: Yeah. Makes a lot of sense. I think that approach is probably why these days you don't need to look for business. You didn't bite off more than you can chew and you made sure that you delivered on what you promised.

Ryan: I've always been a really big advocate in personally educating yourself on why are using what you're using. I started early on picking a theme every single time I built a WordPress website. I'd just pick it aesthetically. If it was a yoga website I would find a yoga theme, and so on and so forth. Just through clients basically demanding it, I started using the Genesis Framework on a regular basis. That made a gigantic difference in terms of continuity of the builds and how they work. Then with WordPress, if you're just getting started with WordPress, or building a company based on WordPress, or you're in the service business and you're using WordPress - having managed hosting is a really big deal. Using one of those economic hosting scenarios that's less than $5 a month, it's not more affordable in the long run, in my opinion, because the problems have a way of catching up. Where is with managed hosting, what I have found is that it has allowed me to not have to hire techs to do more of the remedial work. Like, personally I work daily with WP engine. All of the sites I maintain are on it. I would say at least 90% of my client base is on WP engine as well. That expands my offering by 70 people in turns what I do into a 24 hours service where people can call into somebody at any time, or talk to someone about the generals of WordPress. That saves me a ton in terms of the amount of communication I have to do.

Eric: I think another important factor for tool choice, theme hosting provider - any sort of third-party functionality required. Like, affiliate management, membership management etc. is longevity. You want to make sure that when you set your client up with something that there are teams available to support and maintain that software that you've chosen going forward. The last thing that you want is to put something on a build with a client and then have to swap it out later because something changed and it's no longer being updated, or something like that.

Ryan: Or a hundred clients. Once you start getting into the hundreds, having to change out a framework could take up a good amount of time. The shelf life in a world of constantly evolving offerings - quite the added value. If you can build a website in 2012 but still at the top of Google in 2018, that's something special if nothing's been done to it.

Eric: That's an interesting point for people who make a living being developers. Technologies change so frequently. New technologies come onto the market. How do you maintain that balance of not having to constantly try and chase everything that comes out, but making sure at the same time that you're relevant, with your skills?

Ryan: Agency standards really help with that. Also, use what you need. I personally use the most powerful option that I can find that's done the best for me in the past. The second part of what I do as a developer/designer/consultant is follow the bouncing ball of the industry using different services online and seeing what some of the biggest industry leaders are using and asking - does that apply to me, or, is that the next five years of what I'll be doing?

Eric: I believe that this is a really important part of what a developer should be asking themselves. As someone who hires people these days, when I look at resumes and I see people who have a slew of technologies, that tells me that they're a jack of all trades, master of all none, which is not what I want. It means that the likelihood of those people being able to deliver is far lower than someone who can say with confidence, "this is what I work with. These are the tools that I'm really good at using. No, I don't work with those things, but I can accomplish the same thing with this tool." It's super important for hireability.

Ryan: The jack of all trades, master of none analogy - there's some guy who's really good with a feather pen. At one point, the world was his oyster, but there were some people who are diversifying their skill set and they could continue getting closer to being a master with a wheelhouse of different scenarios. I think that's kind of where we're at right now with technology. If you're using WordPress you're eventually going to come into contact with JavaScript. A lot of people start using WordPress prior to knowing any PHP. Lo and behold they have to understand PHP and start learning that. I think that's the important thing - looking at all the different tools and saying three years from now is this going to be a viable, or is it a flash in the pan?

Eric: Now, you've been working with WordPress for a long time. What do you think people who are building online businesses using WordPress need to know in 2019?

Ryan: Well, the big thing in 2019 is using WordPress 5.0 and Gutenberg of course. I think those are two important things to embrace. Also looking at where it comes from. Look up a few of the talks as far as what it is and why it's such a gigantic shift in WordPress has come up because it's going to open up the door to a lot of different opportunities. I think that's kind of a life that's in WordPress. This machine that's evolving and everyone is riding on top of it. This is a good year for that. There's a lot changing. In 2019 I think using strong, quality tools on it that make new features and new additions to something as big as WordPress not only more powerful, but less stressful. MemberMouse, of course the reason I use your software is it was mentioned that it had the least hiccups to it through some people that I really trust that handle a lot of support. They maintain a lot of different websites that use a lot of different membership modules and they said that yours was definitely worth checking out. The quality of the build is why I use it.

All the little things are supported well. All the little knick knacky things that no one is putting any love into. Those things will fall to the wayside. So, quality things in 2019 - professional term stuff. Quality support and keeping up on the way it's going to be moving forward.

Eric: One of your areas of expertise is helping your clients rank well in Google. Is this something that you feel is an essential skill for all web developers to understand?

Ryan: I think SEO is super important. I think that it's the roads that lead your potential customers to you. All of the sites on the internet, basically satellite and Google - Google decides who gets seen. Unless you want to use a social network for marketing or, get most of your work through Pinterest or whatever. Also, doing SEO well making sure that people who aren't supposed to end up on your website don't too. You don't want to bring a whole bunch of the wrong people because it doesn't do anything. I think SEO is super important for web development. I'm almost surprised that it's its own industry.

Eric: You are surprised?

Ryan: I said almost. There is so much search engine optimization that's a part of the build and it's a part of the content and the decisions that you make.

Eric: You're helping me currently on a new website build and we reviewed it. I was surprised myself by how many areas there are, but after hearing them it's amazing that these things weren't considered because the whole goal of the website is a marketing channel. To get people, the right people, in front of the product or the service. By the things that we covered, it was basically hobbling the effort. From that perspective, it's essential to support the investment that's being made in these online resources. It also seems to be a somewhat of a black box or black magic. SEO is its own domain. How do you even enter into it?

Ryan: For a really long time, I ran on an elliptical for four miles and watched a tutorial on SEO. Just briefed over it and maybe listened to it for another time to see if there's anything I can catch. Nowadays I would say it's more so trying to think like a robot. What does a robot do when it goes to a website? It's not witty or funny. Also, how often is something use? A really weird example about super simple SEO, that I don't see a lot of people talk about too much, is you have all these people using royalty free stock photography, right? So, someone downloads a picture of a flower from iStock - the robots know the point of origin of that image. That piece of your website isn't something new for Google. Google, it doesn't care about the ten thousand times that image was used because that would just populate the whole website of that same picture of a flower. It notices the pixels, it says it's existed here, and I found it years ago and I can't forget about the tens of thousands of others that people have downloaded it. However, if you flip the image so that the petals are now on the left instead of the right, to a robot that's a completely brand-new image.

Eric: That's interesting.

Ryan: All of a sudden, you've got basically original content. Desaturate it a little bit, flip it horizontally - new Image. Nowadays you can even verify that through Google. You can slightly modify image, drag it on into Google and see if it comes up as a new one. You're slightly stronger than you were before.

Eric: Something you talked to me about when we were reviewing the website is naming the images in a certain way with keywords.

Ryan: Definitely. You know like you said it's "black box" rules. There are some things that Google has said that actually pertain, but everyone is basically trying to assume what Google is doing. First off, stay is ethical as you can. I bet Google wants to be as ethical as they possibly can giving everybody their equal shot of being something. So, starting there is a good spot because that's where they're starting. Don't try to do anything "black hat." It's just a waste of time. Then from there, video image video images and text, every single image has a file name. That's an area where you can actually use pretty relevant search terms for your website. From what I've seen, it really seems to make a big difference.

Eric: Speaking of which Protrailblazer.com is a site where you go over these tips and tricks and SEO and other areas.

Ryan: Correct. Pro Trailblazer is the next version of what I do distributed to more people. Through learning management software and what not. I'm going to put together a fair amount of methods that I use for others moving forward. I had the same conversations with a lot of people. It's not a canned speech or anything. It's just the best way I know how to do something. So, I might as well can and shelve it. Have it available.

Eric: I feel like that's extremely valuable. You always mention- look there's 20 to 30 ways that this can be done. It's always true. We know that your way of particularly doing things isn't the only way of doing it. The fact is that the 20 year plus career that you've had with 3200 Creative in your development business, with all the customers you've worked with from solopreneurs to Fortune 500 companies, you have found ways to make things work. You have relevant experience and yes while there are many ways to do things, the ways that you have come to do them have worked for you and therefore it's likely that it will at least work for one other person, right? The fact that you're sharing that stuff is great. It's going to be an amazing resource for people.

Ryan: I appreciate that. Like I said earlier, it's either information that you can look at it and say, "well I'm way ahead of him" and just feel better about yourself or, it's a moment to get a little further ahead from where you're at. It's one or the other, but I think each bit of information that you consume is beneficial to you.

Eric: Now, talking about your lifespan of 3200 Creative, there's the beginning phase of getting the ball rolling and then there's a middle phase and then there's the current phase. For others who are also are trying to build a development business and maybe they're in the phase of just

trying to find work, what did you find that was the thing or things that helped be the turning point between when you were hustling to trying to find work and when you hit a stride?

Ryan: We initially got started using for example, Search Tempest. This was pre all the different elance sites. We would search every three or four hours a day for people looking for someone that could do what I knew. Three hours of my day was unpaid looking for work time, just responding to emails and hitting the virtual pavement every morning. At the end of the week I had a dollar amount that I was trying to hit. That was pretty much the same way, but not as far as reaching out to people and actually looking for the work.

Eric: Yeah because you did it consistently for enough time and delivered, which is very important. There's a lot of people on elance who don't deliver.

Ryan: The paper trail of success is really important when you get started to. Not every person that you work with is going to sync up with your method; however, the majority absolutely should. When you are successful you should make sure to ask for credit, a testimonial or something. Those types of scenarios come in handy when a likeminded person reaches out to you with a similar need. There's a lot of trust in having accomplished something in the past.

Eric: Basically, in the beginning spending a significant amount of time seeking out work, having goals in terms of how much work you want to get in specific periods of time, making sure you deliver on that work. Is there any other things that you were doing in the beginning that you feel were extremely valuable to get to the next level?

Ryan: Probably one of the differences that I did right away was - I'd get $1,000 to do something and I'd put $2,000 of my time into it. When I was getting going I would put above and beyond what was expected of me into it. Then next time around if that project ever came up I would have an idea of what I would need in a monetary sense to do it again. Taking that extra initiative to make sure that I had good examples of my work.

Eric: Which is extremely important. If it's something you've done and you're proud of and you can share when you do business, then that one project can end up, in a sense, being a foundation for making you a lot more.

Ryan: Every single week up until now that story still happens. Where something comes up and it's just something I know I need to do a little bit extra on. It's worth it to me because it does more to verify the quality of the product.

Eric: Now, with people who are trying to do what you were doing back then, do you see common mistakes that they're making?

Ryan: The initial web development that I'm familiar with is you start with a blank document and you build out the website from nothing. Nowadays there's a lot of add-ons, plugins, themes scripts, frameworks. You can use yarn and plug in a ton of stuff into a website. Just have tens of

thousands of files that you're using. It allows us to create a much bigger end product without going through all the little micro building blocks on the entire final project. However, I can never imagine building a site on basic bootstrap. Just putting in Bootstrap in and saying "what Bootstrap gave me I'll use it for the entirety of this project. I'm going to plug this theme in the exact same way that this theme looks is how the entire build of this site is going to be." I've never really been an advocate of that because if you're building a yoga website with a yoga theme and you're following all the other yoga folk with the exact same thing - how is anyone going to get ahead? They're all showing up to the race with the exact same car. That's something I find kind of strange these days - the amount that people lean on the pre-built.

Eric: The people who lean on the pre-built basically have glass ceiling in terms of how much they can make on a project-by-project basis. There's only a certain client that's going to go in and have their expectations set to have something like that delivered. You're talking like mom and pop stuff.

Ryan: Sure

Eric: If you're going to get business with somebody like MemberMouse or other clients, you need to understand performance. You need to understand when you put a site together how many people visitors are coming to that. What is SEO compatibility of what's been delivered. There's a finer level of detail that needs to be understood.

Ryan: Also, it doesn't really matter. A $20,000, $30,000 website or a $2,000 website, putting the budget into an area that makes that project stand out in the unique way for example, SEO or optimization and finding out - how can I make this work a little bit better. Maybe, as a designer it hurts me to say, but maybe take a little bit out of the aesthetics of it. No matter how nice it looks if no one is showing up and making the project a monetary success, it doesn't really matter.

Eric: It also won't matter what it looks like if it is a monetary success.

Ryan: Yes, so I would say put in budget to actually doing informational design. It's something that I don't see a lot, even at an advanced level. People actually doing flowcharts and wireframes and mobile-first, rather than mobile responsive.

Eric: You think that's important?

Ryan: Oh, I would say you shouldn't open up Photoshop until you've actually drawn a flowchart. You shouldn't look at themes until you have an informational understanding of what the project is supposed to do.

Eric: And, do you review that with the client as well and iterate over that?

Ryan: Usually I do it initially over the phone, very similar to this conversation. The very first part is talking shop and finding out "where are you trying to get?" I got to ask for directions.

Eric: How do you handle push back? If you're talking with a client and they say "here are my goals" and then they say "this is what I want to have happen." But, you know in your mind that the path that they're proposing is not going to reach the goal. How do you handle that situation?

Ryan: Constructively. Pushback is a way that projects can definitely become better. Also, I'm not also always right too, but anytime there is pushback I'm thinking "is this warranted and am I the one that's wrong?" I think that's equally important to discover. In a real-world scenario someone was using MemberMouse and they wanted to build a membership program that would take on probably 4,000 to 10,000 users. At the end of the project if it had been successful with the amount of offerings that they were going to give their users, they would require their own office with cubicles, phone support people and content generators - like a little mini BuzzFeed or something. I asked the business owner, "is this what you see happening when you're making five million a year?" They said, "absolutely not. I don't want to be in that environment even a little bit." So, as excited as they were about doing something other than the plan that I had, they wouldn't have been excited about the end result that it generated. Then realizing what they were sprinting towards, restructured the plan and made it something that was a lot less exciting to talk about preemptively, but a lot easier to work on throughout the duration. It was just simple. It was simple for them to scale.

Eric: Speaking of support. How do you manage your project life cycles with clients? For one thing, how do you know when the project is done? How is it communicated effectively to the client that the project is done and if there is more work that there needs to be an additional, that could be a challenge, you know 'scope creep.' You want them to be happy so you don't want to pushback too much, but at the same time you need to protect your time and your investments.

Ryan: There's probably 20 or 30 different models for 20 or 30 different people. You get used to that working directly with people. Having a one-stop solution for everybody is going to cause some people to not find what they're looking for in your service. Really getting a familiarity for when a certain style of working with someone is pertinent. Some people just want a developer to do everything quickly and briefly and have it done accurately and professionally. They don't want to have that dependent moving forward. Where is other people will have a large website built and in taking on that build to that website one of the conditions is you're taking on a dependent as a developer. When they need things to be modified, upgraded, or additional value-added in it's your responsibility to do so because leaving them high and dry with something that they can't use - I just find that irresponsible personally.

Eric: Yeah, for sure. Irresponsible and also unproductive. If you don't do knowledge transfer then you're setting yourself up for a lot of questions and also that client doesn't want to ask those questions either. They want know the answers and be able to do it themselves if possible.

Ryan: Right. That's just my personal opinion. There's plenty of really successful developers that they build the site and they are upfront that they don't provide ongoing support afterwards. It's a very common scenario where they have a beginning and an end to the primary build. That's about it. That's an important thing about taking on the right work too is you can't take on everybody as a dependent unless you want to hire a whole bunch of people.

Eric: Yeah, for sure. Ryan it has been great talking to you and I really appreciate you coming on. The two sites that we can share with people for you is 3200creative.com and this is the site people will go to for your development services, consulting services, SEO, etc. Then protrailblazer.com is where people will go to access any courses that you're offering, access any free tips that you are offering on SEO, development, tools, etc. Are there any other places that people can go to learn more from you or, contact you?

Ryan: No, that will do it. We don't spend too much time on the social networks. So, 3200 Creative or Pro Trailblazer.

Eric: Awesome Ryan. I really appreciate it. Thanks for coming on.

Ryan: Likewise. Thank you.

OUTRO:

I hope you enjoyed this episode and now have an enhanced perspective on how you can build a successful online business.

To learn more about Ryan and see examples of his work, head over to 3200creative.com. If you'd like more tips and information about topics like web development and SEO, you can also visit his site Protrailblazer.com.
For a list of resources and the show notes from today's episode, go to SubscriptionEntrepreneur.com/117. And if you've enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, Google Play, or Stitcher.

Also, be sure to stay tuned for our next episode – it's going to be really special. In it, I talk with David Sherry – the founder of DeathtotheStockPhoto.com. David started this membership business six years ago and successfully grew it to over 500,000 subscribers and $1.5 million dollars in revenue without the use of advertising. We sat down for a candid conversation about creativity, business building, and marketing that actually works.

Thanks again for listening! That's all for this of the Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast. See you next time!