

SUBSCRIPTION ENTREPRENEUR



HOSTED BY ERIC TURNNESSEN, FOUNDER OF [membermouse™](#)

Ep 128: How To Create An Online Course And Earn Six-Figures with Mark Webster of Authority Hacker

"It's a long-term game, and if you want to get into it and you have the time and you spend years perfecting it, it's amazing. There's no better feeling in the world than waking up and you made \$30,000 while you were sleeping. That doesn't happen in many other jobs, really. I would say that the end is definitely worthwhile. It's not as easy to get started as you may think, but it is achievable."

INTRO:

That's Mark Webster, our guest on today's episode of the podcast.

If you don't recognize his voice, you may recognize the company he co-founded in 2014 called Authority Hacker.

Authority Hacker is an amazing online resource for entrepreneurs who are interested in building and growing online businesses organically through SEO, effective market research, and strategic content creation.

Over the years, Mark and his team at Authority Hacker have built numerous websites of their own that get millions of visits per year and make serious money through affiliate marketing, advertising, and product sales.

Mark not only has a lot of experience building and selling highly profitable websites, but he's also learned how to successfully plan and execute multiple six-figure product launches for Authority Hacker. They launched their first online product back in 2015 and have since tested everything from online courses to membership sites.

Mark joins us on the show today to share what he's learned about pulling off a successful six-figure product launch online. If this is something you're interested in, then you're in the right place. He's both incredibly knowledgeable and a fantastic teacher. We're grateful to have him on the show. So, let's get to it!

As always, I'm your host Eric Turnnessen and this is Episode 128 of the Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast.

Eric: Welcome to the show, Mark.

Mark: Good to be here. Thanks for having me on.

Eric: My pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. So, to kick things off, let's just let our listeners know a little bit about who you are, what you do, and what Authority Hacker is.

Mark: Okay. Well, my name is Mark Webster. I'm the co-founder of Authority Hacker. I founded the site together with Gael Breton in 2014. I've been in online marketing, SEO coming up for 10 years now, actually. Gosh, it makes me feel old. I used to run a marketing agency, so I've done the client side of things. We exited that business towards the beginning of 2015, and really, we saw creating our own business, creating our own websites as a much better option than building other people's businesses, what we felt we were doing with client work. So, we launched Authority Hacker and a number of other websites. We had a health website in the health/nutrition space. We were in a bunch of sports websites, and some tech site we just sold recently as well. There's a bunch of other smaller ones, too.

Basically, we do online marketing for our own sites. We do affiliate marketing. We sell ads and stuff on our sites. Our primary business with Authority Hacker, though, was that we wanted a vehicle to focus our thoughts and put out the training we wish we had when we started our own affiliate sites, our own authority sites. It was initially just like a little blog for us to share our thoughts, share what's working, and it just grew over time. About 2015, the end of 2015, we launched a course. That morphed, then, into a membership, and then later morphed back into a course. Now we have three pretty high-ticket courses, which we sell, and various models. We do product launches, as well as evergreen. Yeah, that's our business, really. We're really just trying to teach people how to do online marketing in an ethical, built-to-last, long-term, from an SEO perspective at least, white-hat way.

Eric: Yeah, and also, I might add, from a place of experience, which you would guess is a prerequisite of people creating courses and training other people to do something, but as we know, it's not always the case.

Mark: Sure. You always have this debate around who is the best person to learn from. On one end of the spectrum, you have someone who just does the activity, online marketing, SEO, or whatever it is you're talking about, who does that all the time. Is that the best person to learn from, or is the best person to learn from a teacher who knows the theory and has studied it but hasn't actually done it? I would actually say neither. It's probably somewhere in between, someone who has a bit of experience of teaching things, of compressing lots of knowledge into succinct, actionable advice, but also someone who practices what they preach and does this. So, I think we can bridge that divide quite nicely.

Eric: Yeah, and you'll get no argument from me there. I think that there is the two sides of the spectrum that you mentioned, and the best place to be is in the middle, in terms of somebody who's going to disseminate that knowledge to people.

You and I were talking a little bit ago, and you mentioned to me that a friend of yours, who had no prior experience, mentioned to you that he was thinking of just launching an online course, and from a place of you having the experience, I guess that made you chuckle a little bit

because it seems simple when somebody who maybe hasn't done it before sees what's on the surface. They're like, "Oh, I just need to get a page up and put some links on there and have something for sale," but of course, when you actually get into it, it turns out that there's a lot more to it. I thought that this nugget would be a good thing for us to talk about, because as we've gone into, you have a number of experience creating multiple six-figure product launches. So, I thought that we could get a lot out of this and share with people, give them a little bit of an overview of what it actually looks like to do a six-figure product launch.

Mark: Absolutely, and as we were talking before the show, came up with this analogy. It's like the swan on the lake. It looks majestic and calm above the surface and awesome. Everyone wants to be that swan, but beneath the surface, it's paddling like crazy and all hell is breaking loose. That's kind of what it's like to launch a course. Don't get me wrong. I still think it is by far the best business model for online marketing. I prefer it much more to, let's say, affiliate marketing or working with clients or consulting, this kind of stuff, but you have to be prepared for all the other stuff. It's not just creating a few videos, throwing up a sales page, and then printing money. It's a little bit more complicated than that.

Eric: Yeah. Now, there's a whole number of things that we can go into here. Now, I've basically got an outline sitting in front of me, which is a list of 15 separate items of areas that you want to look at for a product launch, right?

Mark: Yeah.

Eric: This is just the list, but given that you actually teach people this on your different sites and you have experience doing this, where should we start with this, in terms of helping people understand the reality of going down this path?

Mark: Okay. I think we should start with the product, with the course itself, of what you're actually selling people, because the quality of that is going to underpin everything else you do. If it's not a good course, if it sucks, people are not going to buy it, or if they do buy it, they're going to ask for a refund pretty damn quickly. So, I think that's probably a good place to start.

Eric: What makes a good course or a good product, in your opinion?

Mark: A good course, it's all about providing value to the customer. They're giving you something, which is usually money, and they're expecting something back. In our case, we're in the online marketing niche, so we deal in ... It's quite easy for us to demonstrate a return on investment, because if we show you how to increase the traffic to your website or double the amount of links you're getting every week or whatever, then that will very quickly translate into more money for people. If you're in a more B2C niche, such as health, and you're teaching people, I don't know, how to lose weight or something like that, in a course, the return from them is how they feel, how they look, how long they live potentially, but it's not monetary. You have to be aware of exactly what it is you're offering people, and you have to make sure that your content is going to get them there.

What I mean by that is that it's very easy when you know a lot about a subject to just take all that information and do a big brain dump and ramble on for 50 videos, stick it all together, and call it a course. But you have to think of where your audience is and where you need to get them to. It's very important to structure your content within your course in such a way that they're actually, A, going to follow it, and B, be able to get to the destination. An example of that might be if you take a linear approach to a course, which is they have to follow it in order to get the end result, which is what we do for our course with the Authority Site System. It's kind of like a beginner online marketing course, teaches people how to build a website. We break it down into very distinct modules, first of all. People love when you break courses down into modules. It's much easier to understand. There'll be a basics one, a research one, a site building one, a content one, a link building one.

Eric: Are those modules also linear, or are they just you can approach the modules in any order?

Mark: They're also linear. The module level is the first one you have to understand. Essentially, when you break it down like that, we have five modules, and each one of those is essentially a course in itself. When you think of it this way, it actually makes it a little bit easier to break down that module. It's not such a big behemoth of work that you're about to take on. If we take just the site building module there, we can think of, "Okay. Well, what are all the things we need to do there to get the end result?" The end result being a functioning site that ticks all the boxes. That might be brainstorming a domain, installing WordPress. It may be getting a cheap but still good-looking logo, installing certain plugins, typical WordPress stuff, the list goes on.

We then arrange that in the correct order where it makes sense. You've obviously got to buy your domain before you can set up WordPress, before you can install plugins, that kind of thing. Then once we do that, we're left with a number of lessons, maybe 5 or 10 lessons, say. Then we take each one of those lessons, say, "Okay. The process for getting a logo, how do we solve that? How do we get the user to a point where they have a logo?" That's when normally quite a lot of research comes in because, at least in our case, there's a lot of options for how you can approach that.

In many cases, in many courses, for more complex topics, say hiring a ... Well, actually, let's stick with the logo example. I could name probably 20 different ways in which you could get a logo for your site. You could hire a designer locally. You could go on 99designs. You could go on Fiverr. You could use Upwork. You could go to a specific logo generation company, all these things. If I give you all of those options in the course, that's not really helping you get to the end result. That's just giving information.

Eric: What you could do from a Google search.

Mark: Exactly. Exactly. Maybe not all of them because you might not be aware of some of the possibilities or some of the sites, but really, a lot of this information is going to be available for

free online if you search for, "How do I build a good logo?" and read a bunch of blog posts. You're going to find a lot of options.

Eric: Right. Well, what I meant by the Google search thing is that your issue there is you get a whole bunch of results with no guidance.

Mark: Exactly. Exactly, and it's the guidance which you as the course creator are essentially responsible for delivering. In many cases, it's actually better to give fewer options to people rather than give more options. If you personally know of 10 different ways to create a logo, what is the best one for a beginner in their situation with perhaps limited budget? Then just give them that solution and say ... You can allude to the fact that there are others, "But of all the ones we've tested, this is the best option. We recommend you go with that." That, to a course buyer, is hugely valuable because they've just saved hours of time from having to decide themselves which option to go through. They just follow what you recommend, and they're onto the next step. The same kind of approach is needed for every single lesson in your course.

Eric: Yeah. So, you've alluded to, a number of times, how important it is to understand where the person who's going through your course is at, and this goes back to what you mentioned at the beginning. Who's the best teacher, somebody who does it for a living, or somebody who knows the theory and knows how to teach? This is why it's important, because there is this concept of ... People running any sort of subscription-based product or whatever, there's a concept of churn, people wanting refunds, et cetera. This is basely a result of the lack of success at some level with accomplishing this.

I think that there is an aspect outside of the material itself. How do you maintain ... What kind of tools do you use to help the customer maintain their levels of enthusiasm, help them understand what they've accomplished in different ways?

Mark: There's an interesting dynamic at play here, and what we're talking about really is the difference between a subscription, a membership, and a course, which is what we sell at the moment as a one-off purchase. You buy the course, and you have it, free updates for life, but it's not as if you're getting rebuilt in the future. We did actually try that model, the membership model, and it's great in terms of getting more people in the door initially. The barrier to join is usually quite low. Think of Netflix. What is it? Eight bucks or something for the basic subscription. No one really thinks too much about that for joining. If you had to pay Netflix 800 bucks and you got it free for life ... I mean, first of all, I'd do that in a heartbeat because I think it's a great deal, but most people would need a lot more convincing and be doing a lot more research. So, on the front end, on the sales end, you need to position yourself a little bit differently there.

In terms of inside your course, what you're then offering and structuring, you'd probably do it in a different way. We, in our courses, give everyone everything, all the content, all the modules immediately, up front. I know with a lot of membership offers, the structure's a bit different where you drip-feed module one in week one or month one, module two the next

month or the next week, and do it that way. So, you're kind of holding people back to an extent.

The other interesting dynamic with a membership is that you have a really big pressure on you to constantly be creating new content every month. The view of the consumer is that they're paying their 50 bucks a month or whatever the price may be. I just say that. That's what we used to charge, but they're paying that for this month's selection of experiences, be that new content or whatever they're getting out of your community. I'll talk about community in a second because it's very, very important for both these things, so if I forget, remind me about that. But when you're selling a course just on its own, you basically want to be delivering as much value immediately as possible so that people are like, "Okay, yeah. This was totally worth it. There's no way I'm going to refund."

With a membership, it's like a continuous battle, and you have to be drip-feeding people content long term, and you have to keep producing it again and again and again and again, month after month after month. For us, the pressure of having to produce something new every month, honestly, it was too much. We didn't like it. We couldn't take time out to work on our other parts of our sites or anything like that. It was just our entire focus was around getting next month's content out there. For some people, they're able to do it. That's great. I personally don't think that the model is as good as the course model. That's not even to get onto the point about how much money you're able to collect and the kind of cash flow use of that money for buying ads and whatnot. You're able to recover money immediately when selling a course versus having to wait 6, 12 months to get it all back and then put it back into your ad funnel.

Eric: Right. The other thing that people may not realize is that there's an average retention that you can expect if you have a subscription. People like the idea of recurring revenue forever, and this would be the wrong reason to choose a subscription business. There are other considerations, but if there's average retention, say three to five months, and you're charging \$20 a month, \$50 a month for that, but then with a course you're charging five times \$20 or \$50 up front, you're really more likely going to get more cash flow out of the course situation than the subscription business, in certain circumstances. So, you can't just assume, "Oh, I have a subscription business. Everybody's just going to be ongoing with me forever." It doesn't happen. A lot of times, for cash flow reasons, you'll actually get more money by having an upfront, one-time charge.

Mark: Yeah, yeah, and that's absolutely true if you're running any kind of cold traffic to Facebook ads or anything like that, because you can turn the wheel, scale the machine much, much, much faster.

Eric: Since we're on the topic of designing the offer, have you ever experimented with payment plans, in terms of three payments of whatever?

Mark: Yeah. We've done a lot of experimentation with this kind of stuff, really interesting topic as well. There's no one-size-fits-all, do-this-every-time scenario. One thing which we found to

work particularly well is ... because like most businesses who offer payment plans, a percentage of people will not finish those payment plans. Sometimes 40%, 50% of them will not do it. Sometimes they just let it slip. They lose interest and cancel. Sometimes the credit card expires or there's some other billing issue. We have technology in place to mitigate that, minimize that as much as possible, but it's just a fact of life. It's always going to happen. The longer your payment plan goes on, the more likely you are to hit that point. That's why, for the most part, people charge extra for payment plans. Instead of one payment of 997, they might charge four payments of 300 bucks or something, total of 1,200, or even more in some cases to mitigate that.

What we've found works really, really well, though, is not offering a payment plan initially, just offering the full price, one-off offer, and then if that's in a time-limited situation, in the form of a launch or in some kind of evergreen funnel where you're using deadline funnels to create real scarcity in there, then what you can do is after you finish that offering of the full price, then offer a payment plan to anyone who did not buy that, because our fear and what we experienced in the past was that the payment plan was cannibalizing sales of the full-price product because people were buying it instead because, for whatever reason, they felt it was a better option for them. So, by only offering it after we finished offering the full-price product, we're not having that cannibalization issue, and we're able to make more money because of it.

Eric: Okay. Are there any other kind of things that come to mind for you in regards of the pricing or the offer? To recap, we talked about the importance of creating your product, making sure there's quality there, how to structure it, making sure that you're putting it down in bite-size chunk modules, lessons within the modules, and then packaging up the offer, different approaches to pricing. Is there anything else in this category that you can think of?

Mark: For sure. In terms of pricing, generally most people are not charging enough money. As an experiment, try doubling your price and see what happens. We've done that twice, and it had zero effect on sales. Generally, if people are willing to pay a bit of money for something, most of them, or the majority of them, are willing to pay a lot of money for something. The point in which your ... I forget what the economics model is when the ... Price elasticity of demand, is that what it's called? The point where that intersects is generally much higher than you would expect. A lot of people, myself included, we were scared to price our products too high initially because we were worried no one would buy them, so we undervalued what we were offering, and we underpriced it. We'd lose money, and we can't grow our business as fast. We can't hire more people. We can't release more products. We can't expand our existing product offering. So, you're not really serving anyone by making your offer, your course, too cheap. That's the first thing.

The second is the actual what people get. It actually should be, in most cases, more than just the actual course itself. You want to offer a package of things, which is going to help people, around whatever pain point or problem they may have. I sort of alluded to it before. In most of our courses, we offer a community aspect of it as well. That can be just a private Facebook group for members only. We're really strict about no buying and selling, no sponsorship, none

of that. It's really just high value in there, and a lot of people will value that, sometimes actually more than the content of the course itself. So, if you can cultivate-

Eric: Because in a sense, user-generated content, that does get created over time that you have to maintain in some sense, but you don't have to be the sole creator of.

Mark: For sure, and we definitely have situations where a user will ask a question of a problem in our communities, and someone else will solve it. In fact, most cases, unless it's a technical issue with forgetting your password, that is what happens now. We spent a lot of time and a lot of effort, and we still put a lot of effort, into maintaining and nurturing that community. You really have to care about it and not weaken the value of it by throwing a bunch of ads in there or sponsoring it or doing this kind of stuff. Remember, people have already paid you a lot of money to be in here. That's been a really big success for us, and we emphasize that a lot on our sales page when we're positioning the product. You get all this as well.

Eric: Sure. Now, what are some of the ... going back to the swan metaphor. When thinking about a community, we can all imagine the benefits of being a part of a community because we all have been part of them, but what are the things that you don't see? Where are the areas and the behind the scenes that you're spending your time to make sure that it actually is successful?

Mark: So, there's a lot of ... We don't have it so much in our groups. I think we're quite fortunate, but I know of other people who have just a lot of drama, let's call it that, in their communities, people arguing with each other and saying not very nice things. Having to police that is actually quite a bit of work. There are situations where people will try and sell other people things in your group or organize some kind of group buy, which is totally illegal and stuff. We have to police it, so there's a support element to that. Even little things like approving people to join your group, how do you know that the person has actually bought your course? Well, you have to have a mechanism.

Fortunately, Facebook has now introduced a system where you can put your account ID or your email address that you signed up with the course with in here, in Facebook, and then our support people can check that that person does have an account, but then what happens if someone's payment plan fails? How do we know to remove them from the group? What happens if they issue a chargeback? How do we know to remove them from the group? What happens if they issue a refund? How do we know to remove them from the group? There's all sorts of little things that you probably won't think of to begin with but start coming into play here, and it's very important to have a process for how you and your team deal with each of them. Otherwise ... and this did happen to us once. The group just got really messy, full of people who didn't actually buy or were no longer customers of ours. Yeah.

Eric: Okay.

Mark: It was a bit of an issue.

Eric: Now, are there things that you do, like a calendar of things that you do where you're going to post something yourself to keep people engaged in the group, or does that happen naturally for you?

Mark: For us, it happens naturally. I've seen people do this in groups, and I don't like it. A lot of the time, it seems kind of forced and scheduling. I don't know where they get the actual content for these from. Maybe it's like VAs and stuff writing them, but it tends to be just not super on topic, not interesting information. It's like forcing a question, an open-ended question, then not responding to any of the comments that people reply in it. We're more like, if we're going to share something in there, it's going to be good, so people tend to listen more that way. There's less noise, and that means, first of all, we don't have to worry about, "Oh, it's Tuesday. We have to do our weekly, I don't know, video post," or whatever. We don't have to worry about it from that perspective, but when we do share something, it's usually good. I think people like that. I don't know how that affects the Facebook algorithm for who sees what, but we seem to get quite good engagement.

Eric: So, we talked about people buying the product, designing the offer, getting them into your funnel in terms of after purchase. You mentioned it's good to give them something more than the course itself, which led us into talking about community. Is there anything else besides those two things that you...

Mark: Yeah. First of all, think of what ... How is your course displayed? I've seen people who just do text courses, and sometimes they're great, and there is good information in there, but this is 2019, as we record this, and really you need to be doing video these days, so think of that. When you're doing video, you also need to think of people who perhaps are not native English speakers or good English speakers. You think of things like subtitles and closed captions, so you need to use maybe something like Rev.com to get transcripts made and subtitles files in your videos. Then, on top of that, think of what else can you offer. We put a lot of effort into offering things like templates, documents, any kind of thing which people can use.

In our course, The Authority Site System, we built a Trello to-do list of all the tasks you need to do to launch an authority site, essentially. Each of the cards, it links back to the lesson involved and any additional resources that you need. I mean, part of that was to give something of value, look good on the sales page, hopefully make more sales, but at the same time, that's also helping people to get from zero to the end result, right?

Eric: Right.

Mark: That's been hugely successful for us as well. I'm trying to think of what else. Yeah. Actually, another good one. In the Shotgun Skyscraper Blueprint, which is a link building course we released in May, I built a custom ... It sounds fancy if I say a custom piece of software. We hired a guy ... just a couple hundred bucks. He made this script, which does a bunch of stuff in Excel which you would otherwise have to do manually, but this just automates it. It does it in a

couple seconds. That cost us what? 200 bucks, and it saves people potentially hours every day, if you're following this link building process.

Eric: To add to that, as a software engineer, I have to say it's not just \$200 because you had to instruct the person and have the experience to instruct them on what to build. So, there is the experience baked into that offering, where you can actually get to the point to pay them 200 bucks.

Mark: Yeah, you're absolutely right. Yeah. A lot of people have found that to be particularly valuable, and this is a side benefit as well. When you have software like that, which you can only access when you're logged in, it makes piracy much harder. This is another thing we should talk about. A lot of people will download your course, put it on torrent sites. The online marketing space is very common for people to just resell your course. For a while, there was loads of sites who were just selling our thousand-dollar course for 50 bucks, and I was like, "This kind of sucks."

Eric: Yeah. What do you do about that?

Mark: Well, this is the thing. A lot of people think, "Oh, there's nothing you can do. It's just the cost of doing business," but that's not the case. There are companies out there who will basically be your anti-piracy law department, and they are constantly scanning for new instances of people reselling or ripping your content. They're submitting DMCA takedown results. They're contacting the site owners directly, trying to find out personal information about them to get them to stop, report them to the authorities where possible. Our guys ... and I wholeheartedly recommend them, they're called Takedown Czar. It's T-Z-A-R, is the spelling. A lot of the big guys, Brian Dean and the really, really big guys and are much bigger than us, use them. They're amazing. They actually sent a private investigator around to someone's house in Egypt to tell them to stop doing this once.

Eric: Wow.

Mark: So, that's how far this can really go on that end. You do lose a lot of revenue if you don't have any anti-piracy measures in place because people will download your course, will rip it quite fast after you launch.

Eric: Nice. So, I want to take a step back in a sense, at this point, because we've talked a lot about getting the site up, right?

Mark: Mm-hmm.

Eric: The planning of the product, et cetera. Just to set some people's expectations here, how long should they expect that to get to the point of launch and having the things that we've discussed in place to have a strong offering? What amount of effort should they expect to be putting in?

Mark: I mean, it's difficult to quantify that because a lot depends on your niche and how you're building your course and the work-

Eric: Sure.

Mark: ... going into that. However, I always say to people that the actual content creation of the course ... So that's building the videos, building the content, uploading, designing any groups you're creating or software, all of that ... is about 15% to maybe 25% of the total work necessary to run a business selling courses. That often surprises people because a lot of people have the mentality, "Oh, I'm just going to build it, and then after I've built this content, I'll just figure the rest out, but they're just minor things, and it shouldn't be too difficult." Then when you're in that situation and you're not expecting a lot of work at this point, what happens is that you end up putting out mediocre sales pages, your funnel sucks, you don't have time to do your ads properly, and nothing works, and you give up quite quickly. Realize that when you're creating a course, it is a long game. Quite often, the first thing you do will not make you any money or it will certainly not make you millions of dollar.

Eric: Right.

Mark: You have to iterate over years and years and years to build up to the high-ticket level where you're really selling a lot of things. Fundamentally, though, in order to sell a course, you need the course itself and some mechanism to deliver that. Fortunately, in this day and age, there are some really good tools out there, and so if you're doing this, then you can just get your content out there. They'll take care of most of the stuff. You still have to design and build your own sales page, which is another big task in itself, because if your sales page sucks, no one is going to buy your course. I can't emphasize how much effort you need to put into that, and it's a totally different skillset from creating course content, creating the sales page.

In addition to that, you also need to get your leads from somewhere. That's not an easy thing if you don't have an existing audience. Hopefully you do have an existing audience, in which case you can email them. Hopefully you have their emails, you've been collecting that. If not, start now, and then maybe you're thinking about doing paid traffic, so you want to get into Facebook ads, which is not anymore, the "I Win Button" that it was three or four years ago. It's getting more expensive, 30% to 40% more expensive every single year just because it's a marketplace and more people are coming in, so prices are going up.

What that means is that for a lot of people, the amount that other companies are bidding for ad spots is going up to the point where they're only able to really break even on the front-end offer. I know a lot of companies who target a 0% profit on their front-end product, and then they only make their money on later upsells or, once they're in their system, future products that they push to them, launches, things like that.

Eric: Right.

Mark: So, it's tough out there to be competitive in cold traffic, at least on Facebook.

Eric: Well, reading between the lines here, time is an important component to understand and iteration, learning from something, building something over time that is of value, so setting expectations appropriately to your first go around that you have a certain milestone that you're trying to achieve, and don't be unrealistic about it. I think that's one of the challenges that can happen these days because we know through many channels, we see so many people out there and what they're accomplishing. This wasn't an issue for me when I started MemberMouse. I wasn't looking around at what other people were doing. It wasn't so in your face with Instagram and everybody having their videos and showing what they're making in their businesses. It was more of a solo journey, and I think because of that, there wasn't additional levels of stress that can be added if you're seeing what other people are doing and have this concern that you're not where they are. So, I think that that's something that would be important to keep in mind as people are starting these things so they don't get overwhelmed for no reason.

Mark: Yeah, and how I think about it is you're not starting a course. You're not launching a course. You're starting a course business, and the course business is everything else which supports the course itself. The course is just your product. It's like if you design a new soft drink to compete with Coca-Cola, that's great, but you need the marketing, you need the production, the logistics, all that stuff to go with it. If you break it down, each of those individual things, it's solvable. Online courses is relative to most industries. It's quite easy to solve most of these problems, but there are going to be problems, and you do need to spend time preparing for and solving them and doing a good job, especially with things like growing your audience, sales page design, testing, that kind of stuff.

Eric: Right. Now, when people are getting their product off the ground, getting their course site set up, et cetera, what are some of the common things that aren't actually necessary to focus on in the beginning that people may think that they do need to focus on?

Mark: Yeah. You don't need to worry about ... I talked about anti-piracy and stuff. If your course isn't out there, no one's pirating it. You can solve that kind of problem later. The things like the design, I would say, of the actual course content, of course it's important to have a good design, but it's not the be-all and end-all, and I would take an 80/20 approach with that, so do enough so it looks kind of okay, and you can iterate later. We had really, truly awful design on our site and on our membership area, our course area, for a long, long time. It still could be a lot better, I think, but it was bad, like really, really bad. Stuff was broken. It didn't work on mobile, and people still bought our course. We still got by, so I would say the threshold for that kind of stuff is probably a lot lower than you think it is.

In terms of actually converting leads, then you, as the course creator, as the site owner, as the face of your business, of your brand, you have to understand that a lot of people will believe in you and will be following you as a person. Those people are not necessarily going to need as

much convincing to buy your product. To them, you can get away with pre-selling them in a few emails or making more of a light-touch sales page. I know people who have relatively strong following, and when they're creating a course, they'll say, "Hey, guys. I'm releasing this course in two months' time. Here is a special pre-purchase offer. Be among the first to get it, and get a 20% discount or something. Here's a link," and just link them to the checkout cart, so not actually have a sales page at that point. That's a good way for them to actually test whether people are interested in purchasing the course, because people who like it will obviously buy.

In the situation I'm thinking of, my friend who did this, he sold a crap load of these courses that way, without doing any kind of sales pitch at all, just because he had the existing audience and a bit of trust there. So, I'd say think of these things, what you have, and use those assets to your advantage.

Eric: That was basically about what isn't necessary to focus on, but you also mentioned earlier that 15% to 25% of the whole picture, in regarding to get your site off the ground, et cetera, is about the physical content, the course, et cetera, the site that delivers it. So the remaining 75%, I think we were getting into is you were talking about sales funnel design, growing your audience, customer acquisition systems. There are courses that exist that are hours upon hours of material from these experts who've been doing this for years that will go into one, tiny part of funnel design. These are all just topics that have endless nuance to them, but in terms of approaching these things, what's some good level-setting guidance for how people should think about these things?

Mark: I would say get the technical fundamentals in place, so a shopping cart, a checkout that works, a payment provider, Stripe or PayPal, whatever, that people can actually use, test it, make sure it works. Once that's in place, you can ... What I would focus on is implementing some kind of scarcity in this because, surprise, surprise, scarcity sells. When you have a digital product, which is what a course is, you don't have really any production costs. It doesn't cost you any money to make a new account, most of the time, basically. A lot of people think that, "Oh, I'll just stick my sales page up and wait for the sales to come in," but a lot of time with courses, people are busy. They have a lot going on in their lives. They're maybe going through another course. Why do they need to buy your course now? Not why do they need to buy your course? Why do they need to buy your course now?

If you can give them a reason to do that, such as a price offer, so, "Hey. Here's an introductory offer. It's only available for the first 100 people. Get 50% off. Here's a link," or it could be something like if you're doing a product launch where it's only going to be available for a one-week period ... After that, it's gone. You won't be able to get access until next year, so it's time limited as well, and maybe there's some kind of-

Eric: Is it truly time limited, or are you just making it appear to be time limited? How do you approach it?

Mark: Well, you can do it whichever way you want. Indeed, a lot of people do lie about that and fake it. However, I wouldn't recommend that because once people realize you're doing it ... and most people are pretty savvy these days about countdown timers and that, just refresh the page and get back to it, and it's reset. So, people will see through it very quickly. You'll get a lot of hate mail, and generally you're not going to have a good time.

Fortunately, though, there's a lot of really good technology these days which actually helps you build in genuine, real scarcity to this. If you're doing a product launch from January 1st to January 7th, then you don't need any of this. You can just say it's only available then, and when the countdown timer reaches zero, you just turn off the checkout cart's link for that specific product, or whatever system you have, you just turn it off, and people can no longer buy it at that point. What you'll find is that a huge number of people will buy in the final 12 hours or something of such a launch, if you've been communicating that to them a lot. That's how we generate multiple six figures from many of our product launches.

What you can also, though, if you take an evergreen approach, is you can use tools such as deadline funnels, which is a technology which builds in real evergreen scarcity to an offer. That means that you can ... Let's say someone signs up to our email list, and we give them some free training, a webinar, or videos, or whatever it is, and then we present them with a special offer. "Hey. Thanks for watching our training. If you want to buy our course, which has more training, you can. Here's a link to the sales page. By the way, here's a 40% discount offer. It's valid for the next seven days. After that, it expires."

Deadline funnels will understand who they are, their IP, their email address, a bunch of other unique identifying information ... I don't know the entire technical way in which they do it ... and it will figure that out, calculate it. Once it's gone, it'll stop showing that offer, that checkout offer, to people, so it genuinely will close. That's a way you can achieve real scarcity of a digital product in a non-launch model. We use that quite a lot, and it's been very, very successful for us.

Eric: Now, in order for this to actually work ... Obviously, if you have a really well-designed sales page and funnel where it understands who's looking at it and implements some scarcity, obviously none of that matters if nobody's seeing your sales page, right? You talked a little bit before, "Okay. Well, if you have an existing audience, that's great because they're warmer leads. They trust you, of course." But what if you don't have that? Maybe, obviously, even if you do have that, maybe you want to expose it to a larger audience. What are some of your top three ways that you get the word out about what you're releasing?

Mark: Yeah. Your course business is essentially ... You need a product, and you need leads to buy that product. We talked about creating the product and that side of things. The other side of the equation is the people who are actually going to buy it. The first thing I would say is that most people when they do this, they have an idea of, "Here's 10 different channels I can use. I should do some content marketing, some SEO. I should run Facebook ads. I should get on Instagram, do some influencer stuff. I should start a podcast. I should get on YouTube. I should

do Pinterest," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. That's a terrible idea initially. The end result of a business which is mature and has been doing this for years, yes, that's fine, but the approach which I think you should take is pick one and only one source of traffic, source of leads and just really work hard on making that work and on scaling that. You'll do far better than having five mediocre channels.

In our case, I think SEO content marketing is the best channel for that, both in terms of return on investment and in terms of accessibility. You don't need hundreds of thousands of dollars in ad budgets to get started with that. You can write the content yourself. You can do some SEO, optimize it yourself, build some links yourself, use a few tools not too expensive, and then go from there. The traffic you acquire from SEO, it stacks over time if you're doing it correctly and if you keep doing it, and you don't have to pay regularly to acquire that traffic. It's just very, very good. If you're targeting the right keywords, they're going to be hopefully quite interested in potentially what you have to offer. It's just a good situation all around.

Eric: Yeah, and I want to add at this point, we actually had a podcast, episode 109 with Dan Caron. We had talked a whole episode about channel strategies and SEO strategies. This is kind of one of the main things he was saying, is choose one channel.

Mark: Yeah.

Eric: Understand it really well. That's how you get your success. So, if anybody's interested in diving into that, check out that episode.

Mark: Yeah, and Ramit Sethi is big on this. Their course business ... fantastic business, by the way, what they're doing. If you're ever looking for someone to model, it's that guy. He does most of this right, but he's really big on that. They cut all their conversion rate optimization, the vast majority of their ad stuff. They cut all their affiliate program. They really got rid of everything, and they're just focusing on SEO and producing courses. They make, I don't know, probably eight figures a year now from that.

By the way, the biggest danger of when you fall into that is not at the start. It's after you've actually made some progress. Maybe you're getting 100,000, 50,000 visitors per month to your site and capturing a bunch of leads, selling some. Great. You think, "Okay. My business is here now. How can I double this? How can I 10X this?" You think, "Okay. I just need to start a podcast, do all this other stuff." But no, it's really you need to double-down, find more keywords, get more experience at SEO, produce more content, whatever it is, build more links, you need to do and double-down on it.

Eric: Yeah, so let's talk about this a little bit because you've mentioned a lot of different technologies that can be used at the different phases and the different areas to assist, but there's also, still, the value of building trust with the audience, understanding your audience, and both of these things have a huge listening component. You need to be able to hear, in one form or another, how people are responding to what you're putting out there, and then

respond, AB testing, other techniques. How do you approach this, in terms of when you put something out there, how do you listen for how people are responding to it, and how do you respond?

Mark: Okay. On the surface, it's basically you're looking at, am I making sales? If yes, I'm doing something right. If no, I'm doing something wrong, and then the next step is, what am I doing right? What am I doing wrong? Now, at this step here, it gets very, very complicated because, especially when you have complex funnel setups, it's often very hard to track where your visitors are coming from if you don't have the correct analytics and tracking whatnot set up. Then you're not going to know if this person who's just bought your course has been a long-term subscriber or just subscribed or which blog post they're coming from. Maybe certain blog posts are getting you lots of email subscribers, but none of them are actually buying your course. So, you really get into some quite detailed analytics questions quite quickly with that.

That's not to say that you should necessarily be put off with this because, generally, when you're in this situation, if you're doing something that's making sales, then you're already doing a lot of things right. I would be lying if I said we were super data-driven by this. A lot of the time, honestly, it just goes off of gut feeling. Maybe we make some new course, and we're reading some support threads in our support system, or something different we added this launch versus the last one seemed to produce a lot of interest, or we just have a feeling that maybe that's what worked. We'll try doing more of that. You can spend forever and a day analyzing your analytics. I'm talking more about SEO here. With things like Facebook ads, it's a little bit different. You definitely have to get more analytical and look at the data a bit more.

But what I'm saying, really, is that at a low level, when you're low six figures or less, you can get away with just winging it based on your intuition. It doesn't often get worthwhile to really dig into things until you get to half a million a year and beyond. Then it really does make a difference to optimize this channel by 10% or increase your lead capture rate by 0.1% will move the needle a lot for you.

Eric: At this point, just an open question, is there an area or areas that I haven't specifically asked about that you feel are really important for somebody to understand if they're going to attempt to do this?

Mark: I mean, maybe one or two. I would say the mentality behind it is you have to think long term. I know so many people who have started who heard we or someone else was making money doing courses, and so they made a course themselves. They took the, let's call it, super 80/20 approach, very bare-bones, minimalistic product and minimalistic sales page and launched that with the expectation they were going to get rich by next Tuesday, and when it didn't happen, they're like, "Oh, this business model sucks. Move onto the next thing. What's the next shiny object?" kind of thing. It's a long-term game, and if you want to get into it and you have the time and you spend years perfecting it, it's amazing. There's no better feeling in the world than waking up and you made \$30,000 while you were sleeping. That doesn't happen in many other jobs, really.

I would say that the end is definitely worthwhile. It's not as easy to get started as you may think, but it is achievable. Each thing we've talked about here, figuring out your pricing, figuring out your sales tech, figuring out your sales page, your scarcity stuff, if you're using your email capture, all this stuff we're talking about, when you break each of those down and just try and solve that problem, it's totally doable for anyone with even mediocre intelligence. When you put it all together and you look at it at once and think, "Oh my god, this is all the stuff I have to do," it might feel a bit overwhelming, but my advice is just to get started and do not give up, no matter what, because if you're not making money, it's not because the business model doesn't work. It's because you haven't found out how to make it work yet.

Actually, just one other thing that maybe we didn't cover is on support, customer support, because that is an important thing, and we often ... I mean, we have someone who works full time for us who takes care of that. It's just very important that you're able to collect all of the support queries. Otherwise, you can encounter problems. If those aren't getting responded to, people will issue PayPal chargebacks and all sorts of stuff which can start affecting things quite significantly. So, just things like making sure you check the spam folder if you support inbox in case anything's gone to spam there, responding quickly to people and not letting them hang around for a week or something. All these things are just worthwhile, doing relatively well, I'd say, to give people better overall experience and to stop any cash flow leak from refunds and chargebacks and things like that. The system we use for customer support is called Help Scout, and it's absolutely fantastic. We've used a number before, but Help Scout is still quite affordable, not like some of the other enterprise ones, which can be very expensive, but it performs amazingly.

Eric: I would double agree with your statement about that, and I would say that's one of the things, even early on, is worth investing in a support system for tracking, because you may think, "Oh, I can use my email inbox for a little bit," but really if you plan on achieving any amount of success, customer support is essential. As you mentioned, it's one of the ways that you can listen to your audience and be responsive to what a collective is saying so that you know where to guide things. If you're trying to use a single email inbox to do that, there's no way you can outsource it to somebody else, and very quickly things will get messy and unusable. So, it's one of those things that I feel is, even in the beginning, an essential investment.

Mark: Also, the quicker you get into it, the more data is going to be in your customer support interface. If someone three months from now is asking a question related to their last ticket that they raised but then the last one was in a different system or was in your email, whoever's handling your support is not going to be able to see that history. The sooner you start using a support platform, the faster you start building up lots of nice data about your customers.

Eric: Yeah, and also going back to your comment about how waking up one day having made \$30,000 in your sleep is the greatest feeling in the world.

Mark: Oh, not the greatest feeling in the world. I can probably name one or two better, but it's pretty high up there, yeah.

Eric: Yeah, but I would venture to guess ... You may not feel this way, but it's really not about the \$30,000 in itself. I think the reason why it feels so good is because you actually spent some time and effort to create something that then put that out. If somebody just gave you \$30,000, sure, it would feel good for maybe a day or two, but then you'd be like, "Okay. Well, now-"

Mark: Right. You're absolutely correct, and it's not about that money. It's about the effort that you've put in and, "Okay. This is the payoff." Here is the proof that what you're doing and what you've been working so hard all these months up to this point has been worth it, and people are appreciative of that. You've done your job right. You're bringing a lot of value, and you're ultimately getting rewarded for it. I think a lot of people, when they say this ... probably myself included, to be honest. I'm as guilty as anyone when I say, "Oh, yeah. I made \$30,000 in my sleep." It's like, "No, you didn't." You actually made \$30,000 in the last nine months. You've been working six days a week until 9:00 every night, hardcore to create this course and get everything through the door. So, probably if you work out your hourly rate based on that, it's not that high.

Eric: Yeah, it's not.

Mark: Maybe that's a different way to think about it.

Eric: But there is the non ... I think when you've been doing this for so long, like both of us ... I mean, I think we both started our journeys in the internet marketing space 10 years ago or a little bit more than that. Yes, there have been enough success where the money does come, and it can be reinvested in the business, but you realize, I think, that there's a larger currency going back full circle, where you start at the beginning saying, "Product is the most important thing," because ultimately, the greatest feeling is that you are sharing something with somebody that's helping them to do something in their life that's going to give them some sense of satisfaction.

Mark: Yeah.

Eric: That's a currency in and of itself.

Mark: I'll be totally honest with you, because I often in the past had said that when secretly I was thinking, "No, no. I just want to make lots of money. I just want to make lots of money," but I can't say that because I'm going to look like a dickhead or whatever. But someone at a Mastermind event told me something really useful that stuck with me and changed my perspective on this quite recently. They said that you don't have no morals. You don't have no, I guess ... What's the right word here? ... perspective or values. Values is the word. You don't have no values in the situation. Think of people in your industry who are really just scamming

people, ripping people off with terrible courses and stuff like that. What's the difference between them and you?

Then I thought to myself at that point, "Oh, actually, no. I don't want to do that. I don't want to be associated with that because I don't want people to have a bad experience, because I don't like when people have bad experiences because it makes me feel bad." None of that was on the money side of things. So, they're kind of intertwined, but that really struck me as ... It gave me a different perspective on it, because I will say I'm pretty straight-talking. A lot of people are into this woo-woo stuff about saving the world and making the world a better place. I like to do my bit, but I don't think what I'm doing right now is going to eliminate poverty or anything crazy like that, but that's not to say that it's not valuable to some people, because when ... especially now. We've been running this for many years.

We went to a conference in Thailand at the end of last year, and we had like 200 people show up to this meet-up we were organizing, and there were so many people who I had never heard of, never talked to, never met before just coming up to me and like, "Oh, yeah, thanks. I built this site because of you, and I did this and sold it for X," and all these crazy stories. I'm like, "Holy crap." I had no idea that we were touching so many people in so significant of a way, because you look at this on Google Analytics or on your shopping cart, and it's just X number of users or X number of dollars, but when you actually meet those people for real, it totally changes your perspective on all of this. I would probably say that experience there was one of the most rewarding parts of all these long nights we've made trying to get these videos to work.

Eric: I would certainly agree and reflect that. It's been the same in my situation. So, as we wrap up now, I mean, we've gotten a really high-level perspective of the depth of your experience, and I would recommend anybody who's wanting to dive deeper into these things with you go and check out Authority Hacker and grab one of your courses, because I'm sure you go into all of these things and more in a lot more detail so that people can actually execute this. We'll go ahead and put that stuff in our show notes, too, but also, even with the amount of experience you have, I'm sure that not everything goes right all of the time, right? Are there situations or experiences you've had where you've gone and done a launch, checked all the boxes that you need to check, but still something went wrong that you had to fix?

Mark: For sure, yeah. This is an example of how not to handle it when these things happen. Usually, when something goes wrong, everything goes wrong at the same time. I don't know why that is, but we experienced that back in 2017 in a launch we were doing. We were expecting to hit about \$300,000 with this launch, and we more or less followed the same model as previous launches, so a lot of the sales emails were the same, the sales page. We just moved to a new ... We were using Thrive Architect at the time. We'd moved over to that. We changed a few things with the webinar, but nothing major. Unfortunately for us, our business wasn't really that robust at the time, and we hadn't built many checklists, many SOPs to test a bunch of these things beforehand.

What ended up happening was really just a series of unfortunate events. The webinar, which was going out just before the launch, the WebinarJam, whatever reason at the time, I forget, wasn't sending the reminder emails of that correctly, so not so many people showed up for that. When we did it, my audio wasn't working. It turned out the webcam audio was taking over, and it was messing everything up. So, that was a whole issue. Then turns out that Thrive Architect wasn't working well with the last version of Safari because there was some issue, but they patched it in the latest version of Safari, which is what we had and we were testing on, and it looked fine for us, and we couldn't understand why a bunch of people couldn't see our sales page properly, and it was all messed up. Really, a lot of people who were using Apple devices, Apple products, or Safari in general couldn't buy our course during the first two-thirds of this launch.

It's impossible to know exactly, but we probably lost about \$50,000 with that, and there was more things throughout the launch as well, tech issues, deliverability issues with some emails. I think there was one email that went out in the wrong order or something as well, just everything that ... Not everything that could go wrong did go wrong, but a lot of things that could go wrong did go wrong at that time. When you're doing a big-ticket launch like that, which can account for a significant percentage of your annual profit, if that's your main business model, there's a lot of pressure on you to get it right, and you put a lot of pressure on yourself to make sure you maximize it as much as possible. So, when something like that happens, it's ... I mean, we took it pretty hard. We were like, "Man, this sucks. Is this the right business model? Are we doing this correctly? We should build more websites, diversify our income. We should get into doing more evergreen funnels and move everything to evergreen because this sucks. We don't want to do it again. Blah, blah, blah."

Well, since then ... and this is almost one year and three-quarters later ... we still haven't relaunched that course, and it was our best-selling course ever. Well, up until May, but our audience has grown much bigger in the last two years and stuff as well. People are emailing us every week saying, "Hey. Can I buy this course? When are you releasing it? When are you releasing it?" It's our own faults for really taking our foot off the gas with this and not updating it and not planning more launches, getting stuck into other projects, changing our funnels, building evergreen funnels, which, to its fairness, our evergreen funnels work very well and now make really quite a lot of money. But we abandoned what we were doing for really no good reason other than we had a shitty few days with some tech. I think that's just a classic example of keeping perspective of what you're doing.

After these big launches, especially if something goes wrong, take stock of what happened, troubleshoot, figure out solutions for how to avoid this in the future. Usually some kind of checklist will do the trick there, but don't give up your business model that has made you millions of dollars up until this point. Keep doing it. Keep working and figure out how to release more products, how to get more leads and just make more money, and keep going on that cycle. So, just a little life experience I wanted to share with your listeners.

Eric: Yeah. Yeah, that's great advice in general, because things will not work out all the time. My perspective on it now is I just know that going in, and if something goes wrong, yeah, it kind of stinks to deal with it in the moment, but ultimately, in retrospect sometimes, I've learned the most from those situations, and then when something else comes up, I apply that learning to that situation. It's just part of growing the businesses that we do. We make mistakes, quote-unquote, and then we learn from them. Over time, it's that iterative process where, okay, we apply something we learned to this next time and then the time after that, so it's just part of the journey.

Mark: Yeah.

Eric: Like you were saying earlier, it's a long-term thing. Don't think in the short term, because if you do that, you'll make all sorts of perceptive mistakes.

Mark: Absolutely. The beauty of this model, though, like many businesses, is the first year, the first two years, you might not make that much money or whatever, but it stacks over time, and you can keep growing it and growing it. It gets easier and easier. Once you've built five sales pages, the sixth one doesn't take very long at all. You can start reusing a lot of assets. You've figured out all your video editing, all your tech. You can just instantly reuse that for the next course. Building most businesses, when you really start to make a lot of money, tends to be after several years of doing the same thing over and over again, perfecting it, optimizing it, improving it by 1%, 2% here and there, stacking those improvements over a long time, and then suddenly you have an amazing business on your hands.

Eric: For sure. Well, Mark, it has been great chatting with you. I really appreciate you taking the time to come on and talk about all this stuff. As a final thing, can you tell our listeners where they can go to learn more about you?

Mark: Yeah. So, AuthorityHacker.com is our blog. We are actually posting a lot on there at the moment, sometimes several times a week. We also have a podcast, AuthorityHacker.com/podcast. We have 160-odd episodes at the moment. It's released every Monday. We talk about authority sites, affiliate sites, online marketing, SEO. It's usually myself and my business partner, Gael, but often we have some higher profiled guests on for interviews as well. We're a little bit different. There's no ads. There's no pre-roll. We're not really pushing sales hard and anything like that. It's just how can we provide as much value as possible? I think that ethos is through in a lot of our content, and it's something which people appreciate. We also have courses, the Authority Site System, Authority Hacker Pro, and the Shotgun Skyscraper Blueprint. You can find all those details on our website, but check out our free stuff before you even think of buying anything from that.

Eric: Awesome. Yeah, and we'll put in links to all those things in our show notes so that people can easily find them. Again, thanks a lot, Mark.

Mark: Awesome. Thanks for having me on. Really appreciate it. Great talking to you today.

OUTRO:

That's a wrap for this episode of the Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast. I hope you enjoyed it and are walking away with some valuable information. You can find a full transcript, the show notes, and links to all the resources mentioned in today's episode at SubscriptionEntrepreneur.com/128.

I'd like to extend my sincere thanks to Mark for coming on the show and sharing so freely from his knowledge and experience. And thank you for being here and listening to this entire episode.

If you'd like to learn more from Mark, be sure to visit his site at AuthorityHacker.com.

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