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How I've Been Running An Online Photography Community, Making \$10K/Month From Premium Memberships



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Yosef Adest
Founder, **52Frames**

\$10K
REVENUE/MO

1
FOUNDERS

0
EMPLOYEES

Hello! Who are you and what business did you start?

Hello! My name is Yosef Adest and I am the founder of **52Frames**, an online community that helps people to engage in creative play and personal growth through a weekly photo challenge.

Every week I issue a photography challenge to the community, enabling everyday folk to dust off their cameras or take out their phones meaningfully. I hadn't realized, though, that it forced us all to look at our lives differently.

My flagship product was never a product at all. I ran this community for ten years as a passion project while focusing on my full-time freelance work in video production.

When my phone stopped ringing in clients during Covid, I doubled down on monetizing

When my phone stopped ringing in clients during Covid, I doubled down on monetizing 52Frames and, in 2021, launched a premium membership that was successful enough to quit my freelance job to focus on it full time.

The screenshot shows the 52Frames website. At the top, there are navigation links for Challenges, Albums, Learn, About, and Shop. On the right, there are buttons for "Submit Photo" and a user profile for "Yosef Adest". The main banner features a photograph of a sunset over a lake. Overlaid on the banner is a dark box containing the text "Week 16: Blue Hour" and "Extra Challenge: Light Painting". Below this is a timer with the numbers "0 3 : 1 1 : 4 6 : 0 6" in boxes, labeled "Days", "Hours", "Minutes", and "Second". Below the timer is a red button labeled "See Tips & Tutorials". To the left of the banner, there is a section titled "This Week's Album" featuring a large image of a woman's face surrounded by clouds and a smaller image of goldfish in bubbles. Below these images is the text "Week #15: Dreamscape" and "Extra Challenge: Erik Johansson". To the right of the banner, there is a "Announcements" section with two entries: one from April 20, 2023, about the "52 Picks" album, and another from April 2, 2023, about a featured Framer blog post. There is also a "Trending Photos" section with a thumbnail of an orange.

What's your backstory, and how did you come up with the idea?

I'd love to say that I had the foresight of building this grand vision from the top down, but I started this project for my personal photography growth, created a simple Facebook Page, and invited others to join. People kept coming from all over the world, and I realized each year that I needed to do more to feed it.

I became a de facto community manager. I created rules to make the exercises more focused. I injected more educational content into the prompts. After five years, I started a Patreon campaign to get us off of Facebook and onto our custom website. It wasn't until four years later that we officially launched our dedicated site, with the entire budget coming from the community each month over four years.

Over ten years, I fed this thing simply because I felt it was bigger than me. It was changing people's lives, and I knew I had to do whatever I could to ensure it could continue.

I took zero money from it and wasn't sure if I ever would.





yosef~~a~~dest|com

Photo Credit: Yosef Adest, for Week 28 Challenge: "Rule of Odds" (2019)

Take us through the process of building the first version of your product.

Talk about an MVP, we were just a shared photo album on a “business” Facebook Page, with about 50 photo entries per week. When we had over 100 photos to upload, a friend created a script for me that enabled us to automate the uploading and captioning (sometimes Facebook would break it without warning).

When we outgrew the Facebook limits for a single album on a Business Page (300 photos), we split it into two albums: Part 1 and Part 2.

At some point, I created a simple, corresponding WordPress site to make things appear more pretty, which had embedded Wufoo forms for collecting photo submissions. The photos themselves would still ultimately be displayed on Facebook.

To find your photo in each weekly album, you had to visit our site first and see your name on a list of hyperlinks, which would then take you back to Facebook.

Sometimes my captioning automation wouldn’t work, and I’d ask all the users to caption their photos manually from a Google Sheet, which they would copy and paste on their photo in the Facebook album as the first comment.

This could have doubled for a crazy social experiment, seeing how many tedious tasks you can ask of people.

Back and forth, we did this dance, and somehow, everyone was OK with it. There was an understanding that this thing was held together with digital duct tape but that the bumps in the road were worth the ride.

“I run no ads, no campaigns, and no SEO marketing. There are no landing pages or popups, no promise of a free e-book for your email.



Photo Credit: Steve Allingham, Week 28 Challenge: "Leading Lines" (2022)

Describe the process of launching the business.

They said to look for proof of concept before launching, and I had just that. I had years of evidence that our members were flexible and dedicated, and I had extremely high praise for what we were putting out there into the world.

When I launched the website, we were eight years into this endeavor, and it was a time when trust in Facebook was starting to wane, so the transition was relatively smooth. I ensured the site had everything Facebook had to offer and more.

There's always the fear of trying to move a community. Will they follow?

I pitched it as great news!! They followed. The site crashed on the very first week due to server overload.

About two years later, I decided to monetize properly and launched the Premium Membership program. Here too, I had proof of concept. We have collected monthly contributions through Patreon for over four years for our web development. But again, there was the fear. Would they go for it? Would they pay for something more?

I canceled our Patreon campaign at its highest month, launched our Premium membership to the community, and took a deep breath; it was difficult to press that button.

I tried to make the Premium membership as attractive as possible. In this membership, I offer unlimited access to my "Shooting 101" course, which I had spent nearly a year creating, special early access to the albums each week, advanced filter options, and weekly content that I share each week for different tiers.

I also made sure that NO features that already existed on the site would suddenly come up behind a paywall. Everyone can still participate in 52Frames without paying: Signing up, creating a profile, submitting photos, following others, filtering albums by people you follow, etc. For me, it is paramount that everyone who wants to participate in this vital project can.

In the first three months of launching the Premium Membership, they brought in more than Patreon had for the previous year.

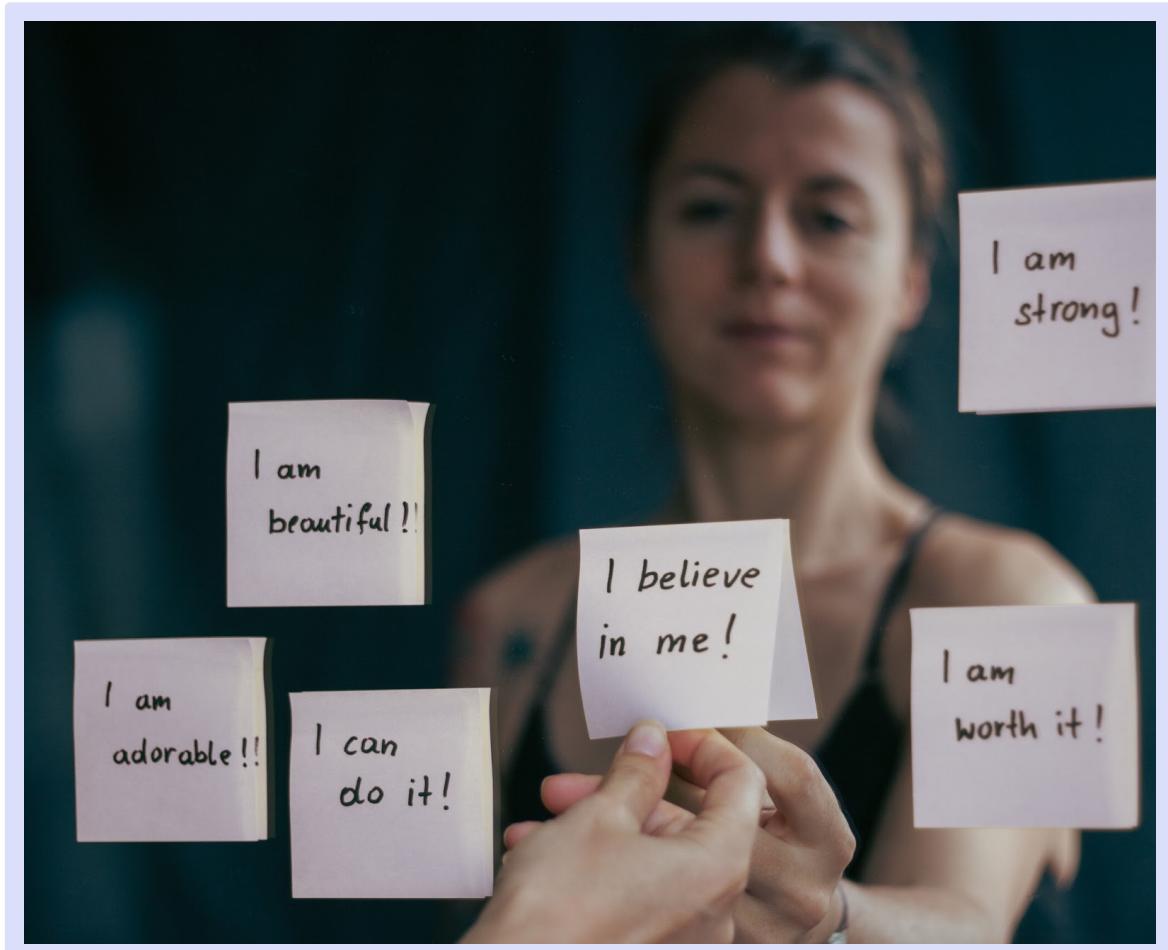


Photo Credit: Manuela Hofmarcher, Week 39 Challenge: "Letters" (2022)

Since launch, what has worked to attract and retain customers?

So, my most significant strength is also my greatest flaw. I am a “community leader/manager” at its core, so my focus runs deep into the community. I invest more in the experience rather than the business.

“ Once you have a strong community, your “people” will naturally want to support you and the value you bring. You can always figure out how to profit on the backend.

To encourage retention, I came up with a “streak number” concept (this is long before Wordle, Duolingo, and the like!) The very concept of 52Frames is the reliance on repetition. The path to improvement and creative breakthrough is the repetition of imperfect work. [I even made mugs.](#)

Posting a photo every week is pretty hard. I figured the only way I’d keep folks around was to focus more on the 52-week streak. Submit for 52 weeks, and you become a “Weekly Warrior”. We have so many weekly warriors now that the social proof hits you as soon as you visit the

homepage.



I send a weekly email announcing the new challenge for the week, and I've gotten good at automation and customization in MailChimp, so the emails are personalized, and retention-minded automated emails go out all the time. For example, if you don't submit a photo for two weeks in a row.

I have a volunteer committee that runs our [entire Instagram account](#), and I let them run it entirely. This is another benefit of going deep into the community; it starts to support itself. I don't believe I would have so many people stepping up and volunteering their time if I had run it more like a business from the start.

52Frames
We are a worldwide community of photography enthusiasts participating in a weekly photo challenge! It's free, fun and feels! Come join us! #52frames
52frames.com

9,775 posts	17.9K followers	922 following
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Our Instagram numbers are like the rest: Slow, steady, and organic. We're now at almost 18k, and it's been a "smooth" curve upwards with no tricks or spikes.

There's also someone that runs our [Pinterest](#), [Vero](#), and Discord.

So while the community is strong, I rely on organic word-of-mouth for new traffic. I run no ads, no campaigns, and no SEO marketing. There are no landing pages or popups, no promise of a free e-book for your email.

Being a "bad businessman" has led me to the successes of this fantastic community, but I also feel its diminishing returns. For 2023, I've committed to double my efforts into marketing partnerships, campaigns, proper analytics management, targeting, and ultimately some ad spending.



Photo Credit: Margot Klaren, for Week 11 Challenge: "High Noon" (2023)

How are you doing today, and what does the future look like?

Today we have about 3,000 photo submissions in each weekly album. My weekly email goes out to about 13K with an astonishing 60% open rate. These are the folks I'd consider to be my active community, around 7,500.

There are around 700 paying members, with a 60/40 split between the two tiers (\$130/year

and \$260/year).

The site receives over 1MM pageviews per month, with a bounce rate under 2% and a 4+ minute avg duration.

While I'm always looking for new ways to monetize, like sponsorships, products, or events, it's clear that my bread and butter are in more premium memberships, which means I need to scale the number of new users to the project.

The methods I'm focusing on now are cross-pollinating with other like-minded communities (this Starter Story feature is an excellent example of that, actually), getting my **TikTok** game on point (how I found Starter Story, actually!), and eventually some targeted ad spend.

Now that the world is officially back open, I'm planning some more "real life" events in the next year or two, like photo trips (Iceland, Faroe Islands), photography exhibits (potentially Germany, Australia), and the like.



Photo Credit: Itai Monnickendam, Iceland

Through starting the business, have you learned anything particularly helpful or advantageous?

I took a very conservative approach towards building everything we have today through incremental steps, which doesn't seem to be the sexy solution touted by many today. I resonate with the Gary Vee mantra of practicing patience and offering value. I had quite a few jabs before the right hook.

I also was ruthless in figuring out how to take that next step forward each time.

Whenever something broke, my mantra was, "How do I make this work?"

As duct-taped as we were sometimes, my community was always very forgiving. And that is what gave me the courage to keep going.



Photo Credit: Lu Rohrer, Week 32 Challenge: "Line from a Song" (2021)

What platform/tools do you use for your business?

Wufoo forms were a life-saver when we started. It's how we collected all the photos for many years. It's also great for payment integration when needed. I still use Wufoo embeds on our site because it's so easy.

Google Sheets continues to be the backbone of my whole admin flow. I have checklists for all my big tasks, which keeps me organized and sane.

Autohotkey was another life-saver, allowing me to automate many early-on processes. It requires some basic coding, but you can automate anything you'd use your keyboard or mouse for.

I use Stripe for all payments, and I've just switched to **Gelato** for our merch "print-on-demand" service, but I can't speak for their quality just yet, the jury's still out on that one.

What have been the most influential books, podcasts, or other resources?

I'm currently in the middle of David Goggin's first book, "Can't Hurt Me" and I find him so freaking inspiring.

This platform, **Starter Story**, has been a real source of inspiration lately. Reading through the case studies is like a caffeine jolt to my entrepreneurial brain.

Advice for other entrepreneurs who want to get started or are just starting out?

My first advice for building a community would be to take profit out of the equation. The mantra should be “How much value can I give for free?” How can I create the most value for my community?

Once you have a strong community, your “people” will naturally want to support you and the value you bring. You can always figure out how to profit on the backend.

But if you dive into it with business-led language, your user base will “sniff” you out immediately. It’s like when a large brand decides to go on Instagram or TikTok, and the content is so dry and forced. Today, people connect to authenticity more than anything, so lead with your most authentic self.

My second piece of advice for creating a community would be to find a unified exercise or project for everyone to participate in. The communities I’m involved with that are most active are the ones centered around a specific activity, project, or goal.

Are you looking to hire for certain positions right now?

Not looking to hire, but always open to collaborating! You can find me, [here](#).

Where can we go to learn more?

- [52frames.com](#)
- [Tiktok](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [TEDx Talk](#)

If you have any questions or comments, drop a comment below!



Yosef Adest, Founder of 52Frames



[Pat Walls](#), Founder of Starter Story

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Sam Parr

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I love this website.



Rand Fishkin

Moz / SparkToro

Love Starter Story's transparency.



Johne Vang

Be The Match

You can't find this information anywhere else.



Trent Baren

Instagram

So much valuable information.



Bilal Budhani

Entrepreneur

I was hooked on Starter Story as soon as I discovered it. Resonated with me right off the bat.



Jenn Leach

Millennial Nextdoor

I made over \$5,000 from my Starter Story membership in a week!



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Jamie

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