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# How I Built A \$7K/Month WordPress Plugin Because I Needed The Product



Laura Elizabeth



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Laura Elizabeth

Founder, **Client Portal**

\$11K

REVENUE/MO



1

FOUNDERS

0

EMPLOYEES

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

My name is Laura Elizabeth and I run [Client Portal](#). Client portal is a lightweight project management tool for WordPress.

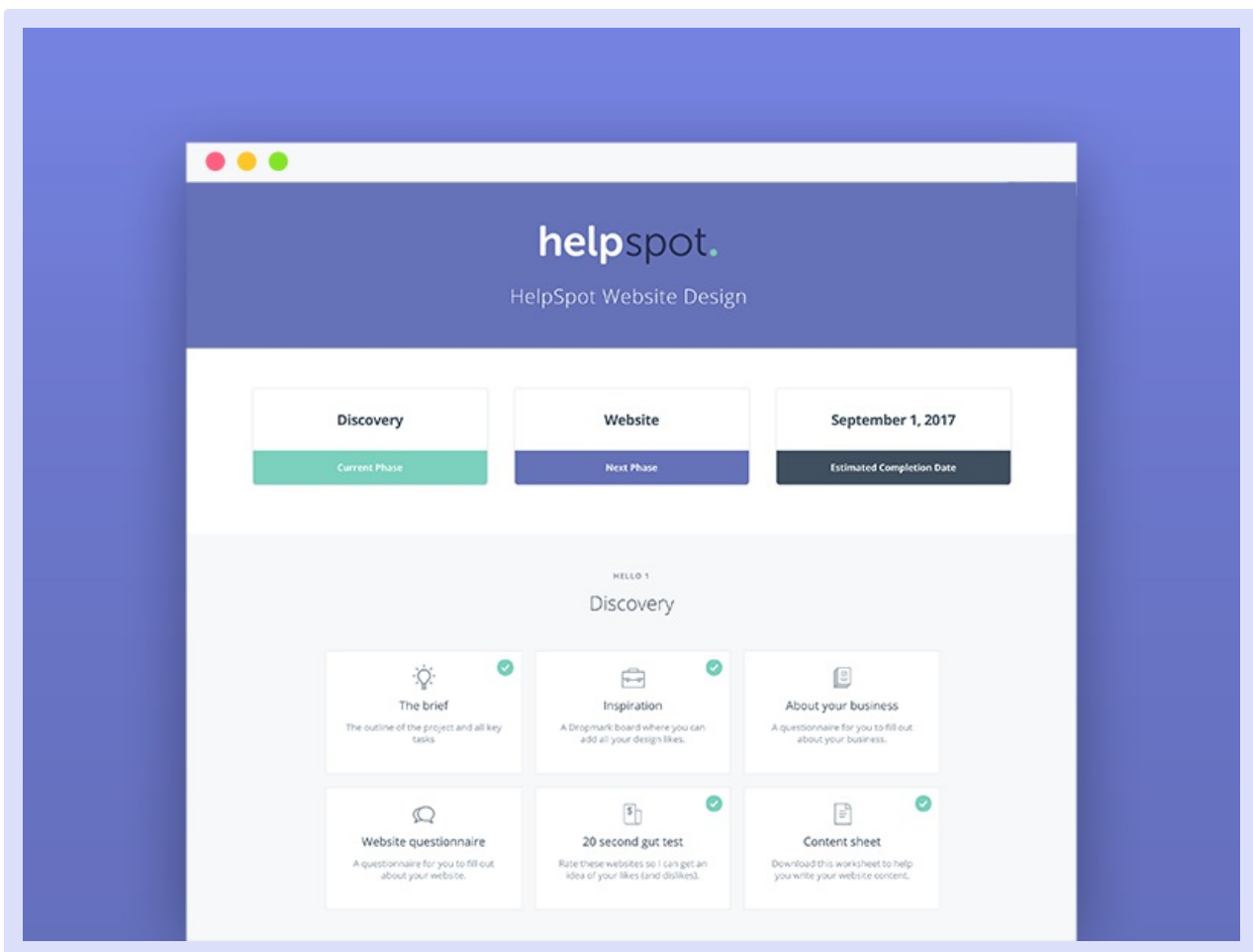
But unlike most project management tools, it doesn't try to do everything. It gives your clients a portal on *your own* website where they can access their project deliverables, see what's coming up, and what's been completed. It doesn't impose any kind of process or unnecessary tools on you, it gives you the freedom to work how you want – while making you look great to your clients.

Initially Client Portal was created for freelancers and agencies. But over the last year or so, we've been getting many other types of customers like lawyers, real estate agents, marine

biologists, travel agents, and more. Basically anyone who needs to share files with their client or customer can benefit from Client Portal.

A typical month of revenue for Client Portal is anywhere between \$4-10k. This fluctuates based on any promotions we're doing or even just the time of year (January-February are pretty big for us, and December tends to be a bit slower).

In July 2018 we started charging an annual support and update fee. This was to help cover the expenses of keeping the plugin supported, implementing new features, and the time spent on customer support. So now if our customers want to continue getting support and updates to the product, they pay a recurring amount every year. If they don't want the support and updates, they still keep the product forever and can use it for as long as they like. So far this method has been great for both customers and the company and has added a projected \$38k/year to Client Portal's revenue.



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

Like many tools, Client Portal started as something that I made for myself. I was working as a freelancer and I really wanted somewhere I could point my clients to that would keep all their project assets in one place. But mostly, I wanted something that made me look like *The Real Deal* to my clients. I wanted to look professional.

“ I built the product with the intention to *use* it which, in hindsight, helped me create a tool that didn't end up trying to do *All The Things* for *All The People* and instead did **one thing really well**.

I had tried other project management tools with my clients. And while the quality was great,

had tried other project management tools with my clients. And while the quality was great, they were often too complicated for my projects. My clients wouldn't use them and would resort back to email. At \$99/month it was too expensive for me to justify – especially since nobody was seemingly using it.

So I really wanted something simple. Something that could enable clients to keep using the tools and the processes they already use (like Google docs, email, etc.) but in one, branded place.

After looking around for something that could do this, I decided to make it myself. I made a page on my website where clients could log in and see everything that we had collected together for their project. There were links to things like the brief, invoices, questionnaires, and more.

I didn't make Client Portal with the intention of selling it. I made it with the intention to *use* it which, in hindsight, helped me create a tool that didn't end up trying to do *All The Things* for *All The People* and instead did **one thing really well**.

Selling Client Portal to other freelancers came about from me deciding to build my personal brand with the goal of getting more clients. I did this by speaking at a lot of conferences about freelancing and design. At one conference in particular, I did a talk on how to work remotely with clients. I mentioned this little portal that I made for myself and suggested if the other attendees has ever faced the same problems as me, they could make one too.



But as it turned out, nobody wanted to spend the time making their own – they wanted to buy mine. When getting feedback on the talks, more than 50% of attendees said the most valuable part of the conference was, *"Laura's client portal idea – it's freakin' genius!"*

And for the rest of the weekend, I had people coming up to me saying, *“Look, can I just buy this? This is exactly what I need. It solves a problem that I didn't even realize that I had. And now I need it!”*

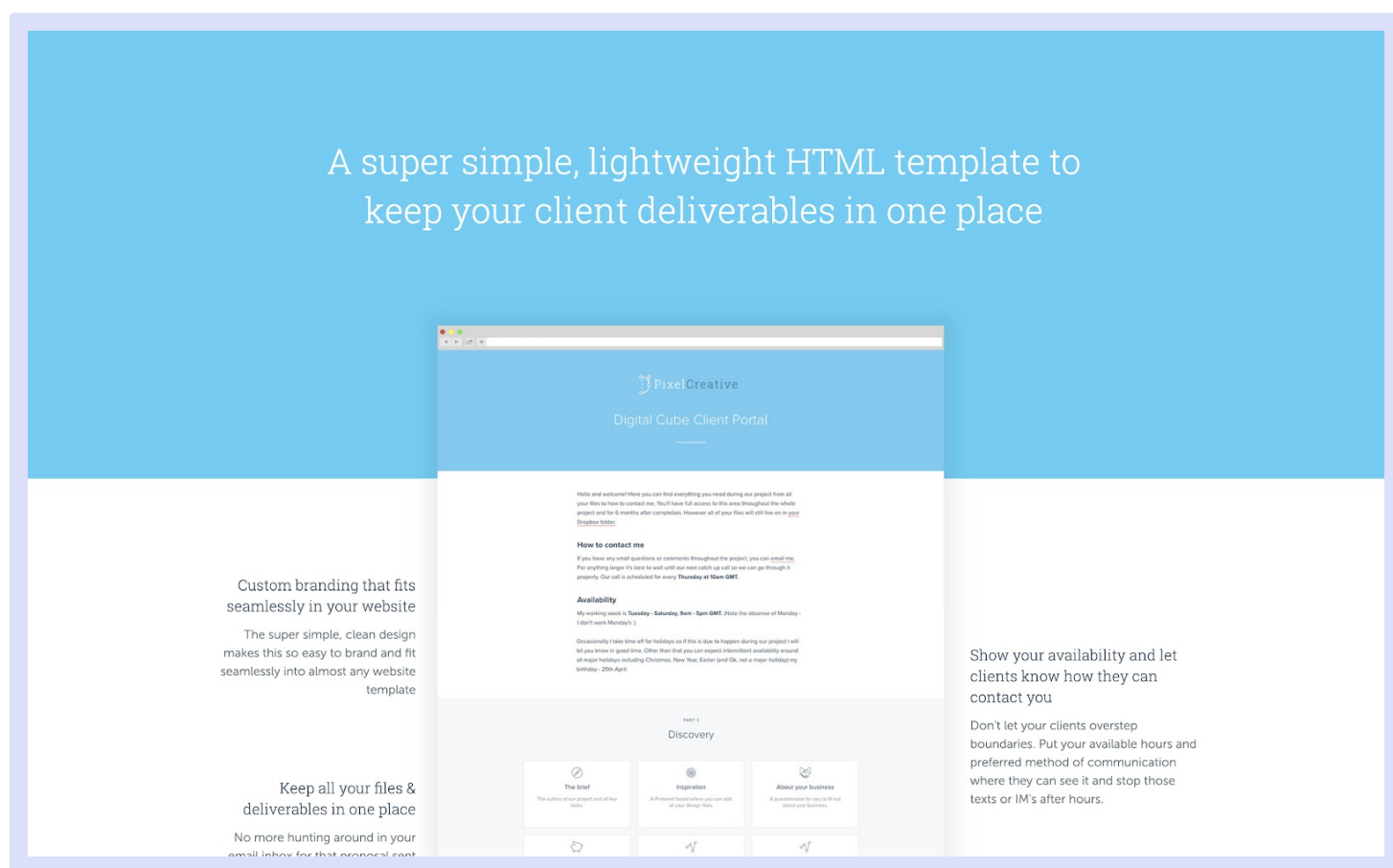
So, after a lot of encouragement from my peers I ended up selling it. I didn't have a name, so I simply called it Client Portal and within a few short (but crazy) months I had quit freelancing and was relying solely on Client Portal revenue for my income.

## Take us through the process of designing, prototyping, and manufacturing your first product.

As mentioned, the initial design was something I created myself. It was simple, but it looked good. The big problem I had when I came to sell it was that I needed to make in a format people could use without diving into code.

I decided to make a WordPress plugin because that's what most of my potential customers used as their Content Management System (CMS).

But since I didn't have the skills to create a WordPress plugin, I needed to hire somebody to do it for me. Instead of investing my own money into it, I decided to launch presales of Client Portal to both validate the need for the product and fund the development.



Presales went well (and I'll talk about what exactly that looked like later) and the time came for me to hire someone to make this into a plugin.

I feel like I got incredibly lucky with the first developer I hired, [Yoren Chang of 1fix.io](#). I posted about the job in a few different forums and Slack groups and her response to me stood out amongst the rest.

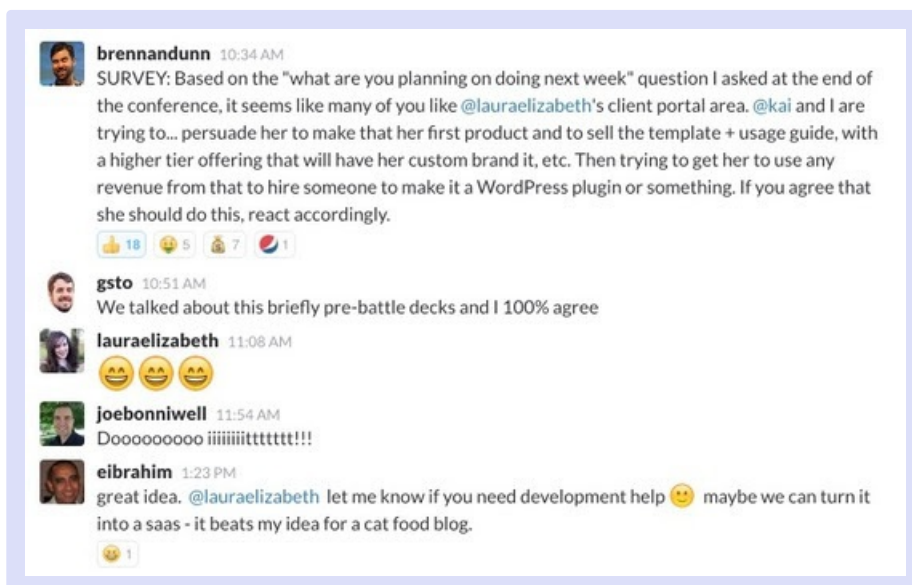
Everyone else was asking about features and budget but she talked about how she'd been following Client Portal for a while. She knew what it was about and what I was trying to do. She had ideas and brought them to the table about what she could see the future of Client Portal being. And we didn't actually talk about price until further down the line.

By then I was already pretty certain I wanted to hire her because she came across as a developer who could also see Client Portal as a business and contribute ideas rather than just blindly accepting what I say.

The start up costs for Client Portal were fairly minimal because it was a simple project. Between hosting, domain name, the WordPress development, and payment processor (I used [SendOwl](#) at the start and switched to [Easy Digital Downloads](#) later) – the costs were around \$3k.

## Describe the process of launching the business.

I launched the presales to a list I had been building of people interested. But my big break came when the organizer of the conference I spoke at (where I had originally mentioned Client Portal) reached out and said he'd be willing to list it in his Black Friday sale email AND send out a dedicated email to his list about Client Portal.



“ As someone who never made a penny from digital products, making \$10k in a weekend felt a bit like an overnight success. However in hindsight, there was a lot that led up to that moment which guided the trajectory of the product.

At this point, Black Friday was three days away so I worked like crazy trying to get everything ready, from the support documents, to the landing page, and getting the payment system set up.

Suffice to say, I got it ready in the nick of time. He launched his Black Friday deal and sent out the email about Client Portal and in that weekend it topped \$10k which was more than enough to fund the development of the plugin.



Here's what 60% of DYFConf attendees told me they'd be implementing ASAP... ➡



**Brennan Dunn** <brennan@doubleyourfreelancing.com> [Unsubscribe](#)  
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Thu, 20 Oct 2016, 10:22



## DOUBLE YOUR FREELANCING

As we were wrapping up DYFConf this year, I asked the audience what their biggest takeaways were from the conference.

Specifically, I wanted to know what they'd be doing *immediately* as a result of what they learned at the conference.

**"Laura's client portal idea. It's freaking genius!"**

As I went around the room polling attendees, this kept coming up again and again. And the funny thing was the focus of Laura Elizabeth's presentation wasn't even *about* client portals — it was about establishing trust with clients when working remotely.

The week after, I asked the conference Slack channel a simple question:



**brennandunn** 10:34 AM

SURVEY: Based on the "what are you planning on doing next week" question I asked at the end of the conference, it seems like many of you like @lauraelizabeth's client portal area. @kai and I are trying to... persuade her to make that her first product and to sell the template + usage guide, with a higher tier offering that will have her custom brand it, etc. Then trying to get her to use any revenue from that to hire someone to make it a WordPress plugin or something. If you agree that

As someone who up until that point had never made a penny from digital products, making \$10k in a weekend felt a bit like an overnight success. However in hindsight, there was a lot that led up to that moment which guided the trajectory of the product:

1. Not settling for a tool that didn't really work for me, and spending the time creating my own gave me something I could one day sell.
2. Making a point to speak at conferences to build my brand expanded my network and introduced me to the right people
3. Saying yes to the opportunity of selling it to others instead of talking myself out of it or putting it on the back burner as a "Someday" project gave me the motivation to work solidly and get it launched.

The most important lesson that I learned here was the importance of increasing your network and building relationships with people you can one day partner with. And this really starts either before your product is even a thing, when it's just an idea or in the very early stages.

You need to do it early because building genuine relationships is really hard to do when there's something you need. People can sense when you talk to them just because you want something from them. But at the same time, everybody relies on other people to give them a leg up. I don't believe anyone is self-made, we're all standing on someone's shoulders until we get successful enough to pay it forward to others.

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

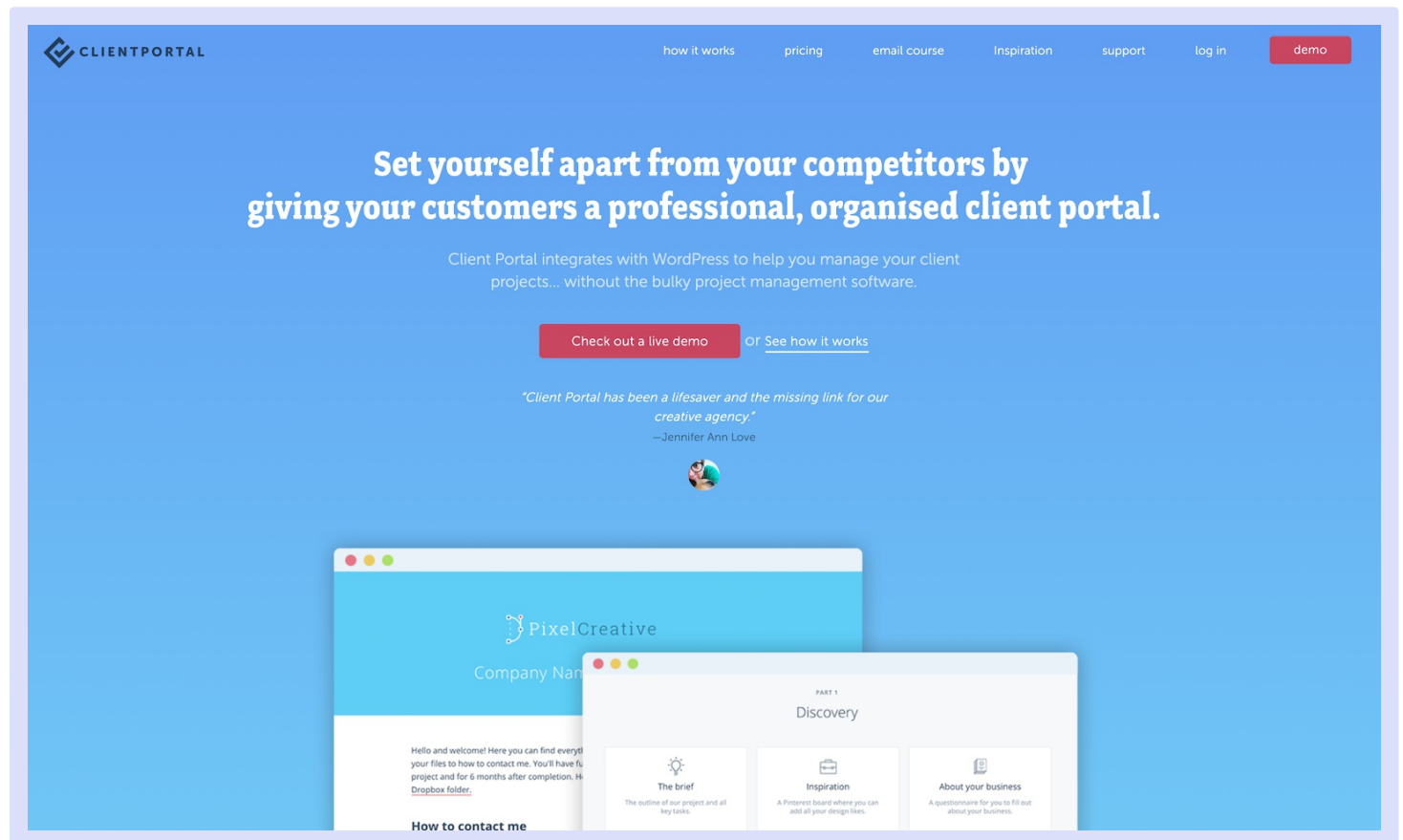
My launch went really well. The presales went well but then I had a bit of a blip. After the launch sales just dropped because I didn't have my own audience.

Since the pre orders were mostly from the audience of the conference I spoke at I now needed

Since the pre-orders were mostly from the audience of the conference I spoke at, I now needed to figure out how to sell Client Portal on my own. I wasn't getting any Google traffic. I didn't have a huge audience myself of people to sell to (at the time, I had just over 1,000 people on my email list).

So I got into a bit of a funk and Client Portal wasn't really doing much so I went back to working on some other things. But I had this product and I really wanted to continue to grow and support it.

One day, I made up my mind to revamp the product and turn it into a legitimate business. I redesigned the website. Instead of just a landing page, I made it into an actual website with a home page, features page, pricing, and so on. So it looked more like a legitimate piece of software.



After I had done this, I actually had people message me saying they didn't invest in Client Portal before because the old website didn't look very good. It made them think the product wouldn't be supported and that not much effort was going into it. The redesign made people confident that I was putting time and effort into the product so their investment wasn't going to go to waste.

In order for me to start gaining some traction for Client Portal, I realized I needed to go out there and talk about it – just like I did at the conference that started it all.

So I started applying to go on podcasts targeting freelancers and agencies. I would talk about how to work remotely with clients and how to give clients a great experience when working together.

I'd mention Client Portal briefly, but that wouldn't be the focus of the interview. The focus would be trying to teach freelancers something really valuable. Client Portal was a part of that, but it wasn't a giant sales pitch.

I reached out to approximately five podcasts a week and out of those five I usually got to go on at least two of them. For a few months I was on podcasts every single week talking about Client Portal, my story, and freelancing. At the end of the podcast, I would point them to a [free email course](#) to learn about freelancing in more detail.

When people finished that email course, I would then pitch Client Portal with a discount.

This worked really well. When I started doing podcasts consistently, I was getting between \$2-4k a month just from that and the email course.

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

Client Portal is still doing well today. I make between \$4-\$10k a month and since it's just myself, a part time developer, and a part time virtual assistant (these cost between \$2-3k combined per month) it gives me enough profit to focus on products full-time and live a fairly comfortable life.

Coupled with my other products, [Project Pack](#) (a set of templates for freelancers which integrates with Client Portal) and [Design Academy](#) (a course teaching design principles to developers) I have a nice mixture of work to keep me busy along with the stability that multiple products provides financially.

What's really great about Client Portal today is that I'm now getting a decent amount of organic traffic to the website. As it turns out, a few thousand people are searching for some variation of "Client Portal for WordPress" so when they land on [client-portal.io](#) they're primed and ready to buy.

The happy accident here is that I named my product something people are searching for. As much as I'd love to say this was a deliberate move, it wasn't. But it taught me to not overthink naming and, if possible, name your product something that's going to help you get traffic from Google.

Because of that, these days I rarely go on podcasts or speak at conferences. Even though it's something I'd like to do again, I don't *need* to because of the free, organic traffic from Google.

My current focus is delving into Facebook ads to see if that can generate more leads for the product. I currently do a bit of retargeting but I'm looking to invest a lot more into it this year.

I'm also planning on ramping up my affiliate program. I currently have about 300 affiliates but there are a few who consistently earn money from Client Portal. I'd like to reach out to those people and set up some kind of joint venture partnership.

In terms of goals, I don't have anything lofty. I'm happy for Client Portal to just keep steadily growing. I don't aspire to have a big team and I'm very happy with the people I've got working on the product right now. We update the product with new features every 4-6 weeks and keep up with any bug fixes or support in between then.

**Through starting the business, have you learned anything particularly helpful**



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

The most important thing that I've learned is that it's all well and good to have a product that scratches your own itch but it has to be a big enough problem for people to actually pull out their wallets and purchase it.

The reason I think Client Portal works is because while it solves a problem of files and links being scattered around everywhere, it also solves this deeper emotional problem of wanting to look professional and feel like a legitimate business that's taken seriously.

And that's the core emotional need that I've learned a lot of other people have.

A lot of people who buy Client Portal say their favorite thing about it is that it makes them feel confident. It gives them the confidence to do their projects with their clients. I get a lot of emails about that, about how Client Portal has helped them in that way.

So I think doing something that scratched my own itch was good, but the fact that it was also tied to some kind of deeper, emotional connection was what really made it a success.

The other most important thing I've learned is what we talked about earlier: the importance of getting out there, meeting people, and building relationships. A lot of people put this off because they're shy or introverted but it really is the best way to encourage opportunities to come your way.

Many stories sound like luck. Something happened and everything took off. Someone was in the right place at the right time, or said yes to the right opportunity and it changed everything. You can't plan when this will happen, or even guarantee it, but you can make it more likely by doing as much as you can to put yourself out there and help people.

## What platform/tools do you use for your business?

I enjoy using HelpScout for customer emails and support. It enables us to have multiple people view the same tickets, have conversations in the comments (without the customer seeing) and provide a great response to every person who emails in. We can escalate the more difficult support tickets and get them to the right person and it helps us achieve inbox zero pretty much every day.

Another tool I have been really enjoying is [RightMessage](#), which is a smart call to action and segmentation tool. I can use RightMessage to find out who's on my website, why they are interested in Client Portal and I can show them the perfect call to action based on who they are and where they are in my funnel.

## ing Client Portal

ment and have a simple  
WordPress website.

How would you best describe what  
you do?

you do:

I'm a freelancer or consultant

I own or work at an agency

I own or work in-house at a company

Other

Powered by  RightMessage

For example, if someone comes to the Client Portal website and I know they're a freelancer who hasn't gone through my free course, it we'll pitch the free course. If someone comes to my website and they are a customer, I can pitch them a customer satisfaction survey or an upsell. RightMessage allows me to not overwhelm people on my website with calls to action that aren't relevant to them and it makes the calls to action that they do see convert much better. So that's really exciting tool that I've just started using over the last few months.

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

### Badass: Making Users Awesome - Kathy Sierra

A great book about how to make the people who use your products successful. I recommend this book to almost everyone!

### Startups For The Rest Of Us

One of the few podcasts I religiously listen to. If you're interested in building a startup, you can't go wrong.

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

Get your product or idea out in the wild as quickly as you can. I was lucky in that I was told I had to launch Client Portal within three days or I'd miss this huge opportunity.

What scares me on reflection is that if I didn't have that incentive, I'm not sure Client Portal would even be released now (three years later at the time of writing).

There's always an excuse or a reason not to launch something, but there's very rarely that opportunity where you absolutely have to launch something *now*. And that's something that you might need to set yourself. So you might need to give yourself the deadline of launching next week. And stick to it as if your life depends on it.

The reason I say this is because I've met so many people who have these amazing products, far more polished than Client Portal was when it launched but they're still not released because there's some small feature that's missing.

It's too easy to put off launching. Usually this is out of fear. Fear that nobody will buy. Or fear that people will buy but they'll hate it and want a refund immediately.

But if you let these fears get the better of you, they won't go away and you'll never launch your product.

Your product doesn't need to be "finished" because your product will never be finished. It just needs to be something that people can use and get value out of. Then, once you have real customers using it, you can start getting feedback and learn about the direction the product needs to go in to help your existing customers rather than guessing.

## Are you looking to hire for certain positions right now?

Not at this time but I'm always open to short, fixed engagements with people who can help grow Client Portal.

I'm also open to joint venture partnerships so if you think your audience would benefit from Client Portal, I'd love to find a way for us to work together.

## Where can we go to learn more?

- [Client-portal.io](https://client-portal.io)
- [Twitter.com/laurium](https://twitter.com/laurium)
- [Designacademy.io](https://designacademy.io)
- [Projectpack.co](https://projectpack.co)

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



Laura Elizabeth, Founder of Client Portal

## Client Portal has provided an update on their business!


Over 2 years ago, we followed up with Client Portal to see [how they've been doing](#) since we published this article.

About 1 year ago, we followed up with Client Portal to see [how they've been doing](#) since we published this article.



Pat Walls, Founder of Starter Story

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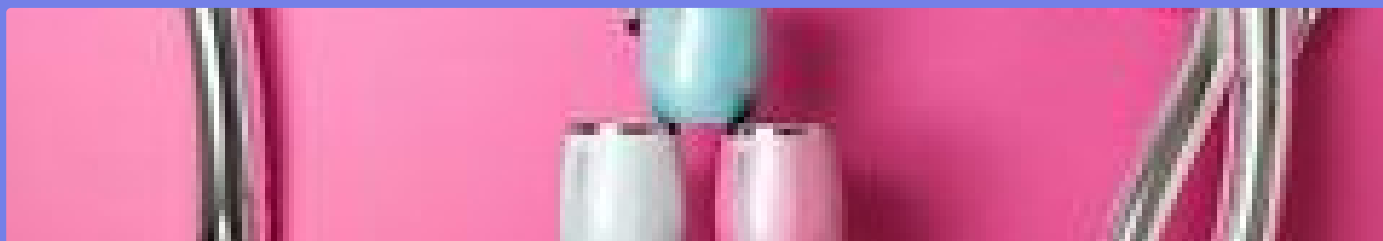
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Drinkware brand

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Chris

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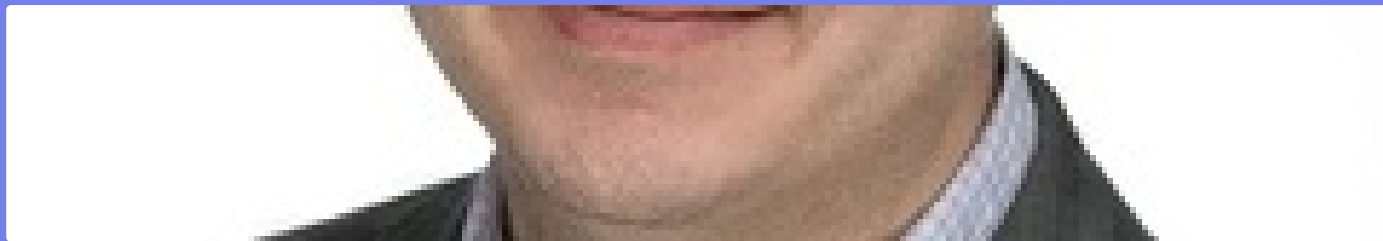
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**\$1.08M**/YEAR



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Garrett

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Abhishek

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Tricia

**\$600K/YEAR**



Michael

**\$264K/YEAR**



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**Sam Parr**

My First Million

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**

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Michael

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