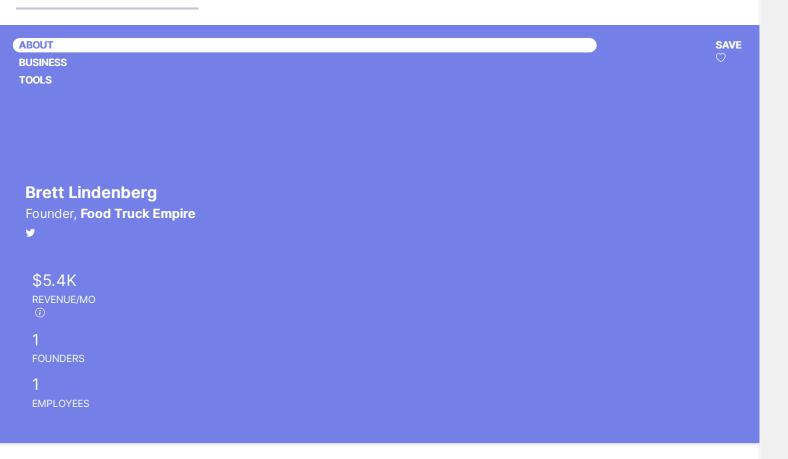
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How I Started A Profitable Food Entrepreneurship Blog

Brett Lindenberg

Published: May 30th, 2019



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

My name is Brett Lindenberg and I started the mobile food entrepreneurship blog

FoodTruckEmpire.com out of my one-bedroom apartment in St. Paul, Minnesota back in 2014.

The first ever podcast recorded for the blog was with a hot dog vendor I found on YouTube.

Fast forward to 2019 and I've now done over 100 interviews with food entrepreneurs.

The goal of the website is to prepare entrepreneurs for starting profitable food businesses. There are a lot of television shows like The Great Food Truck Race that romanticize what it's like to operate a food truck or start a restaurant. While I love these shows as much as the next guy, the truth is there are all kinds of real challenges associated with starting these small businesses that people don't realize: They will be hiring, taking out loans to start the business, marketing, and the list goes on. Our goal is to prepare food business owners for these challenges.

While the majority of our content is free and supported by advertising, we also offer a Food Truck Academy Class that's held 100% online and guides students through the often confusing process of starting a food truck. Many of the past students of this course have gone on to start successful food truck businesses and even restaurants. One of our star graduates of the program Natascha Sherman Hess's food truck **The Ginger Pig** was even named The Best Food Truck in Denver for 2018. Pretty cool!

In 2018, the website averaged \$5,400 monthly. The website now gets over 300,000 page views monthly, has an email subscriber list of over 35,000 and continues to grow. We've been quoted in Entrepreneur Magazine, CNBC, and other media outlets over the years.



Take us through the process of creating the podcast and content.

Back in 2014, I had an idea to start a food truck business. The business model seemed like a winner because I could operate part-time on weekends while maintaining my corporate online marketing job during the week.

I viewed this as a low-risk business opportunity since I wouldn't need to rely on the food truck profits to pay bills. Any income generated would be "extra money" after the expenses of running a truck. Operating at a profit didn't seem like a difficult task to assuming I would be willing to run the business myself and selected a high-margin menu for the truck.

66 Starting a business is time consuming and insanely difficult even if you're doing it full time. Take the hours you have left after work and focus them toward one thing.

As I became more serious about researching the food truck business, I headed to Google to

topics, I was surprised to discover that there was almost no information available online. This struck me as surprising considering there were top rated television shows like The Great Food Truck Race running at the time.

With my background in online marketing, I also saw that there were over 40,000 monthly searches for the term "food trucks for sale" on Google using a keyword research tool called **SEMRush.com**. Based on the increasing interest for this business model on television and the monthly search volume estimates on the topic of food trucks, it seemed like there were other people interested in starting this kind of business too.

Bottom line, it seemed like there were a lot of people interested in starting a food truck, but not much information online to help those people. So I decided to start a blog and podcast that would document my journey starting a food truck. My approach to starting the website was very simple. Start by reaching out to successful food truck owners and ask them questions about how they started the business. I figured if I recorded these q/a calls and published them on a blog people would be more willing to talk to me and share their advice. This would help me start a food truck and create high-quality content for others that eventually visited my site.

I am also a huge fan of podcasts. At the time I was amazed at how a simple podcast like **Entrepreneur on Fire** could become so popular so fast. What I was most amazed about is that the host of Entrepreneur on Fire, John Lee Dumas, could literally ask the same 5 - 10 questions each interview to his guests and create high-quality content fast. I felt like I could provide something similar to the underserved market of the food industry.

Finding the first interviews for my podcast was really simple too. I searched on Google for food trucks that looked successful and emailed them to see if they would be interested in talking to me about their business. Many said yes and we would schedule time to record a call on Skype. After getting a confirmation from a guest, I would write down 5 - 7 questions and those questions would be the basis of a 30 - 45 minute interview that would turn into a podcast.

One thing you discover through a podcast is the way you speak. A lot of people say they don't like to sound of their voice. You'll need to get over this quickly if you want to podcast. But beyond your voice, you'll uncover all sorts of verbal ticks you might never be aware of otherwise. I discovered that I said "ummm" and "like" an annoying number of times when speaking to someone. In fact, years later I still need to remind myself not to say like too much. While it's hard, one nice side benefit of starting a podcast is that you'll get better at public speaking and connecting with others.





A screenshot of what FoodTruckEmpire.com looked like back in 2014.

Describe the process of launching the business.

Like most bloggers, the launch of my business was low cost. I bought a domain name from GoDaddy, website hosting from HostGator, and had my initial website template customized by someone located in the Philippines. I was introduced to the designer from a friend who had worked with the individual for a Wordpress design as well. The total initial investment for the business was around \$500. The majority of the costs went toward paying the designer to create the logo and set up the site.

When you start a blog, my belief is that you should outsource all the one time technical work, design, and setup. There are so many people that spend months wasting time trying to figure out plugins and Wordpress themes when they could have solved the problem for a couple hundred bucks and be off to the races.

At the time, \$500 was a substantial investment for me. I fell into the trap of having around \$40,000 in student loan debt another \$10,000 in credit cards after college. Adding a monthly car payment shortly after graduation and the other bills (rent, cell phone, internet access) meant things were tight for me financially for the first 5 years after graduation.

In spite of financial woes, I forced myself to invest money in the design and setup of my blog. In retrospect, I'm glad that I did this because it saved me a lot of time starting the website.

When you start a blog, my belief is that you should outsource all the one time technical work, design, and setup. There are so many people that spend months wasting time trying to figure out plugins and Wordpress themes when they could have solved the problem on **Fiverr.com** for a couple hundred bucks and be off to the races.



Above is a screenshot of the Google Analytics traffic to my website for the first 6 months. In month number one, I had a grand total of 124 website visitors. When my website was went live there was no fanfare. There were no viral moments or big surge in visitors lining up to read my content.

Naturally, some of those visits were me logging in from different computers. The biggest day of traffic during this time period was 112 visitors. Audience growth would continue to be slow, but steady, for the next couple years. This is what early success looks like for most bloggers. You need to be able to take the long view.

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

The foundation of my business is around conducting interviews. Interviews are the reason people visit the website to learn about how people started food trucks or restaurants. These interviews are produced in different formats using text, podcast, YouTube, or a combination of the three.

There are a few different levels of why interviews work. Beyond creating content that helps you attract an audience, interviews get you access to people. It's amazing that you have the opportunity to speak with almost anyone by scheduling an interview.

I've learned that you should never be reluctant to ask for an interview. More often than not, people will jump at the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise with you. If someone doesn't want to participate, they will in most cases ignore your message and that will be that.

In my opinion, asking for an interview is the easiest way to "network" on the planet. It's less awkward than approaching people at a tradeshow too. Best of all, interviews allow you to lead with value. Most guests want additional exposure for their own business or project and will jump at the opportunity to talk to you about it.

Occasionally, these interviews can even turn into business relationships. One example of this happening for me is with a food truck manufacturer, **M&R Specialty Trailers and Trucks**. This food truck manufacturer has been a sponsor of the blog now for over 3 years and we've become good friends in the process.

I first met the owners of M&R Specialty Trailers and Trucks, Bob and Richard by emailing them to see if they'd be interested in doing an interview. The proposed topic of the interview was about the food truck buying process. As you might imagine, purchasing a reliable food truck that will pass health code inspections is an important and costly aspect of a food truck startup process.

This first interview didn't go as smooth as I had planned, however. In fact, I forgot to hit the record button for our podcast. Doh!

Fortunately, I realized mistake about 20 minutes into the interview. When I let Richard and Bob know I forgot to hit the record button and that we would need to start over, they both laughed.

This mistake actually helped to loosen everyone up and created a better episode as a result.

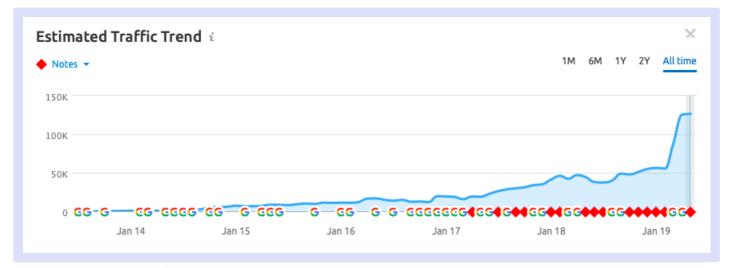
It's important to note that this food truck builder did not become a sponsor right away. It wasn't until about 9 months after the interview aired when I emailed the owner to about sponsoring the program that they came onboard.

My email pitch was pretty simple. I explained that the visitors to the site had been growing, and the business would get a sidebar ad, podcast ad, and named the price to be a sponsor. If they were interested, I proposed a short call to discuss the specifics. The owners said they were interested, we had a 15 minute call to discuss details, and agreed to terms. It was a very simple and low-stress process.

The majority of the interviews you conduct will never turn into direct business. I've done well over 100 interviews and only a handful have become advertisers or sponsors. Still over the long-term, if you're able to sell something of value to the folks you're interviewing anyway, it's a nice side benefit of going through the process.

Traffic Building Strategies

As mentioned in the introduction, at the time of writing FoodTruckEmpire.com now generates 300,000+ monthly page views and has over 35,000 active subscribers. The majority (about 75%) of the traffic is comes from Google Organic Search. Below is a screen shot from SEMRush.com that highlighting organic growth over the years. The number two traffic source is Direct Traffic, meaning people come directly to the website.



Steady organic traffic growth over the years per SEMRush.com.

I wish I could give you a magical way to generate traffic by month 3 of starting a website from organic search. Unfortunately, I don't know how to do that. If you can find someone that does, they are probably trying to sell you something.

Before I get into the actual tactics, the main piece of advice I can say is to be consistent and view this as a long-term game.

I'm in a mastermind with a diverse group of bloggers (mom blogs, food blogs, health and wellness blogs). While everyone's blog topic in this group is different, each blogger published regularly for 3-years before hitting full-time salary status (loosely defined as \$36,000 - \$55,000 per year). You might be able to get there faster, but this is the time frame you should be preparing for It's crazy how many people share this same time frame.

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From a tactical standpoint to generate more search traffic, build a plan and stick with it. Don't get focused on the day-to-day analytics. Look month-to-month to access your traffic gains. If you follow this basic process it will still work in 2019 and beyond. This is literally the same process I'm following this year.

Create a Content Goal to Publish 2 - 3 High Quality Pieces Per Week on Blog

Focus on quality of the posts. Focus on finding topics with 100 or more monthly searches in SEMRush.com. Add images, spreadsheets, videos, calculators or something else in your content to make it truly unique from everything else published online. Each post should be over 1,500 words in length or more to ensure you're going in-depth on the topic.

Find Ways to Get Other People or Organizations Involved in Each Piece of Content

When you get other people involved in the content of your website it's more likely to be shared. Don't just write about your own thoughts on a topic. Gather the opinions and get quotes from other experts on the topic you cover. This is a great way to meet people and help promote your own content. The more you do this the more you'll get referenced by other bloggers or experts which will generate more inbound links (important for search) and social traffic to your website. This is critical in the beginning to get noticed.

You can help people get involved in all sorts of ways. Interview them on a topic. Get a quote from them on a specific topic. Have people take surveys and then provide data about the results.

As an example of this in action, here's a recent piece of content that includes **survey data and interview responses** from independent coffee shop owners. To create this piece we got quotes from over 20 small business owners to get their opinion on the main reasons coffee shops fail.

After hitting the publish button, I email each person to let them know their interview is live and encourage them to share the link on social media. I also to tag the handle of each coffee shop on Twitter to make sure they were alerted that way as well. The more people you can get involved in a post, the more exposure you'll get in return.

Find a Foundational Subject Matter Expert on a Specific Topic

If you're going to be deep diving on a certain topic it can help to conduct a deep-dive interview series with one featured expert. If you run a podcast or blog that includes interviews, you already know that conducting outreach, scheduling a time to talk, and all of the administrative back and forth associated with booking guests takes a lot of time.

To make this easier you can find one person to deep dive on a certain topic. I've used this approach numerous times to create pillar pieces of website content. Instead of spending time booking a dozen different guests, you can do a few long interview sessions over Skype, video conferencing or the phone to go really deep on a topic. If you schedule three different, two hour sessions with a guest you can go extremely deep and get really comfortable with someone. Based on the information you get in a long-form interview series, you can start to build out entire new categories of content for your site.

A couple areas I've used a foundational subject matter expert for my own website is in the **Food Truck Business** and **Hot Dog Business**. If there's someone you've already interviewed that you really connect with and has valuable subject matter expertise, they are the perfect candidate to interview for an in-depth series on a topic.

One final thought while I'm on the subject of content creation. If I were starting at square one today, I would start building my platform on YouTube and not Google organic. There are many niches that aren't competitive on YouTube because bigger businesses think video content is still expensive to create. After building an audience on YouTube, I would add blogging and my own website as a phase two since it takes more time to see results. YouTube is the second biggest search engine in the world and is much easier to break into right now than Google. It's worth considering if you can create helpful and entertaining video content!

Email Subscriber Strategies

You need to come up with a good reason for someone to sign up to your email list if you want to grow subscribers fast. I hear all the time about that people don't want to subscribe to an email list in 2019 or that email is dead. Nobody wants their inbox spammed of course, but visitors will gladly share their email address if you give them something good in return.

Based on my experience building an email list over 35,000 active users, the biggest tip I can give you is to offer different incentives for the different types of website visitors. For example, my website caterers to people that want to start a food truck. That's pretty narrow right there. Here are some of the different bonuses I offer to visitors that are of interest to the visitors of the website:

- 1. Free Guide: How to Fund Your Food Truck This guide teaches you how to raise funding for your food truck through loans, crowdfunding, or savings. This bonus appeals to people that don't have enough money to start a truck yet.
- 2. Top Interviews: 6-Figure Food Truck Secrets In this email bonus, I organize interviews from food truck owners that are doing over 6-figures in revenue annually and provide them for free to subscribers.
- 3. How to Build a Food Truck Guide This free guide shares information about building a food truck.
- 4. Food Truck Business Kit: This free guide gives you a business plan template and other information you can use to start a food truck.
- 5. Hot Dog Business Kit: Email list built around people that want to start a hot dog trailer or truck. Includes interviews from hot dog vendors.



Above is an image of one of the free bonuses available on FoodTruckEmpire.com. When someone signs up for a bonus they are enrolled in the email list.

The examples above show five different ways people can subscribe to my website through different free bonuses. Most websites only have one or two subscription options.

I plan to create a more unique subscriber bonuses this year too. If I create bonuses that are hyper relevant for each type of visitor, the more email subscribers I'll get. I use Opt-in Monster to test a lot of my email subscriber bonuses. This wordpress plug-in lets you quickly change the marketing message for subscribers or set up exit intent pop-ups with minimal tech knowledge.

If you want to create compelling offers to subscribe to your email list, one of the easiest ways is to look at the different content categories of your website. Each category of content you write or vlog about should have its own unique email subscription bonus relevant to the category. This will increase opt-in rates significantly for your website. It's worked well for me anyway!

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

In the beginning, I was laser-focused on covering the food truck industry exclusively. I'm glad that I took this approach to become an expert on a very narrow topic because it helped the website gain traction.

Now that the food truck industry has been around a few years and is clearly here to stay, I've noticed some changes in the industry. Many of the most successful food truck owners expanding to start their own retail restaurants or coffee shops. On the flip side, more traditional restaurant owners are using food trucks to help promote their brands at events or generate more revenue through catering service.

In short, food trucks are becoming restaurants and restaurants are becoming food trucks. Due to the shift, we are beginning to broaden the scope of interviews and content we publish on the website to feature restaurant owners, coffee shop owners, and specialty food innovators in addition to food truck owners.

Eventually, I would like the blog to become the most respected resource for starting any type of food business. We have a long way to go before this is a reality, but it's the future I'm moving toward. It also means much bigger audience potential for website since there's a limitless amount of content topics and larger audience of people we can reach by heading in this direction.

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

I started FoodTruckEmpire.com as a side-hustle. It's still a side-hustle today. If you're reading this and in a job, don't let that hold you back from starting. Most employees have early mornings, evenings, weekends, and vacations free. This is enough time to start a creative

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There are advantages to having a steady paycheck too. Starting a business while you have a job means that you don't need to stress out if it doesn't make money in month one, six, or even a year. It took me over a year to achieve my first \$500 income month. For 99.9% of bloggers I meet making more than \$3,000 month, it took them 2 - 3 years of consistent work to reach these levels. It will probably take you about the same! Don't use your job as an excuse to get started.

What platform/tools do you use for your business?

Here are the important tools I use in my business:

Kajabi.com - This is the platform I use to sell my online courses. This platform makes it super easy to create an online course and connect with a shopping cart. The platform is super easy to use and you don't need any technical knowledge to set it up. Also, you don't need to make updates to it yourself as you would with membership plugins on Wordpress that exist.

BeProSoftware.com- This is a Wordpress plugin that allows you to create online listings. We have a **popular area of our website** where sellers can list their food trucks or trailers for sale. Believe it or not, if you want create listings for real estate, cars, and other products it's almost impossible to find a good solution for Wordpress owners aside from hiring a developer to custom code a solution, which is a really expensive.

Wordpress - Like most other bloggers, my website is powered by Wordpress.

Libsyn.com- This is the platform I use to host podcast episodes. They are very affordable and have a lot of options in the \$5 - \$15 a month range. They also offer quality podcast analytics, which is not. They have a nice looking podcast player for your website too so you don't need to do any additional coding.

Opt-In Monster- I have over 35,000 active subscribers on our email list. The Wordpress Plug-in Opt-in Monster is a big reason for this. This tool will run pop-ups across different parts of a website and allow you to split test the marketing messages so you can find out what works best. If you are building an email list, try this out.

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

How to Get Rich by Felix Dennis - An incredible book on the topic of entrepreneurship from the now deceased owner of the men's publication Maxim among many other magazine titles. Felix's writing style is blunt and totally unique. This book will help you understand the importance of ownership on the path to acquiring wealth. Warning: The book will ruin your hopes of attaining riches through a regular paycheck.

BrandonGaille.com- I recently discovered Brandon's podcast and joined his Blog Millionaire course. One of the most straight forward podcasts out for bloggers and marketers. Does an excellent job getting to the point of his messages and a outlines specifically what to do to build a blog business. Tip: You can also learn a lot for free by observing Brandon's blog posts are structured and titled

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Authority Hacker Podcast - If you want to build a blog this is one of the best resources I've found from a tactical standpoint of marketing your blog. Practical advice on driving Google traffic Warning: If you're totally new to online marketing some of the episodes may be hard to follow. Keep listening anyway.

Puff Daddy- The rapper / entrepreneur Puff Daddy shares his business advice. Great inspirational video. Let's go!

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

On the topic of the much lauded side-hustle. I see a lot of people doing too many unrelated projects. Starting multiple blogs, getting into Amazon sales and driving for Uber so they can tell friends how many streams of income they have coming in. In my opinion, lack of focus is the biggest reason side ventures don't work out.

You probably have someone in your life that's always chasing some new project or hack. The problem is each one of these side venture you go after requires a different skill set, things to learn, and problems to overcome. If you want to start an Amazon product business, you've got to get good at sourcing products, innovating on products, and the logistics of shipping products. If you plan to start a blog, you'll need to develop the skill of high-quality content creation and marketing. These are all skills that take people years if not decades to truly master.

Bottom line, starting a business is time consuming and insanely difficult even if you're doing it full time. Take the hours you have left after work and focus them toward one thing.

I don't recommend more than one side-venture at a time, but I do recommend exploring different ways to generate income from your primary side hustle. If you're launching a blog, try releasing an ebook, online course, affiliate marketing, advertising, or getting hired for consulting work through the platform you've created. This creates a compounding effect on your business efforts instead of starting from zero each time you have an idea.

Are you looking to hire for certain positions right now?

In 2019, I've started working with some folks on Fiverr.com for video editing services. If you are interested in doing a little video editing on the side, feel free to email **support@foodtruckempire.com** and send some videos you've edited in the past that are published on YouTube.

Where can we go to learn more?

- FoodTruckEmpire.com
- Facebook
- YouTube Channel

Brett Lindenberg, Founder of Food Truck Empire

Pat Walls, Founder of Starter Story

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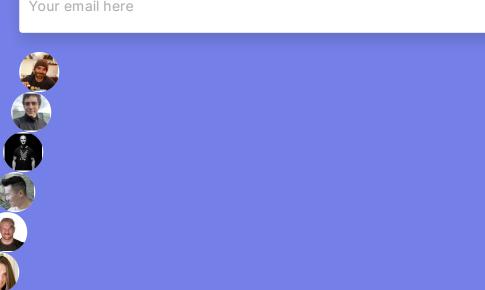
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Resources to keep you building

Building a bu

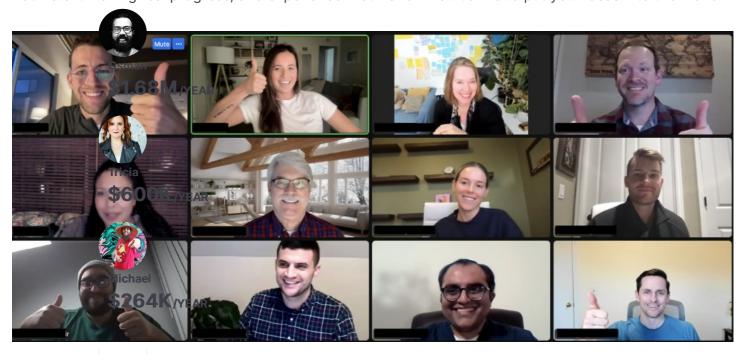
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