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On Starting A Web Design Blog With Over 50M Users



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ABOUT

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SAVE



Steven Snell

Founder, **Vandelay Design**

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I'm Steven Snell and I'm the founder of **Vandelay Design**. Although I've done web design work for quite a while, Vandelay Design is best known for blog content.

When I launched the site as my portfolio, I also started blogging on the site. The blog covers topics of interest to web designers, graphic designers, web developers, freelancers, and business owners. Over the years, the blog has reached a total of more than 50 million users.



What's your backstory and how did you get into entrepreneurship?

I launched Vandelay Design in 2007 and it was my first business venture. I never saw myself as

an entrepreneur and had no intentions of running my own business. Initially, I started Vandelay Design because I enjoyed creating websites and I was looking for a way to make some extra money in my spare time. I didn't set out for it to become my full-time income.

“ Be willing to take a chance on yourself.

For a few years leading up to the launch of Vandelay Design, I had been really interested in online business, especially affiliate marketing. Back in 2007, creating a website was a lot harder than it is now. WordPress was around but only offered a fraction of the functionality it has today. Most other popular platforms and modern website builders didn't exist yet. If you wanted a decent website, you either needed to hire a designer/developer or have the ability to design and code a website yourself.

I was really intrigued by the possibilities of being able to build some web design and development skills to be able to create my own websites for affiliate marketing. One of the ways I got practice was by creating sites for family and friends who had small businesses. Vandelay Design was my attempt at branching out from my personal network and finding more clients.

At the time, I was trying to also learn more about SEO and marketing so I could get exposure for my site and land new clients. I decided to launch the blog and experiment with social media marketing and things took off really quickly. As soon as I had my first spike in traffic, I knew there was potential to turn this into something more significant. With a few thousand people coming to the site every day, I knew there was enough interest in the content I was publishing on the blog.

Back then, I was still working a full-time job for a finance company, and I'd come home and work on the blog in the evenings and on the weekends.

Take us through your entrepreneurial journey. How did you go from day 1 to today?

Initially, my goal with the blog was to use it to generate leads that would convert into clients. I found that I really liked the blogging aspect and the more clients I took, the less time I had to work on the blog (especially with a full-time job). I decided to try to make money in other ways with the blog, mostly by selling banner ad space.

I didn't put ads on the site right away because I wanted to focus on increasing traffic. About six months in, Vandelay Design was getting more than 100,000 visitors per month and I decided to start selling ads. Initially, I managed it on my own by manually billing advertisers each month or setting up a recurring payment through PayPal. Thankfully, after a few months, I decided to join BuySellAds and that was a great move because the ads no longer took any of my time or effort.





Vandelay Design, 2008

In 2010, when the site was about 3 years old, I wanted to branch out from ads and so I started selling digital products to designers (things like icons, textures, vectors, Photoshop brushes, and templates). That was a huge step because it added some diversification and also increased overall revenue. Initially, products could be purchased individually or through a membership model. Today, membership is the only option.

A few years later, around 2013, I started to get more serious about promoting products as an affiliate. Today, affiliate marketing is the biggest source of revenue for the business. I use blog content to promote WordPress themes, web hosting, stock resources, and web apps.

While I've never had any employees, I've outsourced more work over the years, including writers for blog content and designers to create products that are sold in the shop. Today, I keep things pretty lean and do most of the work myself.



background some texture or character as opposed to just using a flat, solid color.

In this post, we'll showcase over 50 sets of free Photoshop patterns for your own use. I think you will find them to be highly useful for quickly giving great effects to your designs in Photoshop.



25 of the Best WordPress eCommerce Themes



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Ultimate Collection of Free

Vandelay Design, 2021

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

Vandelay Design has been profitable almost since day one. Start-up costs were extremely low (hosting, domain name registration, and fees related to registering the business). I'd say I was in pretty aggressive growth mode from early 2008 until about 2014. During most of that time, Vandelay Design was my focus full-time (I left my job in 2008).

Somewhere around 2014, I started pulling back my hours a bit so I could pursue some other projects. I was outsourcing more of the work and doing less of it myself. Up until mid-2020, the site had kind of been coasting for a while. I was putting in enough time to maintain, but not to grow. Over time, the income dropped off as a result.

Starting in mid-2020, I got more actively involved with Vandelay Design again and I've been working hard to grow the site and get it back to where it used to be. Thankfully, the traffic is still pretty good, but a lot of the content had gotten really outdated. Over the past few months, I conducted a full audit of all of the content (well over 1,000 blog posts) and I've been working to update content, write some new content, and delete the content that is no longer relevant. I evaluated the blog to see what types of content are getting results and what types of content are not getting results. In particular, list posts like this [collection of WordPress themes for photographers](#) and web design showcases like this [collection of e-commerce websites](#) have been really good for Vandelay Design over the years.

So far the results have been very good as traffic and affiliate revenue have both been increasing nicely. My goal for 2021 is to complete the updating of all the blog content and significantly increase traffic and revenue from the blog.

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

Originally, when I started the business I learned that I didn't need to rely on employers to earn a living. As I mentioned, I didn't see myself as an entrepreneur and I always assumed I would be an employee for my entire career. I had some frustrations with my job as most people do, and being able to get away and do something on my own was a life-changing experience.

A few years into the business, the biggest lesson I learned was the importance of having multiple streams of income. Once I branched out and started selling digital products at Vandelay Design, the income took a big jump.

Over the past five years or so, I've learned that our priorities will naturally shift over time and it's ok to change your path. I prioritized other projects for a while and didn't put as much time or effort into Vandelay Design, but last year I got a burst of motivation to get back to putting more of my energy into the project that started my journey with an online business.

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What platform/tools do you use for your business?

Some tools that I use daily in my business include WordPress, Google Drive, Gmail, and [Asana](#). I've tried a lot of tools and apps over the years, but I found that (at least for me) many of the tools that are meant to simplify work or life only make things more complicated for me. As a result, I don't use that many tools regularly.

As far as finding freelancers, I tend to use my own network rather than relying on a platform. One of the nice things about running a blog that's been around for almost 14 years is that you build connections to a lot of people in the industry. That helps with outsourcing work, whether it's a writer, designer, developer, or something else.

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

I'd say the books and resources that had the biggest impact on me were the ones that I read and used back in 2007, and before then, when I was just getting started. I read a few books on really helpful web design, especially [CSS Mastery](#) by Andy Budd and [Bulletproof Web Design](#) by Dan Cederholm.

I also learned a lot about web design and online marketing from blogs, but most of those blogs are no longer online. One that remains is [ProBlogger](#).

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

Be willing to take a chance on yourself. As someone who didn't grow up with an entrepreneurial mindset, it wasn't easy to break away from a career as an employee and take the chance on my own business. Looking back, it was the best move I ever made and I probably should have done it sooner.

When I'm talking to people who are in the same position I used to be in (not really happy with their job but not sure how to get away from it) I like to encourage people to pursue their own business part-time until they get comfortable. A lot of people assume that starting a business or pursuing entrepreneurial dreams requires you to quit your job, but that's not the case at all. People are often surprised and sometimes inspired to hear about my experience with growing a successful blog to several hundred thousand visitors per month while I still had a full-time job. It's not easy, but you can get started on the side and then make the jump to full-time when you're ready.

Where can we go to learn more?

My website is [VandelayDesign.com](#). Currently, the only social network that I'm active on is [Facebook](#).





Pat Walls, Founder of Starter Story

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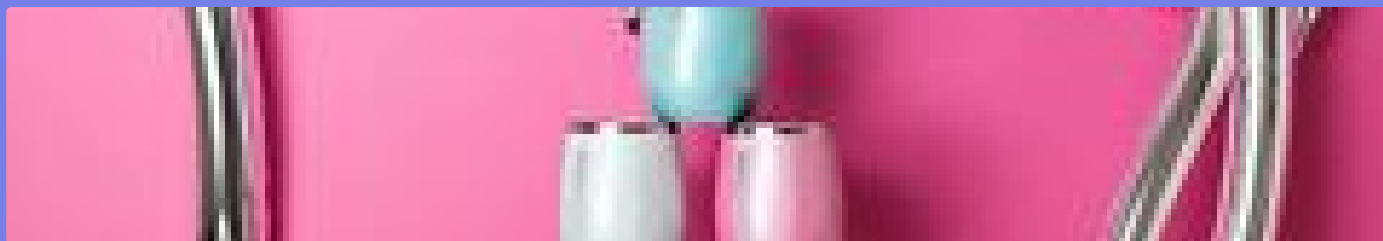
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Johne Vang

Be The Match

You can't find this information anywhere else.



Trent Baren

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Entrepreneur

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