

# **How I Started Knowing Nothing About Online Business... and Still Made a Living On the Web**

by Tom Ewer of Leaving Work Behind

My name's Tom and I make money online. I operate a blogging business under a subcontracting model, meaning that I manage a team of freelance writers and ensure that quality work goes to our clients. I also run a blog that helps people quit their jobs and build better lives.

And I started from scratch three short years ago.

In May 2011 I didn't even read blogs. I was a property manager and knew next to nothing about making money online. I had no expertise in blogging. But I had determination and I had decided to quit my job.

I didn't dislike the work I did – I just felt adrift. I was floating along – I wasn't charting my own course in life. I wanted to change that, so I began looking into how I could turn my simple hope into a concrete reality. That's when I read about The Creative Entrepreneur Issue #1 contributor Pat Flynn. After seeing his name in a blog post I was reading, I hopped over to his website Smart Passive Income. I devoured the blog posts there. Pat's story propelled me forward – I respected his endeavors, his success inspired me, and I grew intrigued by the idea of niche sites.

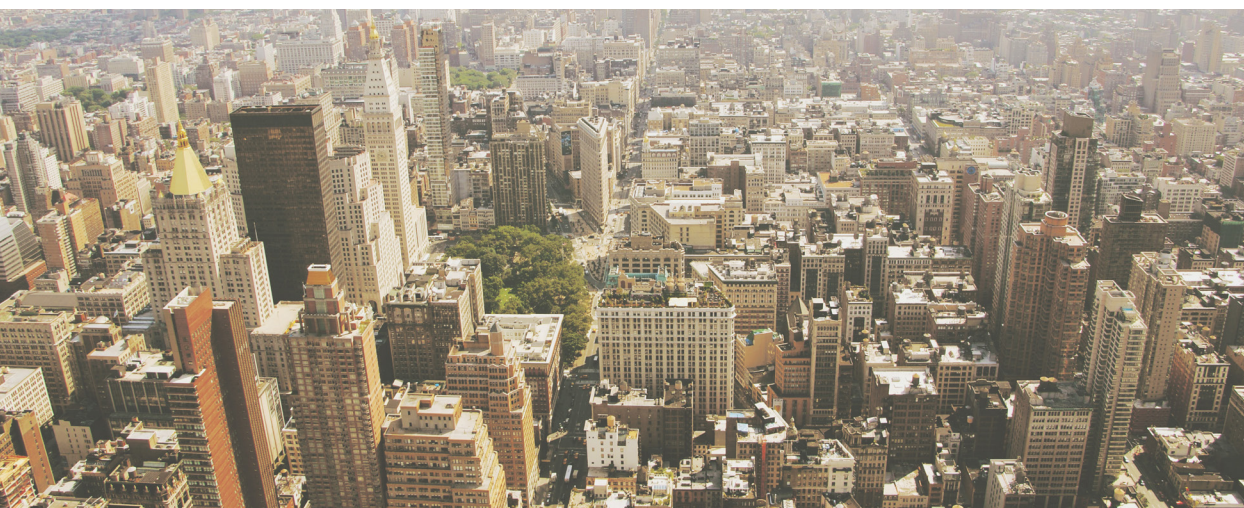
Pat's journey had power for me – it pushed me into high gear because it showed me what was possible with online entrepreneurship. Listening to the stories of others proved invaluable for me as I took those baby steps toward striking out on my own. It's a lesson I value:

## ***Learning about the paths taken by other people can help you blaze your own trail.***

When starting from nowhere and trying to go somewhere big, it helps to have people to look up to.

I was indeed aiming to go somewhere big: on May 23rd of 2011, I resolved to quit my job within one year. A measurable goal kept me focused on concrete action.

For a while, I experimented with niche sites, trying to emulate Pat. But that didn't work out for me. I'll be frank: My niche site endeavors failed, and I stayed on board

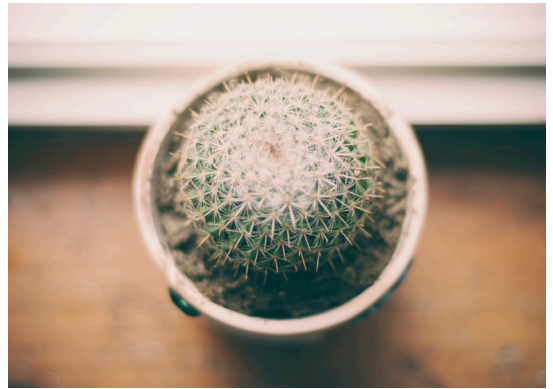


with them for longer than I should have. I stumbled, but I picked myself back up and moved on. But I learned that failure is okay, and I discovered another lesson: it's okay (even recommended) to tread a different path than the people you admire. Whether your differences are big or small, you're not a clone of the entrepreneurs who inspire you, and that's a good thing. You are an individual. You can and should do your own thing.

Sometimes you won't even know what your own thing is until it hits you in the face. I had no idea that I would end up earning a living from freelance blogging (and subsequently, my blogging business). I first started my blog, *Leaving Work Behind*, because I wanted to publicly hold myself accountable to my goal to quit my job. I never knew that it would act as the foundation for a career in freelance blogging and later become a popular community with many successful "graduates." At the time, blogging about my efforts to leave work behind just helped maintain my determination. It put me out there with my endeavor.

I didn't want to fail, and I certainly didn't want to fail in front of others. That helped me stick with it.

***With any creative enterprise, you don't just need inspiration and individuality, you need accountability.***



That could take the form of a blog, a group of fellow entrepreneurs, support from your spouse, you name it. Whatever you do, you must hold yourself accountable to reaching the goals you set. You must create social consequences for failure.

Throughout the summer of 2011, I kept tinkering with my niche sites. But it was fruitless – my first niche site made it to the number one Google slot for the keyword I targeted, yet it still failed to earn money. Come September, it fell (drastically!) in the rankings.

My goal-oriented approach saved me. I didn't give up – the clock was ticking and I wanted to quit my job by my deadline. On a whim, I submitted a number of applications for writing positions advertised on the ProBlogger Jobs Board. In those emails, I linked to a few articles on my little blog.

That's when everything changed.

I didn't know it yet, and I wouldn't fully realize it until sometime later, but my decision to think about a different track was wise. My choice to dive into freelance writing would pay off. I soon heard back from one of the companies I had contacted – James Farmer from WPMU gave me a paid trial. Things were looking up...

And then I failed.

I sent my first article to James, and when I returned to my inbox, he had replied saying that the post wasn't what they were looking for. My tone was too negative. My claims lacked evidence. My formatting looked strange. He declined the post. I wasn't disappointed. I was devastated.

But that wasn't the end of it. James said they'd still pay me for the post as part of my trial, and that they'd give me a chance to write another one. Looking back, I still think that I responded in the right way: I made clear that I wouldn't ask to be paid for sub-par work, and I vowed to take his feedback seriously as I worked to write a better post. That attitude helped me: we must always be willing to accept criticism.

## ***Confidence is great. Arrogance is dangerous.***

I crafted a higher quality post that met WPMU's standards, and before long I was writing regularly for the company.

At that moment, I knew that I could achieve my goal. I knew that I could quit my job. It almost didn't seem fair: I began with minimal knowledge of web-based writing, yet I was able to earn cash by writing online. It excited me. I handed my notice in. Soon after that, I sent out another round of applications and landed a writing gig at Vladimir Prelovac's ManageWP. I'm still working with Vlad today.

My goal was in sight.

But goals can be hard to reach. That's why I found it important to think outside the box. It's not enough to make great things.

Sometimes, you have to make tough choices. People just starting out often encounter the conventional advice: wait until you make as much money with your business as you do at your job. Only then should you quit.

I think you should toss that advice out.

I ignored it and I ended up fine. I wasn't making enough money through freelancing to support myself. But I crunched the numbers: my equivalent hourly rate for writing was a bit higher than my hourly wage at work. If I could free up hours by quitting my job and put those hours into new freelance projects, then I would survive. Once I did the math, it wasn't a difficult decision. A willingness to challenge accepted notions pays dividends.

That said, I did make some tough choices. I knew that my predictions could be off, so I put away several months' worth of financial savings. The real test came with being more frugal: I didn't want to end up penniless, so I gave my finances a critical eye. I tallied everything up, figured out what I could live without, and eliminated a third of my expenses. **I cut spending to cut risk.** For someone starting from scratch, that tactic is priceless.

In December 2011, I quit my job. Come January 2012, I was self-employed, working with writing clients and building my blog.

I was off to a start.

To be sure, I wasn't rolling in riches, but I was going somewhere. I struggled more, as it took me several more months before I fully abandoned my failed niche site efforts. But I continued to improve LeavingWorkBehind.com. I wasn't yet making hundreds of dollars an hour, but I

was on my way.

After securing my first two clients, I never sent another job pitch. Client referrals came in from byline links and through my blog. I would face both setbacks and success in the coming months, but I had started.

I felt inspired. I was myself. I had accountability. I set goals. I stuck to them. I took chances. I embraced criticism. I thought critically. And yes, I made mistakes.

I made a lot of mistakes, many of which I haven't even shared with you here. But I focused on doing my best and I kept going. You can do the same thing. Without much experience to speak of, I had become a freelance writer and never looked back. My business has grown exponentially since then and I am confident that it will only continue to grow into the future.

That's what I've done. But here's my question: what will you do? ■



# **3 Steps to Building a Profitable Authority Business from Scratch**

by Michael Knouse of The Startup Session





***No matter how  
qualified or deserving  
we are, we will never  
reach a better life until  
we can imagine it for  
ourselves and allow  
ourselves to have it.***

*Richard Bach*

When I was laid off from my corporate job last August, I had an important decision to make. Should I go back into the abyss of the corporate world or should I take a risk and do what my heart was calling me to do?

The easy answer would have been to jump right back into the corporate work that I knew so well. But that would have meant further neglecting the creative desires that were brewing within me.

I knew that something inside of me was dying to be born. I knew that I had more to offer to the world than spending half my life on airplanes and talking with clients about software that I didn't really care about.

### **Sharing My Ideas**

I made the decision to shift gears and build a business around teaching others

about a subject I loved and had been studying for years. Prior to my layoff, I had been blogging about the constant struggle between meaning and money, financial success vs. social impact, professional accomplishment vs. personal fulfillment. And a funny thing happened. It turns out that I wasn't the only one interested in this topic.

I had taken note about people commenting on my blog and asking me about re-gaining their dignity by doing work that really mattered to them. This led me to begin strategizing with a handful of people to help them clarify their ideas and get them off the ground.

This turned out to be the perfect testing ground to do something that I had been passionately reading about and studying for years – the art of creating a life of meaning through a business with Soul.

### **A Business Was Born**

I absolutely loved helping people gain clarity and seeing that it's possible to get paid for doing meaningful work. In fact, I loved it so much that I decided to turn it into a business.



I had been randomly meeting with several people and helping them move forward with their ideas. Now it was time to test the waters and see if people would pay for this sort of thing.

I had individual conversations with at least 25 people about my business idea and it turns out that people were willing to pay me for this kind of advice. It took a little time to have conversations with people and validate my idea, but the bottom line is that people were interested and a business was born.

### Teaching What You Know

How many times have you paid someone to teach you something because they have more experience than you do? It happens all the time! I've paid people to help me do a cleanse, build a marketing plan, advertise on Facebook, and learn how to podcast.

The beauty is: every one of us can teach something we know. The quickest way to become an expert at something is to teach what you already know.

***People don't teach because they're experts. They're experts because they teach what they know.***

By far, the easiest way to start a business from scratch is to teach others something you know. People often refer to this as freelancing, coaching, or consulting. I don't care what you call it, but if you have

something valuable to teach, other people will pay you for it.

I've managed to build a sustainable business in less than 6 months and create a steady income by teaching what I know. And I'm going to show you how to do the same.

### Step 1: Choosing what you will teach

The key to choosing what to teach is to combine your own interests + challenges with subjects that others need help with and are willing to pay for.

People make assumptions about what others want rather than doing the hard work of actually sitting down with them, asking great questions, and listening for their true needs.

Take the time to have individual conversations with 10 - 25 people that would be an ideal fit for the subject you want to teach. Invite them out for coffee or have a 20-minute Skype call with them. Be sure to choose people that you know are interested in the subject that you want to teach. Ask great questions to pull out the thoughts they rarely share out loud. **If you give them the chance, people will tell you exactly what problems they want solved.**

You should see patterns of similar needs or challenges emerge as you conduct these interviews. This will allow you to dive deep in your area of expertise.

If you are looking for guidance on choosing a subject to teach, here are some good suggestions:

- Financial (think personal finance or investment advice)
- Career (think job change or career



acceleration advice)

- Business (think marketing, growth strategy, or branding advice)
- Entrepreneurial (think business building or product launch advice)
- Travel & Adventure (think travel hacking advice)
- Physical & Health (think Paleo, Crossfit, yoga, or weight loss advice)
- Learning (think tutoring or skill acquisition advice)
- Relationships (think family, friends and dating advice)
- Spiritual (think meditation or religion advice)

People will pay you to teach them how to reach their goals and solve challenges in their lives. Deciding how you can help them with what they want and need is the first step to getting paid to teach.



***You can be best in the world at whatever you want as long as you define world the right way.*** – Seth Godin

## **Step 2: Define your kindred audience**

To succeed in the world, you have to choose your definition of world, which starts with creating a crystal clear picture of your kindred audience.

Defining your audience should provide answers to three key questions:



1. Do you care deeply about serving your audience?
2. Is your audience able and willing to pay you?
3. Do you care deeply enough to go the distance?

### **Do you care deeply about serving your kindred audience?**

I believe that choosing an audience you care deeply about is the most important step you can take in starting a business from scratch. Ideally, you are or have been, a part of your audience. You will have a much easier time relating to an audience that you share a common bond or connection with.

What is it exactly that you have in common with your audience? Why do you want to work with them? Why do you care?

For example, my kindred audience is people who feel trapped on the corporate treadmill. I can relate to their challenges and struggles. I was in their shoes for many years and I can directly relate to their fears, pains, and desires.

Choose an audience that you care deeply about.

### Is your audience willing and able to pay you?

How much money does your audience make per year? This isn't about excluding people based on their income, it's simply a method to determine someone's ability to pay you.

My initial target audience was men that had experienced financial struggle and needed a strategy to get back on their feet. I had lost a lot of money in real estate and acquired a lot of debt a few years ago so I wanted to help others in similar situations. **This was a bad idea because this group did not have the ability to pay my rates.**

This realization led me to shift my focus and redefine my audience to unhappy employees that have a strong desire to do more meaningful work. They have the ability to pay my rates, I care deeply about them, and we share a common desire and pain.

Work with an audience that is able to pay you. If your audience doesn't have the

ability to easily pay you, start over and reconsider another audience.

### Do you care deeply enough to go the distance?

Here's where it's time to do a gut check and be brutally honest with yourself. Given the audience you care about, knowing their ability to pay what you're worth, and the needs and challenges they've expressed to you, can you create a sustainable business from scratch?

I'm not talking about, "Yeah, I could probably do that," but "Hell yes, let's do this!"

It will be hard to serve your kindred audience and help them solve their biggest challenges or reach their goals. You'll spend countless hours researching, pounding your head against the wall, reading books, soul searching, and suffering insomnia as you think through ways to help people.

Select an audience that you will go the



distance for. Ask yourself, “Am I willing to dedicate the next 2 years to learning how to best serve this audience?” “Am I willing to do what it takes to become an expert and earn the right to be highly paid for serving my audience?”

If you don’t care deeply enough, neither will they.

### Step 3: Getting your first clients

Here’s where the rubber meets the road. Pick 10 people you know and care about in your audience. Go back to the conversations you had when researching what you wanted to teach. Offer each person a free 60-minute session in exchange for being able to record the sessions and post them publicly to your website as a mini case study.

At the end of each session, ask people the following questions:

1. What are the most important things you learned from our session?
2. How will you approach (insert your subject) differently as a result of our session?
3. What specific actions will you be taking as a result of our conversation? Please be as specific as possible.



4. What would you tell another person who may be interested in (insert your subject)?

**Note:** I hope it goes without saying that you have to actually be able to deliver value in order for this to work. If you have chosen a subject that you know well, and have produced results for yourself, this should be easy.

Now take these recordings and transcribe the notes to build mini case studies around the subject that you want to teach. Use these as the foundation for your website and also feature them as a blog series highlighting your area of expertise.

**Note:** It’s easy to record phone or Skype calls with a service like AudioAcrobat.

You can also use the case studies to design an email campaign that slowly but surely builds trust, confidence, and expertise with your audience. At the end of your case study email series, offer a free 30-minute session for anyone that is interested in hiring you. This will allow your audience to transition from seeing others being helped to experiencing it for themselves.

The end of your 30-minute session is your chance to convert a prospective client into a paying client. The most important thing to do is to directly ask for the person’s business in a non-threatening way.

Say something like, “Now that you’ve experienced my services, are you interested in becoming a client? I have a 3-month starter package that would be perfect for you if you believe I can help you reach your goals.”

Some people will want to wait or think on the decision. That’s fine. Ask them how often they would be comfortable with you

following up to see if there is anything you can do to help. Assure them you'll never pressure for a sale. Make a calendar reminder to follow up accordingly.

Other people will want to hire you right then. You should have options available in case they want to sign up for more than 3 months. I suggest you create 3 month and 6 month options that will allow for flexibility. I don't recommend starting with less than 3 months, because it is hard to achieve any kind of substantial results in that amount of time in my experience.

Tell these people exactly how the process works and exactly what they need to do to get started. Your process should include:

1. An intake form that gathers information about them, their goals, and why they hired you.
2. An initial session that revolves around getting to know them, establishing ground rules, and setting goals for your work together

3. Your process for when and how you get paid

The single most important factor in building a sustainable authority business is your own confidence in the value you provide. If you do the real work as I have described it throughout this article, you will be better positioned than 80% of freelancers, coaches, and consultants in the world.

As your client base grows, so will your confidence in your abilities. As your specialized knowledge and client base grow, your schedule will fill up. As your schedule fills up, you can raise your rates for new clients.

The best part: **you will become recognized as an expert in your field when you decide to share what you know with others.**

You don't need to know it all before you get started. It will be uncomfortable at first, but if you start today with whatever knowledge you have and incrementally build and grow over time, the results will be worth it. I promise you that. ■

***Confidence + Value + Action = Results***

