2. Swynk.com

When I first moved to Denver, I was alone. My wife was still living in Virginia, trying to sell our house while I was starting a new career as a DBA in Denver. Not knowing anyone in town, and with daily fires to fight at work, I found myself working long hours, often 12-15 hours a day digging into SQL Server v6.5. It was during these longs days that I found myself searching for help on how to better monitor my servers, write better code, and just solve problems.

One my early resources was Swynk.com, a site that catered to Windows administrators, Exchange administrators, and SQL Server DBAs. I learned quite a few tricks from the authors, and expanded on many of them to build better systems for my company. It was during this time that I realized I’d come up with some solutions myself that were on par with those published at Swynk.

However I was nervous about sending in my own solutions. I had friends that also used the site and I worried that my articles would look silly. They would be too simple and I would find myself embarrassed by the code I’d written and then what?

So I decided to try and publish my work elsewhere. There was a small journal in the UK called SQL Server Journal that had sent out a call for authors. I didn’t know anyone that read the publication, and had never seen a copy of it in the US. It seemed like a low risk way to get published, so I packaged up a solution I’d written to solve some SQL problem and sent it in.

A few months later I received a check and a printed copy of the journal. With my name in it! That was one of the more exciting days in my career. I almost didn’t take the $150 check to the bank and considered framing it and putting it on a wall above my desk at home. My confidence was boosted and I started to write more. I sent a few more contributions in based on solutions I’d developed for problems at work and I continued to publish a few articles over the next year in the UK, building my confidence.

Finally I was ready and contacted Swynk.com. I said I wanted to write for them and sent them links to the articles I’d published in the UK as a reference. They set me up with an account on their server and instructions on how to upload articles. I buckled down to work on a piece that dealt with monitoring my servers. I wrote it, rewrote it, tested code over and over, and finally uploaded it a couple months later.

To my surprise it was well received, and I got another check in the mail a month later. I realized that unwittingly I had started a second career.

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Writing for Swynk.com was an interesting experience. Since I was paid by hits, I was essentially competing with the other writers and worked hard to write articles that would attract interest, choosing topics that were catchy, and trying to ensure that my articles would attract people. I was the writer/editor/publisher for my work, with essentially free reign in choosing what topics I would write about. Fortunately I had enough of a work ethic to write about things that I thought were of interest to DBAs and would help them do their daily work.

The things that came up at my job were good article fodder as it was apparent that others had similar issues. If I had to figure out how to calculate the database file sizes for a SQL Server v6.5 database, there were others trying to do the same thing. If I had problems tracking code changes across environments, plenty of other DBAs were struggling with the same issues. I began to actively look for problems at work. Then I’d build a solution and publish an article based on it.

Without realizing it, I essentially had my own blog, hosted at Swynk, and earning me money. While I wrote in a more formal style than many of the blogs we see today, I still had the same freedom to choose what I wanted to write about. I added book reviews in and when they received enough reads to earn money, I began regularly investing in more books and writing regular reviews. I made an attempt at humor one time, re-telling some jokes I’d heard and those succeeded. I learned to think about writing whenever I did anything technology or SQL Server related. Without realizing it, I was learning a skill that would serve me later as I embarked on writing a daily editorial for SQLServeCentral.

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I wanted to enhance my reputation as well. Unwittingly I was concerned about my brand, something that I’d later grow to talk to other people about. At this time, however, I was just concerned about the next job. The company I worked for was a mess, and either it would succeed and I’d make some money on a large pool of options I’d been granted, or it wouldn’t. In either case I suspected that in two or three years I would be looking for another job. In fact, I’d already looked for a new job, but a raise from my boss convinced me to stick around and put up with all the pressures and problems at this one.

However writing for a living was not on my mind. I knew I could make money at writing, and maybe even get into books writing, but it was funny money. Hobby money. It was enough money to make life easier, or even pay for a second car, but not nearly enough to cover a mortgage. So I tackled writing as a fun project, as something to bring in extra money. I was hungry to learn more about SQL Server and become a better DBA, and I thought that while I did that I could write as well, in essence paying for some of my study time.

The payments at Swynk were separated into tiers. The more you wrote every month, the higher your tier was and the more money you could earn. There were three basic levels: one article a month, two articles a month, and one article a week. We were paid from a pool of advertising money, but the more you published, the higher the multiplier was for your portion of the money.

My goal was to write one article a week, but that was daunting in the beginning. I still was learning to write, and learning to explain things in a way that others would understand. There was also the pressure of getting through a busy day job, keeping notes of things that I was working on, and then finding time at home, at night, and on weekends to polish off articles. Trying to get all that done every week seemed like more pressure than I needed in my life, even though I was being paid. To top it all off, I had one kid adjusting to life in a new state and a new school and another that was less than a year old.

So I started slow. I published one article a week for a couple months, all the while writing at a faster pace. This was another skill that I would need later on at SQLServerCentral, and which I unwittingly developed now. I would save articles as I finished them and stick to my once a week schedule. I think I was earning an extra $75 a month at this time, which was good “fun money” for me, but I wanted more.

Once I realized that I had 5 or 6 articles unpublished, I knew that I could sustain two a month. So I started to publish every other week, and doubled my money. An extra $150 a month doesn’t necessarily change your life, but it certainly means you can do some fun things. Like thinking about indulging in some fun hobbies. I have always enjoyed cars and my dream was to own a Porsche. $150 a month might just let me pay off an older one.

So I started looking. That was one of the fun times in my life, when I realized that I couldn’t afford a 911 like I wanted, but I discovered there were old 912s out there, with the same look, a smaller engine, and a matching smaller price tag. I drove around 3 or 4, but was unable to find one in good enough shape to warrant making the investment in. I continued to save the money from articles, but decided that I needed to make more money to afford a car that was driveable, preferably a 911.

So I stepped up to one article a week. I worried about finding enough content to write about that often, and started to explore different types of writing at this point. I was constantly reading, getting through 5-6 tech books a year, so I concentrated on reading more, and writing book reviews. I downloaded evaluation software from companies and wrote reviews on it after trying it out at work.

Some of the software really helped me in my job, and I convinced my boss to purchase copies. It was at this time that I learned about ER/Studio and RapidSQL from Emarcadero. At the inaugural PASS Summit in Chicago I ran into the reps from the company and they recognized me from the reviews I’d written. That was a good experience and I ended up spending an hour with an engneer, giving him opinions on how things worked well for me, how they didn’t, and learning from him how I could better use the products. A

I also started to mix up my writing and not just write about real world solutions, or scripts that I’ve written, but I also included some research into new areas of SQL Server. I would delve into some area of SQL Server, something new, learn about it, find out how it might work in real world situations, and then write a more basic tutorial that what was in Books Online.

I managed to write one a week for quite some time. That put me in the top tier of payments and I was now making $285 regularly every month. It was time to go car shopping again.

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While writing at Swynk, we managed our own folder of articles, images, etc. and so I had an account to upload my own files. It was good in that I managed the names of articles and could easily link between them. That was one of the things that really got me interested in writing a series of articles on a topic. In order to keep my one a week going, I knew that there were times I'd be busy at work or heading on vacation or something else. So I had to have a a stockpile, however small, of articles. Breaking something into a couple of articles in a series was one way to keep a pipeline going. Typically I had a 2 or 3 part series that I kept in reserve, releasing it only when I got another one done. This allowed me to maintain my once a week pace even when I spent a week with the family on vacation.

I didn’t have an editor, and had complete freedom to write about whatever I thought would interest readers. I also had the responsibility to edit my own work, check it for accuracy, and correct mistakes. These were great skills to learn, and I took all feedback to heart. I think that I learned how to be a better writer, though certainly not one with any shortage of errors. I’ve learned through the years that spell check only goes so far.

It was during this time that I also met Brian Knight. Not literally, though it's possible that we talked or even bumped into each other at the inaugural PASS Summit in Chicago during the fall of 99. But Brian was the guy in charge of the SQL Server section of Swynk.com. It was to him that I released the title and URL of a new article and he got it into the newsletter and marked it down as another submission. I think there was also some good competition between us, since we were two of a few people that dropped out new articles every week. Usually he came out on top in the hit department, but I was learning and catching up quickly.

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During these weekly exchanges of emails and articles, we developed a friendship, albeit a virtual one, but one that I think was just as strong as many I've had in the real world. We learned to joke with each other, about our individual pasts, what our jobs were like, etc. I felt like I could trust Brian, count on his advice, ask his opinion, and even model my work after his. Brian was well known, a member of the PASS board, and someone that seemed to be a leader in the SQL Server community.

As I got to know Brian, I began to realize that he was a pro. He worked hard, he dug in and solved problems, but he didn’t have all the answers. He wasn’t brilliant or more talented than I was. He just worked harder, tried different things, and knew how to teach those skills to others. I also began to realize that I could do what Brian did with hard work and persistence.

Since then I've made many of these friendships with people all over the world. I've met quite a few people in person at some point, but there are many more that I've yet to meet. Hopefully I'll remedy that over time.

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In the winter of 2000/2001, things changed drastically. Swynk.com had been sold to Internet.com and quite a few changes were implemented, but the checks kept coming, so I didn't worry about things. Slowly, however, the big corporate philosophy took over. The payment schedules were changed, lowered, and it became a less fun place at which to freelance. There was also a new editor that took Brian's place and, while he didn't change the content, he was just less interesting to work with. No email friendship there.

Then in January 2001 the final straw occurred. I wasn't paid.

I queried the new editor and promises were made, but no check arrived in January. No check came in February. I'd continued to post articles during the first two months of 2001, but I'd cut back the rate to a couple a month since there wasn't an incentive to post more. I decided at this point to stop writing articles for Internet.com and look for another outlet. SQL Server Magazine had accepted one of my articles and it was in the queue for publication, so that was most likely my next outlet. After all, SQL Server Magazine seemed like the pinnacle of SQL Server publishing at the time.

It was then that I got an email out of the blue from some guy named Andy Warren. I had no idea who it was, but it changed my life. As I read the email, I learned Andy was querying other writers to see if they'd been paid for the last few months. He wanted to get a group of us together and try and force Internet.com to pay us. I have to admit that while I'd been interested in the competition with other authors, I hadn't really learned their names. Since Brian and I were neck in neck most weeks, competing for the most page views, he was the one I watched and was modeling myself after.

However Andy had written a few articles and he got a group of about 6 people together, including me, to discuss the issues. I had emailed with Brian about this, thinking he might be able to contact Steve Wynkoop and get things done, but we were stuck. I brought Brian into our conversations since he knew a bit more about the back end of the corporation and the 7 of us tried to figure out some way to get our money from Internet.com.

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At the same time that the 7 of us were trying to threaten, cajole, whatever, with the Internet.com people, Brian told us that he was thinking to start his own site and he had a prototype at www.sqlservercentral.com. The seven of us looked over the site and started a conversation through email for a week or two. Since most of us had enjoyed the writing, we thought it made sense to try and build our own site. It seemed easy enough to code some web pages and publish articles that we wrote.

Building a company was another matter. We didn’t think it would be hard, but it proved to be one of the most challenging things I’ve ever been a part of.

I think we all had visions of growing something like Swynk and then selling it to a large company. A few people wanted to incorporate and invest a few hundred dollars to get things going. Others wanted to informally see how things went and move forward. In the end, we decided to each invest $50 for the hosting and then move things forward. We had the basics of a site that would publish articles and handle a message board.

At the end of March 2001 the site had one member, Brian. The 6 of us joined with the establishment of this small group and we were off. Brian had produced about 7,000 page views in March, a significant number of them his own as he built the site, and he added some of his content from Swynk.com. We all added some content and Brian sent a weekly newsletter from his home PC and by the end of April we'd added 520 more members and had served 26,330 pages. The race was on.

At this point I played a slightly dirty trick. Since we'd managed our own files at the old Swynk.com site, I'd created a table of contents for my own articles. It was on this page that I linked back to from all of my articles, hoping to entice people to jump between my own articles, driving up hits. I also knew that this page received a decent amount of hits.

On this page, I uploaded a change. An announcement of the new site in Red, bold, large text, anything I could to get attention. Probably not the best idea, but I thought that I'd try and see what happened. The editor soon emailed me, not happy, but since I told him I hadn't been paid and wasn't happy, he let things go. I added a couple new articles to Internet.com to drive some traffic and turned my back on that site.