



This is an edited transcript of the August 26, 2015 Smart Solo Business podcast interview titled – [Brian Clark of Copyblogger Shares His Content Marketing Tips For Solo Professionals](#).

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving to work smarter, find more clients, and build a more profitable business? There is help. Welcome to the Smart Solo Business podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the Smart Solo Business podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host.

My guest on the podcast, [Brian Clark](#), is the CEO of [Copyblogger Media](#). Brian is also a serial entrepreneur who has built three successful professional services businesses using proven online marketing techniques before moving to a completely online business model.

Founded by Brian in 2006, Copyblogger Media is an innovative online company that provides high-quality resources to help people successfully grow their business through social media and online marketing. Brian and his company have earned a reputation for excellence and have received widespread praise. For example, *Advertising Age* ranks Copyblogger as a top marketing blog in its Power 150 list; *The Guardian* named Copyblogger one of the world's 50 most powerful blogs; Brian Clark was ranked number 3 of the 100 most influential online marketers of 2009; Dun & Bradstreet says Brian is the most influential person on Twitter for small businesses; and Technorati says Copyblogger is one of the most popular blogs in the world.

As a well-known online marketing thought leader, Brian's work has been featured in a variety of bestselling business and marketing books. These include *Lynchpin* by Seth Godin, *Epic Content Marketing* by Joe Pulizzi, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR* by David Meerman Scott, *Free Agent Nation* by Daniel Pink, *Referral Engine* by John Jantsch, and *Platform: Get Noticed in a Noisy World* by Michael Hyatt.

For close to a decade now, Brian has been teaching self-employed professionals like us how to create valuable information that attracts targeted attention, drives traffic, generates leads, and builds their business. If that's something that you want to learn how to do, then this interview is a great place to start. Get ready to take some notes, and enjoy.



Welcome to the podcast, Brian.

Brian Clark: Thank you very much. I am very pleased that you invited me to be here.

Stephen Lahey: Tell us a little bit about your career before you became an entrepreneur, and then what prompted you to make the leap to self-employment initially, Brian?

Brian Clark: So I was a liberal arts major in college. I had no clue what to do, so naturally I went to law school. Did really well in law school, but by my third year—I had clerked for firms my second and third year—I knew this is not what I wanted to do with my life. However, I graduated and I had a great job with a prestigious law firm, and I had student loans and all sorts of other issues that I had to deal with, so I ended up practicing for four years in the law firm environment.

I graduated from law school in '94, so that was kind of coinciding with the beginning of the commercial web. Every day after working long hours and not being very happy, I would go home and kind of stare at the computer screen thinking there's got to be a way you can do something with this Internet thing. And then finally in 1998, I was really unhappy, I thought, just generally with the practice of law, but I later kind of figured out that I have a problem working for someone else period, so I took the leap.

And it's interesting because I didn't say I'm going to be an entrepreneur. I actually wanted to become a writer, but that independent streak rears its head again and I didn't want to deal with New York publishing. I considered screenwriting, but I really didn't want to be a cog in the Hollywood machine. Writers are at the bottom of the barrel, unfortunately. So I turned back to the Internet and I watched people like Chris Pirillo publishing email newsletters, selling advertising, apparently making a good living, and I said that's what I'm going to try to do.

So I quit my job. I said if I fail, I'll end up a bartender in Austin. That's not the worst thing in the world, at least when I was that age. And I went for it.

In the first year, I did pretty well at creating content, building email lists, an audience, et cetera, but I made zero money. I had never taken a business class. I never read a marketing book. Finally in 1999, I read a book called *Permission Marketing* by Seth Godin and I figured out I was doing most everything right except I had nothing to sell. So at that point that's when I said what do I have to sell? I'm still an attorney, I can

practice law, and therefore I can market those services and maybe make enough money to keep going with this other business. And that's really the true beginning, I think, of my entrepreneurial career. That's when I realized that I was an entrepreneur who could write as opposed to a traditional writer.

Stephen Lahey: And the web was very much focused, at that time, on the written word, partially because bandwidth and technology wasn't where it is now with video and audio and all this other stuff, and so the web was actually a really great place for writers. And from the standpoint of competition, of course there was a lot less.

You and I talked before the interview and you said that in some ways you aren't an early adopter. But in the beginning you were one. You got into, I don't even know if they called it blogging at that time. I guess they did, in the 90s? Anyway, you got into blogging and content marketing, before they called it content marketing.

Brian Clark: I think there were blogs at that point, but you didn't hear about that at all. Ezines really was what everyone talked about.

As far as being an early adopter, I definitely was with regard to the Internet. I'm just not the type to go chase the latest shiny object now, because now everyone is online and everyone is trying to create the new thing that tracks market share and all that kind of stuff. So I would say I just kind of tempered that as we go forward in order not to be distracted.

Stephen Lahey: Yes, and I really respect that about you. I'm kind of allergic to the shiny object syndrome. I love that you stick to the business fundamentals.

Now, most of my listeners are solos and over the years they've probably built a relatively successful service business of some kind. But they probably haven't used online marketing techniques very much to grow their business. Now, you built, before you got into the whole Internet space as a business model, as in Copyblogger, you built several professional service firms that had a strong online presence. I think that's really what my clients are looking for. As an online marketing expert, Brian, what advice do you give when people tell you – I'm a professional service provider, I like what I do, I enjoy working with clients, but I need to get better with my online marketing strategies. What would you advise them to do based on your past experience building successful firms that way?



Brian Clark:

So the thing I was a very early adopter at was this thing called content marketing. Now even we didn't call it that until 2008 or so and that was kind of reluctantly. It's not, I don't think, the greatest term. I mean, it basically means giving away valuable information to attract people to you so that eventually enough of them want to hire you.

Because of the way I started out online with creating email lists and then, as I told you, shifted over to selling legal services really in order to survive at that point, but basically all I did was start yet another email newsletter. This one focused on Internet issues related to legal issues.

So I'm only four years out of law school, which is enough to have just enough credibility to where people will hire you and you're not too young, because you know law is kind of grey-haired game in that you're seen to be more valuable the older you are. But with the Internet, all those grey-haired people didn't understand what was going on at all and I did, so that was my advantage. And the way I demonstrated authority was by sharing information.

I could have built an entire law firm off of what I started there, but I was smart enough to stick to my guns and not get sucked into that because I did consider myself more of an entrepreneur. I didn't want to practice law. I didn't want to run a law firm. So I basically I used that first business to make a living. And because I was not committed to growing it or scaling it up, I was very selective. I was able to pick and choose clients because I had plenty of leads coming in. So I picked the most interesting work. I picked retainer level work, and I picked people who would pay me what I asked for. And I was still not that confident at that age, but it's liberating when you have the ability to be exclusive just because you don't really want to take on that many clients, and yet you know that that's the perfect way to act all the time even if you do want to build a substantial practice is to choose the right projects and the right clients.

So giving away that free content—which at the time other lawyers, they were saying, oh, I would never do that, because then you're telling them what to do and they don't need you. My response to them was, no, you're a licensed professional, come on now, they do need you.

I never really quite understood that mentality, but hopefully more people have gotten over that today and realize that by sharing what you know freely, all that does is make people know, like, and trust you, and that's who people want to do business with. People want to hire you as a professionals service provider. They don't want to do it themselves.



Stephen Lahey: That makes perfect sense. Now I know your current company, Copyblogger Media, employs a 100% online business model. Tell us about Copyblogger and the thinking behind that shift.

Brian Clark: I went from my first success with my own solo law practice into the real estate brokerage business and that was in 2002. I ended up starting two companies in that space. What was interesting about that is that they were completely comprised of websites. I mean and this is pre-Zillow and pre all of that kind of stuff. Again, everyone kind of thought I was crazy. That's just one of the best lessons ever. If people think you're business idea is crazy, you may be onto something.

So I really did that to expand my entrepreneurial wings, to start a business that wasn't focused on practicing law. And I looked around at the time and said what's a way to do this with online marketing, make a lot of money, and I was really looking for an opportunity more than I was following a passion. And I think at that time I had something to prove. Anyway, I did those two real estate businesses until 2005. I did kind of get overworked, I think, because I was better at marketing than I was at management, and also I just really didn't care about real estate at that kind of passion level. And finally, I really wanted a business where I didn't have clients, so that brings us into the Copyblogger era, if you will.

So I got out of the real estate businesses in 2005, trying to figure out what my next thing is, and I'm watching the commercial blogging space really heat up, and of course everything is based on selling advertising. Same mistake I made in '98. So I come out and say, you know, over the years I had taught myself direct response copywriting, because the combination of that and content was what brought me those leads. So I decided I'm going to show people how to apply copywriting techniques to content or blogging in order to get more traffic and more audience, but I'm also going to tell them that they should be selling products and services, not trying to monetize with advertising.

That really caught on with people. Some of the old guard bloggers thought I was Satan because I said the word "sell" and "blog" in the same sentence, but obviously we've gotten past that. And again, this became what we now call content marketing. So Copyblogger was one of the very first content marketing resources, and it's still the largest in the world today.

And so I started that up and it took off, really grew an audience, but I didn't have a business model. I didn't have specific products and services I wanted to create. I went into it audience first. If I build an audience of



people, I will serve their needs at an information level, and then that will reveal what they actually want to buy. We started our first product, which we talked about a little bit before, in 2007. This was a year and a half after I started the blog, but by that point people were begging us to sell something, and when we did we went from zero to six figures in a week and to seven figures within that year.

So that was the beginning of it all. Each year we launched a new line of business. We got into WordPress software and design. We got into content marketing software the year after that.

Then in 2010, I had basically launched four companies off of Copyblogger with partners. So I was kind of the hub in the middle of everything, but all these smart partners that I had weren't talking to each other. So in 2010, we met in the same room for the very first time and two hours later we had merged all the companies into a new company called Copyblogger Media because we had a vision of something bigger that we wanted to build and that vision was for what is now known as the Rainmaker Platform.

Stephen Lahey: That's so interesting, and it triggers a lot of questions, and one of them is at what point did you decide that the Internet is a great medium for direct marketing?

Brian Clark: That was the day I finished *Permission Marketing* in '99. Godin was a hardcore direct marketer. He was a book packager. He understood the ability to create and package something and sell directly to people. So his true genius, though, was realizing that when it came to online as opposed to something like, say, direct mail, you don't buy lists, you build them. And how do you build a list online? Well, you have to give something to people, whether it be your lead magnet or a podcast stream that shows up all the time, or what have you.

But remember that was the first marketing book I ever read. After I read that, I became a hardcore student of copywriting, advertising, marketing, dating back to the 1920s. I mean, I really went deep once I figured out what it was. And so Godin's thing that got through to me was this is a direct medium. This is a response medium. You're establishing relationships directly with your prospects, and then they become your customers or clients.

So to me, I was like okay, I get it now, this is a new form of direct marketing and direct response copywriting is applicable here. But I think the reason why I took to it so much easier than direct response marketing

professionals from the offline world is because, again, I didn't understand that world. Everything I learned, I applied it to what I knew about the internet, so I was kind of my own version of a digital native. Meanwhile, people with what I consider better copywriting skills and more sophisticated direct marketing abilities, it took them a decade or more to finally get the Internet because it was different and they just couldn't adapt. And so, I always say now that being clueless was the best thing that ever happened to me because I started off without anything to unlearn, if that makes sense.

Stephen Lahey: There's such a powerful lesson there, and for me too, which is the importance of becoming a student and being humble enough to get in that space where you're going to say, all right, I may or may not have grasped what Seth had to say in this book, but let's try it.

Brian Clark: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: You know, let's test it. Testing. So you have this interesting analytical mind, which probably served you well as a lawyer and you were able to get into the details of direct and online marketing and be a student, and I think that that's really powerful.

Now, obviously it took you a while to get to the point where you were saying I just want an online company, not a professional services practice as a lawyer, and it as a slow process. I think that a lot of people who we're talking to right now may be kind of frightened at the prospect of investing time in any kind of direct or online marketing. Can you contrast the challenges of running an online company versus a professional service business with a strong online presence and how they're different animals?

Brian Clark: Direct marketing has a lot of baggage, so in this context it just means you're establishing a direct relationship with a person who is a good prospect for becoming a client, so just keep that in mind. You don't need an intermediary such as television, or radio, or whatever. You can start your own video show, you can start your own podcast, you can start your own blog, so that's what we mean by direct. So don't let that frighten you off.

Here's my main challenge when I was doing this in the context of a professional service provider. I was the marketer, I set myself up as the authority, the person who knows this stuff, what I call the likeable expert because you're sharing and playing nice, but you also are demonstrating that you know what you're talking about. That's really the key. Don't



claim that you're the best patent attorney, for example, demonstrate it with your knowledge, and you do that by sharing. So that's the fundamental principle there.

The challenge is if you're doing that kind of marketing and you're doing the work, if you're successful at the first thing, it impacts your ability to handle the real thing that you do, which is the practice of law, or consulting, or whatever the case may be. So I was fortunate with the legal practice, there was a good balance there because I wasn't trying to be overly ambitious. I was really trying to make a good living with an eye to keeping enough time to figure out what the next company I was going to start.

With the real estate business, I positioned myself, I was really good at marketing. We brought in a ton of business. I was making more money than if I would have stayed and made partner in my old law firm. So from that perspective, it was great. But again, I don't know if you've ever read *The E-Myth* by Michael Gerber, but the whole—

Stephen Lahey: Yes.

Brian Clark: —thing about being a technician and working in your business instead of on it—that was me. I was really good at bringing in business, but then I had independent contractors, realtors essentially, and yet I was the most knowledgeable person about real estate due to my legal background and the fact that I became a broker. I was the best negotiator. I was the center of it all, and I could not get out from under it. And that was my main failing as a service provider because I was never going to let the ball drop. I was never going to let a client be unhappy, which meant I worked 17, 18 hours a day and that doesn't scale.

So the question here is you need to be able to create content online in order to attract people to you and therefore make online marketing work for you in real terms. That means valuable leads that turn into actual clients that turn into revenue and profit. Let's not forget why we're doing this.

Ultimately, you do have to create a system or a machine, if you will, and I think maybe that's why some professional service people are more comfortable with older forms of lead gen such as advertising because you do it and then the leads come in and then you handle it, while I think the perception is with online content, you're on this conveyor belt constantly. That doesn't necessarily have to be the case, but you do have to figure out a way—and I liked your example. You're providing a very valuable

process mechanism. People want that. They [opt-in](#) and you can communicate with them.

It doesn't necessarily have to be like a blog or a podcast, although I obviously enjoy creating media. We used to call it new media. I'd say today we're all in the media. People want to avoid marketing and advertising messages, but they still have problems, they still have desires, and they're going to search out for people who at a preliminary basis satisfy that initial question, and then they're like, okay, this is a person that seems like they know what they're talking about and I like them, I connect with them. And that's really how modern online marketing works. It's making that connection. One-to-one. That's the direct part.

Stephen Lahey: I really like what you're saying, and we could literally go on for hours and I could interrogate you and get all your secrets, but let's just say this. You have a lot of wonderful resources that you provide and that people can explore, like the Copyblogger site and so on. So keeping in mind that my listeners are self-employed independent professionals, and usually they're selling some type of consulting services, why don't you walk them through some of the resources that you provide via [Copyblogger](#), [Rainmaker](#), et cetera, and let's just talk about that a little bit.

Brian Clark: Well, at [Copyblogger.com](#), which is still kind of the central mothership of the entire enterprise now, we have a ton, ten years of content there. We've tried to organize it, and we're even doing an upcoming redesign in order to make it even easier for a certain type of person to find the certain type of information that you're looking for.

So let me first say that all of the stuff we offer, we have a resource called [My Copyblogger](#). It's free. You have to register for it, but it's a library of 16 eBooks and a course. Now, all of that stuff, content marketing, copywriting, email marketing, landing pages, all these core topics are perfectly geared for professional service providers.

There are some people in our audience, maybe half, maybe that not much, who really want to build a business like ours, which we would call a digital commerce company where you sell digital products and services, everything is delivered online, which is really the kind of company I wanted to create after doing my time in professional services. But I believe that content marketing is one of the most effective and really kind of clear cut ways for a professional service provider to get way more clients.



Let me give you an example of this whole media, not marketing approach that I use to try to explain content marketing. There's a show on basic cable, HGTV, called Love It or List It. It's a reality-type show.

So, on the show there's David who is a real estate broker, there's Hilary who is an interior designer, and each show focuses on a family, or a couple, or someone who basically has outgrown their existing house and they're presented with two options, remodel to make it more livable or put it up for sale and go buy a new house. So obviously David wants them to buy a new house. He gets the listing of the existing house and he gets the commission on the new home sale. Hilary is given a budget to remodel the house, and at the end of the show, the people have to choose whether to stay in that house or to go move to the new house that's made.

So you're thinking, okay, great, I don't know where this is going. Well, reality TV stars are not—well, that's not their real job. David is a working broker, Hilary is a working designer. And I always ask this question—I give this example in live presentations all the time—do you think David gets a lot of business because he's on that show? The answer is yes, absolutely. He's a working broker in Canada with his father. They have their own firm.

Do you think any of those people who come to him because of that show feel like they were marketed to? It's not like the glamour shot bus stop bench thing that so many realtors kind of default to in their marketing. He's basically on a show that allows him to demonstrate his expertise. He's not even the nicest guy in the world. He's kind of prickly, but he's authentic, right? So that's something else I always say, be you. Resonate with people strongly so that some people love you as opposed to everyone just going eh. And that's the other issue that people have trouble with, they're afraid to offend anyone. But trust me, say anything online, you'll probably offend someone, so just don't sweat it. Talk to the people you want to talk to and that's a great content marketing strategy.

The only difference between David and what we can do online now in terms of demonstrating your expertise and your authority and that you're a good person, well, David had to audition for a show. So, he had to be picked and now he doesn't own any of that intellectual property. However, if you position yourself and your marketing efforts online in a more media way, meaning like you create a magazine about issues relevant—let's stick with the real estate thing just because it's easy—you start a local publication that talks about your geographic area, demonstrates that you know the neighborhoods, talk about real estate

issues, demonstrate you know your practice, all of that kind of thing, you actually have a media asset in addition to all the leads you get.

So that's my favorite way to explain how this type of marketing works. Then people are like I'm not in the media business; I'm not a content creator. There's tons of people who are. And if you're going to hire, you know, most real estate brokers or agents now that are successful with the team approach, right, so you have different team members who handle different things. Someone on your team has got to be in charge of the content strategy, and it will pay for itself many times over.

Stephen Lahey: Some good points, Brian. As we wrap up I do not want to neglect to mention your new podcast. I think it's tailor made for my audience. It's called "Unemployable", which I love, by the way. And I am unemployable. I think you are, too, proudly, right?

Brian Clark: Yes. Absolutely.

Stephen Lahey: We're not going to be working for someone else. We're unemployable. So tell us about the Unemployable podcast briefly, and then let's just remind them of where they can find that and all the resources that you just mentioned.

Brian Clark: Okay, so visit Copyblogger.com, head over there, read some of the blog posts, but make sure to register for those free eBooks. Unemployable is a new project and it's really, you know, a lot of people become familiar with me now as the CEO of a software company, but when I started out, as we discussed I was clueless and then I was a solo and then I kind of evolved over 17 years. So [Unemployable](#) is a way for me to talk to people, and I'm really thinking a lot about freelancers and professional service people maybe as a solo, consultants, one person businesses, and maybe an early stage startup.

Occasionally, we'll talk about things such as product development and of that nature, but mostly I think I'm talking to people who are, in fact, taking clients and providing and doing great work who probably need or would like more clients, they would like better processes. I've learned from my mistakes of a decade ago in the meantime and that is really due to surrounding myself with the right people and doing what I'm good at and letting them do what they're good at. A lot of that kind of processes, hiring, staffing, legal issues, all of that is what I'm trying to share with people over there.



So if you go to [Unemployable.com](https://unemployable.com) and register for free, much like over at Copyblogger, you'll get the podcast episodes, but I think the real meat is coming shortly in the form of a webinar series on creating systems, hiring virtual staff, all sorts of things along those lines.

I'm known as a marketing guy and a content guy, but I love entrepreneurs. I love anyone who is outside of the world of a job and making it. Some people like to say, well, freelancers and solo practitioners or professional service providers, it's just a different model. And I just love anyone, like you said, who is out there making it happen and if I can help with that, then I think that's the next phase of my career.

Stephen Lahey: Well, I highly recommend that people subscribe by email at [Copyblogger.com](https://copyblogger.com), and go to [Unemployable.com](https://unemployable.com) and subscribe to the podcast. Obviously, if you're listening to this podcast, you love a good podcast, so do that. And thanks again so much for joining me, Brian. It's been an honor.

Brian Clark: I appreciate being here and the great questions. If you ever want to do a repeat, we could dig in to some of that other stuff you wanted to ask. Happy to come back some other time.

Stephen Lahey: I would love it, Brian, thanks again. And to our listeners, thank you so much for spending some time with us today. If you like what you heard, visit [SmartSoloBusiness.com](https://smartsolobusiness.com) and subscribe by email. Along with fresh podcast and blog content, you'll also receive my free interactive workbook that I mentioned in, of course, this interview, it's called [*Expand and Improve Your Client Base*](#), to help you attract and acquire more of your ideal clients. Thanks again for listening today and best wishes for your success.

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