

Interview with Brian Clark of Copyblogger

This is a detailed Q & A with **Brian Clark** about authors as digital entrepreneurs. Brian is founder of the immensely successful **Copyblogger.com** and an authority on how to build a business around content marketing.

Debbie: Welcome to **Brian Clark**, who as far as I'm concerned is an Internet rock star. I'm a *Copyblogger* fan girl. So thank you for doing this Brian, it's very exciting.

Brian: That's very flattering to hear.

Debbie: A little background about Brian and *Copyblogger* <http://www.copyblogger.com>. I think everyone [*note: who spends a lot of time online*] is fairly familiar with it. It started as a blog in 2006 and a one-man operation. Now, six years later, *Copyblogger Media* has grown into a very profitable software and training company with multi-millions in annual revenue. Brian and the original *Copyblogger* blog are not making money from advertising; they make it from selling and providing training for software, including the popular Genesis framework for *WordPress.com*.

The *Copyblogger* blog <http://www.copyblogger.com/blog> now has 171,000 subscribers, and the company (*Copyblogger Media*) has over 80,000 active customers. Brian's new venture is an e-newsletter called *Entreproducer*. [*You can sign up at <http://www.entreproducer.com>*] What he's doing in a series of emails is telling us how he grew this huge audience, and how the audience has helped him understand what products and services they need. He is working on his first book, titled *Entreproducer*. He's using "agile content development," the same method he used to build the *Copyblogger* audience, to research and write the book. Brian, can you explain what you mean by that?

Brian: Right. That's taken from a software concept. You hear things like "The lean startup," which is taken from manufacturing processes that Toyota started in the late 80s. And basically, it's just delivering more value, more efficiently, with less waste. And that's been transferred over to software programming, where you start with an idea for a product, you make it minimally viable, you sell it even though it's not that great, and then you improve it based on feedback.

In 2006 when I started [Copyblogger](http://www.copyblogger.com), I wasn't as familiar with those concepts as I am now. Then I got into my first partnerships, specifically with Tony Clark, who lived by these "agile software" methods. He said, "You know what you're doing,

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the way you're building your content and your audience, it's according to these principles?" I just thought it was a sensible way to do things.

But from that point forward, we started thinking about what we were doing. We're in a unique position where we create content, but we're also teaching people how to do it. For me, it's easier sometimes just to do than to teach, but I love to teach. I'm always driven to find out how someone can learn from something.

So basically, this concept of agile development is starting with a basic idea, like all authors do, and then you start putting it out there to enough of an audience that you can get some feedback from them. Then, you don't necessarily do what people tell you to do, you take it into account with your own vision and what you're trying to communicate.

I'm talking about a business book only, now. You know what you want to tell people, but you might not be sure how to get the message across. This process of paying very close attention to how people incrementally receive and respond to your content, is a way in which you gain much more valuable insight into what will create a better finished product than you would have if you just wrote it by yourself.

In isolation, it makes perfect sense to you, right? You know what you want to say. But I think a lot of otherwise good books with great ideas get lost in the mind of the author because they're isolated. That's the basic concept. And as you know, I advocate authors to think like entrepreneurs. What you're doing in the context of the business book is that you're building an audience for the book, not only to buy it, but to spread the word, which is half the battle. You have to get enough initial momentum, and then you get a snowball effect. But without that, it's very hard to get attention, it's very crowded.

Debbie: Let me make sure we're on the same page with these terms. I've been reading every issue of your [Entreproducer](#) email. You say very clearly, "If you're a would-be author, don't think of yourself as a self-publisher. You're a digital media producer or entrepreneur."

Brian: Right. The easiest thing to think of instead of self-publish is as a publisher. If you succeed, the opportunities that open up to you may not just be about writing books. We have **Trey Radcliffe** who wrote a book in the traditional sense and didn't do very well. So he started his own publishing company and is doing rather well, basically by gaining insight into the problems facing traditional

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publishing. You're going to have to market the book yourself, with a lot less return.

Debbie: This is a key concept: that the whole goal of the Beta Author program is that we can be our own publishers and do this ourselves. We can do a short book that can be smart and stylish and compelling, and we can publish it ourselves on Amazon Kindle. What I find interesting is that if you start to think of yourself as an entrepreneur or digital producer, then you look at your book as your product.

Maybe it's your first product, maybe there are related spinoffs like consulting or speaking where you make more money. But it's a totally different mindset. You've alluded to this, as a "minimal viable book." You release early, release often, and listen to your customers. Does this really apply if you're writing a short business book on your topic?

Brian: Before the recent explosion with the Kindle and the Kindle store, a lot of people put out something free to their audience to get feedback, take that feedback, refine it, and turn it into a more complete book to get a published book. Chris Guillebeau wrote "[The Art of Non-Conformity](#)," and has a new book called "[The \\$100 Startup](#)." It looks like he and I are both on the same path of teaching people about how we got here so they can replicate it..

Anyway, a lot of what ended up in [The Art of Non-Conformity](#) was already published, and he got a pretty lucrative publishing deal I believe. I think he's started publishing again, which I'm a bit surprised at. But the point is, that stuff was written, tested, and put out there for public inspection, and then made better. These days with Kindle Singles and stuff like that, I think you can actually charge money.

That's one of the principles in the lean startup market - you only know what people will buy by what they buy. Even if it's a lower-priced shorter "manifesto" type document that you charge a dollar or two for, you'll get incredible feedback for that. The only thing I don't like about that is that you don't control the audience.

Debbie: Right. Something we've talked about in the Beta Authors group is PDFs. Is this the distinction you're making? What's the difference between having a free PDF available on your site versus the same thing for 99 cents or \$1.99 in the Kindle store? What are the pluses and minuses right now, March 2012?

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Brian: Right now, it's an interesting environment. I was fighting early on the concept that people won't pay for content. I don't think that was ever true, it's just that you can't charge for any old thing. But now, people are saying "Paid content is here, people prefer to get something quality" rather than substandard content.

They want something of quality and in the formats they want. That's why the low-priced Kindle books are doing well. The only problem is that Amazon owns that audience, you don't. If I had to choose between \$3 per book in the Kindle store, or no money but I get the email list and private permission marketing over time – **Seth Godin** principles from over 10 years ago, which is how his first best seller became so.

It wasn't until he applied his own methodology to his books, giving away 3 chapters for an email address, that he got his first best seller. Our whole model is built on that. Our website, with all that free content, and the people that follow us over time, is way more valuable than if I packaged up that, what - \$5 worth of content that's on that site? - and sold it.

Debbie: What if it's a PDF and not an eBook, {does that mean} you're not an author? It kind of has to be a book. And if you don't have a huge following, you're probably not going to spread around that many PDFs for emails.

Brian: Well, no one has a huge following to begin with. Not me. Everyone starts with no audience. That's why we say to start a following now, before you even have a book to sell. But not everything is about PDFs anymore. The great program Scribblr will output your book into all the eBook formats. People can put your real book on their Kindle or iPad. If I were distributing something for free, I would do so in all the formats, even if I had to pay someone \$100 or whatever. But you don't have to, there are tools that allow you to do that.

Or, go the other route, if you have an audience, why not sell it for \$2-3 like you would at Amazon, but not be hit with the 30%? But more importantly, it's not about the money. When we started talking about a minimal viable book, you're learning more than you're earning. Everyone wants to be in a rush to make money, but in my experience, I had to learn a lot about what people wanted before I started making a lot of money. And that's the idea behind putting something out there, not for money, but for information. Feedback.

Debbie: I want to go back - you have some great, great points that really resonate. I've counseled my Beta Authors to get a small book on Amazon Kindle (because it's

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the quickest and easiest way to do it) simply as a first step, knowing that there can be other options. You can give a PDF version away. But you want to be able to say “I’m an author” and have that credibility. You’ve written books before, right?

Brian: Nope. I’m the only person in social media who hasn’t ever, and teaches others how to write. Ironic, right? But I would not be where I am today if I started writing a book. That’s me, I sell software, we’re a software company. That’s not necessarily what your authors want to become – although I highly recommend it.

Let me give you an example. [Entreproducer](#) is a newsletter, I’ve only been writing it for 6 weeks. After 3 weeks, less than 3,000 subscribers, I changed the entire focus of the book. The general subject matter is the same, but what I emphasized and the structure have changed in 3 weeks just based on the feedback I got. And I guarantee it’s going to be a better book.

I’m getting feedback and I’m getting a separate audience. This website is probably going to be worth more than the book ever makes, because eventually, it will do other things. But if you’re an author, you can do that to sell book after book and look at other opportunities that come your way. That’s how I built [Copyblogger](#), am writing a book, and generating a new audience, all concurrently.

I’m not just dragging on the existing [Copyblogger](#) audience; the audience is very different. The person who thinks of themselves as a startup entrepreneur is different than the general [Copyblogger](#) audience. I’m trying to reach new people with the newsletter, and when the book comes out, hopefully it will do much better reaching those new audiences.

Debbie: Can you give us an example of how you changed the structure after feedback in just 3 weeks?

Brian: Yeah, and 3 weeks is way too fast if you don’t have exposure. But I’m just using that as the term where you’ve written a lot of content. It could be 3 months. It’s just seeing what people struggle with, seeing where they get stuck. That’s what did it for me. Where people express struggle, desire, pain - all these classic elements of why we buy things.

They all come out when people respond to content. Either “tell me more about this” or “I don’t agree with you on this.” Sometimes people get upset when people disagree with them, but in my experience, that means you’re saying something worth saying – unless you’re completely wrong, that’s just a different

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context. But if you're writing a business book, you generally know what you're talking about, you just need to know how to communicate it and what to emphasize.

So it occurred to me from my feedback that the book I was writing was okay, but it was bland and needed to focus more passionately on a certain aspect. Starting last week, and this week's article, they're always part of the book but they're more prominent now. I know this sounds incredibly vague, but a lot about being an entrepreneur or an author is taking in what you see and feel, and working with it to come out with something else.

I think all the authors out there know what I'm talking about. It's really a process, more than I can say "Oh, it was comment 14 in last week's etc. etc."

Debbie: No, I understand. For those of us who are not **Brian Clark** with 180,000 subscribers, some of whom are shifting over to "[Entreproducer](#)", do you disagree with the idea that writing a short book is one step in creating this audience strategy? Couldn't you do that and also start blogging about your book?

I'd say the people I'm working with are really smart, expert people, but most don't have a huge following online. Should they be writing a short book? I think getting that minimal viable book out there pushes you into that role of "author" and publisher. What about building the audience?

Brian: In January 2006, I'd been publishing online and building businesses that way for 8 years. Two of them were dismal failures, and then four were really successful, but none were in the online marketing/social media space. Basically when I started [Copyblogger](#), I was just like one of your authors. I knew what I was talking about and I knew what I wanted to share, and I thought if I created an audience, I would figure out what to do.

About 3 months into [Copyblogger](#), I wrote what could be considered a short book. Probably a little too short, but I've seen some Amazon books that were 30 pages. This was too. Back then though, it was a very different environment. People weren't going to pay money for anything, everything was free. Even blogging was anti-commercial.

And then along comes this guy talking about selling things with a blog. Right there I was on thin ice, but that also helped me. I not only released that PDF for free, but I didn't even ask for an email address. But at that time, for me, it was

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the best thing I could do. The book was about what I wrote on [Copyblogger](#), and in a way, it was like a sales letter for the blog.

“If you want to know more about these things, sign up for free and I'll tell you more.” For me, at that time, that was what I needed to do for my ultimate objectives. But, going from unknown with good subject material expertise, why wouldn't – back then, we didn't have Facebook and Twitter. It was a completely different, more primitive environment. But now, content sharing is what people do.

Guest blogging. Everyone wants content. There are so many ways to start building an audience for yourself these days than back then. I always hear “that was easy, you got in early!” Actually, no. I was 6 years late to when blogging started, but it was just becoming commercial. Now it's become totally open, people are paying for content, no problem, big move back towards paid content.

So why can't you do the same thing in building your audience in 3-6 months? You may not get rich off it, but you're starting it. That seems to be what you're saying, and I agree with it 100%. If you want to be in the business of writing and selling books, that's what I would do. That's what “[Entreproducer](#)” is about, except it's not entirely book-specific.

I started off with “The 21st Century Author is an Internet entrepreneur,” because writers are near and dear to my heart. I've been trying to make every one of us into entrepreneurs for 6 years, because that shift in mindset as a media producer who happens to sell books as content – and I'm not trying to denigrate the work of a writer by calling it a product – but it is a product if you're going to sell it. And if you're selling product directly, you're an entrepreneur, or at least a direct marketer. But people prefer entrepreneur.

Debbie: Maybe this is what they call “A distinction without a difference,” as we talk about all the formats and tease out what would work. In a way, it's tactical, like a PDF versus an Amazon Kindle book.

Brian: Oh yeah, these days, I would give away all the formats: PDF, Kindle, .mobi, everything. That way you can read it any way you want. That's totally doable now and I think that's what people expect. But if I were in the business of writing books, I would sell the first book. Maybe not for a lot of money.

Debbie: And through this, I'm hearing you say that blogging is really important. Are you saying that? In terms of creating that audience?

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Brian: I'm not sure anymore. We still use the term “blogging,” but you don't necessarily have to call it your blog. You just have to produce content on a regular basis, same concept. But some people think of a blog as a personal journal, and what I did in 2006 is start writing these long articles that you would see in a magazine.

And [Copyblogger](#) is basically now a magazine more than a blog. It just happens to have “blogger” in the brand. But it's really about creating content that's good enough to be shared in social media. And you find yourself building an audience, at no cost outside of your time to write, which is what you do. This is why I always try to get writers fired up about content marketing and social media.

You're the ones who are in the best position to benefit from this sharing of valuable information. It's only going to be shared between people who it's relevant to, but that's what you want. You just have to make sure there's a big enough audience out there to support your work.

So you have an idea for a book and it's very specialized. That's another thing you're testing by publishing aspects – obviously you're not going to do a chapter – but these articles are going to be on the topic the book is about. If you're not getting enough traction, that's a good sign, along with the lean principles of not going forward with something that will be wasteful or a flop. That's good to know upfront, before you write a whole book and it goes nowhere.

Debbie: It's fascinating. I don't know if all of us have the wherewithal to do it your way. The Beta Authors are not just writers, they're all doing many other things - selling insurance, a professor in Canada, etc.

Brian: Right. [Copyblogger](#) didn't make any money for a year and nine months. I built quite an audience in the first 2 years, then we launched our first product in the 4th quarter of the second year and made a lot of money, so it paid off. But I was supporting myself that whole time. I was working. I wrote two articles a week. I think a lot of writers are more prolific than that right now. I'm just advocating that you share it now instead of hiding it away until it's “done and perfect,” because you don't know.

Debbie: That's a really key point. Brian, there were a couple of questions submitted by a couple of our authors. One of the questions is, “What do you know now that you wish you knew in the beginning?” It sounds like you did a lot of things right.

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Brian: I always give the same answer even though there are a million things. Just because I do some things right doesn't mean I don't screw up all the time. I do, I just learn from my mistakes. That's a valuable human trait for everything. But the thing I struggled with early on that I'm at peace with now is that people disagree with you in less than pleasant ways.

I don't like that about the Internet, it encourages anonymous bashing. Things that people would never say to your face, which I always like to point out. "I'm 6'1" and 200lbs, do you want to say that to my face? Come on over." I really let that get to me early on, but now I embrace constructive criticism much more than before. But it doesn't matter, because when someone gets angry at something you know to be true, you're striking a chord because they're getting defensive, you're challenging their worldview.

And that's what great work does. [Copyblogger](#) went against the grain at the time, but quickly became mainstream because things changed. I hope we changed that to a certain degree, but what I'm really proud of is that we're advocating value-based, customer-focused marketing; not the stuff that we were fed by mass media for years.

I don't consider marketing the highest calling in the world, but if it can be done better, then do it, because it's necessary. That's just the way things are. So my biggest thing, that I wish I knew before, is that the haters are great. Embrace the haters.

Debbie: Let's take a couple questions from our discerning audience. Jump in there, ask Brian a question about audiences, eBooks, PDFs, or whatever's on your mind.

Hilary: Hey Debbie, I submitted some questions on the online interface, did you get them?

Debbie: I didn't. Can you remember and ask us one?

Hilary: My question is - Brian, is "[Entreproducer](#)" basically like an online focus group for your book?

Brian: That's right and I like that. Except, focus groups usually end horribly. They ask people questions and they tell them what they want to hear. There's been a lot of study on this. Anything that suggests an answer or, God forbid, you ask people what they want to buy. You learn a lot from observing people in a more natural, unrestricted environment, and that's what social media is.

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Hilary: Right, but that's mainly what it is in concept?

Brian: Right.

Susan: Hi, my name is Susan. My question is how do you collect the feedback? As emails, tweets, or comments on your blog?

Brian: This is where, often, I point out that maybe I'm not normal. I'm like an observational sponge. It's all of that. I've cut myself off from the public by email for many years just because it's overwhelming. I set up a separate email address for "[Entreproducer](#)" and I've gotten such great notes from "Thanks" to "What about this?" The "Thank you's" are appreciated, but the "What about this?" gives me feedback I can use.

*Note from Debbie: unfortunately, this is where the recording got cut off. The good news is that there were only a few more minutes and nothing substantive was discussed. The **bad news** is this is where **Brian Clark** said he had heard about me online long before he himself became Internet famous. Darn.*

This interview was originally recorded on March 29, 2012.