

Engagement From Scratch: An Interview with Author Danny Iny

19th January 2012

Hi, and welcome everyone. Today I'm going to be talking with Danny Iny, the mastermind behind the extremely successful Firepole Marketing, blogger extraordinaire, coach, and author. Hi Danny and thanks for taking the time to have a chat with me, especially as you've got a lot going on right now.

Hi Belinda, thank you for having me on the call, it's a pleasure and a privilege.

Oh, that's so nice. Hey, congratulations on the recent launch of **Engagement From Scratch** - it's going gangbusters.



Thank you, I'm absolutely thrilled with the result. I wish I could take more credit for it. People are like "You wrote this great book" and I have to just be honest and be like "Well, I only really wrote like 10% of it, the rest is all my much more talented co-authors, I just assembled it". But I'm still very, very happy with how well it's doing.

Excellent, Well, I wondered if you could begin by explaining who you had in mind when you started putting the book together and approaching people, and what they can expect when they read it?

Well, when I started working on the idea of Engagement From Scratch the person I had in mind was the early-stage – whether it's a blogger or an entrepreneur - anyone who has a message of some kind they want to get out into the world, they want to get it to a mass of people who will be affected by it in a positive way. And they've got nobody right now. They've got their followers, as Brian Clark told me, their email address and their other email address, and that's everyone who's receiving their emails.

And if you look around it, a lot of the literature that's out there – whether it's books, whether it's blog posts and so forth – about how to do anything relating to engagement, it always tends to assume that you've already got an audience: here's how to get your audience more engaged; here's how to interact with them. But what if you're starting from scratch? What if you're starting from zero? And I felt that that was a gap, that there were a lot of people who were in that situation who weren't sure where to turn, and so that's what I was looking to do. So I basically went to all of the people who ended up being my co-authors and I said "I want to put this book together and I'd like you to contribute a chapter answering the question how would you build an audience if you had to start from scratch?".

We all have to start somewhere, right.

Absolutely, and for me scratch was just over a year ago. Firepole Marketing is not something that's been around for decades, we're fairly new especially in the blogging space. So there's nothing wrong

with starting from scratch and you can do pretty amazing things in not a huge amount of time – not that we're the best example of that by any means, but it totally can be done.

But the success you've achieved in such a short period of relative time is quite extraordinary, there are a lot of lessons there.

Well, I've made a lot of mistakes and learned from them along the way, so definitely lessons in that regard.

Now you mentioned in a few other interviews that I've listened to that you were quite surprised by the variety of responses you received from your experts to that one question that you posed them, and I love the idea that there isn't one right way to build that community. But do you have any steps that people who, as you said, they've just got a couple of emails addresses and that's it – do you have any steps that people just can't avoid when they're trying to build that momentum?

Yes. A few people have asked me that. And I really had to think about it actually when I first started just looking to answer the question because there is such a multiplicity of perspectives, I mean, 30 different contributors to the book and each one really has their own very valuable angle and perspective. But when I started looking for consistent threads what I found is that you need to know who you're writing for, you need to know who your audience is, you have to work hard to create stuff that is incredibly valuable for that audience. And once you know who they are and what to create for them you've got to get to work and keep on working for quite a long time. Success is there to be had by the people who are willing to do the work but the work is substantial and there's a lot to be done, and a lot of my co-authors were very consistent about that - you've got to do the work and it's not easy. This is, as they say, not for the faint of heart.

I loved your point actually that you should create content that others would pay for, and that's quite a specific mindset where you're not doing it in the sidelines and you're not just pushing out content when you can, you're actually creating something that you'd be happy to charge someone for. It's about quality.

Yes, I think we're in an era where the economics of publishing have rendered it an open playing field to everyone. Everyone's a publisher, everyone can create content, everyone can create a book, an e-book, a video, whatever it is. The technological barriers to doing that have dropped to practically nothing, and that creates that sense that a lot of people have that if I build it, it must be valuable and that's not true. Creating valuable content is still work and people think "Oh, I just need to create a blog, I need to write dozens and dozens of posts. I'll just write a few hundred words about this, a few hundred words about that, and as long as the content is out there the people will come and some people will like it" and so forth, and that's not the case. It's actually the other way around. The fact that it's become such a flat playing field with so many people playing and contributing, more so than was the case 10, 20, even five years ago, means that you have to work that much more harder to stand out.

Absolutely.

So any piece of content that you create, that's really the benchmark it's that if I charged people money for this – whether it's \$5, \$100, \$200, \$1,000, whatever it is depends on what you're doing: are you just writing a blog post or are you creating a free opt-in video course or e-book or something? But if there was a price tag attached to it, and not a price tag in the sense of "I'm giving you for free this thing that's really worth \$37" because you slap it on to make it sound better, but what if you did charge people \$37? What if they paid for it and they got it and they read through it? Would they feel like they were ripped off or would they feel like they got good value for their \$37?

Or if it's your blog post, let's say you spend \$2 to buy a blog post - on iTunes you pay \$1 for a song - you spend \$1, \$2 for a blog post, not a lot but enough that they put something in. Did they feel like they got something back out? And the answer to that has to always be yes, and if you look at your content and you don't feel the answer to that is yes, then don't publish, go back to the drawing board and make it better.

Yes, that's a really important mindset. I'm also reading Mike Stelzner's book Launch and he talks about the benefits of giving your content away for free without expecting anything in return, not as part of an opt-in – although that's still really effective marketing – but a true gift to your audience. And one of the things I noticed about Engagement From Scratch is that you're giving a downloadable version away for free and you're selling it at the same time. Can you talk me through your decision to do that and the benefits it's offered you?

Yes, absolutely, and I would go ahead and clarify or potentially differ from Mike. I don't know what Mike Stelzner meant when he wrote that, so I may either be refining something that he already agrees with or we may have a difference of opinion, which is fine – he's a smart and brilliant guy and he's done a lot of great things, just small difference of opinion here potentially. Giving away stuff for free is smart business in a lot of cases. It's not that you're giving it away for free without the expectation of anything in return - you're actually giving it away for free with fairly specific expectations of what you're going to get back, but you're not expecting something in direct return from the person to whom you're giving the gift.

That's a good point.

I gave the book away for free because there are specific things that I was hoping and expecting would happen. Now, when I gave the book away for free to a specific person am I expecting something specific back from them? No, they can get it for free, they owe me nothing, and that's perfectly fine. But it was a strategic move and it comes down to first of all understanding the economics of book publishing in this day and age. The margins on books are terrible and books are low ticket items, so you're looking at selling a \$10, \$20 item and making a tiny percentage of that. So your take-home on any given book sale is just a few dollars.

So unless you sell thousands and thousands and thousands of them - which some of my co-authors like Guy Kawasaki are positioned to do, but I am not - unless you can sell thousands and thousands of

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copies, there's no money in publishing books. And at the same time, you're going to get a lot more people who are interested and will download it for free but won't buy the book. So for every single book sale that I could make I could probably get 15, maybe 20 people to download for free. And they all happily give me their name and email address in exchange so that I can follow-up with them, offer them more bonuses, and eventually tell them about stuff that I do have for sale and some of them are going to buy it. And having all those people on my list is just so much more valuable to me, having that opportunity to have a relationship with so many people who've read my work and found it valuable is worth an awful lot more. And at the same time there's also the perspective that I'm giving it away for free, does that mean I'm cannibalising book sales? I don't really care if I am, for all the reasons I explained, but I don't even think that's the case because some of the people who download the book will just try it, not like it, and that's fine – nobody likes everything.

Many others will like it, skim it, read some sections here and there, and that's great. And then you're going to have a group of people –small or large depending on how good the book is, and I've been very gratified to see that the group has been very large in this case – who really like it. They are reading it cover to cover and yes, a few people have emailed me to say they've printed out the whole book and they're marking it up and stuff. But most people don't want to print out 240 pages and they don't want to read 240 pages off their laptop either, so if you like it that much and you actually are that into it you're probably going to go and buy the book.

Yes.

There's no way I could have split tested this, but anecdotally I think that giving the book away for free actually helped with book sales, both directly from people who download the book and then went and bought the book, and indirectly from people who download the book and people who wrote about it because they downloaded the book and so forth, and made other people aware of it who otherwise wouldn't have been.

Yes, and that last point seemed to be an obvious benefit to me, making it available so that people could access the content and then rave about the content?

I'm always happy when people rave.

It seems to be very effective and this, together with reading some of the passages in Mike Stelzner's book, has really changed the way I've thought about publishing more serious content rather than just publishing online articles and blogs. And I wanted to touch on publishing a bit more, because you actually published the book yourself in terms of putting the distribution format together, and the printed version, and all that kind of stuff. I can imagine, because you've already talked about margins, that getting someone to do that for you is quite expensive, but for anyone thinking of becoming a self-publisher, what advice would you give them?

I just want to make sure I'm answering the question you actually asked. Are you asking why it makes sense to self-publish rather than go to the traditional publisher? Or having made the decision to self-publish, what advice do I have?

You cleverly picked up on the two questions that I asked you there.

Okay. So let's go with both of those. Why self-publish rather than go with a traditional publisher? I'll be honest, I don't see the logic of a traditional publisher in this day and age. Let's say that out of a \$20 book you, the author, could self-publish and take home \$6 in the best case scenario - which I'm not because half of the profits from book sales are going to the NFTE - but if you're self-publishing yourself you get \$6 let's say out of the \$20 retail value. If you're going to go with a traditional publisher they're going to take probably three quarters of that, you're going to end up with \$1.50 in your pocket, which is huge. Now, historically that made sense because they had the means of production, which you couldn't afford as an author, although that's no longer the case, and they would also market the book for you, and they had the means to do basically distribution. And that's no longer the case.

In practice today, yes, if you're J K Rowling or Stephen Covey or something like that and you publish a book they'll put some promotion weight behind it. But if you're a first time author they're going to expect you to do most of the marketing, and if you're only taking 25% of that total margin available home with you then that means that with a traditional publisher you'd have to sell four times as much to just break even. And they expect you to do most of the marketing anyway. So that just makes no sense to me, not to mention that you're going to be sending in approvals and query letters and trying to get them interested and back and forth on draft and on revisions. I don't see a rationale. I don't see how it makes financial sense to go with a traditional publisher, but if I had gone with a traditional publisher the book wouldn't even exist, we'd still be going back and forth on drafts or possibly even ideas on market research.

So I don't see the rationale in this day and age, the way publishing is still structured. It's a business model that evolved to its present form in the 1930s, it hasn't really changed much since then and the world has changed dramatically. It's an industry that is in desperate need of disruption, and there's a lot of interesting things that are happening in that area with the Kindle, with Seth Godin's Domino Project, with the variety of self-publishing options. So I'm very interested to see what's going to happen and I think the landscape might change because frankly if these companies don't adapt and smarten up then they're not going to survive too much longer. But the way things are right now I just don't see a rationale for traditional publishing.

No, it makes perfect sense.

Yes. So if you decide "Okay, yes, I'm going to self-publish" what I'll say is remember that you're not just an author. You are actually a publisher, your book is a product, and most of the work around selling any product is selling the product, it's not creating the product. So the idea of having a book and just making sure it's available through Amazon, doing a press release, and writing a couple of articles about it, that's not a marketing plan.

No.

A marketing plan is something massive, it's huge. Think about what your targets are, think about what each of your actions is likely to achieve, and then divide that in half, because your estimates are always too optimistic, and think about how much work it's going to take and double it, and then get to work. It's a huge amount of work to market and promote a book. Just to give you a sense of what I did for Engagement From Scratch, which is not even that huge in the scale of what you can do to promote a book, but there's a mini-site, there were two video trailers, there was an engagement contest I hosted on my website, there is the following that I had at Firepole Marketing that I spent a year growing, there is the almost 30 guest posts that I wrote around the launch of the book to spread the word, I sent out hundreds of review copies, physical copies of the book, by mail - I spent thousands of dollars on postage doing that.

But the traction has been fantastic.

Well, that's it, yes. It was totally worth it, worth every penny and worth every minute, but it was a lot of work. Without having done all that this book would not have been nearly as successful, even though it would still be the same pretty good book, in my opinion.

Yes, absolutely, but you're so right, you can't just send out a press release and maybe write a couple of blog posts and then say "No-one's buying my book".

No, exactly.

What would you say are the big lessons you learnt from the whole marketing and promotion process, because it sounds like you approached it with a really good strategy – is there anything you'd go back and change?

Sure, I made tons of mistakes. I produced two video trailers, the reason I produced the second video trailer is that after investing lots of time, energy and money into the first one I realised it wasn't all that good. And not that it wasn't good because of the production value or the quality, I mean it's a cool video, but it wasn't going to achieve the result I wanted because I was copying Tim Ferris' launch video for the Four Hour Body and I didn't have anywhere near his budget, nor was I speaking to his audience. So of course I wasn't going to have the kind of results that he had and, after getting some very good advice from Mitch Joel, one of my co-authors, I went in a totally different direction. So that's one example. And I wrote a lengthy post explaining everything I did wrong on Traffic Generation Café, so that post is there, and I can send you the link if you want to link to it below the interview.

Absolutely, that would be really good.

Another big mistake that I made is the Nominate Your Engagement Superstar contest that we ran to build buzz and excitement before the book launched. Well, I'm in Canada and our Thanksgiving is at a different time and I didn't realise that I had scheduled this contest for American Thanksgiving, when nobody is in front of their computer. So that's just a couple of examples. There are plenty of screw-

ups and there are plenty of things that probably having been there and done that I could do it again next time better and faster. And to a certain extent I was trying everything here because this is not the last book I'm going to write and publish and I wanted to see what works and what doesn't, and next time I'm hoping will be quite a lot better. But the key is that if you're doing a lot and you're very busy and you're very active, yes, you're going to screw-up some of the time but you've got that many more chances, first of all to get it right, second of all to learn from your mistakes, pick up and try and again do a better job. So the goal should never be to avoid making mistakes.

No.

The goal should be to find out what's a mistake and what's not a mistake as quickly and effectively as possible so that you can do more of what's right and less of what's wrong.

Absolutely, and not to let it get you down either.

Absolutely.

There's nothing you can't come back from.

Not that it doesn't get you down, it does, but you suck it up and get over it and keep on going.

Keep on trucking, I like that, absolutely. You also mentioned – I think it was even in the preface – that you really don't like compilation books. This is not a book that you would seek out necessarily to read yourself, this style of a collection of essays.

No, I really don't.

Has your opinion changed after putting one together?

Yes and no. I mean, my issue with this kind of book is, first of all it's partially a matter of taste. I like reading Malcolm Gladwell, I like reading Clay Shirky, I like reading Steven Pinker. I like reading people who take a subject and go into a lot of depth versus these anthologies of ideas that I find tend to me much more surface level. Now, does that mean that they can't be done well? No, they can be done well and I'd like to think that my bias against this kind of book is part of what made Engagement From Scratch as good as it is in that a lot of submissions that I got I pushed back and I was like "No, I want more substance and go into more detail and expand here" and so forth.

But still, that being said, I don't know if this is the kind of book that I would seek out but - this is a key thing for marketers and business owners to remember - I didn't write this book for me. I wrote this book for other people who have the same kind of problem that I had starting out but recognising that I am not my market. I understand my market because I was there, but I am in a different space and I have different preferences. People are different.

It's one of those marketing foundations, but it's sometimes a lot harder to get your mind in the right frame when you're actually doing it, you tend to go with things that you would do, you become your ideal customer, which isn't the case all the time.

It isn't the case all the time and it's almost the most tricky when your ideal customer is a lot like you but not. Like if I was developing a product for the Sex & The City crowd, you're looking at women, 26 to 34, probably single, bouncing between relationships, who love eating chocolate and ice cream – I don't know, this is not my market at all, I'm just guessing here.

It's not mine either, Danny.

If I decide to go after this market I'm not going to get confused and start creating things that I like because that market is clearly very different from who I am. Whereas in creating something great for the Engagement From Scratch audience, which is different from me in some key ways - just like our audience at Firepole Marketing is different from me in some key ways, specifically their level of knowledge about marketing, which is why they're there - but they're also like me in a lot of ways in the sense that they have a lot of the same interests, ambitions, they've been in the same places, very similar situations. It's very hard to fall into the trap and forget that they're not like you and you shouldn't be creating stuff for yourself necessarily. So that's a very dangerous trap to fall into.

Yes, and quite easy as well. You mentioned the NFTE and that half your profits of the sales of the book are actually going to a charity organisation. I wondered if you could just tell me a little bit more about that – how did you get involved with them?

Sure. The NFTE is the Network For Teaching Entrepreneurship, they're an American-based charity but they have activities in I think a dozen or two dozen countries around the world. They're very large, very active, and they do entrepreneurial education primarily for younger people, I believe high school and college age. And the reason why I did that – well, there were several reasons. First of all, it's a cause that I care about, I care about entrepreneurship very much, I think this is what drives our economy, this is what creates new things, and all the best things in society really come from entrepreneurship. I also think the state of entrepreneurship education is disastrous. You're looking at one of the most uncertain, risky, dangerous, and difficult pursuits that someone can go after, and the reason for that is, I like to say that starting a business is a lot more like building a bridge than writing a paper. If you get 90% on a paper in school you get an A. If you get 90% right building a bridge then bridge falls down.

Yes, that's a great analogy.

And building a business is kind of like that. So there's a lot of risk, there's a lot that can go wrong, and there's very little tolerance for error, and yet we take people going into this space – which is so risky, which is so dangerous – who are basically building the backbone of our economy, creating jobs for everyone else, and we just throw them in with their feet first and say "Best of luck, hope you can figure out how to swim" which I think is terrible. And this organisation is out there doing something about it and that's something I wanted to support, so that's the biggest part of why I wanted to make a contribution.

That's fantastic.

On a personal focus level, the purpose of Engagement From Scratch was to help the people that I'm

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looking to reach and to help me build a relationship with them, it was not to make money. And I wanted to be very clear with myself about that, I wanted to take the option of making money off the table so that I would remain focused on what I'm actually trying to do, which is expand the awareness that the potential audience has of who I am and what I can offer and build relationships with them which, of course, doesn't end with the book. It starts with the book and I've been exchanging emails like crazy with literally hundreds of my readers and it's quite wonderfully overwhelming, but overwhelming none the less.

I guess when you take the profit off the table, like you just mentioned, you also increase the likelihood that people will trust you and your message?

Well, it's important to be clear about this, because at the end of the day I'm a marketer, I'm a business person, and I teach people marketing and business, and I believe very strongly that people have this misconception, they think there's always this dichotomy where you've got to choose between doing the smart business thing or the right thing, and it's not true. Usually the smart thing is the right thing.

And I didn't take profit off the table. I just launched a training program about writing, about teaching people how to write, very recently and we're soon going to reopen our training program on marketing to help small businesses tune up their marketing, get more customers in the door, and there's no question in my mind that by virtue of all these people having read my book, signed up to receive updates from me, and entered into a dialogue with me, I'm going to sell a lot more of these two training programs than I ever would have made just by selling the book. So it's not that I took profit off the table, but the purpose of the book itself was not to make money, and I didn't want to be confused by that.

That's an excellent point. Thanks Danny.

My pleasure.

Now I also wanted to mention to everyone listening that you can get a copy of Engagement From Scratch from the Firepole Marketing website, and I'm going to include a link at the end of this interview so everyone can go off and get their free copy and see exactly what we're talking about. And I also wanted to mention the big competition you're running on Firepole Marketing right now, of which I'm very pleased to be an entrant. Could you give everyone an overview about the Marketing That Works ideas contest?

For sure. Well, Firepole Marketing is about marketing that works. There is a ton of blogs, sites, resources, etc. that talk about marketing and most of them boil down to the five things to do with Twitter and the six things to remember when you're doing your elevator pitch, and stuff like that. And that's not what we're about, we're about marketing that works and – despite being good at what we do – we are not arrogant enough to pretend that we have a monopoly on all the good ideas in marketing. And so we're holding this contest, we invited people to submit their best, smartest, most cost effective, most innovative marketing idea to the contest, and the 20 finalist, the 20 people that put the most interesting and valuable – in our opinion at least – ideas on the table were invited to write up a guest post explaining exactly how the idea works and how they can apply it.

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And we're running these posts on the site, day after day, five days a week, for four weeks, and at the end of these four weeks whoever is voted by the public based on first of all how well the posts perform, and then the finalist of that round will be presented to all my subscribers at Firepole Marketing who will be invited to vote on a winner. And whoever the winner is going to first of all feel very good about themselves, both for having won and for getting a nice little cash prize and quite a bit of exposure that we're going to try to afford them for being such a wonderfully talented marketer. And Belinda is one of our very impressive entrants into the contest, so if you haven't read her post then you should head over and you should read it, it's really good. And there are other posts, you should check them out too.

I know one of the things that I've mentioned to my audience that when I've shared my post I've said of course, leave your thoughts, share it with your network, all that kind of thing, but the benefit that everyone gets is these 19 other fantastic ideas. And I for one am checking in every day because it has been a really, really interesting read.

Awesome.

Thank you very much for your time today Danny, that was a very interesting look at the whole publishing process and also building an audience and how you put it all together. I've been really impressed and I've found the read very interesting – as I mentioned before we started recording, I'm going to be posting my light bulb moments from each essay which I hope will draw some more people in as well. Is there anything else you wanted to add before we wrap up?

No, just that the book is available for free, EngagementFromScratch.com. They've come to call me "the Freddy Krueger of blogging" by virtue of being so prolific last year, but that name has a kind of aggressive, mean kind of connotation which is not true at all, and actually I'm a very friendly, easy to approach kind of guy. So if anyone has any questions for me or anything like that, go to Firepole Marketing, there's a big button that says 'contact us', send me an email – it goes straight to my inbox – and I'm very happy to interact with anyone who's interested in doing something.

Which I can absolutely contest to. Thanks very much Danny, I really appreciate your time.

Awesome, have a great rest of the day.

Yes, you too. Bye-bye.

END OF INTERVIEW

You can download or buy a copy of Engagement From Scratch from <http://engagementfromscratch.com/>

And see more of Danny's work at <http://www.firepolemarketing.com/>

