|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Voiceover: | Welcome to Build Your Tribe with your host, Chalene Johnson. |
| Chalene: | Steve, thank you so much for being on the show today. I think people are going to be really blown away by your story and inspired. |
| Steve: | Hey, Chalene, thanks so much for having me. |
| Chalene: | When you graduated from college, what were you doing? |
| Steve: | I moved to San Diego with my brother and I got a job by the beach. I was in sales for a construction equipment company. |
| Chalene: | Your dream job? |
| Steve: | My dream job, yeah, and there's nothing wrong with that. Some people are cut out for sales. I very quickly learned that I was not. Sales was not my cup of tea. I love talking to people. I just don't like selling to them. I had worked some manual labor jobs to pay the bills through high school or summer jobs between college, but the construction industry was something very foreign to me. I quickly learned that this was not my calling. |
|  | I remember on a lunch break one day while at the day job, I went to a book store. Tim Ferriss' 4-Hour Workweek had just come out the week before that or something. I was so unhappy and mismatched in my job that I saw the book cover with the silhouette of the two palm trees and the guy in a hammock between them. I was like, "I wouldn't mind being in a hammock." |
|  | I bought the book. I read it in a day and a half and two days later I purchased the domain nerdfitness.com. This is about a year and a half or so after I had had my personal transformative breakthrough when I realized how important diet and fitness was. |
| Chalene: | You just start a blog, but it's not a business. It's just a blog, right? |
| Steve: | Absolutely, yeah. I was like I'm not sure how to turn this into a business, but I know there's other people out there like me that are nerdy, that love to play video games, and are interested in getting fit, but don't know where to turn. There's no websites out there that are just telling you straight information. There's always something to sell or there's always sponsored by some supplement or whatever. |
|  | I just started writing and I wasn't sure how I was going to monetize it or even if I ever would, but I was like I like helping people and if I could help a few people not make the six years of mistakes that I did, then maybe there's a way that this thing can grow and I can help some more people. Maybe, maybe someday eventually down the line, turn it into a business that I could run full-time. |
| Chalene: | What was the very first thing you did as the founder of Nerd Fitness that actually created income? |
| Steve: | The first thing that I did, so I started the website and wrote articles and honestly, it wasn't until eighteen months later that I finally put out my first product for sales. Up until then, I had just been focused on building an audience and helping people as much as possible. I continue to get the same question over and over again. "Steve, just tell me what to do." |
| Chalene: | Tell me what to do. Yep. |
| Steve: | "Tell me what to do. I'll pay you, but you need to tell me what to do and I'll do it." I wrote an article, "How to Build Your Own Workout Plan," and for some people, they love that, but other people, it's like, "Give me a paint-by-numbers and tell me which colors to put where and I'll paint you a picture." For me, everybody was asking like, "Dude, just tell me what workout plan to follow because I'm so afraid of doing the wrong thing, or if I do six sets of five or four sets of eights, you know, which one's better? I'll just do nothing." |
|  | Ultimately, we put out ... actually, back then it was just me. Now it's a lot more than just me. At the time, I put out what was called The Rebel Fitness Guide. The Nerd Fitness community is called, "The Rebellion," based on Star Wars' Rebel Alliance. Our first eBook was called, The Rebel Fitness Guide. That came out eighteen months after I had started the site and I had actually quit my day job about a month before putting the eBook out, so I actually quit with no income coming in and just this idea that I knew Nerd Fitness had gotten to a point where I couldn't keep up with both. |
|  | Put the eBook out. I was like, "If I could just sell a handful of these," I think it was like forty bucks, "if I sell just a handful of these, it'll buy me a few months income and then I can figure out how to sell more of them and then that will buy me another few months or another few weeks of income." I think it ended up selling like 200 copies in the first few days and I remember bawling my eyes out crying, like, "Okay. I think I can actually"- |
| Chalene: | What were the tears from? Did you feel relieved? Did you feel scared? Did you feel what? |
| Steve: | A combination I think of relief, fear, and excitement. The fact that up until then I had never asked anybody to really put their money where their mouth was and say, "Hey, if you say give me something that will really help me get fit, I'm ready for it." I remember putting it out and just saying, "Hey, guys, I made this eBook. If you want it, cool. There's a lifetime money-back guarantee. Honestly, I just want to help you guys and I know this website is my future. If this doesn't work out, then I'll pick up a day job as a bar back to make ends meet." Fortunately, it worked. |
| Chalene: | Let me go back to that for a second because there are people all the time that will say to me, "When do I quit my day job? I have this business or this blog or this thing that it's not making much money. I hate my job or I don't love my job, but I love this hobby of mine. Chalene, just tell me when I can quit my job." |
|  | I think what you've just said is really cool because there is no right answer. For you, it was quitting your job and you had exactly zero income coming in from your business, but would you say it was the catalyst or the motivation behind like, "Okay, I just have to put this out there and I've got to get my butt in gear and I've got to find a way to monetize this because I'm so passionate about it." |
|  | We're going to get into your amazing success. You've got academies, you've got camps. Dude, you have a killer tribe. It is amazing how people belong to your community. I want to ask you a few questions to help people listening who are Steve back before this thing was making money. I want to ask you a question; I don't know the answer to it. You said you'd been working on that eBook for about six months before you finally put it out there. Knowing what went into that book, if I had said to you, "Steve, you've got two weeks. Right this eBook. Get it done." Could you have done that? |
| Steve: | If there was no other option, absolutely. |
| Chalene: | Yeah, what you did was, it sounds like, you gave yourself a fast-approaching deadline. If we say, "Hey, you've got a year to write a book," everyone of us will take a year, but if we say to ourselves, "I don't have a way to pay my rent if I don't get this done," it's amazing what we can do and how amazing the content is when we have a fast-approaching deadline. You gave yourself that. |
|  | What I want people to take away from this is there isn't one holy-grail answer. I don't know when you should quit your job. I don't know if you should quit your job. If you've got kids and a family and responsibility and people you take care of, maybe the way Steve did it isn't right for you, but maybe it is. Maybe you need that kick in the pants, that fast-approaching deadline of, "Uh oh. I have no job. I do have this book that's almost done and I have these people who've been asking for it." |
|  | When you say, "I don't like selling," if you create something that you love and people are already asking for it, you don't have to sell. They're asking for it. Tell us a little bit about your academy. |
| Steve: | As Charles Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, this is our version of that academy in which people can sign into the academy and create a character and then they receive missions and quests. When they complete those missions and quests, they earn experience points and level up. It's all done in a way where they receive six to twelve months of exercise programming, diet advice, recipes. There's some videos in there, video demonstrations of every exercise. |
|  | If you're brand new to fitness and you're lost and you don't know what to do and you want somebody to virtually hold your hand through the entire process, check out the Nerd Fitness Academy. It's a one-time fee that you have lifetime access to. We're consistently adding to it. There's also a really cool community component to it as well. We have regular Nerd Fitness message boards and then more specialized boards split into both men and women in the Nerd Fitness Academy along with some moderators in each of those. |
| Chalene: | I have a bunch of questions. The first one is first let's just talk to the person who wants to put something out there, but they're really fearful that others are going to say, "But wait a second. This isn't your degree. You don't have enough credentials. There's no letters behind your name." Their fear is that if they call themselves and expert or even put themselves out there as someone with expertise, that other people will judge them. Did you have those fears and/or are you a fitness expert? |
| Steve: | I have a lot of things to say about this question, so I'm glad that you asked it. First and foremost, when I started, I bought the domain name nerdfitness.com and then I did nothing with it for about a year and a half. A big reason behind that was that I felt like even though I was helping other beginners get fit and not make the beginning mistakes that I did, that nobody would take me seriously online without a piece of paper that said I'm a fitness expert. |
|  | I got a weekend certification as a personal trainer. I walked into my local gym and said, "Hey, what sort of certifications do you require to train here?" They said, "We require this one. There's another one coming up in a month. It'll take you a weekend." Blah, blah, blah. I said, "Okay, great. I'll sign up and I'll do that," so I got the personal trainer certification. |
|  | Even then, I still didn't feel right coming across as a "expert," so on my About page on Nerd Fitness, I think I put, it's in capitals, underlined, and bold, and it might even still be there, but it says, "I am not a fitness expert." It's funny. Once I put out that first eBook and actually co-wrote it ... or the workouts were co-created by the guy that did my personal trainer certification, we actually became pretty good friends after that ... after that, I very quickly learned that people didn't really care that I didn't go to school for exercise physiology. They were more interested in the guy that was down in the trenches with them that had been through the things that they had been through and knew where they were coming from. |
|  | The way that I like to look at it is on a scale of zero to ten, zero being a complete newbie and ten being the world's foremost authority on a particular subject, if you're a three or a four, there's no reason you can't help the zeroes and ones and twos. When you help those people that are beginners because you have just been through that stuff and present yourself as like, "Hey, I'm not a ten expert, but I've made the mistakes and I'm going to teach you how to not make them," I think people respond to that a lot more. |
|  | Then as you teach them, you can slowly move up from a four to a five, a five to a six. Right now, I'd probably say a seven or an eight maybe on the fitness scale. My life has been dedicated to this over the past decade. Even today, I would still consider myself a student more of fitness than I would an expert at it. |
| Chalene: | You know, there's this cool thing about what you're doing that it's so unrelated and weirdly-niched, you know what I mean? To think like, "Well, it's fitness for people who consider themselves nerds." I think that's so cool because it makes you realize you don't have to compartmentalize yourself. |
|  | I love fashion and I love music. I used to say to people, "I work out harder when I have a cute outfit on," but I would only say that to my closest friends because I knew they would get it. If my hair is done and I have lip gloss on and my outfit makes me feel thin, I work out like a beast, but if I had baggy sweats on and a sweatshirt and I look horrible and I look like I just rolled out of bed, that's great if you can kill it. I can't. I go so much harder when I look better, but I would never say that publicly. I would only say it to my friends who kind of feel that same way, too. |
|  | I think the important piece for everybody is to recognize you don't have to hide that thing that is you because there are other people who are in that same odd, strange niche who almost don't want to admit it, either. That's who's looking for you. |
| Steve: | Yeah, absolutely. I think my favorite quote, Seth Godin said, "Be judged or be ignored." It's so true. If you just want to blend in the background, feel free. However, if you're going to step outside of that and embrace the things that are important to you and they don't necessarily line up with those around you, hell yeah you're going to be judged for it. I think that fear takes away from a lot of people. |
|  | I think, hopefully, when people find Nerd Fitness, everybody is like, their pursuit happens as their superpower or their mutant power that they then bring to the table and get to be unique in that aspect, but they're surrounded by really supportive individuals that are interested in being in that niche of, "Yeah, dude, I play Dungeons and Dragons and I can also deadlift four hundred pounds." Or, "I run half marathons and then I do live action role playing on Sundays with my friends in town." That is so cool to me that people can do both those things and be celebrated for both halves of it. |
| Chalene: | What would you say is the one piece of advice that you wish you would have taken earlier because you might have been more successful quicker? |
| Steve: | The worst thing: I didn't start building a proper email list until a year or something into- |
| Chalene: | Let's get a big round of applause on that answer. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. |
| Steve: | So dumb. I can think of how many people stumbled across the site and there was no opportunity. Back then, this was 2009 or 2010. I was like, "Oh, people use RSS. They can sign up via FeedBurner and get emails that way and I don't have to do anything. They just automatically get sent out." So dumb. Finally, when I was getting around to, "Okay, if this is going to be a real business, let's start looking at it like a real business," and created an email list for people to sign up for. |
|  | Another thing I wish I'd done early is create some sort of offer. I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I've been running Nerd Fitness, it's coming up on six and a half years now, and it wasn't until probably two years ago, two and a half years ago, that I put together an actual compelling reason for people to sign up for an email list. |
| Chalene: | Okay, so you mean like a freemium or a giveaway? |
| Steve: | A giveaway. Before that, it was like, "Sign up for the email list and get two emails a week." It was an email series. You get five emails scattered every two weeks and it was very disorganized. That just by sheer hard-headedness and writing two articles a week for four years up to that point, I'd built a pretty sizable list. At that point, it was probably up over 100,000 despite all the things that I was doing wrong. |
|  | Then I remember, we were getting maybe like 100, 150, 200 opt-ins a day, which is still a bigger number than I had ever seen. Then, if you go to nerdfitness.com, the new version of the site that you see now is what we launched two and a half years ago. It's like, "If you sign up, get two free eBooks and join the email list," and overnight we went from like 150 signups a day to 500, 700. It was the biggest slap in the face. |
| Chalene: | So huge. |
| Steve: | I'm so thankful that we eventually ... I'm just so bummed out thinking of what I missed out on, although live and learn and just as I had made mistakes in fitness, I had made them in business, too. I was just trying to figure it out as I went. |
| Chalene: | I think so many people assume, "This is just a hobby. I don't have anything to offer them. I don't have anything to monetize yet. I just can't be bothered with creating and managing and figuring out an email list." I just have to commend you for being honest about that and saying, "I wish I'd done that," because it just makes life so much easier. I'm going to ask you an uncomfortable question. |
| Steve: | Oh boy. Okay. |
| Chalene: | You ready? It's two part. Number one, who are you looking for and who do you not want to be a part of your community? |
| Steve: | Good question. Honestly- |
| Chalene: | Don't you dare say, "We want everybody." Don't you dare. |
| Steve: | No, we don't. We don't. I think we welcome everybody, but then we gladly tell people that, "Hey, this might not be for you." Right around the time, about a year after I had started this site, I was getting ready to launch message boards and put message boards up on the site so the community had a way to talk to each other. As you mentioned earlier, wanted to build out our tribe, and we named ourselves "The Rebellion". Actually, I asked people if they wanted to start a rebellion or build an empire and the response overwhelmingly came in for they wanted to join the rebellion. |
| Chalene: | I love that. |
| Steve: | We nerd sourced that one. I think asked through the Facebook page for Nerd Fitness. People ask me when I'm going to run a marathon and I generally tell them hopefully never. It's just not my thing. I don't love to run. We get emails everyday from injured runners that are like, "My knees don't work anymore because I used to run so much," or, "I'm trying to lose weight and I'm running all the time and my joints hurt," and blah, blah. I'm also a huge fan of the paleo diet. Not for the reason like, "Oh, a caveman ate this, so I should eat it," but it's a very simple way of looking at how to consume food and you just eat real things and you don't worry about counting calories. You mostly focus on vegetables. You add in a protein source, generally from meat. Then you get some healthy fats in there. As a result of this, I get a lot of angry emails from pissed off vegan marathon runners. They're like, "Hey, man, why don't you write about running marathons more or why don't you write about being a vegan and how important that is?" I'm like, "Sorry, but that's not my particular"- |
| Chalene: | There's a site for you someplace else. |
| Steve: | There's a site for you. It's called nomeatathlete.com. It's run by a friend of mine and it's fantastic, but my friend Matt who runs No Meat Athlete is a vegan marathon runner. That's what his tribe is about. I'm like, "Fantastic. If you want to stick around for the nerdy stuff, that's great, but if the idea of strength training and this concept of the paleo diet don't line up to your core, do not line up with who you are, then that's fine. This community probably isn't for you." |
| Chalene: | I love that. Do you believe that that has so much to do with your success, that you've just boldly said and unapologetically said, "This is who we are. If it works for you, cool. If not, see you later. Good luck"? |
| Steve: | Yeah, I think especially at the beginning, too. When I started out, we were such a tight-knit group of people. Our message boards launched with I think we had fifty people on them. Thirty, forty. In most other communities, you have a message board with thirty or forty people and that's like a death sentence. Don't even bother, nobody's there. Nobody's going to show up. Because we were so excited about being a part of this thing and being part of this really unique group of people that everybody was just posting on there all the time and I feel really fortunate that I was able to recruit the right kind of people to lead by example. |
|  | To start with like, "Hey, you might be nerdy. Yes, you might love fitness, but also remember where you came from. Even if you're deadlifting six hundred pounds now or you can run a marathon in two hours and forty-five minutes, we all had to start somewhere. There's no bad question." When people join the Nerd Fitness community, like, "Hey, I just got here in the community and I'm doing Weight Watchers and Nutrisystem and I drink Slim Fast every morning and I'm doing this other thing," it's like, "Okay, you're working on stuff, you're trying. That's awesome. Now we have a place to start from and we can build on that." |
| Chalene: | I just feel like you're a kindred spirit. It's been awesome chatting with you, Steve. I know this is going to inspire so many people because like they say, "the riches are in the niches," but truthfully, it's not really about the riches. It's like everybody likes to geek out, you know? We all geek out when we find this odd, strange thing and we run into somebody else who's into this odd, strange thing that doesn't relate to all the other things that we do, and we're like, "No way. You've got that side to you, too?" You've built not just a community and a business, but you've built a life and a purpose around this. I wanted to high-five you and say congratulations. |
| Steve: | Thank you so much. It means a lot. Honestly, I feel very lucky that everyday I get to wake up and do the things that I love, work with a team of people that I'm proud to work with, and be part of a community that I'm proud to call friends. |
|  | I know you mentioned briefly earlier, we have this thing called Camp Nerd Fitness. We just had our first one last year where we finally brought the whole community, well, brought two hundred of our closest community members together to this camp in Georgia and we're having another one coming up this fall. I held it together for the three days at camp, but on my drive home, it was in Atlanta, so my four-hour drive home, I probably cried like ten times. I was like, "I can't believe that just happened. I can't believe we pulled it off." |
|  | Now just watching the Facebook group from people that came to camp last year, they're coordinating meetups and flying across country and setting up nerd vacations with each other and things. It's so much fun to watch it happen. The fact that I get to be a part of it, and that's the way I look at it. I'm just a small part of the Nerd Fitness Rebellion and a part of Team Nerd Fitness and it's really cool to watch it grow and watch these people transform. I'm honored to be a part of it. |
| Chalene: | We are honored to hear your story. I know people are going to check out your website after this episode and I hope that they'll become nerds. Unite. You found your home. Steve, thank you so much for everything you do. |
| Steve: | Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it. |