

[Transcript] My First Million / #2 with Ramon Van Meer - Blogging His Way To \$9M in Cash

All right.

Quick break to tell you about another podcast that we're interested in right now, HubSpot just launched a Shark Tank rewatch podcast called Another Bite.

Every week, the hosts relive the latest and greatest pitches from Shark Tank, from Squatty Potty to the Mench on a Bench to Ring Doorbell, and they break down why these pitches were winners or losers, and each company's go-to-market strategy, branding, pricing, valuation, everything.

Basically all the things you want to know about how to survive the tank and scale your company on your own.

If you want to give it a listen, you can find Another Bite on whatever podcast app you listen to, like Apple or Spotify or whatever you're using right now.

All right.

Back to the show.

At this point, it's a money printer.

I was very lucky that in content, you, with a very small team, very low overhead.

We're talking monthly, your poll and in between four and 500,000 in revenue.

What's up, guys?

Sean here.

This is a special little introduction to this episode from my phone because we got some good news.

We broke into the top 10 on the Apple iTunes rankings, which is really crazy, and I thank everybody who downloaded the episode, subscribed, left a review, Venmoed me a dollar.

Everybody who supported the show, thank you very much.

The rankings don't really mean much.

I'm going to do the show anyways because I just like having conversations with smart people, but damn, it does feel good when something actually works and when people like listening to it, and I really appreciate that.

That's good news.

The other good news is that we're bringing on our first sponsor.

You'll hear me talk about them a little bit midway through the episode, but I just think it's cool.

We're the money podcast.

We talk to people about how they made their money, and it's only right that we make a little money ourselves, I think.

That helps keep the show going and makes it sustainable for everybody.

Big shout out to Monday.com, who's coming on as our first sponsor.

I also like that it's actually a product that I use.

In fact, last week, I started using Monday.com to organize the podcast because there was so much stuff going on.

I got to book guests.

I got to send stuff to the editor.

I got to do this and that.

Any project, it just starts getting super busy, and so Monday.com was a really good place

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to just organize everything, have my list in a good spot, and it's got really nice design, and I'm a sucker for design.

This sounds like an ad now.

This is not the ad.

The ad comes later, but I really do use the product, and I'm glad that the sponsor is something that I actually use and really like, so shout out to them for coming on board.

This week's conversation was with Ramon Van Meer, and Ramon is a really interesting dude, and this episode is going to be different than most episodes.

I would say that majority of the guests, when I have them on, they are intimidatingly smart.

When they're talking to me, it's pretty obvious within five minutes that I'm the dumbest person in the room, and I just try to ask questions so that let them talk and let them tell their story, and I just do my best to keep up.

But Ramon is not a genius, and that's what I'll say.

Our buddy Sam, who introduced us, he says it differently.

He calls Ramon, like, he just tells him, you're so dumb, you're the dumbest smart guy, I know, and he means it with love, because what Ramon does is he doesn't overcomplicate things, and you're going to hear that in his story.

For example, the essence of his story, and he'll tell you better than I will, but he wanted to start a blog, he just looked at what was already popular, and then he started a blog in that little niche.

He bought a \$49 WordPress template because he doesn't know how to code, he outsourced the writing to some freelancers because he doesn't know how to write, and somehow, some way, just did those simple things and built the most popular blog about a subject that he doesn't even really know.

It's a soap opera blog, like Days of Her Lives, Young and the Restless, that's like soap operas, and he's never even seen an episode of a soap opera, and so somehow, this guy who can't code, can't write, and never watch soap operas, built a blog filled with daily stories about soap operas, and the business started printing money, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars a month before selling it for about \$9 million, and so Ramon is one of the most humble guys I've ever met in Silicon Valley, very good at just keeping things simple, and if you take nothing away from this, it's to remember that you don't have to be a genius and you don't have to have some super complicated high-tech business plan to make it work. Sometimes, if you just find a niche that has a lot of passion around it, you can build a very simple business, and he's going to tell you about that.

So, hope you enjoy the episode.

If you do, leave a review, shout me out on Twitter, do something so that I hear you guys.

That's what gets me excited to keep making this show happen.

I don't have to do this show, I do it because I love it, and I really appreciate everything that happened after the first episode.

All right, enjoy.

Okay.

Here we go.

Let's do this.

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All right.

Sometimes, I get asked to do a podcast or an interview, and I'm a shy person in groups, so I don't really like to do TV or interviews.

I don't like to talk too much about myself, it's just, I don't know why, so sometimes it gets awkward.

A friend of mine asked me to do a TV segment for him.

It was not a TV, like national TV.

Everybody would really see it, but as soon as he hit the record on the camera, then I started mumbling, and I froze, yeah, so I'm going to do my best.

We'll try not to freeze.

This one's informal, without even doing an intro, so I'm doing a podcast.

The podcast is called My First Million, and the idea is, I want to talk to different founders, entrepreneurs like you, who have hit their first million, million dollars, million downloads, million subscribers, something, some huge milestone, and I want to find out how they did it.

I wanted you to come on, because you have a wild, a wild story about how you hit your first million, very unorthodox, very different than even most of the Silicon Valley success stories, yours is totally different.

Let's start with the very simple question.

How did you make your first million?

Nobody will guess this, and nobody believes it when I tell them.

I started a blog about soap operas.

It's a news blog that will write about the running soap operas.

We're talking days of our lives, young and the restless.

Exactly.

And first question people always ask, are you a soap opera watcher?

Because especially when they see me, then they cannot believe it.

Up to now, I've not watched one episode of any soap opera, but yeah, that was the website.

I built it and sold it in three years later.

Wow.

So the story is going to be, you decide to make a soap opera blog, God knows why.

You somehow were able to make a soap opera blog successful, despite never watching a soap opera, and you sold it how long ago?

10, 11 months ago.

All right.

So 11 months ago, you sell it for, say, nine and a half million?

A little bit below nine million, 8.75 million cash.

And this isn't like a Silicon Valley, like you own 4% of the company.

This was your company, you owned, there's no outside investors.

I had no investors, I bootstrapped it.

I had some advisors, I think I owned like 98% still.

And then I gave some shares or some profit to employees, but yeah.

Okay, love it.

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So we're going to go in.

So how does this start?

Why even create a soap opera blog to begin with?

Yeah, I started this and I called the Golden Age of Facebook, where you can basically create a fan page about any topic and very cheap and fast could build a huge fan page.

And back then, the newsfeed algorithm was still in favor for publishers.

So whatever you post it, a lot of your fans will see it.

So are we talking like the Buzzfeed, Upworthy Days when they were getting a ton of traffic on Facebook?

Yeah.

So I knew, okay, how to drive traffic from Facebook to a website.

I just didn't know what the topic would be.

So should I sell product or service or content?

If you're content, what kind of content?

So I just...

And take me back.

Are you just at home alone in a room thinking about this?

You're just brainstorming on a whiteboard.

Yeah, 800 square feet apartment, me and my son together and just brainstorming ideas.

And what was your son's ideas?

What was he thinking?

Actually, he actually has good ideas actually, but it's more games, but he always comes with these really interesting thoughts that I never think of and then, hey, he has a good point.

But yeah, going back to the Facebook, I started 10, 11, 12, I forgot different fan pages about different topics.

So one of us about pets, marijuana, soaps, politics, and I will just drive some traffic to it or build some likes, paid and then post some random pictures and then see the engagement.

So some fan pages really bomb.

I had 10,000 fans, I posted a picture and I got two likes or whatever.

Right?

Okay, horrible engagement.

But there were two topics that really stood out.

One was soaps, the other one was politics.

And this was even before the craziness that's, you know...

Before Trump.

Yes, exactly.

VT.

Way before Trump.

Politics, I really didn't like because especially, you know, one side was more engaged and everything against what I believe in.

So I dropped that actually after two weeks.

And then I saw the soap opera fan page doing, you know, a lot of people sharing and commenting and liking, even though I made a lot of mistakes, posting the wrong actors, like I posted pictures

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of people that were not in the show and things like that.

But the engagement was crazy.

The engagement was probably higher than people go out raged.

Yes, exactly.

So I built a simple WordPress site.

I bought a team from Team Forest, put it on WordPress, used photo...

Are you a technical guy?

I mean, what's your...

Because a lot of people get stuck, right?

You know, hey, I want to build this website.

Yeah.

I can't code.

Do I go learn Python the hard way?

Do I go buy this course and try to become a developer?

Do I try to outsource it?

Yeah.

Do I try, you know, a WordPress theme?

So I think that's why we live in such a great time, right?

Like you don't actually need to know a lot to get stuff, you know, built.

WordPress, it's so...

Or Shopify, if you want to start selling something, Shopify is very easy.

And if you want to build a content site, WordPress is also.

So I am technical, but I didn't code anything to...

Like this website I built in a couple of hours was a WordPress, a team, a very simple logo.

Because I'm just a believer, like trying a lot of different things.

Fast.

Fast.

And then see if something works, then you, you know, optimize or make it better or make it look better or faster, things like that.

But, you know, I tried to prevent spending too much time in the pre-launch phase, where

like I made those mistakes too, when I was younger, I had a business idea and then I,

you know, I took weeks to design a business card and, you know, and a website and eventually after months of hard work and then the idea didn't work, right?

So now I'm the opposite, just quick.

So a couple hours, very ugly site.

Now I had the problem.

I don't know anything about soaps.

As you can hear, I have an accent, English is not my first language.

So writing is also not my strong point.

So when on Upwork, back then it was called Odesk.

So this breaks all the rules, by the way, it's, you know, oh, founder market fit, zero.

Passionate.

Passion.

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Zero.

Exactly.

Skill set.

Zero.

Can't write.

I decided to start a blog.

Exactly.

But you knew one thing.

So if we're recapping the kind of what you had, what you didn't have.

And that's the stuff you didn't have, but sounds like what you had was you knew that at least for this time period, there was a cheap way to buy likes on a Facebook page.

And then whatever that Facebook page is, and you tried 20 of them, WWE and pets and whatever, and then take that traffic on the fit, take the likes on the Facebook page, turn it into website traffic.

And so you did your testing period, you decide soaps is the one I'm going to do because the engagement is high using the data, it's all good.

And now you got your blog up, but you don't have the content we all go in.

Yeah.

So went on a website called ODesk, it's where you can hire freelancers from writers to video editors to anything you can imagine.

Put an ad out, hey, I'm starting a soap opera blog, looking for a writer.

And very lucky, I found an editor writer that used to write for and print soap opera magazine 20 years ago.

So you watch all the shows, she's in the industry for many, many years.

So she knows the story.

That's how people used to solve this problem.

They would buy the magazine, I would say, or talk about that week's drama in the soap and then magazines just were too slow for the new world.

Yes, exactly.

So that was also a luck that there were competitors, but it's like the old school media competitors.

It was like these magazines that have been around for 20, 40 years.

What's like a big magazine that covers soaps?

The biggest one is called soap opera digest.

Okay.

It's been around, I think 40, 50 years.

Straight to the point.

They have a website, but their main focus up to the last couple of years was always their magazine.

Yeah.

You love that because you see this incumbent who's, you know, they're from the print world.

They have a website.

Websites like a PDF, basically.

Yes, exactly.

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So you know, when you see that the website reminds you of a PDF, it's like this is a good market to go.

It's a good market.

So I found her, started with one article a day and just test out and see how it works.

Up to now, actually, she's still working with the new owners of soap opera.

Yeah.

And so she starts cranking out content and give me your mindset.

I mean, are you, are you pretty certain that this is going to work?

How are you paying the bills at this point?

Yeah.

Like take me back to, because I know it works, right?

The spoiler of this podcast, shit worked out, sold the company, you know, that worked.

So what I think is important to go back when it wasn't clear that it was going to work.

You have some belief, but like, again, I want to know how were you paying the bills and

then what was your certainty level on this or were you still hedging your bets with other things?

Yeah.

I mean, if you look backwards, like, you know, oh, of course it's, you know, it's works.

In my case, every person I told this idea to told me, you know, you're crazy.

Like it's never going to work.

Soaps.

Like who watches that?

And why didn't you listen to them?

You're just a stubborn guy or what?

Yeah.

And because, you know, I like to keep trying things until I see it doesn't work.

And then I go to the next idea.

I saw the engagement.

So going back, it took four or five months before I really started seeing good amount of traffic to the site.

Because the problem with content, you need a lot of traffic to really make money.

You know, back then I was just using only Google ads.

So the banners on my website, even after a couple of weeks, I made like \$2 a day and then \$4.

You know, I couldn't, you know, I paid more for the article than return.

But what kept me going was that the engagement on the fan page, like the fan page, I only had to pay the first couple of weeks, you know, I think to 20 or 30,000 likes.

After that, the fan pages grew organically, whatever I posted, got so many shares.

And I did see an opportunity, okay, there's not a lot of competition.

The fans are super engaged.

It's content that is every day like soap operas are aired every single day for 52 weeks straight.

They have some blackout days, but basically it's every single new episodes, new episodes every one day to Friday.

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So apparently they record a bunch of them on the same day, like five, six.

It's very, very basic, meaning like they're sets.

It's just the actors, like I think even the directors are in a booth upstairs.

And then they just crank out, you know, you know, with all the respect of the soap opera, you know, actors, it's not like a Hollywood, you know, set.

It's not Game of Thrones.

We're talking about it.

Yes, exactly.

So it's a lot of content.

And when you write about the topic or you think about, you know, starting a content site, you also want to think, okay, is there going to be enough content to write about?

So for example, if you do a Game of Thrones blog, you're kind of limited because it only airs two, three months, I don't know, actually a year.

This season was six episodes and now it's done.

And it's done.

Right.

So then six Sundays.

Yeah.

So it's not a lot of content to be fair, are you a Game of Thrones fan?

No.

Okay.

So to be fair, you could write an infinite amount of content, just complaining now about the ending and the last season.

So start a petition.

Right.

Start a petition.

Exactly.

So soap operas had this unique property.

Yeah.

Daily content, new content every day.

And I mean, what is your article about?

Is it here's the recap of what happened in case you missed it?

Was it like speculation of what's going to happen?

What was the content like?

Or was it just pure clickbait on Facebook of like, see which character you are on this quiz?

Yeah.

So because I didn't know anything about the audience, I had to learn like, what do they like?

What did you read?

So I tried everything, but it was very obvious people like to read what's going to happen tomorrow or the next day or next week.

So like a theory or a spoiler.

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Yeah.

Really spoilers.

Okay.

And just like the answer.

This is what's going to happen.

Yeah.

Like, oh, Jake is going to, you know, leave Mary tomorrow, you know, that kind of articles really did well, did well.

Like I think 80% of our traffic came from spoiler or spoiler related articles, unbelievable.

Then of course we did, you know, to get more content out because the more content you put out, the more traffic you get, you know, more traffic, more revenue.

So we, we did, we wrote about recaps for the people that missed an episode.

We did, you know, what days of our lives character are you, but it was more quiz to capture emails.

I really use that as a, as an email list building tool that did really well.

Like we bill over 300, I think close to 350, 350,000 emails.

We collected with these, you know, silly quizzes.

Right.

You said the first few months you're trying to get traffic, first four or five months, not very much traffic, you know, two bucks a day and an AdSense type of thing, but you keep going because you see the engagement.

And did you have a day job at the time?

I mean, how did you live, you know, it's you and your son at home.

How are you paying the bills?

Yeah.

I had an online travel agency company before with my previous business partner and I sold half of my shares and the new buyer that's bought my shares paid a year long every month.

Right.

So that was exactly what I needed to pay my bills.

So that was, you know, it was my luck that, you know, I could then, you know, just do other things.

And are you the type where, you know, did your mind ever go, I should just get a job or were you just bullheaded of like, no, I need to create these websites and own them and make a business out of that.

Yeah.

I've been an entrepreneur, like I've been so many different businesses, like I had some jobs when I was 18, 19, but basically I always had my own companies.

So it was never a thought of, okay, if the soap doesn't work, I'm going to go get a job.

It was actually, if soap doesn't work, I'm going to figure out something else.

Right.

I'll try pets.

I'll try politics.

I'll try something else.

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Okay.

So you're building up the traffic and what's the, what was the inflection point?

Why did things go from a little bit of traffic, a little bit of ad revenue to, give me a sense, where did the traffic get to over time?

What was like the peak of it, of traffic?

It was like very slow, like flat almost, but very little bit uphill.

Like, and then suddenly, yeah, we started growing much faster because I was starting to collect emails starting when a person came to my website, I asked, hey, do you want to get a push notification?

So I started to diversify my traffic sources, not just Facebook.

And then, yeah, four or five months into it, then it started doubling every day and then the growth went really fast, actually.

Awesome.

And you were, you're buying traffic at this point still or at some point did you just stop buying and you just started making the content and people shared?

Yeah.

So I only bought 30, the first 30, 40,000 likes at below one cent per like.

That was very cheap, after that was organic.

Wow.

Yeah.

And then I only started boosting posts on Facebook, like buying, you know, like paying for traffic a year after.

So we're talking like you spent hundreds, in the hundreds of dollars.

My math's not great, but I think that one penny, something like that, you spent under a thousand dollars total on paid for this website, built that asset up into something that you were able to sell for almost nine million bucks.

So that's a tremendous, tremendous type of return.

Is that what you thought was possible or were you thinking this will make me 10K a month and then I'll figure something else out?

Yeah.

When I started, I thought, because I was in, you know, I sold my shares, okay, what I'm going to do next.

I know I like internet marketing and I was always, you know, doing marketing stuff or buying some small websites, selling them or building them from scratch.

So I thought, okay, this could be a fun project that maybe makes me, you know, 20K a month and you know, that will be, I didn't know like, you know, my first goal was a hundred dollars a day.

And then very quickly was a thousand dollars a day and then I thought, oh man, this is a thousand dollars a day.

This is amazing.

And, but it's kept growing.

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Need help making your first million?

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Be direct.

Our sponsor, monday.com is here to help with the weekly dose of the monday.com motivation.

So the thing is, you know what you want.

So you got to ditch the fluff and state your goals straight up.

Send emails, make phone calls, network, being able to communicate your goal directly makes achieving it that much easier.

So you got monday.com to see how their color coordinated dashboards improve communication for your team, can increase your workflow, manage workloads and get you one step closer to getting that money.

Monday.com.

All right.

And the thing I love about you is you're so different than all my other friends here where a lot of people, you know, you live in Silicon Valley.

There's a lot of people who love self promotion.

I'm one of them.

Started a podcast.

But a lot of people who love Twitter, they love talking to people.

They love meeting people.

They go to networking events.

They host dinners.

You don't do any of that shit.

You're like a, you know, solo guy who just make, should happen and that's really all you're interested in.

It's just that, that very singular laser focus.

So when this is happening, my question is, how do you celebrate?

How do you get ideas?

So when you're hitting these milestones, is it just kind of you doing a fist pump in a room?

Are you talking to somebody?

You're just telling your son?

Yeah.

How did you celebrate?

And then I also want to know, how did you get your ideas of, hey, I should do push notifications. I should do these next things.

So tell me a little bit about both of those.

So once we started making money, I, you know, one thing that I learned is that reinvesting right away back in the business.

Like I was only making maybe five grand a month and then I hired a full time person because I knew, okay, even though business wise is probably not smart, like you don't make enough to afford that, but I just did it because I knew I can then focus on growth.

And then that person can focus on the day to day things.

So after probably six to nine months, you know, I got a small office and then got first employee.

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I got some freelance remote people writing and helping out some freelancers. The audience is so passionate that it was very easy for me to find, you know, people that just want to work for free.

Yeah.

Like, you know, help but post stuff on Facebook and things like that.

But that's the journey of the entrepreneur.

It's just often like lonely, especially if you're still in a phase of working from home because yeah, you have no people around to celebrate.

Ideas I got from, you know, because I love doing it.

Like it is a super cliché, but you know, I don't see it as work, right?

Like it's my hobby.

If I'm not, you know, I love reading.

I love, you know, coming up with growth like hacks and, you know, ideas on how to drive more traffic.

And if this might be the entrepreneur test, right, if you're listening to this right now and you're like, you know, those like Viagra commercials where it's like they describe 50 symptoms at the half a second, it's like, if these belong, you know, if any of these apply to you, please go see your doctor.

The way I see what you're describing is the, if any of these apply to you, please become an entrepreneur, which is like most people that you meet, they work their sort of 95 and the objective is to turn off their brain and turn off the work part of their brain.

So can't wait to, you know, go home, get off that, you know, the weekend is here.

All right.

Fantastic.

Monday is back.

Now I have to go apply my brain to this thing that I don't necessarily want to be thinking about.

Yeah.

Whereas it seems like for an entrepreneur, there's a certain level of curiosity and obsession that just makes it where you can't turn that part of your brain off, you're always thinking of ideas.

Yeah.

And so that's the, you know, if those apply to you, please go see, you know, please go see your doctor, please go see your investor and go get a check to start your business.

It's true.

And it's a blessing and a curse at the same time because I cannot, I was this morning talking with somebody and I said, even if I want to, I cannot turn off the switch, right?

So it's very hard for me and for my family actually, for me to go on vacation, right?

Like you're not a great date.

No, I even on vacation, I, you know, I work, of course I will combine it with doing stuff.

You know, I have to do that for my son.

It's always spinning, so to speak.

So it's a blessing and a curse.

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So you were saying that's how you're getting ideas.

You were just constantly thinking of different things to try, were you looking at competitors?

Were you talking to advisors or what was your method to get new ideas?

So I like to reverse engineer shit, right?

So I always look at first at direct competitors.

So if you want to do something, look at the market, the competitors that are out there and then see what they're doing right and what are they, you know, not doing so well and just pick ideas from that.

And I looked at, you know, sites that were not competitors, but are doing great in content in general and then just had, you know, oh, they, you know, they're building a list with push notifications.

Oh, let me try that.

Oh, I see here in quiz, you know, figure out what kind of dog you are.

Hey, maybe we can, you know, change this into a soap opera actor quiz, right?

Stuff like that.

And then you're not trying to be a genius.

You're trying to get the result.

Yes.

If somebody else has an idea that's getting good results, you'll try it.

Yeah.

Reverse engineer.

And you told me, I think maybe the first time we went out to dinner because I was like, it was something of our own.

Why so?

Why did you even try soaps to begin with?

And you had said something like, tell the story where you said you saw somebody selling a website like this and he, you know, the guy was asking for \$100,000 and you were like, I mean, I don't even have, I don't even have \$100 to give you for this, but if you're selling it for \$100,000, that means there must be some value here.

Is that how it went down for that part?

So still to now, I always like to look at marketplaces where people buy and sell websites.

I think you can learn a lot.

They write a whole summary and give access to the PNLs.

And then so you can...

What's an example?

Where would I go if I wanted to find websites that are for sale?

Quietlight Brokers is actually one of the biggest ones.

It's like, see it as a real estate broker where they have a couple of website listings and then you can buy or sell.

Right.

I was on there this morning, actually.

Oh yeah?

Yeah, because I hadn't heard of Quietlight.

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I had seen some of the different Shopify, buy-sell ones and I went to Quietlight and you're right.

I mean, you just see, hey, I have a business, I sell leather products and I'm doing 2 million a year in sales.

Yeah.

That's kind of interesting.

Let me see.

Whether you want to buy it or you want to take inspiration and sort of come up with similar businesses.

Exactly.

That's a strategy.

Yeah.

It's a really good way to get inspiration and then see.

So maybe you look at the summary, you look at the website, you look at the numbers, the P&L and you say, wow, they're already doing 2 million, but the site is shitty and opportunities to add value.

Add value and then you can either decide, okay, maybe I see if I can buy it or you start from scratch.

I had no money.

So in that same period when I was building those fan pages, I saw a listing on Flippa about soap operas and read the summary and I thought this is interesting, but the price was way too high.

It was \$100,000.

So I said, okay, let's just see and just build it from scratch ourselves.

Right.

Yeah.

It's like real estate.

You see these listings and you say, hey, go raise the rent, but sometimes if you have no money, the beauty of the internet is it's like you can go build a building just like that.

In the real world, okay, well, I can't go build my own building, but what you were able to do in maybe six to eight months was you built your own building.

Hey, I can't buy that one, but I can build my own.

And so at what point did you realize this is going to work?

This is going to be successful at a scale that is even bigger than I originally thought?

Yeah.

What was that turning point?

I still remember it was December, I think, 27, it was when I was testing different articles and different times to post and different things.

But that day was the first day we made \$100, but it was really calculated, okay, we post on this time, this kind of article, and it all sort of fell into place.

So you made \$100, but you knew you would make the \$100.

Yes.

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It was not luck.

No.

You had a system.

Yeah.

Now I got finally, I was working on a system and it was kind of working out, kind of working, but now it was like it fell in place.

Okay, now the strategy, the blueprint, it's working.

And then now it's just a matter of scaling, getting more fans to the fan pages, building, find different ways to get traffic and more content.

So now it was more a matter of scaling, so to speak.

And what worked with scaling, what were some of the techniques that really worked?

The biggest was building the email list.

That was also a huge hedge for, because back then this was before Facebook started screwing up the news feed, so to speak, the algorithm.

So once Facebook was doing that, every publisher, including me, we saw a huge drop in reach.

So less and less people would go to our site from Facebook.

So I had to hedge that risk, so to speak, by building an email list and also Facebook groups.

So up to today, actually, Facebook groups still are really, really powerful.

And did you see that coming or was this a reaction?

Oh, shit, Facebook turned off the traffic.

We better do something.

Or did you sort of anticipate that?

The first time around was like nobody really knew, and then the news came out, and then suddenly the traffic came out.

But the second time, the big update, by that time, I had a couple advisors.

One is Sampar, who runs the hustle, and another advisor that used to work at Facebook.

So he told me in big lines, okay, I don't know exactly how or what or when, but I know Mark Zuckerberg's vision is really not pro-publisher, so to speak.

He really wants people, so make sure you hedge, focus on Facebook groups, focus on getting into Google, Google News, and things like that.

So a little birdie told you, you should look at this.

I strongly emphasize that you should look at this.

Don't put all your eggs in one basket, and still to today, when I buy or sell or buy starter sites, it's like I want the first traffic.

I don't want to be 100% depending on Google, 100% even email, or 100% push notification.

From all of these, the email is still the best bet, but even Google can make any change tomorrow, and then you don't get the traffic you used to get.

And so you're going down this path, and in different businesses, there's a moment.

And there's this guy, Ben Horowitz, who's a venture capitalist in the city for Andreessen Horowitz, and he has this term that he likes to use, WFIA, WIFO.

And what that stands for is, we're F'd, it's over.

Being something goes so horribly wrong that you're unsure if you can really recover from

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it.

Were there any of those moments?

It sounds like the Facebook traffic thing could have been one of those moments, but you're a very calm, cool, collected guy.

So I don't know, did you ever hit the panic button and say, this is it, it might be over?

I think you'd never lose that as an entrepreneur is that you don't know what's going to happen.

What is the right decision?

So several times I was thinking, okay, should I sell now or should I wait?

If I don't want to wait too long because maybe things change and then my traffic goes down and then the value of my company is much less, I cannot sell it anymore or nobody wants to buy it.

Right.

Or I was also, because I was only writing about soap operas, and soap operas are the only four airing, like only four in the United States.

10, 12 years ago, they were like 12 or 13, the soap opera get canceled.

So I was also thinking, oh man, what happens if two soap operas get canceled, then I don't have content to write about or less content and then nobody will buy it.

So that was when, for example, the soap operas would re-sign the contracts with the networks.

Those were the times, man, shit, should I sell it, should I not?

Trying to get information, you know, trying to get inside information from the networks, you know.

So did you talk to any of the soap opera folks?

Do they know who you are?

Yes.

And did you have to pretend where you're like, oh, I'm a huge fan?

Oh, so sorry.

So not me personally, I didn't talk to them, but our writers, our writer team, yes.

So after I hired the first one, see how they had connections with networks and soap opera actors and then some of our other writers, one that lived in LA, he knows all the publics and the networks.

And so we got also, you know, interviews, exclusive interviews with soap opera actors.

We got the spoilers for two weeks out, you know, so we'd write more about like, what's going to happen tomorrow?

Right.

All that stuff.

So we had some, but I didn't do it.

But even if you didn't have to pretend.

And I will not do that.

You wouldn't have pretended.

You wouldn't have told him, hey, I never watched an episode.

I don't watch it.

You know, I'm sorry.

But, you know, I, I love the audience, I love, you know, the low traffic, so the fan base

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is amazing.

And so when you advise people, if somebody came to you for advice, are you one of those people who says, listen to what I say, not what I do as in follow your passion.

Hey, I'm not, I'm not doing that necessarily with the topics I'm writing about or the company's kind of the customers I'm serving.

I'm not one of, you know, I'm not scratching my own itch.

I'm not super passionate about that space, but you do it anyways.

You think that's a good strategy or it's just a strategy that works for you and maybe not advisable for others to follow?

Yeah.

So that's also, I think, one thing why I don't really like, because nowadays in the news in your Facebook, you see so many of these so claimed gurus and then the six steps to this and the four steps to that, you know, it makes me cringe because what works for me doesn't work for somebody else.

I think you really, you know, every person is different.

I think what worked for me will not work for a lot of other people.

But in my case, I think my passion is not so much the content doesn't really matter.

My passion is the entrepreneurship, the journey of starting something, not knowing what the outcome is and trying to find creative ways to make it happen.

So for me, I like you have a product, a service or content, a soap opera content site, whatever it is, and then you have traffic that you need to drive there.

So for me, it's like figuring out, OK, how can we get as much traffic for as cheap as possible from point A to point B?

And that's for me, the game that I like to play.

If you were selling paperclips or cardboard cups, it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter.

Right.

It's the game of driving traffic, customers, or wherever you see it from point A to point B as cheap as possible.

Love it.

So that's a little bit my...

You get to the end.

Why did you decide to sell?

Why not keep going?

Because at this point, it's a money printer.

Yes.

I was very lucky that in content, you, with a very small team, very low overhead, you can make good revenue.

And we're talking monthly, you're pulling in between 400,000 and 500,000 in revenue.

And the overhead was 100 something, depending on the month, but we were a very small team.

In the house was me and three others, and then a handful of riders, so it was a very small team.

We had a person doing the ads, a day-to-day person that runs everything, and then a video

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host and editor.

Love it.

So you got...

You have this cash cow.

Why sell?

Because you don't get often, you know, mil-to-million-dollar offerings, you know, like...

So I thought it's a life-changing...

So somebody just came, or did you go out and market it?

So first I wanted to see, hey, can I even sell it?

So initially I went to ask one of the advisors, Dave Nemitz, one of the founders of Bleach Report.

I asked him, hey, how much do you think I could sell this, right?

And he brought me in touch with an emergent acquisition person or a guy, however you say it.

And I hired him, and he shopped it around, and I got some meetings with some companies that were interested in buying it.

I got horrible offers, like, you know, like, one time my revenue, for example, and then...

One X revenue.

One X revenue, and then maybe with a little bit of cash, and then the rest of the money

I had to wait, like, you know, four years, every month I would get a little bit, you know...

They're trying to drip you your money.

Yes.

It's like the, you know, the private equity play, right, where they try to repay or pay with the cash flow from the business.

So that was not worth it.

When I reached out to the broker, I used to work with quite light brokers.

I bought and sold a couple other smaller sites through them, but I always thought, oh, this is too big of a website.

I don't know a lot of people that can afford, you know, or can buy, you know...

Did you go in with a number in mind?

I think that's hard for entrepreneurs, right?

Somebody says, well, what would you sell it for?

Yeah.

You're like, shit if I...

No, you know, some days I wake up, and this is worth 100 million, and some days I wake up, and I say, take this off my hands, you know, so...

Did you have a number in mind?

How did you think about it?

It's true, like a lot of, especially entrepreneurs that are married to their idea, they think their companies were way more than it actually is.

By that time, I had, you know, friends that are in the same industry, and you kind of get to know, like...

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There's a standard.

Yeah.

Or like, oh, this site sold for XYZ, and so you can see at different valuations.

So I had a number in mind that was actually way lower than I actually sold it for, and

I went to the broker.

I said, hey...

Hope that guy's not listening.

Yeah.

Well, it's an interesting story too.

So the broker, how that works with when you go to a broker, they just look at your last 12 months of profit, and then they put a multiple on it.

So if you did a million dollars in profit, they can sell it either between 2X and 5X, depending on the industry, the trends, you know, traffic sources, all kinds of stuff.

So when I started the process of selling through the broker, you know, at that time, whatever I was doing in profit, it came down to a \$5 million value.

Multiple.

Yeah, multiple, \$5 million.

So I said, okay, yeah, I will take \$5 million.

Started the process, but the whole process takes months too.

So because you have to get all your paperwork, you know, all your P&Ls and all your data rooms, so to speak, and then a summary and interviews, and then you start talking with potential buyers.

So in those months that passed by, my revenue just skyrocketed.

So I told the broker, I call him, I still remember, like, I felt so bad because I felt, you know, oh man, this broker worked so hard on my deal, and now I'm going to call him saying, hey, you know, \$5 million is not enough, like, I want to, I want to delete, I want to stop, you know, the product, like, I don't want to sell it at this moment, just wait for a couple of months, then the value is much higher.

I called him, I told him the stories, I listened, you know, like this happened, and he totally understand it.

So what happened by me pulling the listing, whoever was already interested in it, now wanted even more, like, I wish this was a genius plan of mine, this was pure, like, just happen.

So a couple of days later, whoever first offered \$5 million to say, okay, I want to, I offer \$6 million, and then another, so there was a bidding war between initially three bidders and then two, and eventually I had to choose one of them.

Amazing.

Yeah.

And so by then, you're like, hey, this is a good deal now, I'm happy with this deal.

You take it, you sell the company, painful process or was, you know, standard transaction?

It's an emotional roller coaster because it's a lot of money on the line.

My biggest issue was like, okay, can this person really close, like, at the end of the day?

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Like, because you go to the diligence period.

So first...

It's not all about price.

You also need the certainty that they're going to deliver and they're going to close.

So once they, you agree on a price, you sign an LOI, light of intent, and then they have X amount of weeks to dig into all your numbers.

One big mistake, one of the many mistakes I made was my books were not as clean as I supposed to.

Like I had other websites, I had just one LC, one bank account, you know, at very scrappy basic.

Ramon's lab of experiments, we're all on one books.

So we had to go literally each item of all bank statements, each line item, okay, this is not for the soap side, this is for that, like we had to go through everything.

Their lawyers, my lawyers, their CPA, my CPA.

So it was a very painful, long process.

And of course, there's now looking backwards is easy, but at that moment, I think, oh man, maybe they're going to change their mind, maybe, you know, maybe in between the due diligence period, my traffic, you know, Facebook makes another update and my traffic goes down and they pulled a deal, you know, like that goes through your mind the whole time, like, man, let's hurry up.

Yeah, it took two months.

And the buyer had some issues too, that one of the investors pulled their funding two weeks before closing and yeah, stuff like that.

All the adventures.

Okay, so it ends up closing.

Does your life change?

I mean, this podcast called My First Million, I think, I remember, you know, thinking, hey, if I had a million bucks in the bank, then my life would be so different than I would feel this way.

I would act this way.

I would spend this.

I would do this.

In reality, from doing this podcast, talking to people, that doesn't seem to be the case.

What was the, what was day one of that life for you?

It's super, and I always screw up this word, it's anti-climatic.

Anti-climatic.

Climatic?

Yeah.

So, anti-climatic, because I remember when the money came in the bank and, you know, I was hitting refresh over and over again.

That I did, I was looking for it, and of course, I took a screenshot, but I, you know, I got some champagne for the office, we did the toast, and then literally like 15 minutes later, we all were about to work.

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And through emails, yeah.

Like, it was, and the next day, you know, at night, I just, I had to pick up my son, cook dinner, you know, it's just normal life.

And then the next day, he went back to the office and just work.

What did your son say?

He was eight years old at the time or something, so does it register in his brain, you know, with his hands?

No.

It doesn't care.

No, he didn't care.

I think it's different when you have really no money, and then suddenly you hit a, you win a lottery, and then the next day you have a lot of money.

This, even though it was relatively quick, two to three years, but the website was already doing, you know, really well.

Very profitable.

So, if I wanted to buy something, I, most things I was, could already have bought, you know, so it was not, not something, oh, if I sell this, I'm going to buy, you know, this and this and this.

Like, I didn't have that.

It was just, okay, now on to the next journey, so let's speak.

And so, we get about 10 minutes before they kick us out of here, but the, the questions, you know, what happens then?

So you, since then, you've bought a handful of other websites.

Yes.

Again, like a real estate guy, you sort of buy it, you try to build it up, you either run it or you sell it from there.

Was that a good idea or bad idea?

Are you happy with how you, how you parlayed one thing into the next, or would you do it differently?

No.

I can see that look on your face.

Yes.

Because you know the answer already.

But yeah, no, I, what I wanted to set up was sort of like a PE kind of setup, like a private equity where I could buy, you know, undervalued internet businesses, you know, make them better and then resell them.

Mistake what I did was I bought from totally different, there was, there's no synergy for the properties I bought.

So all the properties are profitable, but I would have been just make more sense now looking backwards if I had just around one topic or one like industry.

So it could be easily, I could scale it easily, I need less people, less headache.

Or one business model, right?

Because you have a SaaS company, that's a B2B company.

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And then you have a content site, you have an e-commerce, you know, a pet site.

Yeah, exactly.

And you need different skill levels and different kind of people, different models, different ways how to drive traffic.

So it's not that focused.

When I started, so one thing was on my mind how to drive more traffic, how to drive more traffic.

And now it's like, oh, we have a, you know, B2B, like we need a sales team for this.

Oh, we need, you know, a content site, we need, you know, different things.

So we all live and learn.

And now you have a new project, new idea that you're cooking up.

Yes.

Almost back to the roots a little bit in terms of what you're doing.

So let's talk a little bit about what you're doing.

I'm super excited.

Yeah.

I'm coming on as an investor because I think that this thing is going to be big.

So tell us a little bit about it.

Yeah.

So very quickly, Noveli is actually a platform where people can read short romantic stories, short romantic novels, books on their iPhone or tablet, either read it or listen to it.

So it's a book, but also an audio version.

Me and Sam came up with the idea where we're back and forth, we're really good friends.

We always come up with weird and crazy ideas.

And we came up with this idea when I still had the soap opera website and I still had access to all these readers.

So we thought, oh, people that like soap operas probably also read romantic novels.

So same story, put a really ugly, simple wordpress site up, had somebody write a couple short romantic stories and drove traffic to it, see the engagement, see people like it or not.

And the engagement was crazy.

People were literally like begging in the comments like, oh, we love this chapter.

When is the next chapter?

Things like that.

But then I started a process of selling the soap site.

So I put this idea on hold so to speak, okay, we can figure it out later.

Right.

Yeah.

A couple of months ago, we just revisited and now we're building an app and it's going to go live in a couple of months.

It's a same demographic, you know, like the middle-aged woman that liked to read Roman's novels.

Think of these novels that you growing up saw at the supermarket or the gas station, you

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know, with this cheesy book cover.

Yeah.

My mom has read, I think, like 55 Danielle Steele books.

Yes.

Exactly.

I think some article came out saying she's written more novels than anyone.

She's got like 300 days on the, you know, 300 weeks straight on the bestseller list or something crazy with different books as, you know, she's a machine.

Yes.

And then there's, you know, obviously 50 Shades of Grey, there's Twilight, there's all these kind of franchises that have been built in this same kind of, you know, romantic fiction genre.

Yeah.

And so you see something there.

I think that this romantic stories or romantic fiction is big.

Yeah.

Well, A, the category is huge, there's a huge amount of people reading this kind of books, but it's also people that read romance novels are also very frequent readers, meaning on average in America, a person reads five books a year.

The average romantic novel reader reads one book every two weeks.

Like you said about your mother, like she read many books, right?

So not a lot of people, but also they read a lot of these kind of, and there's a lot of subcategories.

You know, you have like, you know, from vampire romantic, you know, stories to 50 Shades of Grey to the really cheesy ones, like it's, it's, you have a lot of subcategories as well.

I remember as a kid, I used to read every sports fiction book I could get my hands on.

Yeah.

And I think one day I crossed over into that and one of the books in the sports fiction was like a sports romantic fiction or something.

I remember taking it home, reading it first 10 pages, I was like, what is this?

By the 15th page, I was like, all right, I'm finishing this book.

This is a great book.

Yes.

As an eighth grader.

I remember that.

That's so funny.

So yeah, there are all these subgenres just within it.

And so, you know, what, what does success look like?

What do you think?

Where do you want to be with this project with Noveli, you know, six months from now?

Six months?

Well, six months is...

Okay, maybe 12 months.

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Yeah, okay.

Six months we hopefully will be, you know, launched then and have a good number of downloads. But in a year, we want to be at least at 100,000 active users and build a platform not just for readers, but also for writers.

I think because I had a lot of writers in the soap hub time, I think writers are very undervalued nowadays.

It gets more and more difficult for them to make money and for different reasons, you know, more competition, Amazon, probably things like that.

So we want Noveli to also be a really good platform for writers to make more money, have access to their audience, communicate with their audience, with their readers, and get also more exposure.

I think this is a great idea.

I think that the writers getting that opportunity, it's very hard to make a living writing now.

So knowing that, hey, if I publish here, I will get readers and I'll get money.

And then on the other side for readers, you know, there's a reason Netflix paid like 100 million bucks for one more year of Friends or, you know, the office is the number one show is because people love this comfort and familiarity with content.

They love that if they can just push a button and then they will feel a certain way, it's like push a button, get an emotion.

And that's really what comes of, you know, if you build a platform like this because somebody will be able to push a button, they'll know what they're getting out of it.

It's not like opening up Amazon and saying, here's a bookstore.

Go find what you want.

This is saying, hey, you want to, you know, here's a great story, it's a romantic fiction story.

And they'll be trained to say, hey, if I want that feeling, if I want that type of entertainment, this is the app to go to.

I really think this has a lot of potential, I'm excited to see what you can do with it.

Yeah, we're excited to.

And all right.

It's great.

So we'll wrap it up there.

Rona's been awesome having you here.

You know, I would normally say, hey, where can people find you?

This is your chance to shout out your social media or wherever.

Self-promotion.

Yeah, I don't think, I don't think you even have anything there.

If, if somebody has a, like I always like to help and advise or, you know, if people have a specific question, they can find me on LinkedIn.

If you look Ramon Van Meer, then you can shoot me a message.

Awesome.

Well, thank you so much for coming.

Awesome.

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Hanging with you.

And I believe we have a Spartan race this Saturday to go to.

So yes, I will.

I'll see you in the mud very soon.

All right.

Awesome.