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Side Hustle Show Episode 10

Nick: Hey everybody! Nick Loper here. Welcome to the Side Hustle Show. Pretty pumped to have made it to Episode 10, it's been a ton of fun so far. Hopefully you're enjoying it as much as I am. So how's it going? Good? Great. Well, even if it's not so good, your day is about to get a whole lot better once my guest, Robert Ferrington drops some blogging knowledge bombs in your earbuds. Now Robert is an amazing Side Hustler, still working full-time, but pulling in \$3000-\$5000 per month from a small portfolio of different blogs he runs in his spare time nights and weekends. It's an amazing story. So, the flagship site is TheCollegelInvestor.com so you can go check that out. You can also find Robert at KidsAintCheap.com, Entrepreneurship.com, MyMultipleIncomes.com which I love, and BeatTheNineToFive.com which is also awesome. In this episode, he shares some really great advice for starting and growing and managing and monetizing your blog. And in addition to those, if you stick around to the end of the episode, I'll share my top five tips for new bloggers. And with that we'll get right into it, and here's Robert.

Alright Robert, welcome to the Side Hustle Show.

Robert: Hey thanks for having me Nick, I really appreciate it.

Nick: So take me back. You've got this portfolio of sites now, but take me back to the beginning with TheCollegelInvestor, is that kind of your flagship site?

Robert: Yeah, you know that's my main site. That's the site I started really blogging with. I didn't even really know what blogging was, but I was just bored, and I wanted something to do and, the internet has always attracted me. I remember being in middle school programming this old Mac Apple computer, and I just have always been interested in that, and I've always been interested in finances and personal finance. So the two kind of came together with TheCollegelInvestor and I started there. It's been a long ride, I didn't know what I was doing, didn't know what a theme was or WordPress or any of that stuff, and it literally took me a long time to figure it out. But it's still going strong, and I'm really excited for how it's growing now that I have figured things out a little bit.

Nick: Did you find ... was there a conscious effort to choose that niche in the market? Do college kids have any money to invest anyways? I'm curious how that concept came about.

Robert: You know, I was actually thinking about that in the car today, because I think I should add my tag line back there. For me, I was just graduating college when I started it. And I was willing to start investing, and personal finance was something I was super passionate about. For me, I was struggling with student loans. I wanted to really start investing, it's always been a passion of mine, I always put my little bit of spending money in there, and then talking to my friends and talking to people I know. Everyone wanted to, but nobody quite knew how to, and that's kind of how that got started.

Nick: Very cool. I think it's tough because in college you hear always the pitch, like the earlier you start, the better off you're going to be come retirement time. But it's just tough to get excited when it's 40 years away, and at 10% a year. When you're in college ... I want to double my money over night, I want to find the get rich quick schemes and stuff.

Robert: For sure. There's two things that have always bothered me in colleges. One, the people that were like really passionate about investing were always about these penny stocks, and all this crazy stuff that you definitely shouldn't do. But it was fun for them, and it was almost like, some people play poker, and some people did that. Because, you could lose it all overnight, or you could double your money.

Nick: Okay, it's daytrading 2.0

Robert: Right. And the other thing was, right at the time it was the great recession. I remember sitting in class one day and had my laptop open, and watching the stock market go down like 350 points. And I was like "Holy Crap, what's going here"? That's the first time I've kind of experienced that in my lifetime, and it's a big shock. All those kinds of factors combined together.

Nick: Very Cool. So this was like during the market crash 2008-2009 timeframe when you started?

Robert: 2009 is when I started the site. I've always been passionate about it before then, but officially launch 2009.

Nick: Ok. So what kind of actions did you take in 2009 to get it off the ground and try to build up the readership to where it is today?

Robert: It took a long time. In 2009, going back in my archives, my first posts ... I don't even what I was writing. It was really light content, really crappy. But I just wanted to share some insights. And had a terrible free theme, and I thought it was the greatest thing in the world. But that's really how it started, and I think after six months I had maybe 30 people a day coming to my site. Like nothing.

Nick: All from just search engine traffic?

Robert: Just search engine, maybe my mom, I don't know (laughs). But nobody was coming to the site. And it wasn't until I stumbled upon other personal finance bloggers and started making some connections. Then I stumbled across a network of bloggers called The Akizi that I started reading the forums, started to learn a little bit, started to network with people and kind of see what I should be doing. I learned a little bit about SEO, and what do you put in the title tag? What's a description? I didn't know any of that when I started. And so some of that started getting me going, and seeing what other people were doing, that's kind of what got me going.

Nick: Exactly. I think, a really good point to bring is to make some connections in your niche, and it's not necessarily to view these other bloggers as your competition, but rather see how you guys can co-operate and lift everyone up.

Robert: I 100% agree. Literally, finding a network of bloggers was my saving grace, because I probably would have stopped blogging, I wasn't going anywhere. It's like, how much can you put out into space and no one cares, before you kind of get burned out, right?

Nick: Yeah. I've been blogging for several years, and I've kind of been there.

Robert: Right, and so that's what did it. And getting involved on the forums, talking to them, emailing them, and then looking back in hindsight, the reason why is I think you can have so many blogs about the same thing, because a blog is different from the New York Times, because a blog has a personal spin or opinion. Where the New York Times shares the news. To me, you have a hundred personal finance sites, and you can all cover the same story, but everybody is going to have a different take, a different insight, a personal story that's going to connect to it and everyone is going to be a little different. And I think that's what's really cool about it.

Nick: Ok. Derek Halpern calls this NewsJacking. You can go after the current events or whatever that's hot in the news, but put your spin on it and twist to make it relevant to your audience.

Robert: Right. Honestly I took Derek's post and I actually used it one time, and it's a great strategy. I wrote an article on TheCollegelInvestor. How Shark Tank Is Making Me a Better Investor. The first thing I did is I set up a bunch of scheduled tweets to tweet all the shark tank guys, all of them. And a few of the retweeted my content to their hundreds of thousands of followers. They will get huge traffic to that post and to the rest of my sites, so it's a strategy that definitely can work.

Nick: That's an awesome story. I wanted to touch on this really quickly, the difference between a blog and niche site depending on pronouncation. With New Niche Site Duel 2.0 on smart passive income, and Spencer Haws and a bunch of these other guys, this is kind of a sexier and maybe it's being pitched as a more passive approach versus blogging where you gotta create a ton of content on a daily or weekly basis. I just wanted to get your take on the difference between the two and why you have chosen the harder road on the blogging path.

Robert: It's interesting, because if you go back on my income reports on MyMultipleIncomes, I actually had a niche site for a while, and I sucked at it. I couldn't get it to go anywhere. I don't even it call it like what Pat Flynn is building a niche site, he's building these authority sites that are designed to be huge guides for whatever. He had the Security Guard Training before. It's an authority site now, and to get it to rank well and consistently stay well ranked in Google and to get a lot of other traffic, you have to have thick content or meaty content now. And to me, a niche site typically didn't have that in the past. It was very targeted, very thin, and it was designed to push you to an ad or push you to whatever was going to make money for whoever owned that site. Whereas, having a blog or authority site, you build the content. To me a blog is like the old school magazine, and a niche site is like a flyer.

Nick: I think that's a good comparison. I was going to ask about monetization, because I've been reading a couple of your monthly income reports, and we're not talking about a few pennies from AdSense here, we're talking about some pretty significant money. Yet, on TheCollegelInvestor there's not a ton of invasive ads. So can you tell me a little about the monetization strategy and how that all works?

Robert: A lot of my monetization comes from private advertisers and it actually goes into the post, so my best posts are my old evergreen content that I can put related content into.

For example, I talk a lot about my student loan horror stories and how my student loan servicers jacked my credit because they didn't process their bills on time and all this stuff. So, I'll put in affiliate advertising, and direct advertising related to checking your free credit score, and different things like that can really help you with your content, but it's related. To me it's really important. You build the story and people do it because it's just related, and I think that's key.

Nick: Ok. Now are you reaching out to these advertisers and saying would you like to be a part of the site? How do you go about signing up with them?

Robert: Now I'm able to do that more and I also have a huge contact list that I've built over the last few years that I can just reach out and say: Hey, it worked in the past, or I know this is your client. Because a lot of the big companies use third party firms to take care of their advertising campaigns. Online, once you connect the dots, you're able to find out who does who, and maybe they can point you in the right direction to what company has this company and see if they're able to do something. I actually have some investment firms that are doing the same thing and they're trying to get their online presence and their blog presence because they're starting to see that's the way to go. It's kind of selling them at the same time as showing them how this can add value to them.

Nick: Have the readers grown up with you, or are they cycling in and out as they become not college age anymore?

Robert: It's hard to tell. I definitely have some of the same readers, and then I have new ones all the time, and with TheCollegeInvestor it's tough because I have a segment of readers that it's about the student loans, and a segment of readers that it's about the investing. I'm hoping that they're starting to bridge the gap between the two, but you never know, because with my key content there's a couple of strong investing articles, and there's a couple of strong student loan articles, and you never quite know.

Nick: It's tough to start talking about investing when you're still in debt.

Robert: It's one of those things, it's a reminder, you should do it. I was having an interaction with another blogger, and chatting about: How do you know if people actually care about what you have to say, or are you always getting Google traffic or do you have loyal readers that care about your stuff? I actually wrote it about recently, about how you have online brand recognition and the metric that we've decided is: are people searching for your stuff in Google? If they're searching for your brand name in Google, they're looking for you versus are they searching for search terms.

Nick: Right. And do you find that people are searching for you specifically at this point?

Robert: Every day there's people searching for TheCollegeInvestor Brand, so that's a good sign.

Nick: That's great. So when it comes to investing, I'm curious to get your take on this as somebody who's investing in the market and their side hustle business, is there a good portfolio mix that you would recommend? Or where would you tilt on that scale?

Robert: You've got to do both. My big philosophy that I'm going with BeatTheNinetoFive is that I think you could do it without having to sacrifice. And we'll see, my goal is in 2 years, hopefully I can ditch my 9 to 5 and be able to do this full time without compromising. So that's my premise. So with that being said, I'm trying to make sure we're maxing out our IRA's and all that type of stuff, while still building websites, and as we were talking about earlier, buying websites and building the company.

Nick: This pretty impressive portfolio that's already bringing in ... what would you say an average month is?

Robert: It's \$3-4-5000 kinda depending on the month, we definitely have better months than others. That's what scares me the most about eventually trying to leave the 9 to 5.

Nick: There's a little more volatility there.

Robert: Right. I have a few metrics that I'm going off of, and it's sustained consistency. I want to have a baseline consistent amount every month. But I would say \$4-5000, \$3000 on the low months right now.

Nick: What are you waiting for? Do you have some crazy high monthly expenses?

Robert: I'm married, baby on the way. I have a house, and I'm partially scared shitless probably (laughs), but I definitely want to make sure family life settles down, we've got a good routine with that. Sustainable income over a period of time. So that's what I'm going for.

Nick: That's true. But if you're still around since 2009, you've survived all the algorithm updates to this point, I feel like you've gotta be pretty safe from getting Google-slapped.

Robert: Well, I don't know. You can never be totally sure. That's one of those things, that's why I said: Do people search for you or are they searching for your content? You get a little more safer every time that more people are searching for your brand, because that means that hopefully you can withstand a Google-slap. If you have a nice social media following, if people are searching for you, if you drop in some search rankings, I think you can survive some of that.

Nick: Definitely. You touched on, real briefly, purchasing sites. Can you tell me about your experiences or strategy on that front?

Robert: Yeah, I bought 2 now just this last year. I bought a site KidsAintCheap and CultofMoney, both of them are in the personal finance niche. With those sites, I was looking for some sites that were under-monetized, hadn't been updated in a long time but still had good rankings. You kind of saw with Pat Flynn was building up to his niche site duel, they were talking about kind of building a blog network and leveraging that. So I'm trying a combination of a mini blog network and leveraging those to help out some of my main sites while at the same time using them to monetize some of their content as well.

Nick: Did you find them on Flippa or did you approach the owners directly?

Robert: I approached the owners directly. So I scoured through some of the blog directory listings, and there's a lot in the personal finance space that kind of rank like the 100 top personal finance blogs, so I kind of scrolled through there, looked for ones that hadn't been updated in a year but still had strong page rank, and domain authority and had a lot of content, and I just emailed them and started going through the list. I probably emailed 50 - 75 blogs, and most of them didn't respond, emails probably gone off into neverland. Then one got back to me and we just started chatting about it "Hey, I see you haven't done anything with this in a long time, are you interested in getting some cash and handing it over?" and a couple of them were interested.

Nick: That's great. Somebody offers you cash, and you're like "quick, don't act too excited, somebody wants to buy this old junk heap off me" (laughs)

Robert: Yeah. So I think it was win-win, they weren't doing anything with it, I think I got a good deal. KidsAintCheap is already profitable in 6-7 months, so I think they're working out.

Nick: That's outstanding. I was going to ask about what kind of multiplier you're targeting? Just ballpark what the price point was for those acquisitions.

Robert: For these older ones, one year of annual income tops, but I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt -- it's not AdSense income, search income, it's everything they've ever done on the site. These are older sites, and we just kind of haggle from there.

Nick: That's 12 months earnings, and that's, in your opinion, under-monetized. You're able to break even even faster.

Robert: Definitely. That's the one benefit I have, because I do have 2-3 years of contacts that want to advertise on my site, so I kind of took a strategy and just pinged them all as soon as I got the site. "Hey, a site you might be interested in, let me know". Quickly, easily, being able to use my connections to get going on those sites.

Nick: It's stuff like that where you can get 100% return in 12 months or 14 months that makes me not want to touch the stock market.

Robert: I can sympathize. It's one of those things, I still believe that you do have to invest for your future, and I think there's some really cool things you can do with the stock market. I'm a big believer in IRA's, you can have that tax deferred, and tax-free withdrawals in the future. I'm a big fan of my SEP-IRA, you can take the business income and you can shelter it from taxes now, and it still grows for your future and retirement as well. So there's just some cool things you can do.

Nick: Definitely. On TheCollegeInvestor I notice you've gotten some pretty serious press mentions. New York Times, USA Today ... I wanted to talk about how you went about pitching those reporters, or how those articles got written.

Robert: Sure. HARO is the best source that I think you can go for ... Help A Reporter Out. I'm subscribed to that, and I try to respond to as many relevant ones as possible. For whatever, because you never know. And a lot of times I'll get mentioned or written up on just some random person's blog, and then it gets syndicated by the New York Times and you get a lot of traffic. Or it'll be on their home pages, and then just getting your blog, your website out there in front of other readers. You never know when the New York Times or Money Magazine or some random reporter is just going to be reading that article that day, and they want to use your site for something else.

Nick: Very cool. Are there any pitch tips? If there's 100,000 people on this distribution list, the odds of your pitch getting accepted or getting even read sometimes, it seems like it may be a waste of time.

Robert: You know, I think it all depends on your thing. I've actually used HARO as well to get sources for stories that I've written on in TheCollegelInvestor. And I was surprised, sometimes you only get 10-15 pitches. I think it goes both ways, if you're there and it's only 10-15 pitches, it's: be early and be memorable.

Nick: Very good. So, after blogging for 4 years on the same topic, how do you keep coming up with content ideas and avoid beating the dead horse of personal finance?

Robert: That's a joke for personal finance bloggers. There's probably like 6 topics that we talk about: Debt, Savings, Investing, Insurance and Retirement ... you go on a cycle. It's all about taking a unique perspective, and highlighting a unique story. And it may be telling a little bit of a story and intertwining that to why people care.

Nick: How many times can you say, "you should save your money"? (laughs)

Robert: Exactly. Then it's, let's talk to other cool people. This year I started Know a Young Millionaire series. I've been reaching out to young people under 35 that are millionaires. How they did it, what they're doing now, and telling their story. Those articles get a lot of traction. I do that news hacking a little bit. One of my most popular articles last year was about Robert Kiyosaki, and his company's bankruptcy. He's a big dude, Rich Dad Poor Dad, but then at the same time, his company went bankrupt. So talking a little about that.

Nick: Oh, the irony.

Robert: It's "I preach personal finance," but people will say he did the smart thing, he let his company go bankrupt while he kept his millions.

Nick: I'm sure he sheltered his personal assets from that stuff.

Robert: Exactly. So that's the role model. But at the same time ... pitching ... who knows.

Nick: I'm curious, between these 5 or 6 different sites, how many posts are you writing yourself? Are you finding the time to do all this stuff? You mentioned a staff writer before?

Robert: On TheCollegelInvestor I'm writing about 2 posts a week. I try to keep all my posts 800-1000 words. I do longer articles there. And then I have staff writers that do post every day on that site right now. Right now, 5 staff writers there. Screen them, other bloggers

and other people I know, we really have a good harmony that works, so even though it's different people, they're united on the same front there.

Nick: Do you have to pay these people?

Robert: I definitely pay them. I think I pay them a good amount per article, and they've stuck with me. And I even give them incentive bonuses as well. If they get 1000 page views in the first 7 days of their article, I'll double what we paid for the article.

Nick: How much does a typical article cost?

Robert: Right now I pay about \$25 and I ask for about 1000 words for an article. But give or take. I'd rather the content be there right content. So if you're gonna go less than that, cool if it's awesome.

Nick: That's a pretty bold move too. Maybe I'm too cheap. (laughs) That seems expensive to just keep pumping the content machine. But obviously its working.

Robert: I've done all price points. Actually I do have a couple of staff writers at different rates, depending on their experience level, and what kind of content they're giving. I've done it all, I've done the \$5, \$10 articles, I've done more at \$35-50. And then I read other blogs, and they're about freelancing and different types of work, and "you can get \$500-\$1000 an article" and I don't know how I can get that high. I guess there's people out there that do.

Nick: Maybe if you're writing for Mashable or something with a ton of views where they know they're going to make it back in ads or something.

Robert: That's where I put the incentive. It's quid pro quo. You help me, I help you. You're definitely getting paid, but if you tweet this and you promote it to your audience as well, and they come and we get awesome page views, that kind of thing, definitely we want to give a bonus for that as well.

Nick: Do you find there's a pretty strong correlation between page views and income?

Robert: There definitely is, especially on the pay-per-click and the affiliate. More people that are looking at that content, definitely the more you can convert, especially if it's relevant.

Nick: So, a couple of staff writers. Now are they also helping out with these other sites, or is that more all you?

Robert: I have a total of 11 staff writers right now.

Nick: I'm really impressed with working full-time, managing this pretty serious portfolio of sites, and managing this whole team of writers too.

Robert: I have 11 staff writers for all the different websites, some of them just post once a week on the site. EntrepreneurshipLife, one of the other sites, I've ramped up to 5 day postings this year. I'm testing out some things there. I have a virtual assistant as well, so that helps keep everything organized for me.

Nick: That's gotta be a worthwhile investment just to keep things sane.

Robert: Definitely. It keeps things sane, and helps with a lot of the routine and stuff that I can't do, because I do work during the day, and believe it or not, I don't have access to a computer for like 8-10 hours a day.

Nick: That makes it tough to moderate comments and do all the outreach that you have to do during the course of the content cycle.

Robert: Exactly. So that's why we're here at night and we're doing this.

Nick: For everyone listening to this in the future, we're recording this at 9:30 at night.

Robert: I always joke, because I listen to Pat Flynn and he's recording at 2-3 in the morning.

Nick: Even later, that's nuts. I'm definitely asleep by that time. (laughs) If I was going to ask, if you had to start over at this point, what kind of actions would you take in the first week, in the first month, to rebuild? Or would you rebuild, or would you do something different entirely?

Robert: I kind of did something totally different with BeatTheNineToFive, so that's definitely the newest site, it doesn't have a lot of content on there yet, but we're building it. It's my most personal site, but it's also the culmination of probably all the lessons I've learned. When I started in 2009, honestly I don't think I made my first dollar on TheCollegeInvestor until 2011. It took me 2 years before I figured out how to even put AdSense on there and try

to make something. I would say, the biggest thing is network. Get to know people in your space, get to know people in other spaces, and tangent spaces, and just get to know people, send them an email, leave a comment on their site. It doesn't matter how big or how many page views or how big a site is, if you're leaving a comment every day, they will notice. Even if they're getting 100 comments a day, if you're there every day, they will notice. And then, you can reach out to the person and talk to them, try to meet people in real life. Because there are people behind the websites and the blogs, and a lot of them, you'd be surprised they're nearby, or gonna speak somewhere by you, and see if you can meet them.

Nick: Are you attending any personal finance events, or a financial blogger conference?

Robert: I've missed the last 2, but I'm going to be going to the financial blogger conference this fall. I'm very excited about that one. I'm lucky to have a lot of bloggers in my hometown, or near my hometown, or like to come here. So every now and then, we'll meet up and chat on Twitter and go have some coffee.

Nick: I think that's a great way to build a deeper connection than just a virtual one.

Robert: Network. Thank gosh I found the Akizi network when I did. They have a forum and you can ask any newbie questions you want, and no one shames you. A lot of people are just there to help and that was a huge benefit. So network and just get to know other people on your space.

Nick: And that's a network for specifically network sites?

Robert: No, you can find the link on my homepage. It's really for anyone. It's personal finance lifestyle bloggers. It started off mostly personal finance, and a lot of personal finance bloggers get out of debt, and they're "What do I blog about now?". It's evolved into lifestyle and other things. There's just a lot of cool bloggers, the network is 110-120 blogs, I'm a member of it now, so I've been commenting and helping out on the forums for a long time. It's free, just go there and hang out and learn something.

Nick: Very cool. Robert, any parting tips for aspiring part-time entrepreneurs?

Robert: The biggest tip I have is to just go take some action. Go out and do something, stop thinking about it. You could start a website, it's super cheap. You could go contact somebody, you can leave a comment. You can send an email. Make a social media connection, use an @ sign on twitter. Just say, "Hey, I like your site" "Hey I'd love to email

you". Just Do Something. I've been frozen on an idea, wondering why won't this work, or why will this fail? There's already 500 personal finance sites out there, why should I start another one? But, Just Do it! The one great thing about online business, is there's no cost, it's so cheap. You can go get \$3 hosting, you can get a free theme, and you can just start.

Nick: That's true. You've got nothing to lose but time.

Robert: Exactly. But time's a killer, man. Just go do something!

Nick: I appreciate your spending some time in our listeners' earbuds, and thank you so much for sharing all this wisdom and very inspiring story. Even if you don't make money for the first 2 years, it pays off later if you keep at it. I love it.

Robert: Thanks Nick, I appreciate it.

Nick: See you soon. What do you think? Pretty awesome stuff, right? Five grand in your spare time is super side hustle baller if you ask me. I especially like all his stuff about reaching out to other bloggers and becoming part of the community. Because it can be pretty lonely sending posts out into the wilderness of the internet and having no one ever read them. It's like, if a tree falls in the forest ... if a blogger blogs and no one reads it, does it even count?

So, as promised, my 5 tips for beginning bloggers.

#1 Pick a topic you care about. It doesn't necessarily need to be a passion, but you do have to care, because otherwise there's no hope at all of making your readers care.

#2 Pick a topic other people care about. This is the mistake I made my first four years of blogging. Because it was very much a personal blog, which is totally fine if that's what you're going for. But then you can't be disappointed when only 10 people want to read it.

#3 Go Self-Hosted. You can set up a free blog on Blogger or Tumblr or WordPress.com, but it looks super junky because that's going to be in your domain name, and you don't have 100% control over how the site looks and the content and everything else. So, by going self-hosted, you have way more credibility and then you own your own domain name and it's the better way to go.

#4 Design matters. People make a split-second decision whether or not to trust you and that isn't enough time to read your words, but it is enough time to see what your site looks like, and I'm not saying I have the best-looking site in the world, but I'm saying spend a little time picking a good theme and making sure the site looks legit to your readers.

#5 Be Yourself. Don't be an anonymous publisher. People want to connect with people. How many times have you gone to a website and clicked the about page, and found some useless garbage that sounds like it came out of Dilbert's mission statement generator.

That's one of my biggest pet peeves online. Have an opinion, pick fights, name names, just have fun with it.

That's our top 5 and that's our show. Thanks so much for listening. Until next time, go out there and make something happen, and I will see you next week in Episode 11.