

TEI 003: Innovation Lessons-Learned Creating StudioPress—Test Feasibility, Identify Trends, and More

Host: Chad McAllister, PhD

Guest: Brian Gardner

Chad: Hi. I'm Chad McAllister. I'm pleased to be talking with Brian Gardner today. He's a wonderful example of product innovation and business creation, an innovator, entrepreneur, and business owner. And like a lot of us that have been involved in innovation, Brian started out by seeing a need and then creating a solution that people are actually willing to pay for. He did that by pioneering a new market, and many of us are familiar with this, creating the very popular Genesis WordPress themes and his company StudioPress, and now building on that success by becoming partners with Copyblogger.

Copyblogger is known as that company that teaches business owners about how to do online marketing that works. With his help I really see Copyblogger becoming the ecosystem around WordPress for online businesses and business owners that are using content marketing. So Brian, I thank you so much. It's really nice to be able to talk with you today.

Brian: Yeah, I'm glad you reached out, glad you participated in my charity event and I look forward to talking about business stuff.

Chad: Great. Thanks so much. I'd like to get started by just getting a little sense of you and really going way back in doing that. I'm curious about what kind of kid you were. You know, the kinds of things you enjoyed as a kid, what you were good at. Just think about that for a moment.

Brian: So what's interesting was, as a kid and through high school and into college and all that, I never really was a business guy nor a computer guy. The interesting part is that I'm now a business guy and a computer guy. Without any formal training in school for that, a lot of that was all self-taught, trial and error, rolling up my sleeves and just doing and trying. I'm a firm believer in some cases that being street smart is better than being book smart because a lot of times, books have great information but are not quite as applicable to everyday life. So for me at least, the way I learn, doing it myself and a lot of mistakes happen when you try things and do it on your own. I've learned a lot of lessons along the way but I look back and see where I am at now and I look back and see where I was and it's actually quite rewarding.

Chad: A theme I hear from a lot of business owners is to not let what you don't know stop you, right? And to just dive in and learn what you need to. And when you were a kid, was that a theme that also rang true even though you weren't involved in business and computer sort of areas? Were you the person that dove in and just learned what you wanted to learn about something?

Brian: It is because I would see it from a distance as something I would want to do. Way back when I was a kid, I would be on the other side of the fence watching the kids in the pool skateboarding and I didn't know to do it but I'm like, "I want to do that." So you know from skateboarding to all kind of lessons like that along the way, I would see it from a distance and say, "I want to do that. I need to figure out how I'm going to get there." I didn't have skateboarding lessons paid for me by my parents or anything like that. I got a skateboard and started riding and kind of tried to imitate what I saw until it actually became a skill. So I've learned that quite a bit, even in facets of my online life now, whether it

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be marketing or whether it be social media, just observing successful people in social media and kind of identifying their tendencies and their habits and patterns of behavior and saying, “Well hey, geez! If this is working for so and so, I’m going to try it and see what happens” and sometimes I’ll try it in a way that there’s no response and so I’ll have to back up say, “Okay. I didn’t quite do this one right” or I’ll try it and there’ll be great response and I say, “Wow, gee. There you go.”

Chad: Yeah absolutely, so many good many models to learn from including you, while we’re talking. I know when you got out of college you did product management for an architectural firm. What prepared you for that? I don’t know what you did in college.

Brian: Absolutely nothing. I left college two years in because I still at that point didn’t know what I wanted to do. So I came back home and picked up a managerial job at a convenience store that I had had in high school. I just kind of came back home and said, “Maybe I’ll get into management or something like that” and so I started working at a convenience store. One of our customers who came in on a daily basis and who I got to know, was the principal at this architectural company. He said, “You know, I’ve got to hire a younger person in our company. We’ve got this position to fill. It’s kind of ambiguous. We don’t know yet what it’s going to be. But I’ve gotten to know you over the years, Brian, and I like your work ethic. I think whatever it is I have you do you’re going to succeed at” so he offered me a job. At the time I was working sixty hours, starting everyday at 4 o’clock in the morning and so this was like a true business job, so it was kind of a gift. And I believe that Harry, my boss at the time, was placed in my life. He kind of pulled me out where I was and kind of into the real world. So I was there for ten years, learned a ton about computers and things like that and also just customer service because with project management, I dealt with our customers. I dealt with our vendors and there was a lot of trying to please and get things done and on time. It taught me a tremendous amount of stuff kind of leading up to my departure and into the WordPress ecosystem and working with software.

Chad: What a wonderful experience to be able to learn all of those things. Was this a smaller sort of environment where you wore a lot of different hats?

Brian: It was. We had maybe fifteen-ish people in our office. A lot of our people, sales guys and project managers, were older and so, from a computer stand point and an IT stand point, I was known as the computer guy. If anybody had anything, whether it was mouse that wasn’t working to an email problem, they came to me because they figured I’d know what I was doing, which of course I didn’t. I would go learn how to do what I needed to fix and that became an asset.

Chad: Absolutely, right? The ability to adjust as I learn. You know that old saying “Fake it till you make it”

Brian: That or “Let me google that.”

Chad: Right. Exactly! That’s what we do now. Oh great! Thanks for sharing about that. One of my favorite authors is Max Lucado and I like him because he takes these Sunday school stories I heard when

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I was young and he writes them as modern tales and teaches their powerful lessons. He wrote a few years ago this rather different book for him called the “Cure for the Common Life: Living in Your Sweet Spot”. And in there he describes this process really of how do you find your sweet spot in life, what you should be doing. He talks about that process that starts with looking at yourself as a child and growing up, through school, and what sort of things did you did enjoy that you might have been kind of good at but not great at. But you really enjoyed them and areas you could build upon. And using that as kind of self direction towards what you should be doing. So now successful StudioPress, now partner with Copyblogger, do you feel like you’re in your sweet spot today? Are you doing what you should be doing or are you still looking for new directions?

Brian: I do. And I have been, over the last six or seven years since I left, I’ve been in computer stuff, WordPress blog design, whatever you want to call it. From the perspective of the different seasons of my life, yes, I’m in my sweet spot, but within that sweet spot are sweeter spots. There are elements to things that I was doing I didn’t like personally, handling accounting and doing various elements of the business, which is one of the reasons why I opened the merge to Copyblogger with open arms because it allowed the idea of being in a bigger company with people doing things. At the time I was wearing all hats and I’m not skilled in all hats. And I was like, “Man this is even better. I can refine my sweet spot by being not even just online and in social media, which is sweet for me, but within the context of my day and my responsibilities, now I can delegate the things I don’t like doing to people who work with us or for us. And that narrows it down to sweet spot even more because now I’m doing the two things that I really, really enjoy right now. One of which is managing people but two is still pioneering ideas and identifying things within the design and modern design trends and applying them to people’s web designs. Yes, right now I’m in my sweet spot and I love it.

Chad: Wonderful. That pioneering spirit really connects well with what we see in so many people involved in innovation and creating businesses and actually gives us a great transition. So why don’t we just dive into talking about that pioneering spirit. I’d like for you to think about an example of innovation in your company, whether it’s StudioPress or now Copyblogger. Some example of innovation that you could share with us. What comes to mind?

Brian: Probably the idea of the Genesis framework. Prior to Genesis we were developing individual standalone WordPress themes. What was happening is, as we develop new themes, you know, theme after theme after theme, a lot of the code base was basically copy and paste and similar. It was more a matter of changing the way the front end looked. In other words, what you see on your computer screen. It’s not necessarily a new concept in general but from a WordPress perspective, there’s got to be a way to kind of centralize the code base so that it can be just like a library. The library exists anytime you use any of themes. You don’t have to change it within every theme. I reached to Nathan Rice, who’s our lead developer now and I’m like, “What do you think of this idea of having code-shared, which is kind of having a coat of paint and just changing the way it looks on the outside and having those kind of be separate” and that’s kind of how we birthed the idea of Genesis.

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The best way to explain it is the engine of a car. You can change the way the car looks by slapping on a new coat of paint or wearing something different, but the engine's still going to be the same. An iPhone and iPhone cover--same sort of concept. So, from a WordPress perspective, the idea of doing that really opened up the possibilities for what we're doing now, which is getting everybody onboard with Genesis from the idea standpoint, and the options that are common with all of our themes--layout options, SEO settings, things that are applicable to everybody and allowing them to have a different look of their website just based on some extra files that are kind of independent but reliant on the core.

Chad: Right. Those that are listening that are programmers are used to this idea of inheritance, right? Inheriting capability from the superclass. That's how I think about this, that as a WordPress user, we now have child themes that bring in the capabilities from Genesis, from the framework, right?

Brian: Yeah. Absolutely.

Chad: Was this a brand new thing at the time for WordPress, this idea of a framework and child themes?

Brian: You know, I don't necessarily think. Framework and child theme, it did exist very small-scale and I even think WordPress themselves. ??Actually underscores, maybe it was the name of the firm,?? Thematic which was created by Ian Stewart who works with Automattic as well, kind of in concept had it but it really wasn't out in the spotlight. They're incapable and you know nobody did much with the idea of child themes and whatever. I mean I really do think that when Genesis came out, obviously with the marketing power of Copyblogger and the reach that we had at that point, framework and child themes and things like that all of a sudden became a household name within WordPress.

Chad: Right, because I know there are other theme providers and they use the same terminology, right? They talk about, "Oh, we haven't done our child themes yet!" Genesis has such a strong offering and frankly a strong hold on the market. You get so much capability for so little cost. Sounds like there's also, as often is the case in innovation, this was somewhat born out of necessity, right? Because before that, as you said, you were just copying between themes and replicating a lot of code and having a lot of repetition in the process, I would expect.

Brian: Yeah, and that was great up until the point where we realized we had to redo something or update it a certain way and now all of a sudden we had to go update the same thing within twenty-five different themes whereas now, Genesis itself is just updatable through the dashboard which really makes it easy to just say, "Hey, we tweaked a couple things. We fixed some bugs. Click your button." And everybody, all hundred thousand people who are using Genesis can have that change in a snap. Whereas before, we would have to email zip files to everybody. People would have to replace files through FTP. I mean it was just a hodgepodge. So from an innovation standpoint, the technology that we've been able to kind of bring it to is so much more efficient.

TEI 003: Innovation Lessons-Learned Creating StudioPress--Test Feasibility, Identify Trends, and More

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Chad: And Genesis, from a customer's perspective, also provides a lot value because it's so easy for me to go in and change another theme style, right? Just pick another child theme and get all the capabilities I'm used to having still, and that works really well. I think with that example you gave us in creating this Genesis framework as an innovation example. What makes it innovative is it was responding to a real need, kind of born out of your experiences with supporting all the themes, but then offering a lot of value to the customer which is a key aspect of what we need in innovation--providing value to the customer. In the process you really created this new market, and made something people were glad to pay for because of the value it did offer.

Brian: Yup.

Chad: Great example of innovation. In that example, it sounds like that came about just naturally because of what you needed. Where did the idea come from in the beginning? Sounds like it was from your own experience, is that correct?

Brian: Yeah. It was from my own experience for my own site as well as just the business that I was building with Revolution Themes and StudioPress at the time. It was just like you know what you said, just a common thing that needed to happen and so you do the research and there's a feasibility test you got to do and "can we do what I think we need it to do?" and if the answer's yes then you move forward then deploy it and see how folks respond.

Chad: So how did you do that feasibility test? How did you find out if people would be willing to pay you money for this?

Brian: Are we talking about Genesis specifically or just themes in general?

Chad: I'm not sure where you first came across this idea in the beginning. I suspect it was probably with themes in general, if people are going to pay money for that.

Brian: Yeah, that was an easy one. At the time I was doing a bunch of free themes so everybody would come and download. Folks had asked me if I would do some customization so that's how I kind of got my feet wet with WordPress from an ecosystem standpoint. I had a design that I thought was really, really good. It was rejected by somebody, so I flatout asked people on my blog, "Hey would you buy a WordPress theme." I didn't conduct any other kind of research or survey other than just opening up in the comments and just letting my readers respond. And the response was overwhelming, "Yes. We'd pay X." At that point, you have a golden opportunity--when you've got hundreds of people who are saying, "Yes, I'll buy whatever you make." Then the question is, "Okay, how quickly can I make something?"

Chad: Right. And get it available for them. Excellent. For Genesis, I'm not sure if you actually needed to do anything like that. Was there any kind of feasibility study?

TEI 003: Innovation Lessons-Learned Creating StudioPress—Test Feasibility, Identify Trends, and More

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Brian: No, because at the time people were already buying themes as they were, so I knew that Genesis and the idea that we were building was just a better version of what was already in place.

Chad: Absolutely. So for product innovation, we have the first part, which is that catalyst, where the idea comes from, and there's a whole lot of other stuff that actually has to make it successful, to make some impact on customers and create that market. What were the elements that you looked at that made Genesis successful for you?

Brian: The elements that made Genesis successful?

Chad: Yeah, and think about this in terms of executing, right? So you had the idea of, "Let's create a framework and a superset of this common functionality among these themes." And somehow you actually had to get that work done and then get it out to the market and see if people would use it.

Brian: Yeah, so the things that probably made it successful....One of the approaches that Nathan and I did from the get-go was that we knew that we wanted to work within the architecture and user experience within WordPress as well with Genesis. A lot of people have kind of reinvented the wheel with maybe the way their options pages look or maybe they overbrand their product. We had decided from an early stage that we just wanted to make people feel like it was still part of WordPress. And as subtle as that may have been from a decision standpoint, I really think that it helped some of the success; people don't feel like they're in a foreign country when they're working within our framework. They think, "Hey this looks like it was in WordPress. I'm used to the way this looks. It doesn't look foreign to me. It doesn't scare me. I know what I'm looking at and how to use it." Some of the other things...just building what people want and being receptive to suggestion. We would come out with a 1.0 version and folks would say, "Hey this is great. We love this. It might be missing that." A lot of people think they know what other people wants or don't listen to what other people want and it's huge. I mean, people are saying, "Hey we want X and we'll pay for X" then you go build X. To me it doesn't take rocket science just to come to that conclusion. So, to just always listen to our community and be open. Of course there are times when, like a parent, you've got to set boundaries and say, "No. This is just not healthy or this is just not a smart thing for us to put into Genesis or maybe make it into a plug-in or something like that." So listening to the community, just listening to our users, good and bad, from a feedback standpoint.

Chad: Right. And it sounds like such a commonsense thing to do, to listen to our users and what they need and yet I find a lot of the time, product development groups are very internally focused. They have a notion of what they think is best and that doesn't always align with people actually want. So thank you for sharing that example. Good for us to think about what made it successful-- great example of product innovation. When it comes to your group, I would suspect at least for the Genesis part, because I typically ask people you know, "Who is the most innovative person in your group and what are they like?" is it fair to say that that was you? And so not to put you on the spot but is that a fair assessment?

TEI 003: Innovation Lessons-Learned Creating StudioPress—Test Feasibility, Identify Trends, and More

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Brian: Yeah, and this isn't any kind of me putting myself on a pedestal because there are many facets to running a business, all of which are equally important. But I am the "idea guy" at least from the software standpoint. We have an educational department at Copyblogger and things like that. But from a software and product standpoint, I've always been an idea guy. Even back when I was building Legos back when I was younger. The idea of building something for me has always been like the kill. The kill is for me the best part. Once we build then okay. Then we put that in the hands of other people in our company and they continue to nurture it. I'm always thinking of how to push the envelope, how to make it newer, how to make it better. So yes, that is absolutely an accurate diagnosis.

Chad: I love the Lego example. In part because my son is eight years old now and I see a lot of him being the idea sort of guy, him developing that way. And he's building amazing things with Legos, including the robotic Lego set now too. So, when it comes to your characteristics then that make you good at that, that makes you a good innovator... let's just drill down into that a bit more. What is it that really makes you good at that? What do you think are the key characteristics that get you excited about building and being able to do that?

Brian: You know it may sound like a copout answer but it's just kind of who I am deep down. I love change. I like new stuff. To some fault, I may overstep my bounds when it comes to that. Because you know it's one thing to be a certain way within yourself but when you do that in front of hundreds of thousands of people... sometimes change too quickly for so many people, it's a bad thing. For me, I've always been a sprinter versus a long distance runner even though I'm a half marathon runner now. But from a non-running standpoint--projects and things like that--if I can come up with an idea and execute then I'm ready for the next idea. Other people might come up with the idea and then stay within the idea and do a bunch of things, refine it and whatever. So it's good that there are people in our company who kind of counter-balance me and say, "Hey before we step over to this part of the room, let's just tighten up the part of the room that we're on, a little bit more." Within every company there's always a need for ebbs and flows and a balance system, because if the whole company thought the way I did, we would probably be nowhere near as successful as we are.

Chad: Absolutely. It takes a team, a number of roles here. There are those people who are really good at sowing and there are those really good at harvesting and those that are really good at preparing the soil for the next time around, right?

Brian: Yes.

Chad: Sounds like, my bet would be, from the first ten years of your career, managing a lot of projects, that the exciting part was probably the formation of the project, and you probably got bored as it was going on.

Brian: Yeah. I started the project and ended the project. For me designing the project and pricing the project and getting it to the point of sale were by far the best parts. Then it became a chore afterwards.

TEI 003: Innovation Lessons-Learned Creating StudioPress—Test Feasibility, Identify Trends, and More

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Yeah, you know, it's hard. Now, I got to order it and deliver it and get it installed-- that's less fun. But obviously, my responsibility was to take it from start to completion so I learned to enjoy it enough to where I wasn't bad at the back half of the job.

Chad: It really does sound like you found this great sweet spot-- a great blessing with having to build StudioPress and all those experiences really on your own shoulders and now getting to work as you merge with Copyblogger. A great sweet spot that really lets you work how you're wired to really excel, being the idea person.

Brian: Where I'm at right now is wonderful because I do--I get to identify trends. I get to come up with an idea, design it, get it to a theme that's built, release the theme, and then I turn it over to other departments-- the documentation department, the support department. And then I get to turn around and start right back on the next theme. So for me, right now, I'm purely living in my sweet spot because I get to do all of what I love to do.

Chad: Oh that's wonderful. That's what we all want to do, find that sweet spot, right? And be able to leverage our skills as best as we can. What kind of advice would you give the small business owner or the entrepreneur on how to be more innovative? What kind of things to pay attention to? What kind of things to do? What would you tell them?

Brian: One of the things that I did with themes, and of course you never want to imitate or copycat, but you always need to look at your competition to see what they're doing. There was a point back when I was within the first couple of years of what I was doing where I felt like I was starting to fall behind the times because I was never formally trained in graphic design. I started to envy some of the stuff my competition was doing so I would look to what they were doing and in concept, not you know straight up carbon copy, I would say, "Okay. What are they doing better than me? What areas can I improve on?" And from an innovation standpoint it's not so innovative, right? Because you're sort of idea-copying your competition. That's just business. But look to your competition just once in a while. You know, like you're driving a car. Race car drivers do it all the time. They look in their rearview mirror. They want to see who's coming up, who's far behind and where people are. If you think you're out on the road all by yourself, you might be in a bad spot. So, looking to your competition to see where your position is within the marketplace. "Are you losing ground? Are you gaining ground?" things like that. That's probably one thing I would recommend.

Chad: Absolutely. This notion of benchmarking is when businesses look at somebody who is doing something really well, whether it's in their industry or somewhere else that they can leverage. One of my favorite examples is Southwest Airlines. Their key to success was turning planes quickly on ground and?? getting ??back there and they benchmarked NASCAR pit crews who were really good at turning a car and getting it back on the racetrack. So your advice I think is spot on, really helpful to not copy but look at what others are doing well and see what you can learn from that for your own business. So, as

TEI 003: Innovation Lessons-Learned Creating StudioPress–Test Feasibility, Identify Trends, and
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Host: Chad McAllister, PhD

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I'm travelling around talking to business owners and product professionals, do you have a recommendation on who would be a good person to talk to to learn more product innovation lessons from?

Brian: Do you just mean someone kind of within the general internet sphere?

Chad: It could be anyone you encounter. It could be the person you go get coffee from in the morning because like you, many of us enjoy Starbucks. It could be someone you work with. Someone who you think might be insightful when it comes to product innovation and success with business.

Brian: One of the guys that I look to is Rafal Tomal. He's our lead designer at Copyblogger. From a design stand point, he's always out there learning new methods, new tricks, and new things that I think we all need. Even if we're on top of our game. I think there's always something you can learn from somebody and so from a design perspective, because I'm such an idea guy, I come up with ideas and I need to know how to execute them so I'm always going to him and saying, "Hey Rafal, what do you think about this movement within a theme or the way this is designed or transitions or whatever" and I throw the idea out there for him to help me kind of execute on it and then I've learned something. And he's given and I've received in that context. So, people within your company, even if you're the partner of the company and they're the employees of the company, you can still learn a lot from people out there.

Chad: Very good. Thanks and I might be trying to reach out to him and see if I can set up another interview. Brian I really appreciate your time. Thanks for discussing your success and how that applies to other people involved in business and product innovation specifically and thanks for the discussion today.

Brian: Yep Chad. It has been a total pleasure.

Thank you for listening to product innovation training your customers will love you for. To learn more please check out the blog at www.TheEverydayInnovator.com. Keep innovating!