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Todd Garland Explains How He Started and Grew BuySellAds.com into a \$10+ Million Dollar Company

YARO: Hello, this is Yaro Starak and welcome to another Entrepreneur's Journey interview. Today on the line with me, I have someone I am really looking forward to talking to because I've personally been running a business, or at least a startup in this industry and this particular person has by far, one of the leading companies in the space.

So, I know how hard it is to achieve that having worked in the field myself for the last two years. I'm definitely looking forward to hearing the story of Todd Garland who is on the line.

So, Todd, thank you for joining me!

TODD: Thank you very much, Yaro for having me.

YARO: Todd is the current founder and CEO of BuySellAds.com which is a direct advertising network. I think that's what you would call it, wouldn't you?





TODD: Yes, I mean, it's I guess, it's an advertising marketplace for lack of a better term. It's not necessarily an ad network but, definitely an advertising marketplace.

YARO: Right so, essentially, you help people monetize their websites by selling display advertising for them so, banners and you have a few other services in Twitter and email newsletter advertising, that sort of space.

TODD: Yes, exactly. Basically, if a publisher has any sort of audience that they can monetize, we'll help them do that.

YARO: Okay, in 2011 you were stated as making 8.5 million from this business because you entered [The Inc 500](#) fastest growing companies. That's correct, right? We don't have this in Australia, so is it fastest growing startups or fastest growing companies or...?

TODD: Yes, so what it is Inc Magazine literally takes you, either your tax forms or like an audited financial statement from your accountant and you have to submit them for the first year, which for us, would have been 2008 and then, three years later, which was 2011 and basically, they take the growth in revenue between those two years. That's how they put forth this list that they call the Inc 500.

And so, what's interesting about that is that it's not like most other lists that are out there about companies. That's not a popularity contest. It's actually based on purely revenue and just to clarify, it's US companies only.

So, clearly, there's a lot more out there but...

YARO: Well, the point being you're in charge of a company making more than \$8 million a year, I'd love to learn more about obviously, buy and sell ads but, we need to go back in time and get Todd's story from the beginning.

So, Todd, where were you born and raised? Did you go to University?

TODD: Sure.



I was born and raised in a little town in Maine, in Southern Maine called Cape Porpoise. Cape Porpoise is actually part of a larger town in Maine that's better known, called Kennebunkport.

The reason why Kennebunkport is known is because they were a couple of Presidents who summer there, both of the Bushes. While I don't claim any sort of a political affiliation, if I say, Kennebunkport, some folks will know where that is.

YARO: Okay, a claim to fame.

TODD: Yes, exactly.

YARO: Is it an entrepreneurial hotbed?

TODD: Well, you know, it's a tourist town so, I think any tourist town, there's definitely, there's hostile involved because you have all these rich people infiltrating your town every summer and you have to try to figure how to make money from them.

YARO: [Laughs] Did you attempt this, too?

TODD: Yes, I mean, I think I guess my fondest memories of a childhood would be trying to sell some of my parent's items from the house when they weren't paying attention, out in the street, I'd set up these impromptu yard sales and stuff like that.

YARO: Without them knowing.

TODD: Well, I definitely got in trouble a few times. I remember one time, I sold my dad's stereo system. He wasn't happy at all.

YARO: What did you get for it? Was it market value?

TODD: I had no concept of what it was worth. I think I made like \$20.

YARO: [Laughs] I can understand why he got upset.



TODD: Exactly.

YARO: So, that was your lemonade stand basically, your first kind of business as a kid.

TODD: Yes, that was my lemonade stand but, I'd say the work, I don't know if I'd say I'm most proud of but, the work I enjoyed most when I was growing up was in high school that was actually washing dishes in a restaurant. And, it's not like to like paint some sort of rags to riches thing. I actually thoroughly enjoyed washing dishes because I could sit there and do this repeatable thing without really putting much thought into it.

It's kind of like software. I don't want to say you don't put much thought in the software but, once you have it built, the thinking that you do isn't as intense as it was building. You're just going to try and sell it and repeat it over and over again.

YARO: It's an interesting analogy. I was thinking that maybe you're a stoner when you were a teenager or maybe you were really Zen so, you just like sitting there and washing the dishes but, what you said is a lot better [*laughs*].

TODD: No, I was a straight shooter man. I think in high school, I missed like one day in four years. I was a shy, straight shooter kind of guy.

YARO: And, that led to University?

TODD: Before I went off to University, I actually studied abroad in Brazil for a full year. That was a year between high school and college.

YARO: Like a gap year.

TODD: Yes, exactly. And, I actually think that was probably one of the more formative times of my life, I think. Just because I think anytime you'd experience different culture and kind of have to ingrain yourself in a different way of life overall, it's a pretty eye opening type of experience, especially outside of the States, you know.



YARO: Right, and you're 18 so, that's pretty young. That's a new culture, a new language. It must be challenging. Did you just sort of study... what is it called? Is it like a diploma or what is it a gap year? Was it a course?

TODD: See, this is the best part. I didn't have to return with any sort of accomplishment or whatsoever other than saying like I submerged myself within the culture and learned the language and stuff like that. I didn't need any more credits to graduate high school and of course, that year brought in a great impact in my ability to get into college and so, it was more so just, I don't want to say vacation because I work hard while I was there but...

YARO: You worked hard doing what?

TODD: What I meant by work hard, I worked hard to I guess, submit myself to their culture and try and take in all that I could.

YARO: But, you weren't studying University lectures or high school courses or anything like that? It was just living in Brazil and learning a language.

TODD: Yes, exactly. I went to high school but, I guarantee you, all the days that I didn't skip school in my regular high school, I definitely skipped in Brazil. So...

YARO: Probably a more distracting there, more things to go out and do.

TODD: Yes.

YARO: Okay, so you come back from Brazil and you go straight into University?

TODD: Before I went to University, I actually took some computer classes out of Community College.

YARO: How come?



TODD: To be honest, I had no idea what I really wanted to do. I remember I took a Photoshop course which I really loved and I took a course in like operating a video camera like on a movie set or something like that.

YARO: Right.

TODD: And then, I was working on another part time job. I was landscaping that fall. I think it was more so I was still kind of decompressing from my year abroad and trying to figure out what my next steps would be because while I was still in Brazil, I hadn't really planned forward for attending some sort of University. And so, that fall was when I was kind of getting all my ducks in a row and then, that's when I applied to a University and started there in that winter.

YARO: Can you put a timestamp on this like when you came back from Brazil, what year was it so, you know where the Internet was at the time?

TODD: Yes, sure. So, I was in Brazil between 1989 and 2000 and so, I came back from Brazil the summer of 2000 and then, started college the winter of 2001.

YARO: Okay so, we're looking at the .COM boom basically, it was when you were starting college.

TODD: Exactly. I actually, I didn't have my first computer, I don't think until I was actually in Brazil.

YARO: Right, so you're not exactly what you'd call a child prodigy when it comes to developing software and having a business. You were selling your dad's stuff on the street... there wasn't really anything else in terms of your background.

TODD: No, I'm no prodigy whatsoever.

YARO: So, you go into University then, college and sort of not really sure what to do. What degree did you do?

TODD: I actually studied Portuguese.



YARO: Of course, you did.

TODD: Yes, exactly. I already spoke Portuguese but, I didn't really know what I actually wanted to do but, at that time, I was building websites and so...

To be honest, I don't really know what I was thinking. I didn't really have any sort of like a very direct plan for my life at that point. I was just living. It's like, "Okay, I'm going to go to school and..." you know, I'm going to lie here in the States like school for some people isn't all about studying.

Like for me, maybe that's what I should have been focused on but, I didn't have it all put together yet. I didn't have that puzzle figured out.

YARO: So, you basically went to parties is what you're saying.

TODD: Well, yes and no. I mean, I don't know. I was just having a good time.

YARO: [Laughs] Good time. Okay, having a college experience but, maybe not so much focused on the education. But, maybe your parents don't want to hear that, right? Not that it matters now because you're in charge of a company.

TODD: Yes, I don't want to sound like a total screw up but, I mean, let's be honest. I went to college Major in Portuguese for which I had absolutely no intention of ever... I had no idea how I actually applied that to my life from there from that point forward. I was thoroughly ingrained in building websites and knew that was something that I loved to do at the time but, there is no real structure, course workaround anything like that.

I mean, certainly, there is definitely Computer Science but, my brain is much more creative and technical in that sense.

YARO: Right and in terms of building websites, you were basically taught from those courses you did and self-taught, is that it?



TODD: Yes, I'd say more so self-taught. When I returned from Brazil, I actually started a website called the International Exchange Student news and that's really what is my first experience, building something online and I had to figure out how to do it because I couldn't afford a penny but, it built the site for me.

YARO: And, that was a hobby though. It never became like a money-making business.

TODD: Yes, definitely. It was funny. Somebody, I think, people would email me to buy ads in the site and I was just, it's like what? You want to pay me to put something on the website?

No, I mean, this isn't really for that. This is just for exchange students. I totally didn't get it.

YARO: Well good thing, you figured out eventually. So, take us forward then. It's 2000, or sort of the first few years of 2000, you're doing a Portuguese qualification at college but, you're also building websites. I'm assuming that's like you're spending money, the money you made from building websites, right?

TODD: Definitely.

YARO: Did you start a business then after graduation or what happened?

TODD: Wow, so that's actually a really good question. You probably know that you're walking in that question. I won't lie. My life literally fell off a cliff in 2003. The reason why is because both my parents actually passed away within two months of each other.

YARO: Oh wow.

TODD: Yes, all of a sudden, the partying and good time at college came to this screeching halt.

YARO: And, that was unrelated how they died?



TODD: Yes. It was unrelated.

YARO: So, you did not see this coming, that's for sure.

TODD: No, not at all.

YARO: Okay so, how did you continue from that point forward then?

TODD: So, I mean for me, at that point, because I had fallen behind a full semester in college and most of my friends were actually already a semester ahead of me because I had started halfway through the year when I first started college. And so, all of a sudden, they were all graduating and I was still going to be there for another four years.

Having my parents just died, I was like, "Oh great, so now, I'm going to be here and trying to deal this." Clearly, my parents aren't around. My friends are going to be leaving. I'm going to go crazy in this place in Western Mass. It's just not going to work.

And so, I still didn't really know what to do. I'm not going to lie. I sent around my resume to a few, I actually thought it was fun at that time. I'm just like, I'm just going to send my resume to some of these companies in Boston and see what happens.

Luckily, I ended up meeting with these two other guys who had, I guess what we called an Interactive Agency at the time and they were just in the process of really starting that company and stuff like that and so, actually, I entered a great time, took a full time job there and it was, all of a sudden, I was no longer in college.

So, I guess, you could say I'm a dropout.

YARO: Okay, so you actually didn't finish the degree.

TODD: That's correct. I didn't finish the degree. I still want to but, it's definitely taking a back seat in terms of... you know, where I spend my time...



YARO: [Laughs] Fair enough.

Okay, so you were working at, what was it? An interactive agency so, what do they do?

TODD: So, basically the same thing I was doing freelance. We built websites for other people. We managed search marketing campaigns. We solved SEO before we even really knew what SEO was, you know. Kind of back in those times when it's like the whole pitch was, you know, a website is an online brochure, as crazy as it sounds, like that was literally like part of the pitch that actually made us a decent amount of money back then.

YARO: Yes, all right. So, you're sort of capitalizing on that initial move with all these companies wanting to have a web presence and really that was the early days in some regard.

So, static brochure websites. Did advertising come into it by then? Were you starting to see that as revenue stream anywhere or we're still far away from seeing the vision?

TODD: We're getting closer but, more so, we were spending advertisers money, managing page search campaigns and so...

YARO: Was that pay-per-click, though?

TODD: Yes, that was paper click.

YARO: Okay.

TODD: And, around the same time, I'd say after I've done working there for a couple of years, I started playing around with some websites as a hobby and so, one of those sites I ran was CSSElite.com which was just another one of those CSS galleries for a dime a dozen back in the day.

YARO: I'm assuming by now, you've actually developed some good design skills because if you starting a CSS based website, you obviously have an eye for design or care about that industry a lot.



TODD: Yes. I think I could say that, I mean I built a lot of sites for a lot of clients and I definitely discovered some sort of good fit there with my personal skills in terms of CSS. That's back when we were first switching from tables to CSS based layouts and luckily, that whole thing kind of clicked in my mind early on and that's when I feel like, in terms of my actual skills, they started to really accelerate.

YARO: In terms of your entrepreneurialism at this stage, you're an employee still. You haven't really had a business yet. Are you hating being an employee or is it okay? What is your attitude towards breaking free from that nine to five role.

TODD: I actually owned a small percentage of that business and so, it was almost like a partnership like the two guys were much older and much more experienced than I [0:17:09] share but, I did have a small chunk and got distributions from that.

It was actually a great little gig straight out of college, well, for a dropout, of course.

YARO: And, you were getting a salary, I presume too.

TODD: Yes, exactly.

YARO: So, were you experiencing like a startup company then? Did you sort of notice the dynamic nature of the business or were you really just putting out websites and you were doing the grant work for clients.

TODD: Yes, I mean, and stuff like doing more grant work. I'd say, I mean, back then, so we're talking 2005 now, I still feel like the whole startup thing was pretty young and I myself who's incredibly naïve, I mean, for example, I don't even really know what venture capital was or like, I had no—Like if somebody said, "venture capital" to me, I'd probably just nod my head and smile.

YARO: Okay, so you're involved in this company and you start a CSS website. Now, that website actually had a big part to play, didn't it in eventually launching buy and sell adds, is that right?



TODD: It did.

YARO: Okay, so is it safe for us to jump into that connection now or is there any little business we're missing out on here?

TODD: No, that's it. I mean, I had those two sites, [CSS Elite](#) and a similar site called [13 Styles](#), and that was really what started the whole idea behind buy and sell ads.

YARO: So, were you running those websites as hobbies on the side of that full time job?

TODD: Well, I kind of started them while I was on my way out the door there so, it was kind of in between, that company called [MindFire](#) and when I went out to do freelance again. But yes, I was basically running these on the side as hobbies.

YARO: How did you find growing them? Was it easy because obviously, that was a fairly crowded space, design space? Maybe tell us how you grew the website, that's probably the... since the start of buy and sell ads, how did you grow these two design based websites.

TODD: A lot of it was SEO and a lot of it was not like, a lot of re-blogging. Like on CSS Elite, I keep track of lots of resources and things that people are posting about, how-tos, demos, and stuff like and I'd link out to them.

That turned out to be incredible for SEO like any sort of term that had a decent amount of volume, which you did find through Google Search Tools, I write some sort of re-blog of something that links out to the original source and I'd actually end up ranking pretty well for a lot of those things.

So, a lot of SEO for CSS Elite, 13 Styles is more literally just producing quality stuff. 13 Styles was a CSS Menu website and so, I was just producing CSS menus. I have like 20, 30 or 40 and just giving them away for free.



Naturally, it just got a lot of links back and stuff like that, I mean, in terms of traffic. We're not talking about insane numbers. We're talking about CSS. CSS, we probably had maybe 150,000 to 200,000 page views a month. 13 Styles, maybe like 80,000 page views a month.

YARO: Enough to make some money from them, that's for sure.

You said you left the job. Why did you leave?

TODD: I was just ready to go out and be on my own and try my hand at doing my own thing, I think. I also think I was a little young and naïve, as well. I had the mind set well, why am I doing all these work when these other guys get to keep all the money that they make from me?

So, I didn't really understand the whole process of how business is actually built and how, just because you built something doesn't mean you should get paid for even 75% of it, right? There is a company being run. There are bigger things involved.

YARO: Okay so, your thoughts were... Let me get this straight to you. It's 2005 or is that about the time you left?

TODD: 2007 actually.

YARO: You are like about 26 or 27 at that stage, am I correct?

TODD: It's funny I have to think about those but, I think around like 25 or 26, yes.

YARO: Okay, so you've been earning a salary like the decision to leave, were you jumping to a soft landing or were you basically... Did you have a bunch of money saved up and then, you just said, "You know what? I'll figure out how to make money from there." What was the plan? [*Laughs*]

TODD: That's a good question. So, I mean, like I said, I own a little bit of the company and so, I ended up selling my portion back to those guys when I left. And so, that have me a little bit of a soft landing but still, I had to figure out a lot on my own.



I won't lie, every time I've left a company, it's scary no matter what you have saved it up or what kind of plan you have. It's definitely scary.

But, every time I have left a company, I've always discovered like, "Oh wow, there's like this whole world out there that like, I was not letting myself get to before and you know what? Everything is going to be okay."

YARO: Right, but to answer the question, the plan was just to figure it out, right?

TODD: Yes. Quite literally, the plan was to figure it out. I had some... I lined up this free landscape like right around the time when I was leaving. I'd already kind of made my decision to leave but, I've been talking with this company and I basically given them some sort of... But again, it was a freelance project, right? It wasn't like a full time thing.

That company is a pretty big company right now, HubSpot.

YARO: Oh yes.

TODD: And so, I'd say maybe a month after I left Mind Fire, I ended up starting maybe, I'd say like 50% of my time at this company called Hubspot. But, at the time that I left or gave my notice, I had a hunch that things were going to work out at HubSpot but, I didn't really know for sure. And, again, it was still freelance.

I was really just going out and figuring it out.

YARO: Okay, so you had options. In other words, you knew you could make some freelancing money here. You had a couple of websites that were growing as well. So, you're just going to see what worked was sort of the plan.

TODD: Exactly.

YARO: Okay, so with the two websites, CSS Elite and, is it 13 Styles?



TODD: Correct.

YARO: Okay, so those two sites, I guess when you got your job, you can spend more time on them as well.

Did you think that they would become your main source of income? How open were your eyes to having the website of your own that made money?

TODD: I'm not going to lie. I still don't really think I fully got the whole picture. If I had been a little more [clueful?] as to how much money you could actually make from having a series of sites, I probably would still be doing that and never would have come across the idea for buy and sell ads.

YARO: Interesting. Okay, so you weren't thinking of these sites as your business. You were kind of just still indulging in your interest and design in CSS.

TODD: Yes, they were definitely still hobbies.

YARO: Okay, so, I'm assuming it was just you as a one-man show. You were writing the content. You were the one doing all the SEO work. You're the one doing the designs. Were they Wordpress blogs?

TODD: Yes, they were at Wordpress.

YARO: Okay. Can you connect those two sites with buy and sell ads? I'm assuming by that point, you must have people coming to you to want to buy ads off those two sites.

TODD: Exactly, at this, where we are now, there's two tracks that really started. This is actually pretty important for the story.

The first track is what I already had to the company called HubSpot. So, that's one track and then, the second track is when I first started development on buy and sell ads.



So, I would say probably two to three months after I left Mind Fire and when I just started working a little bit of freelance time for HubSpot. I started, I guess right about around the same time, I started working on the idea for buy and sell ads.

And, the whole idea behind buy and sell ads which interestingly enough, when I first started the idea is actually called search friendly ads because it was back when you could still do some SEO type things and I was thinking, well, wait a second, these guys are buying ads in my site. They're also getting link backs at the same time and so, that's kind of a new angle on selling these ads.

YARO: That's for SEO friendly advertisement.

TODD: Yes, exactly. I quickly figured out that that actually wasn't a very good approach and so, I ditched the whole thing and then, started on just to focus on actually buy and sell ads without any sort of SEO value in the ads. But, running those sites CSS Elite and 13 Styles is really what led me to the idea of buy and sell ads.

I don't think it's fair for me to say that everything about buy and sell ads is incredibly original, right? Because people have been selling display ads forever. They are at the time where other ad marketplaces like [AdBrite](#) and there are clearly many ad networks out there.

The difference however in my idea for buy and sell ads versus all these other ad networks and marketplaces really centers around the ability to sell an ad for a fixed 30-day rate. There literally was no other ad network out there that would automate that process for you or marketplace.

And so, that's really all that buy and sell ads was built to do in the beginning, sell an ad for a fixed 30-day rate and that's it.

YARO: Right so, I'm assuming you built that a lot for your own means. You were just looking for a platform to actually sell the ads from your own two websites. Was that correct?



TODD: Yes, I mean, the thing is like those sites, I mean, I don't want to sound like a jerk and say that two or three thousand dollars a month in supplemental income isn't a lot of money but, it wasn't enough money for me to really take great care of those advertisers and really spend the time I should have been spending on making that happen for them.

And so, really, I just wanted a way to sell those ads to those advertisers without having to talk to them.

The other thing I found is that every time I get an inquiry for somebody who wanted to buy ads from one of those sites, it was really frustrating because I'd reply as quickly as I could but, like half of them would just never end up coming through.

And so, I wanted a way to capture that impulse when they were in that state of mind when they're ready to buy something or ready to take action. And so, really what I wanted was a conversion page like, "Oh, you want to buy an ad out of the site. Okay, just click here, pay here and we're done." And then, the ad is live, right?

YARO: Right. So, no negotiating via email or phone call or just anything like that. Here's how much you pay per month. Here's the way to buy it. Here's the way to pay and away you go.

TODD: Yes, exactly. Take it or leave it.

I think one of the other main differences with something like a buy and sell ad is that you're not putting these fictitious prices out there, right? You're not saying like, "Oh, this is a 35-dollar CPM, buy it or not," right?

Like, clearly, if anything that's priced unreasonable, somebody is expecting to negotiate. But, if you price something reasonable and attach a way for somebody to actually take some sort of action by that, better things will happen.

YARO: You're reducing the friction.

TODD: Yes, exactly.



YARO: Okay, so tell us about your life though at this point because you're living off a combination of freelancing income, advertising income from your own two websites, while you're sitting there personally coding up buy and sell ads. Is that a correct picture at around 2007?

TODD: Yes, no. That's exactly right. So, I'm sitting there and living out some of the income from these sites, my freelance work which included HubSpot at the time and then, sitting there in my basement apartment with no windows and no whiteboard trying to figure out how I'm going to piece together these buy and sell ads thing.

YARO: And, you're a one man show, right at this point?

TODD: I was for the first year, basically, yes.

YARO: That must have been hard [*laughs*]. I can only imagine because you're already running two blogs or two websites plus producing for another website, a big website and any other freelance gigs you have plus doing your shopping like were you married at this stage? Was there any kind of partnership involved or...?

TODD: Yes, I was dating who is now my wife. Yes, it was definitely a very busy time, right. I was still a little bit in party mode. I was dating so, I kind of slowed down a little bit but, we were still going out at night and stuff like that. But, at the end of the day, if you want to do something, you've got to do it, right?

Like, I think one of the most important things in this life is getting to a point where you figure out that nobody is going to hand something to you and nothing is just going to all of a sudden appear magically.

If you want to do something, you really have to go out there and get it done and do it yourself.

YARO: I'm assuming that's what motivated you to code up buy and sell ads. You just really want to see it created so, whenever you found time, you got into a dark room and coded.



TODD: Yes, exactly. It's something I really wanted to use on my own site so, I was like, everyday I'd sit there and say, "Oh man, I can't wait until I can just put this ad code here and have it work magically somehow."

YARO: Okay.

Given, you were juggling so much then and if not, there's a lot of people who I think, when they just start their companies that when they can have the biggest challenges to get to the success point.

What made the difference? Why were you able to manage so many different things so well when so many people seem to struggle to do one thing, especially because a lot of people do a full time job and they're looking to find the hours outside of a full time job to get a company going.

What for you was... Is there a productivity technique or a mindset? You mentioned before obviously, the drive to want to see something created but, from practical standpoint, was there some structure to your life at this stage?

TODD: It's like I don't know. I don't want cheesy but like, we've got 24 hours each day and if you're trying to figure out how to get something done that doesn't seem like you should have enough time to get done, there's no other way than just like, I mean, let's face it, you stay up late and you make certain sacrifices to do what you're trying to do.

It's important to know that I think at this point, the whole starting of buy and sell ads, that I actually stopped doing all of my other freelance work and I started full time with HubSpot.

I also tend to be a pretty honest guy. And so, I was very, when I was working on HubSpot, I was working on HubSpot, when I was not doing anything other than HubSpot, buy and sell ads really was an early morning and late at night kind of thing.

It's the type of thing where... I know, I'm trying to figure out a way to answer your question. I guess, I just don't really have any good answer.



YARO: Yes, one of the things I'm noticing about you, Todd is you seem to be a bit of jack of all trades in certainly tech because you're coding software as well as doing design work and publishing and which I'm assuming needs some writing, those are three areas where I think not everyone is usually good at three, not easily a designer, a developer and a writer or content creator. Is this something special about you in that regard?

TODD: I'm definitely not special. I'll be the first one to tell you that. I think I also don't think I want to show anybody my actual coding skills, right in terms of backend stuff. At one point, we actually re-wrote the entire code base of buy and sell ads. I'm clearly not a very skilled developer but, I do hack buy and sell ads together well enough so that it worked and then, actually did what it said it was supposed to do, well enough, right, get the job done.

YARO: Right, [unclear].

TODD: Yes. But, I mean, I think in terms of jack of all trades, I definitely feel like having some sort of front end user interface skills is definitely very, very valuable skill for any kind of founder or person who is starting a business because if you are able to take how you are conceptualizing this thing in your mind, and this vision, and actually translate it into something that you can see and touch and feel and that works, you're connecting the dots a hell lot faster than somebody who is not doing that.

That isn't to say that people who, founders that aren't frontend UI people can't do as good a job as I can do because clearly, there are plenty of founders that are doing a hell lot better than I'm doing but, my point is that, in order to get from that idea, that vision into something that's functional, I'd like to think that it's maybe a little quicker, it comes together maybe a little quicker, I guess.

YARO: All right, well take us forward then to the process of launching buy and sell ads. How did it go?

TODD: Sure. So, at this point, I've been working at HubSpot for combined freelance and full time status for about a year and a half. Buy and sell ads



at this point has also sat on the shelf, finished for about six months without launching.

So, clearly, if I could go back and launch buy and sell ads six months sooner, I'll do that but, the fact is I was scared to launch it. I was saying to myself, "Oh, nobody is going to like it."

I'm sure it sounds pretty crazy like did you really let it sit on the shelf for six months?

Sure, I mean there are some things that had to be done. There are some loose ends and so on to be tied up for me to actually launch it but, it was the core buy and sell ads was effectively fully finished for about six months before I launched.

YARO: So, you were just afraid.

TODD: Yes man, I was a limp. I've experienced this many times before when we re-wrote the entire code base. I was absolutely terrified to re-launch it. I'm going through it right now. We're gearing up to launch what we're calling our **Buy Sell Ads Pro Product**. This thing, we originally said was going to launch in like January of this year. I think that's nine months ago so...

State to launch for about two months now but, we just keep polishing and polishing and polishing and we finally gotten to the point where we're actually going to launch it but, a lot of what's held us back from launching it now versus two to three months ago is me, right? I just have this thing where it's like, "I don't know. I need to make sure that it's ready. I don't feel that it's good enough like it still needs some work done."

Not one of my best qualities, so...

YARO: [*Laughs*] Perfectionism is always a trap for entrepreneurs.

What was the plan with Buy Sell Ads when you first launched? Was it, just put it out there and see who used it or was it really like, I'm going to make



money from this, you know you're going to take a cut from advertising straight away.

TODD: Yes, the goal of Buy Sell Ads in the first year, I want to get to the point where I was making \$5000 a month, right. So, clearly, you can see, at the outset, my goal and vision for this wasn't as big as it is now. It was very naïve. I just had no clue what I was getting myself into. I won't lie.

YARO: But, you had a business model ready to go.

TODD: Yes, I mean, the business model was rock solid. The Excel spreadsheets are great. Everything worked out, right but again, I was shooting very, very low for the site. I really didn't have any sort of background and display advertising or startups as we call them now. I feel like there's a lot more, there's a much larger startup movement, a lot more education, a lot more literature, a lot more buzz out there and people advocating for what it takes actually build these companies.

Around the time I launched Buy Sell Ads, it definitely wasn't to a point that it is now. Maybe, it was like that in Silicon Valley but, it definitely wasn't like that in Boston.

YARO: Okay, so... But when I say you had a business model, you were planning on, here's an advertising management tool that allows you to sell direct to sponsors on a monthly basis, like a set time basis.

But, if you use that, I'm going to take a cut from those ad sales, like that was what you had from day one.

TODD: Exactly.

YARO: Okay so, can you tell us what happened? Did you just press the "on" button and then, tell a few websites that this was available? How did you roll it out?

TODD: Yes, no. That's pretty much how it went. So, I put the site live. I put my own websites on it. I reached out to some folks that had sites in my same niche, I guess, I'd say who I became friends through running those



sites and it was literally like the first handful of people I reached out to were like, "Oh my God, this is exactly what I need," and got it set up.

If I look back, I can pull this up here but, I actually kind of know by heart. If I went back to the first like three months of launching the site, it quite literally took off.

YARO: What do you think that is? Was it something about the market because I'm assuming you were in design space. So, it was mostly design websites who started using you. I've got a little insight in this area because I have been looking to take clients on for our own similar type of similar service and you face resistance about taking a 25 percent cut from advertising and if they're a not a large enough website, they're not going to make any ad sales, anyways.

So, how did this all roll out for you so well, I guess is the question?

TODD: I think it's because we were solving one thing that was very, very... It was very clear about what it was that we were solving for these publishers and they got it right away because they were selling ads the same way I was selling ads on my hobby sites and it's that we were providing their advertisers in them a way to like close a deal very, very quickly without anybody having to do anything except upload an ad and pay for it.

That's the only one thing that we did really, really well. It's important to note that back when we first launched, a ton of stuff was manual. If you needed to cash money or withdraw money from your publisher account, you literally had to send me an email. If you wanted to cancel subscription, or if you were an advertiser or wanted to cancel a subscription, you just send me an email.

And so, there is a lot of these manual processes built around the site but, the one thing that we did really well was fully automate it.

YARO: I'm assuming there wasn't a lot of available options to do what it did at the time like you... I know in 2007, it would have been OpenAds which is



now [OpenX](#), I think or PHPAdsNew. They went to so many different iterations.

They were definitely ad rotation services and plugins and scripts that allowed some of this process to be automated. Did you just hit the sweet spot, you think?

TODD: I think it was just the way that we did it. It was the fix 30-day rates and the subscriptions. The fixed 30-day rate is how these publishers were selling and the subscription is how the advertisers wanted to buy.

I think subscriptions really are a bad wrap because people think instantly like, "Oh, we're trying to trick people into keeping this running longer than they want." It's not the case at all. Advertisers love subscriptions.

YARO: All right so, take us forward then from that point, three months you've had some rapid growth. Did you get to your 5000-month target quickly?

TODD: I think like the second month.

YARO: Wow, amazing. So, how many sites do you sign up by then?

TODD: There's probably about 30-40 sites running in the marketplace by the second month.

YARO: They must have been fairly high-quality sites. You're not getting a lot of low-traffic sites at that stage.

TODD: Yes, we definitely got, they are all decent, very decent sites.

YARO: At this point, I'm assuming you're starting to feel the pressure of having to deal with these clients. These are all, like you said, it was manual processes. You're going to start getting a bunch of email.

Can you, I guess, take us to this growth stage where you must start thinking about hiring people, your code base, you develop the needs, your customer service needs, all of these different roles are going to become



more and more difficult for one person to do. So, how did you manage the growth?

TODD: Sure.

Also important to note, I was still actually working full time at HubSpot at this time and so, this was still a night-weekend-early-morning whatever type project for that entire first year.

So, in February 2008 is when we sold our first ad and then, I was working full time at HubSpot through the end of 2008. So, literally like January first 2009 is when I went out on my own to do this full time but, for those first eleven months, I was still working full time.

In terms of the growth and stuff like that, when I look back today, it still amazes me how quickly things grew but, I have to say I loved it like the whole issue behind people having to email me for silly stuff like withdrawing money and cancelling subscriptions.

I loved it, right because it gave me that opportunity to engage with all these users and I really just enjoyed getting to know this people.

There's a lot of our early users from that first year, even first two years who were doing all these stuff manually that I'm still really good friends with.

In terms of... You mentioned something earlier too about the 25 percent being a lot. You'd be really surprised. There are some folks that think 25 percent is a lot and maybe, for them it is but, there are others where they sit back and they think well, I can either spend 25% here and let them deal with all that stuff or I can save that time and I can work on this where I'm clearly going to make more than just the 25 percent in profit.

YARO: That being said though, did you offer some sort of ability to find the advertisers at this stage or really, it was just about the software and that's where the 25 percent was paying for the ability to easily take payments from advertisers and subscriptions as you said because if there weren't many options I suppose, as a value proposition that makes sense at that stage too where today, maybe given there's more options, some people



won't take 25 percent or some people will take 50 percent if you like Google AdSense or something like that. It was a different place, I guess and this is five years ago, right?

TODD: Yes, this is definitely a while ago. There were definitely fewer options but, I think the 25 percent, when I ran the math and built my spreadsheets and stuff like that, that was literally the lowest I could go and actually turn this into a business.

How I got the 25 percent was just putting my thumb in the air and saying, "Oh, let's do 25 percent." And then, when I went actually through the process of seeing how that worked out with our expenses and growth and stuff like that, anybody trying to do is for less than 25 percent, I get a great chuckle and I just say, "Well, good luck my friend," because it's hard for anything less than that.

YARO: Yes, I agree. So, take us to the growth.

TODD: Towards, I'd say, maybe four to five months after launch, things were going nicely. The software really started to become a pretty big strain and I realized that I had to do things to the software, improve software to keep up with this growth because there are so many things that people are asking for, people that are loving the service, loving the site but, they need these extra things to make it... better for them.

So, that's when I really started figuring out, okay when am I going to leave HubSpot? How am I going to leave HubSpot? And, what am I going to do with Buy Sell Ads once I get out there? How am I going to hire people? And stuff like that.

And so, my first hire in terms of a full-time hire was a developer. Basically, what we did is we re-wrote the entire code base together in about four months' time in doing the backend and myself doing the front end.

At that time, we brought on two extra people to help us with support but, these folks were part-timers. They're still with us today so, no discredit to them in terms of not calling them first full time hire but, they are part-time



guys and they definitely helped us really keep all those users engaged and stuff like that.

YARO: I assume you were boot strapping so, there was no investment ever along this. It was just taking the cash flow from the business, paying the people you hired.

TODD: Yes, exactly.

I'm pretty simple-minded when it comes to business. It's okay, so I made a dollar and now, I've got \$0.85 to spend on growth and \$0.15 for myself.

YARO: Okay. Can you, rather than go through I guess this has been five years since you started Buy Sell Ads, any kind of major hiccups along the way or anything in particular that really changed the direction of the company because it's a big difference, I guess, from 5000 a month to a six-figure business to a seven-figure business and you're almost towards an eight-figure business now, as well.

How does that happen?

TODD: It's really easy to sit here for four or five years passed and look back and at this point, it feels like it was easy because I feel like what we are doing right now is not much harder but, I mean, I've definitely gone through a lot of ups and downs with Buy Sell Ads, definitely emotionally, mentally, whatever you want to call it. It's been a really hard road just because yes, we're in a very competitive space, we're boot strapped and so, we tend to get a lot less attention to that sense from tech blogs and stuff, people who maybe we all feel like matter but, at the end of the day it doesn't really matter.

I don't know how to say it... We just been organized is all.

YARO: [*Laughs*] Well, maybe I can be more specific in terms of the two elements of the business that I guess drive your company, is getting new websites to use Buy Sell Ads and getting new advertisers to purchase advertisements so, you get your 25 percent thereto and drive your cash flow.



At some point, like if you had to hire a sales team, to recruit both sides of that relationship, or has it all been organic?

TODD: A decent percentage has been organic. And that has been one thing that I'm pretty proud of about Buy Sell Ads, is that we've been able to churn up that organic growth and then, the other side is exactly what you said, having a team that helps recruit an onboard folks, both on the advertiser and publisher side.

We don't really call them sales people per se. We're all account managers in a way. We have our group of advertisers and publishers that we take care of and let's say like the specific verticals that we focus on in terms of growing within our marketplace.

I think, one thing about Buy Sell Ads that's very important is that we let ourselves to all of our users and so, we advocate for them pretty aggressively whether it be on the advertiser or publisher side. It's like we're Switzerland in the middle of the advertiser and the publisher.

YARO: Right.

TODD: We don't get in any conflicts and we arbitrate and we... any sort of disagreements and stuff and we try and make good sound decisions. We just do what we call good business when people ask, "Well, how do you figure out what is right to do between these advertisers and these publishers." It's like, I don't know, we just do it. Seems like the right thing to do. It's worked out for us.

YARO: It's almost like you have to be relationship managers here at the same time because you're dealing with those two groups how to get them on the phone and find out two sides of the story and then, decide what really happened and make a decision from there, right?

TODD: Yes, definitely. And, I think in terms of growth, I think another big thing for is that we're very, very transparent so, you can go into a marketplace anytime. You can see what's sold and what's not sold for any publisher.



And so, if you have a site, let's say a really popular Apple site or Mac blog whatever you want to call it, and you're looking around and seeing what websites are making good money in that vertical, you're going to go through our inventory see ten to fifteen or twenty sites and you're like, "Holy sh*t! They're making a lot of money."

You know exactly where that money is coming from and that's from us. So, it makes a very, very strong case for that publisher to sign up with us and then, let's picture them. They go out. They fill out a form. They start talking to us and they're like, "Oh wow, these guys actually know what they are doing. They're not a bunch of jerks. They reply to me. They reply quickly. They speak intelligently and they sound like they know how to help me get from where I am right now to where I want to be."

That's what's worked for us, really.

YARO: How big is your company now like how many people are employed? Are you in an office? What's today's situation?

TODD: Sure.

I think there's thirteen of us now and I always don't really know exactly how many people work here because we've been basically trying to hire as quickly as we can, as often as we find smart people will hire them because we're in a really strong growth phase right now.

The other reason is because we are remote. Everybody is remote. And so, there's myself and one other gentleman in the National office in Boston, and then, we're all spread out. We have folks in Texas, California, North Carolina, Toronto, just outside Toronto, Montreal, Germany, a couple in London, Romania, and I guarantee I'm forgetting somebody. I'm going to feel guilty if they listen to this but, ...

YARO: How do you like, because that's not intentional. I'm assuming you're just looking for the best people. How do these people come to you? Do you put job ads out there and then, they just apply from anywhere in the world. You pick the best person? How does this work?



TODD: We pick people who understand what our users are trying to accomplish. So, whether it's on the advertiser or publisher side and the vast majority of folks that we actually have hired have been users of a service in some capacity, whether an advertiser or a publisher.

Just two weeks ago, we hired like one of our midyear publishers. So, it's a guy who's writing our sweet spot, making a good amount of money from us each month, totally gets the problem we're trying to solve on the publisher side and now, he's working for us.

YARO: It's amazing what Internet companies can be like at the moment like that, that spread of where people work and they're all doing remotely and you got different time zones yet, I'm assuming because they're got some fairly segmented roles.

They don't really need to interact with each other to much so, they can just work with the clients and they're good to go.

TODD: Yes. We use a tool from [37Signals](#) called [Campfire](#) that keeps us fairly well connected during the day in terms of when people need to help each other out. Obviously, we have Skype. We have a pretty good task system built within to our admin panel that we use for the site.

There are people on the team who will talk to them like once every few days and there are other people in the team who are in Campfire joking around the whole time and I've got to remind them that there's stuff that got to get done.

Everybody who is working for us, as far as I know, they actually want to be working for us. And so, they enjoy what they are doing. It gets back to life in general. If you're doing something right now that you're not enjoying then, you got a problem, man because we're not here that long so, you might as well do something that you're going to enjoy. Otherwise, what the hell is the point, right?

I think that's what I love most about Buy Sell Ads is that I still really, really love what I'm doing. That's important.



YARO: Which leads to a good wrap up question, Todd. What is the day in a life for you now? How do you live your life? I'm assuming you've got a fairly large chunk of an almost \$10 million company now. I don't think you've obviously gone the whole, buy the Ferrari, live the first-class kind of lifestyle just yet but, how has your life changed as a result of Buy Sell Ads.

TODD: Sure thing. Just to puff the Buy Sell Ads just real quick, we're definitely over \$10 million now. \$8.5 million is 2011. We're still growing.

I still do a lot, and this is probably a quality of mine that isn't that great. I still do basically, I'd say like 90 percent of our frontend UI work but, it's just because of something I really, really love and we're still in a very heavy product development phase and so, that's where I feel I can help the company the most right now.

On the personal side, my wife and I are expecting our first child in October and so, a lot of my personal life has been centered around, for example, this weekend, I'm decorating our nursery and stuff like that, getting ready for our first child.

I just feel like I just lost my train of thought, day in a life.

YARO: *[Laughs]* Well, I'm assuming you're still working a 9 to 5 for Buy Sell Ads or do you throw the hours, because you said you go on office so, you must have set hours.

TODD: Yes. I'm still hustling. It's definitely more than 9 to 5. I wake up about 6 AM. I'm on the 6:50AM boat into work. As soon as I step on the boat, my laptop is open and I'm definitely on the 5:40 or 6PM boat home and work until I reach the dock at like 6:30 or so..

It's still all hustle. It's like I'm still in that days of the phase where hopefully, I wake up at some point, two or three years from now and we'll have this huge company behind us but, we're still really just... It's just all hustle right now.

YARO: So, is that the plan for the future though? I'm assuming you're expect at some point, you're going to sell out and no longer need to do the



long hours. Are you still making up as you go along? What are you thinking about the future?

TODD: Overall, I probably sound like wishy-washy like who is this guy trying to grow this company? It sounds like kind of aloof but...

YARO: You sound like a startup still, that's for sure. You sound like you've got personal heavy involvement still in the company like the front end is mostly you so, if you look at Buy Sell Ads right now, we're seeing your work at we look at the site, right?

TODD: Exactly.

YARO: And, you're putting the long hours yourself. You get a distributed company and I guess, it's because it's your baby and it's still your passion so, you're very truly heavily involved and you see things you want to see built still.

I'm guessing at some point, you must think though, that will be enough and I want to exit or not.

TODD: Yes. I don't think we're going to reach that point for a little while and I'll tell you why.

Right now, our current marketplace, it's a very important part of our business, right now and going forward but, in terms of revenue and what it does, I think if we fast forward two or three years from now is actually going to be one of the smaller pieces of our business.

Right now, we're getting ready to launch our first new product which is **PublisherPro**. And so, keep in mind for the first four to five years of this business, the marketplace is the business. There is nothing more.

That is what has fueled all of our growth until now. This PublisherPro product is taking a step up and saying, okay, so we have this marketplace and people are buying and selling ads. That's great. It's a nice business. It employs all twelve of us and we have a good time whatever. But, there's got to be more.



PublisherPro is our first step into trying to figure out what more is out there. We believe that we can still publishers do a hell lot more than what they are doing just through our marketplace and on the same token, we believe that we can help advertisers do a heck a lot more than what they're just doing through our marketplace now.

And, if you think about people buying and selling, display advertising directly from each other as the marketplace and then, all the other advertising and all the other monetization they're doing outside of that is just a much, much bigger space than just the marketplace.

Yes, I think we're also in a period where advertising online is definitely changing. How? I'm not really sure. But, I feel like we're a pretty young, pretty nimble, I guess, I'd say company in the space who hopefully will be in a position to capitalize on any sort of change that happens and hopefully, we can be part of any sort of change that would happen.

And so, I don't know, there's so much going on in the ads base. It's still so incredibly young in terms of this industry overall and I'm just really excited that we're a company that loves to build software and are still young enough without the type of baggage that some of these larger companies have such that we can innovate in a time that's really important which is right now.

YARO: It would be interesting to see when your baby is born how you go with time management because obviously, you'll have slightly less time with a baby there so...

TODD: Theoretically...

YARO: It sounds like you're not taking exit at all right now. You just have too much you want to build and that's the plan.

TODD: Yes, exactly. We've had a couple of opportunities to exit and any opportunity that comes along, I definitely entertain it quite honestly because it's fun to go through that process up into the point where I actually have to do any work and usually, when it comes to that point where they ask me to



do work is when I say, "Ah, never mind. I was just trying to see what you were up to, anyway."

That made me sound like a real d*ck, I'm sorry. I don't want to come across that way but, yes. An exit is like a complete afterthought at this point because if we were to sell the company now, I'd always wonder what it could have been if we had kept pushing along and moving toward the vision that we're trying to build.

I don't want to live with that wonder for the rest of my life especially in case this is the last exciting thing that I am able to do.

YARO: Yes, fair enough. All right, Todd. I think it's a great time to wrap up the interview. Thank you for taking the time to tell the story. You've done a lot but, obviously Buy Sell Ads is a massive highlight. Let's just finish up with just one last question here which is really just a question I ask everyone who comes on these interviews because the people who listen to these interviews are usually in a situation where they haven't had a successful business yet. They are still trying to figure out what works and quit their job, have enough money to travel or do whatever exciting creative craft that they like to do.

But, reaching a cash flow positive business is quite challenging. It sounds like to me, you've haven't really had too much problems or maybe in hindsight, it sounds like that but, kind of like every project you've touched whether it's been the two hobby websites that grew to enough to make \$2000 - \$3000 a month in advertising income, you always had the freelance work available to you when you quit your job.

What would you give advice to these people who maybe don't seem to get that kind of result or maybe it wasn't that easy for you. I don't know but, whatever the case is, what's the key to getting that point where you feel comfortable enough to live off whatever project you're doing.

TODD: You're just going to find something that you truly love doing. If I love Buy Sell Ads just for the money, we probably wouldn't be working to grow the company like we are now and for me, building software is what I truly love to do and so, I know, as long as I can rub two sticks together and



figure how to make at least a little bit of smoke and somewhat of a fire that I can probably take care of myself from building software. And so, that kind of understanding that I myself, that's a passion of mine makes me feel comfortable in what I'm doing, I think.

Clearly, it's easier for me to say that now that I'm on a little bit of the other side of the fence in terms of Buy Sell Ads is already up and running, providing a salary blah, blah, blah but, you really just have to find something that you truly love doing and if you're not doing something that you love doing then, you really got to think, think pretty hard and figure out what it is that you will love to do.

YARO: All right. That's a great point to end on. It's passion, not just the money and I think, that's been a consistent point for a lot of people although, I still know a lot of people who decide just to make enough money like go for a project that's about the money just so they can have a little bit of cash coming.

That seems to rarely work. So, there's got to be a connection here to the motivation behind it.

That's another person reinforcing that point. Thank you, Todd. Thank you again for sharing this story.

Obviously, the main website, if they want to check out your work is BuySellAds.com. Are there any other websites you want to shout out to?

TODD: All I'd say is look out for Pro.BuySellAds.com pretty soon.

YARO: Okay, chances are when you're listening to this that may be out already. So, we'll check that out and I look forward to seeing that as well, Todd. So, thank you again.

TODD: Great, thank you very much Yaro. I had a great time. I really appreciate it.

YARO: Thank you.



TODD: Take care.

YARO: Thank you.

If anyone else is interested in more interviews like this with Todd, there's a whole back catalogue at Entrepreneurs-Journey.com, that's my blog. If you Google YARO, you'll find it that way and you can just click the Podcasts interviews tab to find all the interviews. Thanks for listening. Thanks Todd and I'll catch you again very soon. Bye!



Relevant Links Mentioned in this Interview

- [Buy Sell Ads](#)
- [HubSpot](#)
- [The Inc 500](#)
- [CSS Elite](#)
- [13 Styles](#)
- [MindFire](#)
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