

EPISODE 18

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:00.9] SS: A San Francisco designer was sitting at his home office sipping a cup of coffee, every sip is a mini break from the long hours of writing the script for the course he was about to record. He was in the middle of the sixth month break from client work and the month without a salary was beginning to take their toll.

As they move closer and closer to the launch date, his bank account continued to empty but no matter how stressful it got, his commitment to deliver the highest quality never wavered. Well that launch date eventually came and the designer was rewarded for his work. His scores was quickly considered one of the greatest resources for designers to learn Sketch and improve their skills.

[0:00:35.2] DT: Hello hackers, thanks a lot for joining us for another episode of the Hacking UI Podcast where we hack our way through design, development and entrepreneurship. I'm David Tintner.

[0:00:43.9] SS: And I'm Sagi Shreiber.

[0:00:45.2] DT: Our guest today is a super talented designer with an entrepreneurial fire burning in his veins, he's currently splitting his time between doing amazing and diverse design work for high end clients and running Sketch Master, his scaling platform of professional training courses for Sketch. We met him in San Francisco and felt we had to get him on the podcast.

[0:01:02.6] SS: Ladies and gents, it's our pleasure to present to you Peter Nowell.

[0:01:07.0] DT: Let's get hacking.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:19.9] SS: Welcome everybody and today David and I are here with Peter Nowell, Peter, what's up?

[0:01:25.6] PN: How's it going guys?

[0:01:26.4] DT: Hey Peter.

[0:01:28.9] SS: All good, great to have you here man and it's been a few weeks since we met in San Francisco and I'm so happy that we now got this episode going. First, for the ones that don't know you, maybe you can start about giving a bit of background about yourself?

[0:01:45.0] PN: Sure, yeah, my name is Peter Nowell and I'm a designer in San Francisco. I've been a freelance designer for the last four years and a lot of people will know me for the articles that I've written about Sketch or the training courses that I've made about Sketch on, most of those are on Medium and I've done quite a bit of freelance work in many different design areas but most people will probably know me from my online content.

[0:02:14.1] SS: Yeah, I certainly know you for your content and you've written great articles. So just first of all, we will put them in the show notes for anybody who wants to get to them. But before we dig into the article themselves, right now you're a freelancer, that's what you're doing most of the time or all the time or?

[0:02:32.9] PN: Now actually, my time is split almost 50/50 or 60/40 between working on my Sketch courses, making new courses, keeping it running, talking with customers, making improvements to the existing material, keeping it up to date and taking on one or two freelance projects as well. So rather than kind of having one main thing, I've kind of split my time about three days and two days for those two different kind of, in a way, two different businesses.

[0:03:02.6] SS: Okay. So what do you say would take more? The courses right now or the freelance?

[0:03:07.1] PN: Right now it's a bit of the courses, It's incredibly time consuming to write this and to create them, it's very laborious to do it really well and I'd say, I also find it really helpful to section off my projects in specific days. So I know exactly which days every week I'm working with a client or on a client's project and it's not like a couple of hours here, a couple of hours

there, especially for the creative work that I — or I suppose for my own creative process, I get the most out of having long blocks of time where I can just spend a day or most of the day focusing on writing a script or creating a new design and I need those big chunks of time.

[0:03:54.7] SS: Yeah.

[0:03:55.9] DT: Yeah, I completely understand, I'm the same way too. Sagi and I are always talking about trying to batch our work and try to get things done in big blocks like that. Because you're absolutely right, for the creative process, it's really difficult to get into it for me at least, it takes me probably half an hour to an hour until I'm in the zone and then when I'm in the zone, I don't want to be disturbed at all. Once I'm there, once I get to that spot, I can go for hours on end but it takes a while to get there.

[0:04:19.5] PN: We're in this age now where the world doesn't care when you're in that zone and you're still going to be tweeted at and all of that stuff. So you just kind of have to turn off notifications and dedicate your time to something, or at least that's what I found to be the kind of constructive for myself.

[0:04:35.8] SS: Totally, the thing is, that these days when you don't respond to twitter messages sometimes, it counts as a dick. It's like, "You didn't respond to my Twitter message." I don't understand this. It's attacking from all sides Messenger, Whatsapp, Twitter, you know?

[0:04:52.5] PN: Everybody feels bad but it's kind of funny like, I'd say maybe half the emails that I received and probably send as well start with, "I'm sorry about the delay." It's like this kind of etiquette, nobody can keep up but we all still feel bad for ourselves or like we all still berate ourselves.

[0:05:13.3] DT: Definitely agree with you on that one. So can you give us — all right, so you're freelancing and you're splitting your time between the course right now. So on the freelance side, how many clients are you working with or what kind of jobs are you doing?

[0:05:26.8] PN: Right now I'm working on a pretty big branding and web design project and that's my main client right now. In the past I've, when I've been doing full time freelance, I've

had three to four clients at a time. And again, I still find it really helpful to break them up by full day if possible, like three days a week on this project, three days a week on that project and then I kind of have a very, I have some very easy calculations about my week, right? It's pretty clear that my week is full and I don't have space for another client if I've already committed three days to one and two days to another.

Some of the times that I've, in the last few years, that I've enjoyed the most are when I have had a few different clients in different areas. For example, like there was one time, there's a local juice company in San Francisco called Juice Shop. I did most of their design work and expand everything from web to packaging and print to typography and type design.

[0:06:28.3] SS: I love it by the way.

[0:06:29.3] PN: Thanks Sagi. And also quite a bit of physical signage. Some of my favorite times where we're working on like a big laser engraved, wooden sign one day and then the next day, a contract job for Apple, designing icons that is completely digital. Or submitting code that was going to be on Apple.com, which is just like, I get even thinking about it because that is for me the most exciting part. That's the most exciting that my job can get, when I can do a few different things that kind of stimulate different parts of my brain and get paid to do all of those.

[0:07:08.1] DT: Definitely understand that one. Yeah, I was going to say on that same subject, it's stimulating your brain from kind of a few different ways, is that how you got into your side project or can you talk to us a little bit about that transition from doing freelance to working on the course so much of your time?

[0:07:25.7] PN: Yeah, absolutely. So it's interesting, about a year ago, I started to transition out of my client relationships because I knew that I wanted to create these courses. I had been to a couple of meet ups, I had met a number of other Sketch users and I was starting to realize that there was a noticeable lack of professional training for this tool. Sketch is a pretty new piece of software but it's already being used in very professional context. It's being used by most of the top companies to design products that millions and millions of people use.

So it seemed kind of like, “All right, this one hour basics courses that are starting to come out and may or may not be produced very well, those don’t cut it anymore.” I’ve been using Sketch since about 2012. At this point it’s a little over four years and just found myself in a position where I had already used it for many different projects, even print projects and that I, simply by having used this tool for a while, had a lot of those professional workflows to share with people.

I decided, “You know what? If this courses need to be made and I can make it, I’m going to try and clear off my schedule,” and so right around January, February, I got a completely empty schedule but I wasn’t goofing off all day, I really try to stay disciplined and spend about five or six months creating the courses. So it was kind of funny. In a lot of ways it was a side project and I thought about it as a side project for a while, but I had to approach it for at least some period of time as my main project. Now, it’s a half project.

[0:09:09.5] DT: That’s really interesting. Okay. Do you think it would have been possible to do something of such a high caliber like you did if it was a side project? Or was it something that really needed complete, full time dedication?

[0:09:21.2] PN: I see maybe a lot of the articles that I’ve written as side projects. They are considerable in kind of how comprehensive they are on a given topic. I make a bunch of custom graphics for them and really try to make sure that they’re an extremely helpful, practical definitive resource for whatever topic they’re on. Those take many days of writing and in the last few years it hasn’t been, you know, that has been a side project.

That was maybe like I was able to spend a few hours one morning working on that or an hour in the evening. To me, that’s a side project and it works pretty well for those little chunks, like those little one piece articles. But as soon as I knew that I wanted to commit to creating something that was really like the best training videos that I had ever seen because I’m just a huge perfectionist and I knew that if I did it I was going to make sure that I did it really well, that was a bigger undertaking. I actually didn’t realize how big an undertaking it was.

Again, probably largely due to my perfectionist personality, I just couldn’t stop until it was great. I do think that if you’re going to do something that you expect to really represent you, and that it’s going to be more than what you can do and I don’t know, a week’s worth of evenings, it probably

makes sense to block off a little bit of time on your schedule that is like really dedicated time, not just evening, time or an hour in the morning. Because that's the way that you show yourself that you care about it and if you're like, me, you get your best work done when you've got those long blocks of time. Also, when you are able to recharge on the weekend or cook yourself a nice meal in the evening and not be constantly stretching yourself too thin.

[0:11:20.1] SS: Yeah, totally. And I think that what you did here, it kind of applies. So anyone who is hearing the show and thinking about opening a side project or has side project and wants to do something bigger like a course or something like that than I really believe in those batching your hours thing. You have to batch your hours because yeah, you're doing something big and you need to focus for it.

Also, people that are working full time jobs, do you have any tips for them batching those hours or?

[0:11:53.6] PN: It's interesting, some people, I know even myself I might not say that I have a full time job but I certainly spend more than 40 hours a week working. So I do have a full time job, it's just not with an employer. It's not W2 which actually I'm just realizing is a reference to the American like tax filing form. But yeah, I don't have an employer but I couldn't say exactly for somebody in a full time job. It's just been a while since I've worked for a company so I'm not sure if I have a lot of advice.

But I would say that honestly, maybe the best advice I could give is don't worry about having a side project if you are really putting yourself out in a full time job at least 40 hours a week, I mean, it's up to you but I think that there's sort of obsession with having a side project, as though that's what makes you an interesting person and that's like where you're actually going to do your best work.

I would really fight that because if you're working a 40 hour week job and you aren't able to do your best work, we're talking about, it is a privilege to be able to make money from what you do and I want to acknowledge that. But you should also probably question whether or not those 40 hours are really what you should be doing.

[0:13:20.7] DT: Yeah, I think that's a really good point what you say. But I think for a lot of people, I know that I felt this way, that a side project can be that way, if you realize that the 40 hour week job is not what you want to be doing, a side project can be the way to help you transition out of that. It will be that time where you're kind of caught in the middle for whatever financial reasons or you're not sure if the side project you're working on is full time. Maybe it can be a way to get your feet wet and not just swap 40 hours a week on something you don't like with 40 hours a week on something else you don't like.

[0:13:53.3] PN: Absolutely. I would say, still, my biggest piece of advice is being very defensive about your time and not trying to kill yourself by working 16 hour days every single day. I've spent quite a bit of time doing that and it's really not sustainable for very long. So the extent to which anybody can block off maybe one great, quite, isolated day in their week to focus on that side project or block off a three hour period of time in the evening that they just like, maybe they get back from work a little early.

It's like, there isn't going to be any more time so you just have to be like more defensive of the time that you do have. Something that we all say a lot and that I'm constantly learning and relearning is to just be better at saying no. It's one of the things that I'm most excited about my schedule right now is that I have two things that I'm doing and no more.

I'm working on my courses three days a week and I'm working on a new client project that I'm really excited about two days a week and that's it. I know I'll probably work a little more on the weekends or whatever but basically, it's very clear cut and I can't over emphasize how helpful it is, really psychologically, to just have things that clear cut.

[0:15:15.6] DT: Definitely. I have to ask you Peter, I think that a lot of the question that a lot of people have now, what you said is great advice about managing your time but a lot of people out there are probably saying, "Okay, I would also love to just stop working as a freelancer for a few weeks and go all in on my side project." But how were you practically able to do that? Was it you saved up enough money before they do it or you're making money during it or it was just this was an investment that you chose to take on and you said, I'm going all in, can you give like some tips on that?

[0:15:45.5] PN: Yeah, absolutely. I was able to take that time and really invest my time and my money into that five or six months where I was not making any money. I saved up beforehand and I used up just about all the money I have. I've been about all the money I have. I have been able to replenish my bank account a little bit and that's good in a more stable place now. But that gets me back to really deciding to do things that you really believe in. Because if I was not willing, I wasn't going to go raise somebody else's money.

I wasn't going to go raise, I mean, the reality is, for a small business, even raising \$10, \$20, \$50, \$100k, which sounds like pennies in silicon valley where like your seed round is at least \$500,000. That's a lot of money, that's somebody else's money and for me, I knew that putting my own money into it and to keep me going was probably one of the best ways of making sure that I was doing what I really cared about doing and that I stayed on track because I was only accountable to myself. I guess I kind of forgot your question. That seemed like an important part of the answer.

[0:17:15.4] DT: No, that's a great point and I really like what you said there about not wanting to raise money. I think that Sagi and I had a lot of conversations about this too with Hacking UI and that really is something we agree with as well. On that note, I want to ask you, is this something, now that the course and everything seems to be very successful is that something that you're considering going forward or are you looking to hire people or to grow it or is it something that you always want to continue working on yourself?

[0:17:41.6] PN: Well actually yeah. Let's get to that in a sec. I just thought of one other thing that I wanted to say on the last question, which is that inevitably, if any of the listeners are like me, we bite off more than we can chew. And, you know, originally, I wanted to create like a full comprehensive beginner to advanced course that went through maybe like eight different design projects included every single feature in Sketch and that's still my plan. I've designed a lot of those demo projects that will become the center pieces of future courses but some of the best advice but some of the toughest to swallow advice that I got in the process of making them was that I wasn't ever going to complete it.

If the scope was that huge. I just started to break each of the courses or I broke the courses into each of those projects and each was about an hour to two hours. Suddenly I was just like,

“Okay, I’m going to release the first two projects which I’ve already written,” and it became so much more manageable because I knew that, “Oh, I could release this in a couple of months.” As opposed to, “Well, I have no idea,” but at the current rate, it’s going to be at least another six or eight months. You know I couldn’t have afforded that.

Breaking things up into smaller chunks and trying to release little bits of it and start making money because again, you have to be accountable to yourself. You have to do things in a smart way that might not be the most ideal way. So I was able to start making money about five or six months instead of maybe never, who knows? The project has been too big and now it’s out and it has — it’s sustaining itself and it’s sustaining me enough to create future courses.

So breaking things up into little bits and trying to get them out there and ideally start making money for you as you continue building out your whole vision, that’s a really important part of the process and it can be difficult to swallow, if you’re like me.

[0:19:56.6] SS: Yeah, for sure.

[0:19:57.8] DT: Yeah, that’s awesome. I want to follow up with that but just before I do that, I want us to take a quick break and give a shoutout to our sponsors for this episode.

[SPONSOR BREAK]

[0:20:06.6] DT: Hey guys, I want to tell you about our sponsor, An Event Apart, because they have some of the best conferences for both designers and front end developers, and if you haven’t attended one yet, you’re really missing out. The events are extremely professional and always cover the most cutting edge technology and latest developments. They bring in the best speakers and biggest names in the industry every single time.

I’m talking legends like Eric Myer, Jeffrey Zeldman, Rachel Andrew, Brad Frost, Dan Mall, you get the picture. It’s just about the talks, they do an incredible job of making the conference social and encouraging people to meet a network. If you’ve been to this kind of conferences before you know that designers and developers aren’t always the most social crowd but at Events

Apart, they take special care to make sure it's fun, inviting and that there's never a boring moment.

They host seven or so events per year in cities all across the US so you can find the one that's most convenient for you. The tickets are also affordable for two or three day event like this and we can make it even better. You'll get \$100 off any events if you use the code "AEAhacking" at checkout. Got to aneventapart.com/hui and use the code "AEAhacking".

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:21:08.3] DT: Yeah, so I was just curious before you had mentioned that you didn't want to raise money and that you took this investments. I was just curious if that's how you want to continue and want to go with the company and with the courses.

[0:21:18.8] PN: Yeah, it's interesting, I've had a — oh my gosh, I start everything with it's interesting". I guess I'm reflecting on this process and I've had a few people give me advice who I've asked advice from after having launched the courses. Like, "What should I turn this into?" Some of the most helpful advice has really just been spinning that question back at me asking, "Well, what do you want this to be? What do you want this to, what road this to have in your life?"

Because to be honest, I could turn this into a far more lucrative business by doing, by taking it a couple more other directions. Right now, I'm not interested in hiring a bunch of people and turning this into some massive empire or design training, that's just not what I want it to be for myself and in order to do that, I would have to be then in kind of a managerial role where I am managing people and I've had other people come on to help me and that's very helpful, it's more occasional, it's more short term contract help.

Whether it's marketing related or producing the courses, post production, things like that and I have a developer who works with me once a week who helps add new features to the platform, not that I couldn't but because I'm stretched very thin and people ultimately want me, this was kind of this moment of realization that sounds very silly in retrospect but people want me to make new content. People want me to design a great platform and make new courses and new

articles. That's why they started following me, that's why they are following me and that's really the main expectation there.

So if I wanted to build this into something where I had employees and that was really, you know, I kind of jokingly say that it would be like a design training empire. I do think that that is possible but it wouldn't allow me to do what I do best and it would be so much more than I kind of want this to be in my life, which is something that I care about but that is not 100% of my professional work. So I guess in response to your question, there can often be pressure to create a project, maybe like release and MVP or something and then scale it. Hire employees and like, just have some sort of exponential growth.

But I think it's also okay to have something that is not exponential but that is steady and is a very considerate part of your professional work for your life and that helps you with your personal goals. So for example, I can make money if I go travel because people will still buy my courses while I'm away and that's incredible, that's a huge personal gain that I get from this and I don't need it to be some big empire that's going to need me around 60 hours a week just to manage it just in order to feel happy about that.

[0:24:28.7] SS: Yeah, I really dig what you're saying and you tell us something that we teach in the Side Project Accelerator we say that whatever people right now wanting to do side projects and even make them scale those in the future but always make the decisions based on freedom. So what you're saying you can go travel and people will still buy your courses, that's a decision based of freedom. That's getting it, it's a decision based on freedom, the way I see it right? I mean, that's what you're shooting for, you're shooting for your free time, you're shooting for experiences in life, you're shooting for just enjoying life, not just like working.

[0:25:06.3] DT: Or even when it comes to working, the freedom to decide what to work on.

[0:25:09.8] PN: Exactly and I think you know, I still see myself very much as a designer even though most of this year, I have —or the majority of this year, I've been a trainer or a writer and it's very important to me that I always have one foot firmly in creating design projects even if the other foot is in something that uses different skill sets like writing or training. So yeah I guess

David what you were saying like yeah, what you want your professional work to be, I always want to make sure that I stay connected with practicing design.

[0:25:48.5] DT: Definitely.

[0:25:49.8] SS: Cool. So what I would like to get in to is just go, date back before the course and actually also, still right now. What you were doing and I remember we talked about it in San Francisco. You had written articles on Medium, just following and then you launched a product to that following, which we call “audience driven product development” and that’s something we find common pattern between successful solopreneurs or internet like entrepreneurs, whatever you want to call it, that we’re doing.

I want to talk to you about how you gained that following, how you gained your audience. Because obviously it was on medium, it was not with your own blog, you do not have CPA’s all over the place to sign up for your mailing list. I want to talk to you about your views. I think they are very unique, you have about 12,000 followers on medium, which is amazing. You have way over 1,000 likes and everyone of your medium, which is crazy. I think mine is like the maximum was like 90, I don’t know.

[0:27:00.3] DT: So tell us, what did yo8u do exactly?

[0:27:04.4] PN: Guys, there’s a magic formula, don’t you know it? The whole thing for me is I just write something when I feel like I have something meaningful to contribute and each of those followers and you know, it’s the numbers are far less if you look at Twitter or any of this other services like I haven’t made it a priority to grow an online audience but around my articles it is sort of very naturally, very organically grown. I think that rather than having gained those followers, I’ve really earned those followers by simply focusing on writing very practical, very helpful and meaningful and I would also add like well designed, intentionally created articles occasionally.

Not with like a strategy, not with a set schedule like I’m going to release one every month. I’d probably be 20 times where I am now if I did have one of those strategies but that’s not what has mattered most to me. Yeah, part of the reason that I obviously created my courses was

because I knew that so many people were reading my articles and so many people were interested in this topics. Just as you say like, Wow, that is incredible. I would say Medium article is where I'm like, how the hell did they get that many people to recommend their article.

That is just crazy, there are some crazy numbers that far exceed my articles and I was always 100% of the articles that I have published, I'm just blown away that that many people even care about this stuff. It's like, I am just going to release the most nerdy... just niche esoteric design, technical article and I don't expect more than, I don't know, a couple of hundred people to even read it and it's like *Pixel Density* or *How Bézier curve Work*. Who cares about that stuff? Seriously, it blows me away how many people.

[0:29:16.4] SS: Obviously a lot.

[0:29:18.0] DT: Yeah, apparently you found what the audience wants. So I had a friend stop me in a conversation recently and he pointed this out as the impetus behind everything that I've created whether it's an article or a course and I said simply, I just wish somebody had told me this when I was learning and there was a section in my first article about Sketch that was called like *What I Wish Somebody Had Told Me*.

It was about this like, strange path, direction, issue that Sketch had and how to fix it. It's like, it plagued everybody and then one day, miraculously, I discovered why it happened and how to fix it. Everybody, it was like, that was why people shared it so much and why people started following me was because I started to share what simply I wish somebody had told me. I don't share something unless I have that to offer. In that sense I'm a little bit old school and a little bit contrary to a lot of the marketing advice that swirls around this days.

[0:30:33.0] DT: That's great, you solved your own problem and then share did with the world, and I think we can also really relate to that, the way we actually launched Hacking UI was I remember every day Sagi would come in and bitch and complain about how he couldn't expert SPG's from Photoshop. This was like three or four years ago before Photoshop CC or anything. Then we built a script that did it and then we shared it. But yeah I totally relate to you solving your own problem and then that's what you're sharing with people.

[0:31:01.4] PN: Yeah, I would also say that you are right and that I probably could not have launched my courses to much success had I know had that following. It's not a huge following especially on Twitter but it's like, it's just enough of a following that, you know, folks like you, other friends in the design and the tech world that I've met were able to check it out and say, "Hey, this is very quality and they have sometimes 40 times the following that I have and it's like Just enough following to get it out there.

It wasn't an explosive launch, it wasn't like my gosh, it's just like, I can retire now or something. It didn't pay for itself instantly on launch day but it was — there was enough momentum to carry it forward.

[0:31:52.3] DT: I guess it's also a very specific audience too, like you said, you're writing very technical in depth articles that if the people are following them or recommending them to others then it must be people who really care about the subject.

[0:32:04.3] PN: The funniest thing too is like, I do not claim to be the expert on most of this stuff when I released an article and video about pixel density or Bézier curves, I always have people who are far smarter than me, responding saying, "Well actually, it's like blah, blah, blah with the math," and it's like, "Okay, I wish I had access to you. I wish I knew you when I was writing this." Sometimes I go back and I try and edit something but it's miraculous like, there are a lot of far smarter people out there and most of them aren't sharing their, in a very practical way at least, a lot of this workflows or techniques or simply that are knowledge.

They're probably spending all their time working on something very important, but I have found that I'm kind of maybe it's just where I am in my career but I'm just technical enough that I can understand that stuff but still very grounded in training and talking with people and writing a lot that I love to learn something and then explain it even better. So I try to be a more like a bridge with what I create than trying to say, "Hey, I'm the expert, here's the definitive and all piece."

[0:33:21.4] SS: Yeah, you're authentic, that's good.

[0:33:24.3] PN: You know, it's funny too though like online, we all think that this people who are hosting something are just like the experts and it's like, "Oh my gosh, you wrote this thing," or

like, “You made this thing and we’re all just like normal people.” Like Sagi, you know I knew you and hacking UI long before we just met recently in San Francisco but we just went to like a grocery market and ate a casual lunch together and we were just like normal people. It’s always kind of funny like this impression that we get of people being so much greater than they are. We’re all just like normal people kind of humble just sharing little things.

[0:34:05.5] SS: Yeah, anyway and totally relate to that and also want to add on top of that that I had the same kind of experience when I reached out for people for my podcast like design managers from the Bay Area like I was like, “who am I? I’m this little guy from Israel from Tel Aviv and those are like biggest design managers, Airbnb and Facebook and all,” and they were like, “Hey, no problem, let’s talk.”

They were like really cool and they’re real people and we talked and we had jokes going back and forth, it was just like a — so everyone is a person and anyone who is reachable. So just like anybody hearing this, you should know that everyone is also reachable and everyone is a human being and would like a nice conversation to meet other cool people.

All right, so going back to Medium, just a few questions about that. First of all, are you going to have a mailing list sometime or have you ever thought of this for growing?

[00:35:03.9] PN: I started a mailing list relatively recently and it’s still a small list. I just have a very small text link at the bottom of my articles but it’s something that I send out maybe once a month. It’s pretty occasional just whenever I am speaking at an event or I have released some sort of article, some sort of news, I try not to force myself onto a schedule but instead to share things when I have something for share. For me, a newsletter is a way simply of spreading the word on something because for me, I’m not putting out articles or courses very frequently.

I spend a lot of time working on a few things and so when I release something, I really want people to see it because I’ve put a ton of energy into it and these days Twitter, for example, is great for sharing frequent content. But a lot of people, unless it starts to be picked up by a lot of other users and retweeted and all, a lot of people will completely miss some big projects that I have just released simply because in this age of social media where we don’t have a great means of spreading — how should I say this?

[00:36:27.9] DT: Well I think there's a lot of noise. A lot of noise and it's hard to get through the noise and find the good stuff.

[00:36:32.8] PN: There's a lot of noise and also, quite simply, you miss people. So with e-mail, the way I see it is that's just my way of having a greater likelihood that people who care about what I make will see it and it's not something that I spend a lot of time on. It's not something that I try to make any money off of. I think an e-mail newsletter can be many things for many people and for me, it's just a way for sharing the news when I have an important project to share with people who really want to know about it, quite simply, yeah.

[00:37:13.1] SS: No it makes sense I mean...

[00:37:15.8] PN: It just gets lost any other way and it still gets lost in email, you know? Half the people or something will not even open it or see it.

[00:37:25.8] SS: Yeah.

[00:37:26.8] DT: So in addition to the email that you said you're just starting to get into now, do you do anything else to promote your articles or to promote your work outside? Like after you've published something on Medium, do you promote it somewhere?

[00:37:39.9] PN: I share it with my newsletter, I share it on social media. I try to notify maybe a few people who I think are going to be really interested in it. Or a few people like, for example, I might shoot something over to you guys and say, "Hey check this out. You might find it useful." Or if it is something Sketch related at all, send it to their team and I know that they generally like to include that in their own newsletter. Their own newsletter, which is infinitely larger than my own and it's more of a way of rather than having a big promotional push.

It's like, okay, we all know these days how hard it is to just notify people of something that they are going to enjoy reading or watching and so I'll try to reach out to a few people directly who I think are going to get something out of it or enjoy sharing it with their specific audience. But I

don't do a huge marketing or promotional push. I kind of do a few things and then cross my fingers and then try to get on with my next project. I'm not a very fierce marketer.

[00:38:54.9] SS: All right and one last question, are you going to have a blog of your own one day or are you going to keep writing on Medium as the strategy?

[00:39:04.5] PN: I'm not sure if I have the answer to that. I definitely see both sides of the argument and for me, writing articles on Medium allows me to publish these individual pieces that very much stand on their own as opposed to feeling that there is a commitment to consistency or a commitment of frequency. So I haven't written an article in — actually I just had one published. I don't know, it's like I can write one every month. I can write one every two or three months and I think people are generally okay with that and on Medium, they really stand alone.

I also like that on Medium many more people find it because, like I said, I am not avidly trying to grow my newsletter or I am not avidly trying to grow my follower base and so the extent to which Medium can just naturally help me with that, help me get my content in front of people who want to read it, that's really helpful. I have enough people coming to my own website and to Sketch Master for my courses that I don't feel myself needing to have a blog on those. But I think that you can go both ways.

I think that Medium works really well if you don't want to maintain a blog as one of your main projects because it will be a project. You know? With Medium articles, I can make each little one a side project, you could say. But a blog is a big undertaking and people expect you to continually update it. And then what if you like to write some content that cannot be on your blog like it's for a magazine or some other publication? For me, it's a little bit more flexible and it opens me up to a few more options when I use Medium.

[00:41:02.2] SS: Okay, cool. I find it really interesting, by the way, the fact that you're not most bloggers or solopreneurs. Even in a way, we are different because David and I are all about optimizing. Like okay, we saw that the less article we wrote, we posted it on our Reddit and this sub-Reddit and so next time, we're going to do it again and you know what? We found out that we just have to put the course of the Side Project Accelerator on.

So we're going to update all the landing pages that we possibly can in our website to have a message about it and we're like, "Okay let's optimize, optimize, optimize," and in terms of optimization of our audience, one thing that is the most important to us is our mailing list and with that, we derive the thing that we need a website of our own because then we control where we have sign up boxes, where in Medium you can't have basically sign up boxes.

So you're the exact opposite. You're like, "Guys, take that aside, I don't need this on my head right now. I just want to provide value," and the value actually does bring you tons of audience and that's really inspiring I think, for me at least.

[00:42:20.8] PN: Yeah, it's funny. I had this period of time after I released the courses, it was about three or four months ago and it was right after I was able to get a few good nights of sleep and answer a bunch of launch related e-mails and request and it was kind of like, "Okay, what now? Well I know I have more courses with a bunch more promotional things I can do. Oh, there's a bunch more marketing related stuff I can do. There's a bunch of optimization I can do."

For example, I know what the conversion rate is between the amount of people who land on Sketchmaster.com and who generally, in a given week, and how many people purchase a course that same week. And I could have focused on optimizing that and for a long time, I was really stressing out about doing that and I was making little changes and I hired a marketing person to help me with a number of little tasks and we spend a lot of time setting up analytics and all sorts of stuff and trying to optimize our funnel and all this.

This is important maybe for a company that has a product and a small team. So it could make sense for a startup, for example. But for me, I'm just one person and I didn't really want to spend so much of my time focusing on optimization when it wasn't what makes me happy and also when, at the end of the day, like I said earlier people expect me to be making new content.

So now, I have a couple of focuses like there are a couple of interesting partnerships for organizations that can use these courses for their students or for their employees or whatever. So a few of those partnerships are very useful for me to focus on and then improving the current

courses, I'm pushing out updates just about every week to either the website or the courses themselves and I am so happy to be doing that and to work on new courses.

And it's funny, I felt this huge weight lift off of me when I said I had a friend and adviser tell me, "You know what? Just don't focus on optimization right now. You can do that once you have accomplished a bit more of your goals towards making more courses but you're not there yet and you don't need to stress out about it."

So I don't want to belittle the importance or the value or the impact that you can have by focusing on optimization but for me right now, it just wasn't the right thing. And it's so funny, overnight I was a far happier person. That might just have been my personality. I might have been getting missed aligned with what makes me tick.

[00:45:02.9] SS: Yeah. No, it's very interesting, so cool. So now that we're talking about the course if you may, I would like to get into the course itself and ask you basically get technical. So before the course, did you have any launch? I know we just kind of talked about it but what did you do to launch your course in terms of did you have some kind of, I don't know, three weeks of promotion before you launched it?

[00:45:33.9] PN: Oh my gosh, this was embarrassing. So I will tell you a little story, I was completely out of money. I had almost entirely drained my bank accounts trying to get these stupid courses launched and finished and was so proud of them but I was also so out of money. And so for the last four to six weeks leading up to the launch, I worked 12 to 16 hour days every single day and there's a difference between picking your hot shit because you're working very long hours and when you don't have any other option because you need to get this out and it needs to start making money so that you can eat.

And so I was working so crazy hard and I did have, in about the three weeks leading up to the launch, I had a small group of about 30 people from my newsletter kind of half the price or early access and providing a lot of feedback as I made my final changes to the courses and that was very helpful. They were also helpful for some of the promotion and having some quotes from customers and what not, but I wouldn't really call that too much of the promotional strategy.

I would say that Sketch Master had to launch when Sketch was sending out a newsletter and it had to be in it. They were sending it out at, I don't know, 6 AM San Francisco time and I worked just nonstop through the night just trying to get the last of all pieces of the website or analytics connected or whatever. There was actually like one video in the course and particular that I was rushing to finish that night and so I had to launch it that morning and I was so deeply exhausted.

That after it launched, I really had no energy to do a whole lot of promotion that day and I tried to post it in a few places and then take a quick nap and so a few days after that, I was able to post it in various places and there was some buzz around it. But I say it was embarrassing because Sketch basically launched it for me when they send something out to their big newsletter and I was so wiped out that I could barely even stay awake to post another thing on Twitter or Facebook.

So yeah, not recommended partially or largely due to the financial reality that I was in leading up to it but yeah, I would say that having a group of people test it before hand was helpful both for feedback and to get some people very excited about it before it launched and I could have done a lot more. I could have lined up a number of interviews or podcasts or articles that coincided with it and a lot of that stuff had to come in the weeks following. But in retrospect it wasn't that big of a deal. Launching is important but it's not make or break. What is important is what you do after.

[00:48:56.2] DT: And I think also one of the interesting things about your course is that it's available all the time, right? It's an ever green course essentially. So there's no start and end or different batches or different periods.

[00:49:08.1] PN: Yep and it's not a subscription. It's kind of funny, I could probably make a lot more money by making it a subscription too. I am just a big believer in doing something simple and making it as straight forward as possible. So you just buy the course, you get it, you've always got access and I'll try to keep it up to date. Period.

[00:49:27.8] SS: Yeah.

[00:49:28.3] DT: So I want to ask you about keeping it up to date. So how much are you going back and updating videos and lessons that you've already recorded because Sketch is constantly making updates, or are you just making improvements?

[00:49:40.3] PN: Yeah, all the time both for feature updates that Sketch is making. So for example, right before I launched the courses, they had that big update where they completely changed how symbols worked and I had to spend a few days going back changing the scripts, re-recording audio, adding whole new sections to the courses and given my process where you've got this one or two hour long course that builds a real world project and every section builds upon itself, it's a whole workflow related.

So a new feature can very much disrupt that workflow or change that workflow or add a whole new workflow and it is particularly time consuming, given how I've made the courses, to make those updates. But that's been something that I make sure to do and hope that I can continue doing that for quite some time and I also try to make some improvements to the courses that I hear from customers.

Where they say, "Hey you know this works for me but I wish there was a way to do this maybe without a plugin," and so I will think about it in a different workflow and try to reincorporate that back into the course. It's funny, without a subscription, I've tried not to make it an expectation that the courses would be updated. But I care a lot about it and I want these to continue to be the best resource for people to learn how to use Sketch very professionally.

So, you know, it's just something that I feel like I owe it to my customers. I really care about every single person who buys it. I see all of those purchases come in and fortunately, it is making enough money that I can do that with part of my time.

[00:51:21.9] SS: Cool, that's amazing.

[00:51:25.7] PN: Now that Sketch is releasing new features like every eight weeks. It definitely means that I have to frequently update the videos.

[00:51:35.2] SS: So how do you do it? Technically, how do you go back and update the videos?

[00:51:39.6] PN: Some people make tutorial videos by just turning on their webcam and talking for an hour and those can be useful but I knew those wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted something that was really professionally made, had great production quality and that every single thing that I said was well thought out and that I always knew I was being very efficient with people's time. So the amount of material in a one hour course that I've made is equivalent to a two or three course somewhere else.

I write the scripts, so I design a project that is going to require all of the features and workflows that I want to train people on and then I reconstruct that project while writing a script in my own words like very natural language and then I record it on this very microphone that I am talking on right now and have an audio editor, cut together the best takes and make it into a seamless audio track. I then listen to that audio track while I record the screen recordings.

So that I can speed up my typing or cut that together separately from the audio into a very seamless finished piece that seems like it was just perfectly recorded the first time around and then I also add motion graphics and animations and a little bit of live action video introducing the courses. So they are very time consuming to create and when I go back and change them, I'm just always crossing my fingers that it's something that I can just maybe re-record a little bit of the audio. But increasingly, I have to maybe make up traumatic change to the script and re-record one or two sections, which can take several days.

[00:53:28.1] SS: Yeah. So it's a challenge and also you would Sketch updating so often so you do the big challenge, right?

[00:53:36.4] PN: Yeah, it is.

[00:53:37.5] DT: And it sounds like a pain staking process.

[00:53:40.5] PN: It is but it's the right way to do it for this. There are many different roles that tutorials can serve, but for me I want these to be a very linear well guided process of taking somebody to a better level of understanding and because it's so guided, it cannot be two minute

videos just focusing on one feature and then another feature and then, “Oh Sketch just made a new announcement. I’ll just add another two minute video,” and boom, I’m done.

I expect that if I was watching these, I would expect that the workflows that I am being told are the best design work flows to use that they are continually the best and the easiest and the most efficient even after Sketch issues another little update.

[00:54:32.4] SS: Yeah.

[00:54:33.0] PN: So yeah, I supposed it’s a lot of the other stuff that I have done. It’s not the easiest way but it’s the way that I am most proud of.

[00:54:42.7] SS: Yeah and so after all this hard work, I really have to ask, how is that you manage to price so low?

[00:54:51.2] PN: Yeah, so it’s interesting that you say that. I both agree and disagree because I wanted these courses to be accessible to a bunch of people and I’ve played around with the prices a little bit and when I increased them, my overall revenue went up a little bit but I also noticed that I wasn’t getting as many international purchases, not as many people were buying the bundle of the courses, which I really feel like these courses were made for each other.

They cover the fundamentals in a very nice package and I want people to get that information. I don’t want them to feel like simply because the price of each course is a little higher, that they need to learn less or that people around the world are suddenly priced out and you know, even at my lowest prices, I’ve had people in some parts of the world like Turkey just say, “Hey, you’re courses are way too expensive because of the exchange rate,” and it’s so funny.

It’s like they’re just like some various specific cases where some people in some countries are just inevitably priced out. I tried to help them a little bit when I can and after student discounts. But I see these courses as part of a greater plan to release more and more and more courses and once I have three, four, five maybe more courses, I want people to feel comfortable just maybe buying a couple and then buying another one once they are ready for it and not needing this to be huge decisions.

Like I said before, this is making enough money to keep itself going, to sustain me and as long as it does that then I don't think I'll need to raise the prices. I ultimately created this so that the digital design world could be very well trained on this tool and I'm not trying to profitize off of that too much so much as I am, you know I just needed to make enough money to keep itself going and to keep me going.

[00:56:55.0] DT: That's awesome. That's awesome and it's really nice to hear. I really like someone who truly loves their craft, values what they're making, it's bringing value to a lot of people like thank you Peter, really awesome to hear.

[0:57:09.2] SS: I'm feeling like I'm interviewing the Hattori Hanzō Maker.

[0:57:13.6] PN: What? I don't understand the reference.

[0:57:17.6] SS: The Hattori Hanzō story.

[0:57:17.9] DT: You're not the only one.

[0:57:21.5] SS: It's like Kill Bill, come on. It's a famous movie.

[0:57:26.4] PN: Am I a cool action figure then?

[0:57:28.6] SS: You're the cool crafts master who is sitting and making samurai swords and making them so sharp and working like you really care about the craft and you're working hard too, because you want this craft to be the best and you really know your shit. I mean, really, you really know what you're doing and you have a mission and you're not trying to...

[0:57:50.1] DT: You're trying to help people and get the information out to them.

[0:57:53.5] PN: Thanks guys. Yeah, I think I hopefully have a future making samurai swords.

[0:58:00.0] DT: That's the second chorus, right? That's the next one coming up?

[0:58:02.2] PN: Yeah, surprise.

[0:58:04.0] DT: Well on that note, I think we're pretty much reaching the end of our conversation here this time. But it's awesome having you and thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

[0:58:13.2] PN: Absolutely, thanks so much.

[0:58:13.7] DT: I know I learned a lot today. I want to ask you, so where can the listeners find you on the internet?

[0:58:21.1] PN: Yeah, my personal website is pnowell.com. You can also go to Sketchmaster.com, that's where the courses are and on medium you can either search for my name, Peter Nowell or you can get a link to it from my website.

[0:58:39.9] SS: Cool, and we'll put all of those in the show notes as well.

[0:58:42.6] PN: And I'm on Twitter sometimes, sometimes I'm on Twitter, [@pnowelldesign](https://twitter.com/pnowelldesign).

[0:58:51.6] DT: Cool. All right, thanks a lot Peter.

[0:58:53.7] PN: Thank you guys.

[0:58:54.9] SS: Thanks so much. Peter, one last thing, you said that you would like to give a discount for readers, right?

[0:59:01.3] PN: Yeah, readers and listeners, anybody who goes to Sketchmaster.com/hackingui through the end of October can get 15% off any of the courses.

[0:59:12.8] SS: Amazing, that's amazing, they're already — no, I'm saying, they're already worth so much more than what you take from them and getting this discount is amazing, if anyone like hearing this and working with Sketch and/or considering working with Sketch, go over there and buy those courses now. I'm kidding.

[0:59:33.0] PN: I've actually had a lot of people who are professional designers take the courses and tell me how many new tricks they learned, that they were surprised to learn. Even if you've got it down, check it out and you might learn something.

[0:59:48.2] SS: That's awesome totally. All right Peter, thanks so much man, it's a pleasure having you, pleasure meeting you also in San Francisco, I'm sure we'll keep in touch and thanks so much.

[1:00:00.3] PN: Thanks so much guys.

[1:00:01.0] SS: Good luck with the force and everything you're doing.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:00:014.0] SS: All right, so that's a wrap Thank you hackers for joining us today and we hope you enjoy the show, you can find all the links and resources from this conversation on hackingui.com/podcast. Just before we go, we want to share with you something that you might find useful.

[1:00:30.0] DT: As you know, we are voracious readers and consume a ton of articles, books, podcasts, and videos about design development and side projects. We curate the hell out of everything and each week, we send a short round of email of our favorites. If that sounds like an email you'd enjoy getting, then we'd love to have you join our awesome community, which already has more than 20,000 happy members from all over the world. You can sign up on hackingui.com.

[1:00:51.0] SS: By the way, on hackingui.com, you'll also find some other cool stuff like the Side Project Accelerator, our eight week online program in which we teach everything that we learned in the three years working and scanning Hacking UI as a side project before we quit our day jobs.

[1:01:05.0] DT: And, you'll also find our resources page which reached top of the week on Product Hunt Tech. Our events section which is filled with conferences and meetups for designers and developers.

[1:01:14.0] SS: Hey D, don't forget the T's man. We've also got some cool T-shirts for designers.

[1:01:17.0] DT: Sagi, again with the T-shirts?

[1:01:20.0] SS: Hey, I designed those. But really, last thing, if you enjoy this, we would really love to hear from you. Either by tweeting us at Hacking UI or by reviewing the podcast on iTunes. Those reviews really go a long way and help us and even make our day.

[1:01:34.0] DT: All right, we'll see you next week hackers. And remember to keep hacking.

[END]