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Episode 136:

“Using Substack to Grow Your Author Platform”

Mike Michalowicz:

Welcome back to the Don't Write That book podcast where you can learn how to write your bestseller and own your authorship. Follow along with us as we give you an Insider's view of the book Industry. Now, here are your hosts. Myself, **Mike Michalowicz** and **AJ Harper**.

Mike Michalowicz:

We're live and we're gonna get right into it. <laugh> <laugh>. I said I would say that. So I said it. Um, special episode in that Archer, my pooch has joined us today. I,

AJ Harper:

I feel like he needs to always be here. 'cause I feel, I just feel chill,

Mike Michalowicz:

Right? Yeah. He does that for you. So this morning I was telling you, we live right outside, uh, a wooded area here. And we have Turkey that come through wild Turkey. And sometimes they come in a, a gaggle. Is that a group of Turkey? Or flock? Or flock, whatever, uh, of a dozen or so. And when they cluck, they set, we,

AJ Harper:

You know, we don't, we don't sound like we paid attention in school.

Mike Michalowicz:

Didn't Yeah, we didn't. But when, when they make their bird noises, they sound like a yelping dog. They can gobble, gobble. I guess it's gobble. Yeah. And so Archer spotted them from the deck. He's waiting to the command. He's a hunting dog. So I just say, get it. That's the command. Get it. And he just goes, bolting. And it's the most joy. He's never caught anything. He doesn't wanna catch anything, but he loves chasing him. And all the birds fly up. Well, today, I guess there was only one Turkey, and he took over a little ridge line. I couldn't see him. I hear this, I think it was yelping. I was like, oh my gosh, my wife's gonna kill me. Where dogs hurt. I go, ru-- like literally running out there to see him. Now it's one Turkey who was flying up into a tree and going, and it sounds like my dog's hurt. My dog comes proudly.

AJ Harper:

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No one was hurt.

Mike Michalowicz:

No one was hurt. He came proudly trotting back and, uh, now is laying down in our studio.

AJ Harper:

I love him.

Mike Michalowicz:

That we do. One thing I was gonna make it, uh, one thing I was gonna ask you to make this episode awkward was about the gym teacher. Tell me, you said you had a bad experience with your gym teacher.

AJ Harper:

We don't need to get all the way, all the way into it. Okay. Yeah. What, just gimme, but I just feel like any gym teacher in the eighties, maybe like secret, evil empire stuff.

Mike Michalowicz:

My gym teacher was Frank Bender. He, um, I guess in the seventies you wore awkwardly tight gym clothes as a teacher. Oh God. So it just looked weird. The shorts that were like way, way high. But I remember he, we do kickball and he would love past us. I don't know, third graders, love to throw spinners. That's where you throw the ball and it has a spin to it. And when it hits the ground, every hop it starts jumping around all awkwardly and strike us out. And he would laugh. Like, that was his joy.

AJ Harper:

Mine. Mine, mine was Mr. VaKolskis. I'm not gonna say his first name because I don't want anybody to Google him and see if he's still alive. Oh, because he was a tormentor.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. What's, what's the chances that he's still alive? I wonder if Mr. Frank Bender's still alive.

AJ Harper:

I bet. I bet he is still alive. Because you know, they all seem so old, but they weren't really that old.

Mike Michalowicz:

No, they're like in their twenties.

AJ Harper:

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And then everybody looked old in the eighties.

Mike Michalowicz:

Everyone looked. Yeah. 'cause the smoking,

AJ Harper:

Everybody looked so <laugh>. But my gym teacher used to have bring out a scale and we would all have be weighed in front of each other.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh my gosh. Then he'd rain down with criticism. Oh, that's classy. That's classy.

AJ Harper:

It's really hard on a chubby girl. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, <laugh> an emotional, that's unbelievable.

AJ Harper:

Listen,

Mike Michalowicz:

emotional trauma. What the hell?

AJ Harper:

The eighties. No joke.

Mike Michalowicz:

No. Could you imagine stuff like that happening nowadays? No.

AJ Harper:

No, no. That's the tame thing that happened to me.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh. Maybe off air. We'll talk about some of the other things.

AJ Harper:

No, we don't need to. We don't need to talk about it at all. Because here we are living our best life with Archer

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Mike Michalowicz:

<laugh>. There you go. So, uh, today's episode 1 36, we're gonna talk about using Substack to grow your author platform. Yes. Are you big into Substack? Yes. Oh, I can't wait to hear. This is gonna be a learning episode for me. I'm joining in studio with **AJ Harper**. I'm **Mike Michalowicz**. We are co-writers of all of my books. So, money Habit. I'm looking over your shoulder here. The Pumpkin Plan. Fix this. Next. All In. You're an author of Write a Must-Read and you have future books coming out. What? Is there a publishing date targeted? No. Okay. I'm excited for those <laugh>. And you'll see over AJ's shoulders, his red must read back there. Uh, here's what I admire about you is your commitment to the quality of the show. So we recorded this episode 1 36 last week around different content and we, we were just riffing to see if this would work and Yeah. You're doing the head shake now. Right now. No. You said no. It's, it's not.

AJ Harper:

I knew when we were doing it and then I was driving home and I was going, no. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Always trust that instinct. Yeah. Why do you feel that episode was a no go?

AJ Harper:

Because I don't think it's something that our readers need to listen to us talk about. Okay. They're tuning in for a different reason. Yeah. It's not a big mystery. We were just trying to make a curiosity. You had Yeah. Something useful for listeners.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I read Brave New World and, um, it triggered this concept or question around author responsibility and we kind of riffed with it and didn't

AJ Harper:

Work. It didn't, it didn't quite work.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Okay. You ready to get into it?

AJ Harper:

I'm ready. This one's gonna work.

Mike Michalowicz:

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This <laugh> This's One Better Work. Uh, I wanna thank, uh, uh, page two simplifies the imprint for sponsoring today's episode. If you are a author or aspiring author in the entrepreneurial space, check out page two Simplified. You can simply Google it. All right. What is Substack?

AJ Harper:

So it's a publishing platform. It's most mostly known as a newsletter platform, but you could think of it almost like it's reviving this old school blogging, but in a way that helps you build community. And your email list.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is it like MySpace? Like that old schooly?

AJ Harper:

No. Oh no.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's just a old school blog. Like WordPress.

AJ Harper:

No, it, the part of it that's feels, it feels old school in that people are super into each other's blogs or newsletters in the way that they used to back in the early days of blogging. Okay. And it's not, it's not built like those platforms.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. It

AJ Harper:

Just has the feel, you know? Okay. Remember that? Yeah. When you would follow someone's blog. Oh, totally, totally subscribe to someone's blog.

Mike Michalowicz:

I used to follow Mr. Money Mustache

AJ Harper:

<laugh>,

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, and a couple other, it was Tim Ferriss I was into. It was so interesting because, because you could find some on a very specific vertical space that you were interested in

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AJ Harper:

And you could find voices that you liked. Yeah. You could just find people whose lives you were in, you were interested in learning more about. So it has that feel and it's, um, you have to subscribe. So you're not dealing with this social media component. There is a social component called notes where people who are subscribers can then comment on your posts and leave notes, et cetera. But it's not like being in the wide open. Right. The comments you might get on saying Instagram post. Hmm. You know, I wonder if

Mike Michalowicz:

That's in part why it works. Is it, you know, when you say something, it's a community that's like-minded community.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. And it's curated for you. So you know, you've got your subscribers, so you're not dealing with all the trolley trolls all over the, all over the place.

Mike Michalowicz:

I noticed you ever go on Reddit?

AJ Harper:

Oh yeah. All the time. Yeah. So

Mike Michalowicz:

Reddit, I think Reddit's pretty great.

AJ Harper:

I do like Reddit. Reddit.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's all anonymous contributions. Yes. Right. All the comments and so forth. And there's a little bit of trolling, but how they moderate it is you can down or up vote a comment. Yeah. And so that seems to work actually pretty effectively too. But it doesn't feel like community is to me as I maybe, I don't know sub that all. So

AJ Harper:

I think Reddit has communities within it. Hmm. For example, I'm a Bridgerton super fan.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay.

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AJ Harper:

And I'm a lurker on Reddit, so I don't actually have a handle. I just read stuff. I don't really comment. Yeah. But I know that in the Bridgerton Reddit, there's a community there of people who know each other. I'm not contributing in any way. I'm just looking.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, that's interesting. Yeah. Could you be a lurker for Substack or do you have to be a subscriber with a handle?

AJ Harper:

Sure. But I would say that is a lurker. If you're subscribing, you don't have to actually comment.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay, I see. Yeah. I see. So let's go why into why you think it works so well for authors?

AJ Harper:

Because I haven't seen anything grow the email list so fast.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is it the Substack email list or do you go, do they go right into your own email list

AJ Harper:

So it can be merged in with you? I mean, so you, it can go straight to your, let me see, I'm not gonna say this. The tech technically perfectly. Yeah. But you can download that email list as your own. Okay. So it's not like they retain it. Okay. You can download it as often as you need to. And you can also have a separate email list. So you've got a big old email list that you would wanna keep, but you can also have a Substack email list and you can bring some of those people over, of course with your, with their, their permission. But you are going to grow that list by the Substack list by leaps and bounds compared to your regular growth tools.

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting.

AJ Harper:

Like by thousands.

Mike Michalowicz:

Really? Yeah. Okay. Well, well it's I guess in context.

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AJ Harper:

Context, that's why. So I like it because it grows your, your email list like wildfire. Yeah. And because you can build community and because you can build community on for authors, why it's important is because it's for writers. It's for people who like to write (Mm). And who like to read. (Mm.) It's not like this, um, influencer space. Mm.

Mike Michalowicz:

And what do you personally write on there?

AJ Harper:

Well, I haven't, I, last year I was intending to go live with this whole big plan for Substack, but I didn't actually launch it because one of the things that I feel strongly about is you don't wanna start something and then not be able to continue it consistently. Agreed. And that's the key over there. So I have my substack, but I haven't really been that active on it, but now we're starting that. Okay. So for me it's about writing, publishing, creativity, the same stuff that I love to talk about all the time.

Mike Michalowicz:

Now, how would you differentiate building a list versus building a community?

AJ Harper:

Well, the, the community would be within the notes. That would be people who would, you'd be engaging with regularly. But you, so you might have a hundred people who talk with you regularly, but you might have a thousand people who are reading.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. I gotcha. Yeah. I gotcha. How, how do you separate this from, you know, the old Facebook communities or some other thing? Instagram.

AJ Harper:

Well, like I just said, it's their subscribers. So a Facebook community would also be, you would also join that, but, um, but you aren't, you aren't, you don't have their email addresses. You do a substack.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is Substack only written content? Can you do pictorial stuff? Can you do video?

AJ Harper:

No, listen, so good. Okay.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Lay it on me.

AJ Harper:

You, you can do video, you can do audio, you can go live. A lot of people are moving their podcasts over to Substack as a host platform. (Wow.) It's so good. And the thing that's gonna make you very excited is you can have a free version and a paid version and you can have tiers of paid and you can run memberships offers. You can even run, you can even have as one of your tiers that help somebody who's signing up for say, a strategy session with you. Okay. So you can, you can also make quite a living on there.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's interesting. Does it have to be, this is maybe too technical question. Does it have to be additional content that you give to the paid subscribers? Or could you do continuous, like say, could I write a blog that's maybe 10 paragraphs long? The first four paragraphs are free and then you go be to the paywall or whatever.

AJ Harper:

So that's how a lot of people do it. Is they'll say, this part is, this part is the free part. Yeah. And then you can extend it. You can, you can be a subscriber, which is usually really small amount. \$7 a month, \$10 a month

Mike Michalowicz:

Dictated by the author. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Okay. But some people have much higher membership fees. Yeah. Or subscription fees is what they're called. I personally do not like it when I'm in the middle of an article and it tells me I have to pay to finish it. Yeah. But I think you can do other things, like maybe you have resources or a lot of people choose to have the one article's free, but then the special deep dive article, which is separate, that's additional. Some people save their, um, the notes, privileges and commenting privileges or paid subscribers. And that way they're really keeping their community tight. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

That's interesting.

AJ Harper:

So, and then they might have say, office hours, ask me anything since they can do all that stuff in the platform. Oh, that's interesting. You can do it right there in the platform.

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Mike Michalowicz:

I wonder if we could, uh, have a Substack or don't write that book. Why don't you, you, you're adjusting your headset. Just pick it up a little bit. 'cause then it pushed your hair forward. So when you do it, you pick it up.

AJ Harper:

I'm gonna start over. Yeah. Just keep, just keep talking while

Mike Michalowicz:

I do it. Keep talking while, there you go. That's how you do it. That's how you do it the right way.

AJ Harper:

I really hate the headphones.

Mike Michalowicz:

We, if uh, well maybe we can do it without headphones going forward then this was, um, it sounded like Darth Vader a little bit 'cause it got close to the microphone. Okay. So Matt's Matt's panicking over there. So is

AJ Harper:

That, is that anything?

Mike Michalowicz:

It's way better. Yeah. Okay. That's way better. But you know what? We can do 'em without the headphones going forward.

AJ Harper:

That would be amazing. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. Okay then we'll, we'll do that. So could I on Substack stack this broadcast ourselves? Could we do, don't write that book an article and then say we're gonna discuss the article on our paid stack, for example, and then you click through for that community.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. (That's so interesting.) You do anything you want, you could have, um, people run their whole membership communities on there. They do. They have education, they have classes.

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They might have strategy sessions. Like I said, you can do anything you want. And they have multiple tiers.

Mike Michalowicz:

You put a note in our notes about Substack book deals, what's going on.

AJ Harper:

So some people have so much popularity on Substack that they're getting scouted for deals.

Mike Michalowicz:

Wow. That's amazing. Did I tell you our house was scouted, uh, by CBS for a TV show.

AJ Harper:

No. <laugh>.

Mike Michalowicz:

So we get this bizarre thing in the mailbox, uh, that says I'm an agent for CBS and we're scouting the show. But it was like a photocopied one. And so it's a little suss. I call the town. And the reason I call the town is because other properties in this area have been scouted. Bruce Springsteen. Have you seen his new movie?

AJ Harper:

No,

Mike Michalowicz:

It is excellent. Okay. It's excellent. It's about his, he went, he may has depression, but he was going through a depress a period of deeper depression. And he was on this path of popular hits, like born in the USA and so forth and decided to write this album, Nebraska. And it's about this creation of Nebraska, which actually became a top three album, but it was not, um, promoted by the studio. They were not enthusiastic about it. And what he went through, it was filmed a town over from here. Okay. There's another movie called Jewels. It was filmed in this town, like literally down the street. So I'm like, this could be the newest scam. Go into a town. And, um, so I, I called the town, I say, yeah, this is a legit person. So I reach out to 'em and there's a show, TV show, and they're looking for a long flat driveway. So we have a long flat driveway. And they said, we want this pull-up scene that's a long flat driveway. We're looking to rent your home for three days.

AJ Harper:

Did you say Yes?

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Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I said, we said, well, the scout that says we'd like to come to the house, 'cause they wanna see it from all different angles and stuff. So we, we invited them. Here was the crazy thing. They said, they'll pay, they pay you on average \$10,000 a day.

AJ Harper:

It's nuts.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's nuts. And, um, the agent thing, or the representative called me the next day when she was coming out and said, change in plans. We're gonna do some other shot. So sorry you're out. But still is just to be nominated.

AJ Harper:

Just to be nominated for the movies.

Mike Michalowicz:

But really interesting. And it's a lot of money. And I kind of was excited that they weren't gonna a, they could AI it, it's just a flat driveway. They didn't AI it. So people are scouting every, everything is what he's getting to. So they're scout who's scouting these book deals. Agents know. Yeah. This the spot to be.

AJ Harper:

Of course. Yes. It's to the point now where agents are asking people if they have a Substack and encouraging people to get a Substack.

Mike Michalowicz:

Hmm.

AJ Harper:

You know, back in the day when they would say, you should have this, um, Instagram and then now they say you should have TikTok. They're also saying you should have Substack if you're nonfiction.

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting. I'm always hesitant for new technologies, but maybe I gotta move quick or we, we are on Substack, but it's a we not of me yet. Like, I'm not writing for myself.

AJ Harper:

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Uh, but you would not ever wanna use AI for Substack.

Mike Michalowicz:

No, no,

AJ Harper:

No. This is a writing prop platform. Yeah. This is a serious business. Yeah. So if you, you know, if you like writing (Yeah.) You wanna keep up with it. And it's not so much, it's not like, you know, I know you did all your newsletters for the money habit and, you know, one fell swoop. For a year. It's not that kind of thing. Okay. That's not how you wanna approach this.

Mike Michalowicz:

You gotta wake up and write.

AJ Harper:

This is an, or well, maybe not that day, but it's an organic Yeah. More like, we're experiencing this together kind of thing. (Okay.) So you don't, you are not gonna, um, hack this. There's no hacking. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's gr which is great.

AJ Harper:

You could, but it's just not gonna get the same result.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's not gonna, Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Because that's not the vibe over there.

Mike Michalowicz:

That is cool.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Well, I like it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah. Totally. What's your favorite Substack? Is it called a Substack? An individual's feed?

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AJ Harper:

Yeah. Or newsletter.

Mike Michalowicz:

Newsletter. Who's your favorite newsletter or Substack?

AJ Harper:

Well, uh, I always read Heather Cox Richardson.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay. Tell me about it.

AJ Harper:

Which is, I recommended for you to read her. Just the only thing I read, because I don't watch the news anymore.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, okay. Yes. I remember this now.

AJ Harper:

And she gives, she's a historian and she gives very accurate every single day accounting of what's going on in our news. With specifically politics. And it's heavily resourced.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's great.

AJ Harper:

And accurate. And, um, my politics align with hers, so it works for me. Hmm. She has, I don't even know how many millions of people following her on Substack.

Mike Michalowicz:

Hmm. Are there other newsletter options or platforms that you've considered the alternatives to Substack or is

AJ Harper:

Sure. Yeah. There's, um, there's Ghost and then what's the other one called? It's like a bee, like a bumblebee. I can't remember the exact, I gotta look it up.

Mike Michalowicz:

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Okay.

AJ Harper:

Do. But there's, there's a couple more that I think are, are worth considering, but they don't have the same capacity for growth that Substack has.

Mike Michalowicz:

And what do you mean by that? Just the way the technology's designed. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Okay. They're just, the, the newsletters are not growing as fast.

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting. Yeah. Interesting.

AJ Harper:

At least not right now, the way that they've set up the technology, they're just not go working as fast. Okay. Let me just, I wanna find, now I'm stuck on this.

Mike Michalowicz:

She's googling.

AJ Harper:

It's my perimenopause brain. All I can see is the bee.

Mike Michalowicz:

So Bumble, beehive, beehive.

AJ Harper:

Dang it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Bumblebee's. Probably a Bumblebee dating website or something.

AJ Harper:

<laugh>. That's a transformer, right? <laugh>.

Mike Michalowicz:

I was a transformer. Yeah. I've never seen those movies, but I do remember that.

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AJ Harper:

I You didn't see the movies? No. You have, we have kids roughly the same age.

Mike Michalowicz:

Isn't that crazy? Hmm. I I'm just not into movies, really. Uh, like, like I should be. Um, so you're, you're investigating Substack right now yourself?

AJ Harper:

I mean, I've been studying it pretty hardcore for about two years, uh, in terms of growth and why it matters to authors. And I think if it's your, you know, I'm, these headphones are driving me down.

Mike Michalowicz:

Take 'em off. Just take 'em off.

AJ Harper:

I'm just gonna take 'em off.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Just put 'em, just hang them right on there so that

AJ Harper:

I hate them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Okay. They love you though, so at least someone, there you go. Okay. Do you feel more comfortable? Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Good. Oh, I feel so much better. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

Good. Okay. Let's see. Cranking here. So you started looking to Substack when?

AJ Harper:

Couple years ago. And I'm reading it, but I'm also, I follow a couple of, uh, blogs that are designed to help you grow your substack. And I've been really paying close attention to what, how do you do that and what's the, what's the real culture over there? And I think that is super helpful for authors if they can commit again to some consistency on substack and, um, and also

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to com communicating because it's not enough to just put it out. I had one author who was putting out their substack and then said to me about a month into it, I don't think, I don't think this is working. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting.

AJ Harper:

But part of it is also paying attention to other people's sub stacks, commenting on their stuff. And there's a thing called re stacking, which is like reblogging.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, interesting.

AJ Harper:

Right. So if you loved something Yeah. And you would want, you would share it with other people. So there's a whole etiquette there about sharing other people's stuff, communicating with other people, commenting. You need to spend a little bit of time with it. It's not enough to just put your stuff out and help people find it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Interesting. Okay.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So you can't really say it's not working if you're not fully engaged, committed to it. Engaged.

Mike Michalowicz:

So it sounds like ideally you're as much of a contributor as you are a recipient or a bank.

AJ Harper:

You should, you should be. Yeah. It's like it's, you have a community that's not just people who are interested in you. Your community is also people you're interested in. And you share those people with people who are interested in you. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is that why it's so hard to get started? Is is you have to kind of spark it? Spark it?

AJ Harper:

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Yeah. I mean, I think, you know, for some, if you went on there, you would find people who were on there that, you know, so it would probably be an easier lift for you to get going. But I think it would be hard for you because you would have to really be in the day of it. Mm. And you are so scheduled. Yeah. You know, getting shifting into a substack mode I think might be challenging for you. I bet you it would be. But you know what would help, what would be good for you is when you get that itch. Because right now we're on a writing hiatus. Yeah. When you get the itch for that, again, you could say, you know what, I'm gonna, since, since we're not working on a book, I'm gonna do a substack to do satisfy my writing itch. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

That's interesting.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. You

Mike Michalowicz:

Can, I have thrown a feel at times. Yeah,

AJ Harper:

I'm sure. Yeah. So you, you can funnel that though. It's a way for you to test content and to engage, um, and get the writing itch and have that be productive for you.

Mike Michalowicz:

Remember Clubhouse? Yes. So Clubhouse was,

AJ Harper:

Is, this is not that. Okay. This has been around for years. How many years?

Mike Michalowicz:

It's been three years. Okay.

AJ Harper:

No longer even, but, so it's, you are just not, it's not as popular in say the business type world. Yeah. Um, but it's gonna, it's, I think we have at least a few more years where it's really worth doing. Okay.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Clubhouse I remember exploded in popularity and then vanished just as quickly. It was like a flash. It was like a flash.

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AJ Harper:

Yeah. Well, you know, there's still people on Clubhouse.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I um, okay.

AJ Harper:

<laugh>. I'm just saying. Yeah. I mean, some people stuck. They stuck around and they're still doing stuff on there. So I've often wondered who's over there and what are, what are they doing? They're probably just happy as pie over there. Yeah. 'cause nobody else is there now.

Mike Michalowicz:

There's still people using Yahoo email. So there you go.

AJ Harper:

Yes. My dad is one of of them.

Mike Michalowicz:

My wife is one of them. Okay. <laugh>. And it's so funny, you're like, oh, you're so old school. But it kind of gets, it's kind of cool, like if you have an AOL email address, like if

AJ Harper:

You I have a Mac email address.

Mike Michalowicz:

Old school Mac. Oh, that's cool. With your name.

AJ Harper:

Um, I'm not gonna say what it is.

Mike Michalowicz:

Of course not, but Yeah. But you imagine having like aj@mac.com or

AJ Harper:

I do have something very similar to that.

Mike Michalowicz:

It's unbelievable. Yeah. That's the coolest thing. Never, never let that go. Um, so do you have some best practices for Substack?

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AJ Harper:

I think I've shared a bunch of them. Okay. Which is be in it. Yeah. It's not a thing to just put your stuff out there. Yeah. Use your, you know, productivity hacks to get, be consistent with your newsletter. That's not that. Yeah. Think about being in the moment. Think about consistency. Um, Sadé, um, who's on my team, who's my marketing? I don't even like saying expert. I just feel like she's so next level, she's just, uh, the way she sees the world is so different. She's, she said she thinks twice a week is ideal. And I think choose one that's related to the book. The topic, your expertise, the problem you're trying to solve. And then you can let the other one be other things. If you just have musings or ramblings or other things you wanna talk about but have, have one be consistent. And she recommends having them on the con the same day. So let's say you're gonna have a blog about the money habit. You just wanna talk about money. Maybe you just wanna have a substack about accounts.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh. You can go that specific. You

AJ Harper:

Would, you would probably love

Mike Michalowicz:

Geek out on Yeah. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Be like, here's this new account. Or here's so-and-so's account. Yeah. That I heard about. This is so cool. And maybe that would be all it was. Be like, here's an account for this.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, I really like that.

AJ Harper:

And see, you'd be, that would be fun for you. You would enjoy it. Yeah. And it doesn't have to be very long and may, but you would say, I'm always gonna do a Sunday morning or I'm always gonna have. Yeah. And then that's consistent.

Mike Michalowicz:

And could you do exclusively video on Substack or is it Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Oh totally.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Ah, I think we got something.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. You can run your whole podcast on there. You could do private podcast and that Maybe that's the paid version. Yeah. So there's so much you can do on Substack.

Mike Michalowicz:

So let's talk a little bit more about the paid version, the paywalls and so forth. Sure. I, I, uh, follow a sports feed for my old alma mater and there's one site that always has a paywall and now I just excluded it 'cause it's so frustrating. Yeah. The same thing. You read about three paragraphs and that Yeah. Clicks out. So do you have some tips or advice on how to, because you need to sustain yourself, you need to make money. Do you have tips on how to do a paywall?

AJ Harper:

Yeah, I think, you know, if you wanna keep your community tight. Allow, allow people to comment if they're actual paid subscribers. Maybe give them some sort of time with you. Some sort of, and it doesn't have to be where they get to talk to you. It could just be exclusive lives that maybe you'll do within that, behind that subscriber paywall. Um, maybe you would have an extra article, maybe you would have educational materials that they could download and maybe you'd give that to them every quarter or something. Um, you can play anything. I mean, it could be maybe they get to have a session with you once a quarter. I don't know. It can be any, a myriad of things. It could be simple. Um, you might just look at what you already have and make those things available. You can also take the things, this is something that Jen Kem taught me. You can also take things you're already doing and just put those up and those are the pay amounts. So for example, I could have my membership, so it would be my membership and that would be one of the tiers on Substack. Hmm. And it would be a way for me to funnel people into the membership, but through Substack, because Substack does not like promo. So you are not gonna do an email newsletter or a newsletter that's all about promoting some that

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, interesting. You're

AJ Harper:

Not doing that. Okay. No,

Mike Michalowicz:

But that substack list that you're building, you can import into your own email list and you can promote that way. Is, is appropriate or

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AJ Harper:

Well, you would need their permission to be on the, to be on the other list. I

Mike Michalowicz:

Mean, of course. Okay. Yeah. Okay.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So

Mike Michalowicz:

Substack, there's no promo, uh, it's not recommended. Besides not recommended besides Substack itself saying I have a new article coming out or Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Okay. And you could say, I have this other email list. Or you could say I'm doing this event, but it would be very chill. Okay. You know, like a, so there's

Mike Michalowicz:

A definite vibe around it.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. There's a total culture. It's a culture there that's not overtly promotional.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is the paywall engine, like the thing processing the credit card or whatever, is it within Substack or do you tie it into your

AJ Harper:

Existing No, no, it's all within Substack and, and it's a little steep though. I think it's 10%.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay.

AJ Harper:

So Substack is making money off of the, so what they do is if they start seeing you, first of all, they prioritize the people who have, um, a subscription, a paid subscription option. So even if all you do is say, okay, pay the subscribers have access to, they can do leave notes. Yeah. They can comment and that's all you do. Yeah. It's better to have something that say fi even if it's five bucks a month, because then Substack prioritizes you because they need

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Mike Michalowicz:

To make

AJ Harper:

The money. Yes. But then if you start getting subscribers, they push you out, they're promoting for you. So they're promoting your substack. Oh, all the time. Okay. The more subscribers you get, the more

Mike Michalowicz:

Successful you are, the more they promote you. They

AJ Harper:

Push, push, push. Okay. Yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

Which is the same as the Amazon model, which is the same as um, actually all these models, at a certain point they realize they have to monetize. And does that become the end, the beginning of the end when they have to monetize?

AJ Harper:

No, because it has always been that way on Substack. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

So it was,

AJ Harper:

That's been the model from the beginning, from

Mike Michalowicz:

The ground up.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Okay. That's not a new thing.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, because

AJ Harper:

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The idea is the idea that they wanted was, first of all they wanted free speech, but they also wanted journalists initially to have platforms. So now all, we have all these journalists that unfortunately are maybe being have been let go Yeah. From media or are feeling the pinch of, um, censorship. Yeah. Right. Yeah. And so now they can have a substack, Heather Cox Richardson, for example. They can have a substack where people can decide, I want to listen to what you have to say. Yes. I want your reporting and I'm gonna pay you \$5 a month for your reporting.

Mike Michalowicz:

Any idea where the name Substack came from?

AJ Harper:

Oh, I dunno. Okay. That's a good, that's a good question.

Mike Michalowicz:

Going into this, let's just do a quick scenario. Say I want to go into Substack the right way. What would be the, the four or five steps to get me set up properly?

AJ Harper:

Just sign up for an account, pick a handle that makes sense for you. Well,

Mike Michalowicz:

What would make sense for me? Like, have my own name or it could be about money or

AJ Harper:

Could be your book title. Okay. Mine is my book title. Okay.

AJ Harper:

And then there's a page that where you kind of say about who you are. So it's not a traditional bio, it's more like why you wanted a Substack. And kind of what you stand for and what people can expect on the Substack. And then, I don't know, throw all pictures up, done and done. You can get fancy, they have templates. You, they have substack experts who will redesign your substack for you and make it look all kinds of ways. But I would say the main thing is, do you have an idea about what you would wanna do and how, and the frequency. And then just commit to that to get started to see if people are responding. I like

Mike Michalowicz:

That. My, my tip for anyone that's looking to do anything is if you're looking to do it because there's a money opportunity, probably not a good reason to do it. You're looking to do it. 'cause your heart screams out to do it. Probably a good reason to do it. Id call it was a very unexpected

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call from a, a person who's famous in a space outside of what I'm about to talk about. I'm talking to her and she goes, um, I wanna get into comedy. And I, I take pause and I'm like, well, you're very famous for this work you do. Why don't you keep on kind of building your reputation there? That's what you can monetize. She's like, yeah, yeah. That's, that's the smart move. But I, I love comedy and I've actually been doing it for the last three years. Like kind of stand up on the sly. Yeah. On the sly.

AJ Harper:

Oh, that's cool.

Mike Michalowicz:

I'm like, does your heart scream out this? And she said, absolutely. I'm like, do it. And it's funny. Then she retorts, she goes or responds, she goes, you know, less than like 0.1% of comedians ever make a living doing this. I'm like, that's even more of the reason to do it. It's like authorship. My, my heart was screaming to do this and it was undeniable. And when I look at the data in retrospect, I'm like, I'm crazy.

AJ Harper:

Of course.

Mike Michalowicz:

Who's I talking to? Oh, Charles Duhig. Mm-hmm. The Power of Habit. So he's joining us at, um, the authors for authors meetup. And so he's gonna do a presentation on journalistic writing. Mm. Which is different than a lot of these authors. And, uh, he shared a stat when we were just con having a conversation. I said, Hey, I, this is perfunctory. I need to book scan it. You done a million books, so yeah, no problem. I'll provide it to you because you only 0.0001% authors do that. I said Exactly. I do know that. But if I knew that prior to becoming an author, I don't know. I don't know if that would've been the fear factor and I wouldn't have done it.

AJ Harper:

I don't know. Now you would, now you would've done it

Mike Michalowicz:

When your, your heart screams out to do it. That statistic should become aspirational as opposed to fear driving or fear triggering.

AJ Harper:

I mean, okay. I don't know that anybody's gonna say, my heart screams out to be on Substack.

Mike Michalowicz:

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Well, well, no, that's a vehicle.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. I'm just saying it's a really good vehicle for growing your author platform right now. I don't think it, it will stay that way. I agree. In a few years, but I think right now it's very good.

Mike Michalowicz:

Likewise. I'm not saying my heart screamed out to be on Penguin's, uh, publishing platform. My heart screamed out to be an author. And I think for Substack, if, if you're screaming out to do journalism or, or some kind of, um,

AJ Harper:

You don't have to be a journalist to beyond that. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

That, that's, that's why it, it's gonna build on like performative or writing or sharing. 'cause it sounds like you can do video if you're heart screams out to go very narrow. It sounds like this may be the platform

AJ Harper:

And there's people who are not narrow at all. There's a whole blog that I follow and her whole thing is, uh, Substack allows me to just write about whatever the hell I wanna write about.

Mike Michalowicz:

And it's all over the place.

AJ Harper:

So then you would have to have a very succinct, you'd have to very clear personality. Yeah. Okay. So and she has that. So again, no ai. Yeah. Right. Because this is about your vibe, your perspective, how you see the world. Um, what pe people just wanna know what you have to say. That's harder to pull off. Yeah. That means your personality. Right. So then they don't care if you're gonna talk about your mom's beat recipe versus <laugh>. Um, maybe how your, your dad's beat recipe. Maybe how your gym teacher treated you, and then maybe also something really useful about whatever your expertise is. Yeah. And people will be down with that. Yeah. But there's people who, I mean, um, there's people who went onto Substack because they couldn't get book deals and then ended up getting book deals because they had such lot a popular substack. I I own stuff. I love a story like that. Yeah. Yeah. So like anything, your substack, it's gonna take time. You have to commit to it. You have to be consistent. You have to have your thing. Um, but mostly if you feel overwhelmed by it immediately it's, it's maybe not. Yeah. For you,

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Mike Michalowicz:

Lisa Dimona, she is a agent with Writer's House, I think now.

AJ Harper:

Oh, she went to writer's house?

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I think she went to writer's house. Um, she represented, uh, tri still does Seth Godin. Yeah. Is one of authors. I met with her, this goes back maybe 15, 20 years ago and maybe 15 years ago when we were doing Profit First. And I said, I, I want, or I thought I needed, that's what I said, I want an agent. And met with her face to face, talked about it. And, uh, I wanted to be my agent. And she's like, it's not there yet. Profit First like this didn't, didn't get it. And uh, I said, I, I have to do this. I'm called to do this. And she goes, and I said, and I don't think I can get it published. Uh, because Penguin, while they did the pumpkin plan, was not ready to renew up. And she, and we departed ways. Lisa and I very friendly and, and great. But she goes, make them regret it. And once, uh, profit First sold over a million copies, I sent her a text. I never heard back from her. Or maybe it was an email just saying they regret it. Now they, they proved they regret it 'cause they, they bought it back after we self-publish it and so forth. But it sounds like Substack is the same opportunity. It's an outlet of that expression.

AJ Harper:

I just want authors to think about it as a way to really to be seen and um, to be discovered for the the unique perspective and voice that you have. Yeah. And if you are serious about growing, I mean, there's people, Dan Blank, you know, he's moved completely over to Substack because it's growing his newsletter and he's a newsletter guy. It's growing his, um, readership exponentially. So, um, it's a good time to be over there if you can commit to it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Any reasons not to do Substack

AJ Harper:

Again, if you are not able to keep up and you're just gonna put stuff out, but you're not actually gonna engage. Okay. Or if you think that you're just gonna use ai.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Just don't, don't don't use AI pictures. Don't use AI to even edit your articles. These are writers on there. Yeah. They're gonna smoke you out

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Mike Michalowicz:

And if no one's reading your substack, uh, but you're loving it anyway. Just keep going. Is there,

AJ Harper:

I would keep going and try and think about, you know, people always forget to tie what they're doing to what's happening in the world. So there has to be some of that. There has to, that's why I say it's not something that you would write for six months ahead and then load it up or think about it, you know, what's going on right now and how can I share my perspective of that going on in my industry, my neighborhood, my community, my um, uh, my country, my um, my area of expertise. What's going on is something happening. And I can comment on that where you can start to become part of a conversation if you think of it as just, I'm just putting stuff out and I don't care who's reading it. I don't really think you need to do that. You know, don't put that on Substack. 'cause that's, it's a community platform.

Mike Michalowicz:

We were surprised for what we're talking about next week before I share that **AJ Harper.com** is a website to go, uh, when this broadcast, you're probably in the midst of your summer camp.

AJ Harper:

Summer retreats. Summer retreats Or you Oh, you mean summer camp? Yeah. Which is our free,

Mike Michalowicz:

They'll do virtual online. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

So summer camp is a fun free accountability thing we do, um, in the summer.. That helps people make progress with their writing over the summer. And anybody can, can join that anytime. But is that what you're referring to? Yes. Yeah. You can go to **AJ Harper.com**

Mike Michalowicz:

And other activities, events, they can join learnings lessons. I

AJ Harper:

I have a member, I have a membership that people can join anytime and that has a lot of classes, writing sprints, ask me anything with me, that sort of thing. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

He knows Archer's getting up, stretching now. I don't know if he, he, he knows picked up on camera. He's, he's like, alright, we're

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AJ Harper:

End of the episode. He's gonna do a wrap up. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

He's doing the fast Forward on me, <laugh>. Um, any last things about Substack before we wrap it up?

AJ Harper:

No, I think, uh, I Oh I know. Yeah, just start reading. Go start reading some. Yeah. Get, get the lay of the land. That's brilliant. Understand the culture.

Mike Michalowicz:

That's brilliant. Um, also, I, I want all of our listeners to get a copy of Write a Must read right now. Um, and also check out the Money Habit of, I'm really proud of this book. Oh, I didn't tell you the stream of emails are coming in now daily. So it, it triggered two or three Fridays ago and sure enough, there's another one there this morning. Let's

AJ Harper:

How you know it's working.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. That's the, that's the way you know it's working. Alright, so what's next week's episode? We're gonna talk about Book Club scams. Now the title you had here is Book Club Scams and other Bad Ideas. <laugh>, I think it's Book Club Scams and other scams. There is more and more out there and I am aware of authors getting hooked into it.

AJ Harper:

I just didn't wanna use the word scams twice. It's true. If it sounds better the way I wrote it, it does

Mike Michalowicz:

Sound, it

AJ Harper:

Does sound book club scams and other bad ideas. Yeah. Sounds better than book clubs. Scams and other scams. Yeah,

Mike Michalowicz:

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Exactly. But the only problem with bad ideas, it feels like that our listeners would do these type of things.

AJ Harper:

I feel like some of the scams that are coming across in inboxes that it's a bad, they're just bad ideas.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. Yeah.

AJ Harper:

And then there's some that are not actual scams. That's why I said bad ideas and

Mike Michalowicz:

They getting conflated.

AJ Harper:

Some of them are just, it's not a good idea to do that. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

I gotta tell you, I thought I was getting scammed and it's legit and it may turn into a major project. So, um, how do you separate these things out? It's gonna be a conversation for next week too. It

AJ Harper:

Is. We're gonna talk about that.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, we will talk about that. Alright, my friends you've been listening to, don't write that book. Hope you love this episode. Here's a big ask I have for you. Please rate and review the show that helps us tremendously. I know it'll take 30 seconds of your time, but it gets the word out on the show. So whoever pod catcher you're listening on, do that. Also, we have free resource available for you at don't write that book.com. Um, or d I'm sorry, I actually I gave you the wrong site. It's d wt b podcast.com. Dw tb podcast.com. Go there for resources that AJ's prepared for us and also you can email us at hello@dwtbpodcast.com. Let's say this together. Don't write that book. Write the greatest book you can. You.