

Business901 Podcast Transcription

Implementing Lean Marketing Systems



Startup Entrepreneur to Storyteller

Guest was John Gray

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Transcription of the Podcast

Joe Dager: *Hello everyone! This is Joe Dager the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is John Gray. John is making the transition from startup entrepreneur to storyteller. Today John is a full time freelance writer. He enjoys sharing stories about startups, entrepreneurs, and emerging technologies. John I guess the best way to start off the conversation is to ask you to tell me a story about being a startup entrepreneur. Where did you come from?*

John Gray: You know Joe it was basically one of those things of man got tired of that soul-crushing cubicle, selling things for others, watching the goal posts move. When you're a sales guy, I think it's commonplace that achieving performance initiatives is important. And working for people that kind of kept changing the rules of the game was sort of a deal breaker. I was introduced to a couple of seemingly great technical cofounders working on a project. They liked me; I liked them; it made sense. So I showed up with a little bit of pocket change. I figured we could get our way to this technology startup promise land. And that was back in spring 2009, and it was a journey from there.

Joe: *Well you were also an organizer for the Startup Weekend Vancouver, was that an outgrowth of being an entrepreneur yourself or is that where you found these other guys?*

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John: No. I was already well involved with the startup. I think a little bit of when you learn lessons, it is defining community and defining an ecosystem; that's what helps startups grow, hopefully startups succeed. The failure rate's fairly significant, but people have to learn along the way. So in terms of helping out with a couple of Startup Weekends, I was just being a volunteer, being an organizer, and helping give something back to the local community. That's a great a learning experience when people decide to go in and shall we say give 54 hours of the weekend to try to build something and learn some valuable lessons about entrepreneurship. So yeah, that's that story.

Joe: *Well I have to ask you because two things seem kind of seem a little bit opposite to me. Part of your expertise is in telling stories and writing of course, but how does a startup use a story? I can see where it's a great story, and I can add on to it after I failed or after I succeeded. But can a startup use a story? Can they use storytelling?*

John: Oh, I think it's vital actually Joe. A big part of being a startup is everywhere you go, everybody you meet, every coffee shop you're in, you should be not afraid to tell people what you're doing. And a big part of that is being able to quickly, concisely, with some passion, have people connect with what your vision is. Being able to do that certainly will help validate a business idea. And you might think you got a great idea, you got a hypothesis, but unless people are going to potentially buy into it and ultimately buy into your vision, buy your product, you don't have much. And as you go through the process you're going to meet people to potentially – you know angel investors. You might be considering venture capital for your business at some point. You might end up talking more with people that are local reporters, maybe national reporters, maybe bigger than national

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reporters. So having a good story is how you get people in your corner. That's how you keep moving the good ship startup along.

Joe: *So do I go out there and tell this vision story and create this story of where I'm going to be in three to five years. Is that what you're saying there?*

John: Well it's always a work in progress, but yeah. I think it's really important as an entrepreneur, as a small team, to be aligned and have a sense of what your vision is. You might not have a product today, but you got a vision for how you're going to make something better tomorrow.

Joe: *You reference a lot and even in your bio I think you reference in your section of human experience with technology. How important is it to blend them in let's say a startup mentality or even as a regular business?*

John: I think in particular or what I've seen in my experience is a lot of people can we say coming from an engineering background, coming from a product background, they see the world through their product, they see the world through their technology. I know enough about technology to be a little bit dangerous, have a few conversations, but I don't consider myself a true technologist. I don't write code. Goodness only knows if you gave me a soldering iron and asked me to build something it would be a mess. But it's important I think in all of our conversations to always have as humanity connected to our conversations. It's that sense of not what it is. People will care about why, and that's sort of the core of how I look at things. Why should I care about what it is you're doing? I sort

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of run by people, “Why this? Why you? Why now? And why should I care?”

Joe: *Is the story that you tell someone or can you include them? I mean, how do you include someone in a story to get a conversation going? You want your story to lead to a conversation, don't you?*

John: Absolutely. I think one of the natural things that I have often tried to do out in social situations or out networking – and of course all entrepreneurs have to balance that. Get out and about versus head down and building your business, building your product. But I think there's this natural inclination in a lot of situations, first thing people do ask you, “What do you do?” My preference is in most situations is to ask somebody what their story is. Instead of telling my story first, discover something about other people. And don't ask them what they do, ask them what their story is and let them tell you something other than the fact they might be an accountant or a life insurance salesman or a computer software developer. Start discovering things about them. I think that's when you can have a connection; that's when you can start understanding. And when you understand where they're coming from, when you understand things that are popular and important to them, what gets them excited to get out of bed every day, then you can align what it is your vision and your story are so it will resonate with them.

Joe: *Do you walk up to someone and listen to them and say that could make a good story? Could pick that up out of someone right away and what do you see in that that makes a good story?*

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John: At times I think I've had that knack. It's often that to me it's sort of that connecting the dots. But it comes back to the individuals, how well they can communicate. Sometimes I have people share things with me, and I get that quizzical look and go, "I just don't get it." And so part of it comes back to that individual's ability to communicate effectively because often times a real key thing is that are they passionate, are they generally excited about what they're doing. I mean that's infectious. Even if I don't get it, if they're excited about it, I can at least ask a couple more questions and try to get some clarification to see if it's something I'm really going to be excited about myself. I think communicating with that passion, with that excitement for what you're doing; it is truly infectious.

Joe: *In technology there are always a lot of talks about user personas, buyer personas, and those types of things, could they be rewritten as just stories or are they kind of an outline of a story? And should you be able to make a story out of your customer persona per se? Is that a good thing and have you done that?*

John: Yeah, I think it's vital Joe. I often ask people, "Who's your customer?" And if I get, "Males and females 18 to 54," I kind of try to point out, "Well that's a demographic, that's not your customer. Tell me who your customer is. Sally that works here that does this and has these challenges that have interested in these needs this to make her life better. She's 32 years old." Really dive deep and try to understand the difference between a demographic and the person, the people that are going to be your customers, your users.

Joe: *Someone who tells stories needs to be just about as good an interviewer as they are a storyteller.*

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John: Yeah. I think there's a direct correlation between the two. And for me I guess I could say I position myself a little bit is I've always been the curious kid. It is asking lots of questions, asking good questions and seeing what people will share.

Joe: *We think about stories and we think about this case study over here and then add some life to it. But to do that you really have to go to the basics of storytelling that we learned way back in school – heroes and conflict and all that stuff. Should we be looking like to build conflict in a case study to make it interesting? Is there some truth to that or am I kind of all wet there?*

John: It'd be interesting to do a bit of a test. Take case study A and case study B and take the case study A that's dry, boring, technical, put it in front of your customer and then take case study B that actually does create some elements of true storytelling and see which one actually gets read, which one people respond to, and which one potentially can take somebody from reading a case study that they might take the time on your website to read to actually then maybe jump from being a potential lead or a prospect, actually work their way through your sales funnel and maybe just become a customer. I have a strong suspicion the case study that's got some elements of resolving conflict, having an element maybe of a bit of a hero's journey to resolve that conflict. It's probably going to be more motivating for the average person than the boring, dry, technical nuts and bolts.

Joe: *I read something the other day that I thought was really interesting that they said part of the problem of business storytelling is they always make themselves out the hero*

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and really what they should do is be making the customer out the hero. What's your thought on something like that?

John: I like that Joe. Actually you should share that one with me because I'd keep that. Ultimately I think when we're dealing with people; people want to actually connect with a sense that you care about them. It's not just all about me. So if all of my communication is really all about me and not answering that question that you're customer, or prospect has; their real question is, "Well what's in it for me?"

Joe: *Really not to describe so much features and benefits of mine, but more of how – the old story is not how they use the drill but how they use the hole to drill made.*

John: Bingo. Yes, I am a big believer in that Joe. Don't make the story just about you and that feature and benefit people to death. I really do believe it's the story of enabling and empowering and showing people what they're going to accomplish by using your product or doing business using your service.

Joe: *You always hear that a salesman has a lot of stories to tell, good stories can spin a yarn. Good or bad, they got stories to tell. How do you know a sales guy is telling you the truth and not spinning a yarn? I mean; you're a storyteller, can they just tell any story? Help me there.*

John: Yeah I know. Separating the BS from the nuggets, right?

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Joe: Yes, I was trying to say that. That's it.

John: But sometimes I think it's how you approach it. Geez Joe, if I knock on your door and we haven't had a conversation or we've never met, and I sit down and I think I've got something. I'm telling you a story I'm not doing my job. My approach to it is simple. Once I understand where you're at, what you need, what matters to you, maybe what your challenge is, what your problems are, what we're going to try to solve, that's when we can start having a conversation. That's when a little bit of the storytelling comes into play. That's when I can say, "Well geez Joe based on what you just shared with me I can tell you Bob down the street, you can't believe what he did. $X + Y = Z$ and if I can put you in that position where you can suddenly envision yourself succeeding, profiting, being productive, being more efficient by doing business with me, me delivering value, then hey I think we've got a winning proposition.

Joe: I kind of alluded to how stories could be the typical hero's journey type, is there a different way that we should look at business stories? Can you say when I go to tell a story about a business that I look at it this way or is there a good way of doing it to develop stories for businesses?

John: I think ultimately is it starts at that real high level with any business is being able to answer those questions as "Why are you doing it? Why do you matter? If we went out of business tomorrow, would anybody miss us and care? What's our purpose?" Attaching meaning to purpose, and I think that most people that are highly capable, successful in business, can tell you more about their purpose and the meaning behind what they're

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doing than describing how awesome they're widget is.

Joe: *You're going ahead with yourself and diving deeper into technology, into relationship to storytelling and technology, can you tell me a little bit about that and what you're doing with yourself?*

John: Well thanks Joe. I think it's all part of a journey. I realized that in 2012 that I had to shift some gears, and I was no longer going to be at that point a startup technology entrepreneur. I had that question "What am I going to do when I grow up?" I'm still putting it off because it's really overrated. But you know I started shall we say dabbling at the writing thing and found I was getting comfortable with it, found I had a bit of a voice, and I guess a few people were feeding my delusions suggesting that they were enjoying some of what I was sharing. But the moment came actually that I decided that I wanted to be a writer when somebody said, "Hey we've got this content we need created, and we'll pay you for it." And I wasn't hung up on having a byline at that time. I saw it as using my abilities to create assets. And hey, a little bit of money showing up for something that I seemed to be enjoying was a good pull. So really I spent last year just discovering whether I'd enjoy it fulltime, whether I actually would get some clients onboard that would shall we say remunerate me for creating assets for them as well as continuing to explore some of my work and contributing sort of some byline material. When you ghost write it's pretty hard to prove what you've written. So I write for a Canadian technology blog called BetaKit – www.betakit.com. I've also done some regular contributions at least on a monthly basis to the Huffington Post British Columbia. So I'm just continuing to shall we say hone the craft, get some confidence, and enjoy what I do.

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Joe: *What advice would you give to an aspiring technology writer?*

John: Definitely be curious. Have a sense of what areas of technology you're comfortable with and what you'd like to have conversations about. I have some distinct areas for myself that I enjoy learning about and writing about that harbor around this whole area of the internet of things and gene and machine technology, some of the things that are going on definitely in the health care space, mobile communications, and largely business to business type of stories. The merging of software and hardware gets my attention, artificial intelligence, augmented reality. I have ADD, so I have a number of things that catch my attention. But yeah, I think find out what you're passionate about and get out to events, build a network, and above all make sure you're trying to write every day, work on the craft.

Joe: *I think that's great advice is to write.*

John: You got to start someplace. If you're going to write the funny thing is you better sit down and do a little bit.

Joe: *What's upcoming for you?*

John: Dealing with this backlog of some great stories that I have come together right now. Right now I'm focused a bit on what's happening obviously right here in my own backyard here in Vancouver. In the Greater Vancouver regional district, we've got a really dynamic

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technology community and some companies doing some incredible things, so I'm excited. I have some opportunities with potentially some other publications coming up, some wonderful new clients onboard that I'm helping write some keynote addresses for which is a new venture for me, and a couple of big conferences. I've got this opportunity to go to Las Vegas for the big IBM Impact conference. I'm excited to learn more about what IBM in particular has in store for their Watson technology. I'm doing a little bit of crowd funding to have an opportunity and earn the opportunity to get myself to the Solid conference in San Francisco May 21 and 22. It's an O'Reilly conference. I'm excited about this whole conference of two days around hardware and software. If you think about the first industrial revolution being one where machine and steam started changing our world, well I think it's fair to say software and hardware coming together dramatically changing the world as we're living in it. So I'm excited about that.

Joe: *What's the best way for someone to contact you?*

John: I'd probably say the best way Joe; I'm a big fan of Twitter. Find me on Twitter. It's @grayspective. It's not a perspective; it's grayspeticive.

Joe: *You also have an About Me page we found on LinkedIn pretty easily I believe.*

John: Yes absolutely.

Joe: *John is there anything you'd like to add that maybe I didn't ask?*

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John: You know Joe; we covered a fair bit. I appreciate your thoughtfulness in letting me share this. Ultimately I really wanted to give a shout out because it's important to me. I've spent a fair bit of this last better part of five years connecting and running around the Vancouver startup and technology community. So I just really wanted to share with folks that we've got a 25 almost 30 year history here that goes back to amazing companies that changed our communication space like MacDonald Dettwiler, and Sierra Wireless. We've got a company like Vision Critical now that's changing market research. Bill Direct, they're changing logistics and leveraging big data. And another exciting company happens to be Recon Instruments that I'm a fan of. They're leading the way in heads-up display technology. We've got HootSuite making a big impact here in Vancouver being a significant player actually globally on the social media scene. And then two in particular I'm excited about that I want to give a shout out that are true global game changers. One is D-Wave, and they happen to be leading the charge into the world of quantum computing. They absolutely made Time Magazine. I'm looking forward to having the opportunity to write about them soon, and then lastly, General Fusion. These guys are doing amazing things, and they've got a chance to completely change our dependence on fossil fuels as a source of energy and they will make a breakthrough in fusion technology and again I'm excited to have an opportunity to be sharing their story in the upcoming weeks. So that's it Joe.

Joe: *I appreciate the shout outs John. It's very nice of you to do that. This podcast will be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 blog site. So thanks again John.*

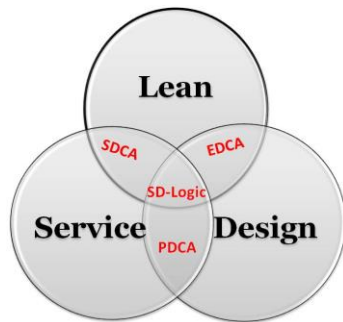
John: Thank you Joe.

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Joe Dager is president of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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