

The Irish Polyglot:  
Benny Lewis

# Living the dream, and profiting from it



LEAVING  
WORK  
BEHIND

**D**igital nomad Benny Lewis is living the dream. After more than a decade on the road, this 2013 National Geographic Traveler of the Year has built a successful business entirely off the back of his blog, [fluentin3months.com](http://fluentin3months.com).

While his unconventional lifestyle necessitates a certain amount of minimalism, the full-time language hacker and blogger relishes the freedom to pick up and go at the drop of a hat.

"I feel possessions own people more than they own the possessions," he says. "Everything I own in the world has to come with me on every flight that I take."

But Benny doesn't feel he's giving up anything to do so.

**"When you sacrifice something you get something better in return."**

His journey began in Spain, where he moved after graduating with an engineering degree. He lived there for six months without ever picking up the language - he figured he didn't have the "language gene".

"It was fun times but I didn't really get to know Spanish culture," he says. "Then I decided to give language learning a real go... After a few months of that I could speak pretty good Spanish. I applied the same process to a bunch of languages and seven years later could speak enough of them that I figured I should write about this!"

The resulting blog took off faster than he ever dreamed. Benny had been working online as a freelance translator but realised his blog was much more scalable, so he proceeded to write an ebook called "The Language

Hacking guide" - and has been earning a living entirely off those sales ever since.

But he has even bigger ambitions. "You start to reach a certain roof with blogging. You can always get higher in Google and get more readers but there are still things you can't do with a blog. So I looked into traditional publishing."

It wasn't for the money - Benny has done very well from self publishing - but the backing of a passionate and established publisher can help open new and bigger doors.

"The reason I want to do that isn't to expand my earnings but to reach new people and try to inspire them to learn a foreign language."

His blog boasts half a million unique visitors per month, a readership Benny built in just a couple of years. How did he get traction so fast? Authenticity is the key, he says.



**TEDx** San Antonio  
x = independently organized event



# Google

A man with a mustache, wearing a dark t-shirt, dark jeans, and a light-colored cap, is sitting on a yellow bicycle with green fenders and a red wire basket on the front. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a large, modern glass building with the word "Google" in large white letters. There are some green bushes and a paved path in the foreground.

“When you  
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in return”





# “You’re more sharable if you’re more relatable.”

Benny detests impersonal blogs – stock images in particular are his pet peeve. “Whenever I see a site like that I roll my eyes a little bit,” he says. “Every single post I’ve ever written has had a photo of me as the main image. If I have a guest post it’s the same rule. The first thing you see when you click through is the person who’s written the article; that engages you on a much more personal level than a photo of a cute kitten or whatever.”

Rather than position himself as a language guru, he writes about his own struggles. “People are a lot more enthusiastic to share your content if they feel you’re an everyman like they are. I don’t do any SEO – I’ve done SEO on one single article on my entire site.

I do get decent Google traffic but the majority of my traffic is from Facebook and Twitter and StumbleUpon.”

Being an everyman doesn’t mean trying to cater to everyone, though.

“You don’t have to put your own face out there but you do have to put your personality into it. I have very frequently in my writing gone out of my way to be very blunt. That may offend people but it also galvanises the community and gets people behind you. When you’re not watering down your words with ‘maybe’ people respect you more. Don’t be afraid to speak your mind.”

Try new things until you find your groove, he advises.

“I would very typically write 4000, 6000 and even 8000 word articles. People would say ‘you should write 500 word articles because that caters to the low attention span of people better’. If that’s the way you like to write then go for it but I found that style works for me.

## **“The best way to find yourself is to experiment.**

Write a controversial article, write a long article, write a short article, write an article that veers off your main topic a little, write something extremely specific, something that you’re extremely passionate about. Try every avenue, see what people pick up through comments and shares.”





“Relying on  
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# Benny believes the best way to make money blogging is creating your own products.

“Relying on advertising is a terrible idea. [Some] people do very well from affiliate advertising but I think the people who do the best are pushing their own stuff.”

**H**e adheres to the ‘done is better than perfect’ philosophy. Set a deadline, then ship your product.

## “My ebook went from idea to breadwinner in the space of six weeks

... I pushed it out and sold it for a very cheap price initially and made a good amount of money that way. Then I put that money back into it so I could improve on it.”

Benny says a lot of people are worried about finding the perfect way to make a living. Keep experimenting and accept that not everything will work.

“I tried a second ebook - I thought if I got language specific I could expand my income that way and it turned out it wasn’t a great idea.”

**The key to success in anything, he reckons, is to make as many mistakes as possible.**

**“I generally have a goal of making at least 200 mistakes a day, whether it’s in a language or in my business. This way I’m learning more.”**

And he urges the rest of us to celebrate our own wins, no matter how small.

“I may want to be as much of a business success as Richard Branson, for instance. That’s a nice goal but I think it’s kind of sad to think that until I’m at that level I shouldn’t be happy.”



**Esther Goh** is a New Zealand-based writer and online editor at Idealog magazine. Her passions include digital media, innovation and travel; in 2013 she took six months off to backpack around the world.



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