CEI 040: Interview with Marlee Ward about Business and Marketing Strategy.

Hey there and welcome to episode number 40 of Connect, Engage, Inspire; the Firepole Marketing podcast with Danny Iny, creator of Firepole Marketing and bestselling author of engagement from scratch.

Online entrepreneurs like you tune in to this podcast every week to learn how to build an engaged audience that connects with their humanity and drives their business to success.

Today’s episode is part of our old favorite series where we republish a really good piece of content that’s disappeared into our archives. In this case, an excellent interview with Marlee Ward about business and marketing strategy. So let’s get on with the show.

Danny Iny  Hi, Marlee.
Marlee Ward  Hey, Danny. How is it going?
Danny Iny  Fantastic! How are you?
Marlee Ward  I am very excited.
Danny Iny  I’m very excited too. It’s a pleasure to be speaking with you.
Marlee Ward  Thank you so much for the opportunity.
Danny Iny  Oh, for sure. I’m just really excited that you’re taking the time to do this interview. For the benefit of our listeners, Marlee Ward runs a really fantastic blog called Metamorphoself that I just recently discovered. And Metamorphoself is a word that she defines as, “a conspicuous pursuit of passions resulting in a transformation of self.”

So Marlee, your blog is full of really great content and combination of text and really well put together videos on the subject of online/offline entrepreneurship, particularly, but not exclusively for women, as well as marketing productivity and a bunch of other stuff.

Have I got the gist of it or have I missed something important?

Marlee Ward  Most definitely, you have.
Danny Iny: Cool. So Marlee, maybe you can start by telling our listeners a bit about yourself. You used to be a lawyer, I read on your site. Can you tell us about the path that led you to your metamorphoself?

Marlee Ward: Definitely. Wow! You know, I think a lot of what has occurred for me has been by default. And what I mean by that is I always knew that I wanted to pursue entrepreneurship but I didn’t exactly know how and I didn’t know exactly in what form. And so because of the desire but not really knowing how to bring it to action, I just followed the steps that I felt like I was supposed to follow.

So I graduated from high school. I went to college. I got a corporate job, I worked in the corporate world, and then I realized that I wanted more than that. I wanted to be able to create more and have more control over what I did and what I offered to the workplace. So I thought, okay, I need to get an advance degree because that’s what you do if you want to make more money and you want to achieve things in a corporate world.

And I was terrified of numbers, so I was like, “You know, the MBA is just not going to be for me. I think I should probably go to law school.” Law school is one of those versatile degrees, you know, I can do with business law or I can do entertainment law. So I went to law school.

And as I started going—during the process of getting a legal education, the entire time, there was a voice within me, a nagging voice that was saying, “You don’t really want to be a lawyer, why are you doing this? You don’t really want to be a lawyer.” And I’ll never forget, I used to sit in corporation’s class where they teach you all of the legal mumbo-jumbo about business and the formation of corporation that have served legal aspects. And I had an incredible professor, Professor [Count], he just screamed off the top of his lungs, “If you want to have money, don’t be a lawyer. Go into business.” And he was actually in the process of getting his MBA while he was teaching law school. So he was a huge advocate of entrepreneurship and business.

And by the time that I realized that I really wanted to step out and take the risk of entrepreneurship, I was already getting ready to graduate from law school. There was a real conflict of world at that point within me because I felt like I put all these time, energy and money into getting a legal education and now I don’t want to even think of lawyers. It’s like the worst feeling.

And so I really felt like, you know what, you got to stick that. You got to make it work. And so, I went ahead and I pursued a legal career and I really tried every single facet of the law that you can imagine. I did litigation for a period of time, then I went into corporate law, then I went...
into real estate finance law—I actually got an in-house job working for a bank. And no matter where I move to within the legal profession, I constantly found myself in the same place.

And so, during this time period, I was spending all of my free time learning about business, learning about business opportunities, creating business plans. I mean, I have like a little mini-library of business ideas that I would go through and I would always get to a place where I felt like, “Ugh, I can’t do this,” you know, “I don’t have enough money,” or, “I don’t have the resources,” or “I don’t know who could help me do this. I need to build a team and how do I build a team?” So I was coming [with that].

And then the financial crisis of 2008 hit, and the legal community was dropping like flies in terms of business law, real estate law. The job just weren’t there anymore. And so, I had the opportunity to either go and become a part time lawyer with the in-house company that was I working with or take a meager severance pay and go on my way.

And I thought, this is the opportunity for me to cut the cord now, because the longer I wait, the harder it will be for me to make the change. And because I have been doing so much preparation behind the scenes and learning behind the scenes, I felt like I have the confidence to go ahead and step out and face and do something, and I did that.

And actually, the first business that I started was a marketing firm that targeted the healthcare industry. And that’s where I started. And through that process and through that learning experience, getting the hands-on entrepreneurial experience, I developed metamorphoself to help other new entrepreneurs to figure out how to take those preliminary steps and get those core elements down that would help them bring their business to life.

And focus primarily on online business because for me, the thing that held me back from entrepreneurship the most was what I consider to be a barrier to entering the market place. And I feel that being able to become an online entrepreneur has really eliminated that barrier for a lot of people.

Danny Iny  Wow! How long were you actually practicing law for?

Marlee Ward  Well, I was actually a Florida bar lawyer beginning in 2007 and I practiced law in Florida, almost three years, because even though I have stepped away from practicing in-house, I continued to do freelance legal work to help support my healthcare marketing business. So I didn’t completely cut ties with the legal world until I was making significant revenue in my healthcare marketing business. So that was really
important for me.

And the funny thing was while I was going through that process, I started to dislike my legal work more and more, because as I was getting opportunities to do work that I really enjoyed, my legal work became even more distasteful. So I was getting referred cases, one-on-one cases and things like that. I did a lot of foreclosure work and—things like that—bankruptcy kind of stuff. And I didn’t want to even take the work even though I knew it would be lucrative because I wanted to have time to cultivate what really interested me. So I guess you can say, I practiced on my own was about two years and then I did internship throughout law school.

Danny Iny: Okay. You make a very interesting point of how important it is when you’re starting something because it takes a significant amount of time for a new business to be producing a viable income in most cases. I mean, we hear about the random success stories—you know, I quit my job and three weeks later, I was making millions. But that doesn’t really happen for the vast majority of people. Starting a business really takes time, so you do need that cushion of that cash flow to come from somewhere.

Marlee Ward: Definitely.

Danny Iny: Marlee, maybe you can share with us a little bit about your business education because you’ve learned a lot. You share an awful lot on your site. I mean, just talking to you, it’s very clear that you’re very literate and savvy from a business standpoint. You didn’t study business formally, right? You were self-taught in business.

Marlee Ward: That’s true. I would say though that I had a lot of experience with business, not necessarily in business. And so when I match that with what I studied and what I learned from a theoretical perspective, from a principle perspective, it actually was very easy for me to turn around and implement.

And I have to say I come from a long line of entrepreneurs. My grandfather started his own business. My father has his own business. And so, I constantly saw that and was always exposed to that. I worked in the family businesses. So there were a lot of things that I saw from that perspective.

And then being a lawyer and working in corporate law, I saw the structural aspects of business. And I saw the inner working of business. And then of course, having my own endeavor at one point, I have that experience. So I think it’s the culmination of those things that really have given the business education that I had. And I believe in being a learner.
for life, so I’m always looking to do that.

But I think something that’s really important to point out here is that when you learn something, the best thing that you can do for yourself is try to apply it in your life and in your experience immediately because that solidifies your knowledge in a way that really gives you a skill that you can then turn around and use to help other people, help yourself. And perhaps, use as an asset to build your own business.

Danny Iny  
I really like what you were saying. It rang a bell for me when you were talking about growing up and your grandfather was an entrepreneur, you have a family of entrepreneurs, so you were just exposed to it. A marketing professor of mine Ken Wong, he also grew up in a family business. And he [indiscernible] and also a wealth of experience. He’s like, “As a child, I would attend 50 board meetings a year. We called them dinner.” And that’s hugely valuable and some of that is being in the right place and the right time. But the other part is paying attention, thinking about how to apply what you’re exposed to.

Obviously, you can go to business school and get an MBA. You can pick up some books. There are resources out there. But for people who are thinking I want to start my business or I recently started my business. I have been in it for six months, a year, two years. And these people tend to be very, very busy. They’re doing like 40 things at once. They have very little time on their hands. Where would you recommend they go to start and round out that education? And obviously, I’d like to think Firepole Marketing is on that list but [indiscernible]. What resources have you found to be very valuable?

Marlee Ward  
Well, you know, I think building a community of other business owners that you can talk to and bounce ideas off of and present problems and questions to is incredibly helpful. So I guess something like that of a mastermind and you can formulate that in a lot of different ways. I don’t know if I’m really answering your question because I’m not giving like the specific resource—because like you said, there are so many resources. And really, at the end of the day, if the information is—good information, appropriate information and [indiscernible] about who you like, who you want to learn from.

But in terms of really being able to get that education, there’s nothing more valuable than being able to communicate with somebody who’s living it and who’s in the trenches. And so, I would highly recommend that you connect with people who have been ahead of you in the learning curve, who’s been in the business a little bit longer than you. I always suggest that you try to build a network of entrepreneurs around you that are a little bit behind you and a little bit ahead of you because you learn
the most when you teach. And then you also learn by what you see in other people.

So you can gather from those who are ahead of you in the process and then turn around, and teach it to the people that you want to link to who might be a little bit behind you in the process. And I think that’s where you’re going to find your most valuable lessons in terms of becoming self educated in business because there’s a lot of things that you can’t fully understand in business until you see them in process.

And so having those relationships with people, where you can say, “Hey, I’m facing this right now in my business, what did you do? How did you handle it?” That gives you an opportunity to see it working in real life. I mean, in my opinion, there is no better way to learn something that seeing it.

Danny Iny
That’s great. Marlee, actually one of the resources that grabbed my attention on your site is your one-page business plan. We’ll link to it from the transcript of this interview but for the benefit of our listeners, can you tell us how you came to create it, what’s on it, how it should be used?

Marlee Ward
Certainly. Well, the way that I came to create the one-page business plan was literally out of frustration. I find that sometimes some of the best ideas that you have come out of a problem that you have. So I actually have done a lot of traditional business planning prior to deciding to launch and online business. So I have become really familiar with the 20-page, 30-page, indexed business plan with an appendix and charts and graphs. And I mean, it was such a painstaking process creating those kinds of documents but I have this idea in my mind that it’s what I absolutely had to do if I was going to be able to have a plan that I could follow and be successful.

And I think really, those types of business plans are for entrepreneurs who are seeking to do really large scale ventures, that are looking for venture capital, that are looking for bankers, and actually, big-time investors because they want to see [those types].

In terms of being a solopreneur, even a small entrepreneurial operation, I found that those types of business plans just were not that functional. And the fact that they were so difficult to create, kind of made me [refuse] doing it all. And so I thought, okay, maybe if I got business planning software, this would make it much easier, it wouldn’t be so stressful. So I actually went out and invested in the B Plan investment software. I’m not sure if you’re familiar with it but it’s pretty popular in terms of some of then mainstream entrepreneurial resources.

And so I purchased that and basically, it was like a data entry software
where you answered all the questions. It basically prompted you, with all the questions that you needed to be able to answer and then it puts it in a pre-format for you and it lets you know where there were problem areas, if you had ratios that were out of whack, or if you're going to run in to cash flow problems down the road.

Nonetheless, I did this for my first business, my healthcare marketing firm, and I found it completely useless. And it didn't at all match up on paper with what I had envisioned in my mind. And I thought this just isn't going to work for me. And so, I was like I need to get down to basics.

And so what I did was I went through that very detailed business plan, and I said to myself, “What are the critical things that I need to focus on to make sure that I successfully carry out this business venture.” And I went through all the sections and I highlighted those sections. And then I kind of did a reverse extraction and I said, “Okay. Well now, what’s the question that I need to ask to be able to get that answer?” And when I did, I ended up with [indiscernible] for my questions. And I was like, “Ah, this is it and I can make it all in one page.” I thought this is all I ever need to create a business moving forward, and that was the birth of the one-page business plan.

And did you use this process for Metamorphoself?

Yes, actually. And one of the things that I really like about using the one-page business plan is that it’s incredibly flexible because it’s so simple. And so Metamorphoself has—which is so ironic because I’ve named it Metamorphoself but it’s undergone a series of changes within a really short period of time.

And even still, right now, it’s still undergoing changes because it’s so closely related to how I work with people and the engagement that I experienced. Some of the products and the services that I provided have shifted. The way that I deliver them have shifted. And so, the benefit of having a one-page business plan is that I’ve been able to go back to that one section and say, “Okay. This is how I need to tweak the way that I delivered it or this is the way that I need to price or package this product because this is how my audiences are best responding to it.”

And so having that one-page business plan has made it very easy to do that. And I don’t think that you can really get that same flexibility out of 30 pages with graphs and charts and all of these other stuff because you’re sifting through a lot of fluff. Whereas with the one-page business plan, you can just get to the harder matter. And so I have used that for Metamorphoself.

And as I post it on my blog, I provide that to any and all of my clients and
I say, “Listen, even if you have a business plan, go through this because it simplifies things.”

**Danny Iny**  
And how long would you say it takes to fill out this one-page business plan, to create it?

**Marlee Ward**  
Well, I really think that depends on the type of business that you want to start. And I don't think it's something that just because it's one page, it should be taken lightly. I don't think it's something you can sit down and do in an hour. In fact, I've never sat down and done one in an hour. I've never coached a client in an hour. It's always taken a few sessions or a series of sessions.

And then, I believe that it also takes implementation and analysis because what you may first believe or understand to be what you originally want to do may turn out to be completely different. And so, I think that it's kind of like a living document. So I would say, initially, you might want to spend a week or so with it and then moving forward, you want to keep coming back to it to see how well you're implementing what you set forth and whether or now what you're implementing is really working for you.

**Danny Iny**  
Okay. Marlee, you mentioned coaching clients and that kind of leads to what I was going to ask you about next. In terms of the plan for Metamorphoself, it really is a fantastic website. Your content is great. It's informative, it's uplifting, I really enjoy it.

**Marlee Ward**  
Thank you.

**Danny Iny**  
And I know that there is a contribution aspect to your business and I believe very strongly that free to create value for people in general, you got to be doing good stuff and creating stuff with people want and then getting stuff out of. So I'm completely there with you on that but I also realized that it's an active altruism completely. I mean, it is a business.

**Marlee Ward**  
Correct.

**Danny Iny**  
So how does Metamorphoself make money? There's the level of the free content that everyone is lucky to have access to, what do people have the option to pay for it?

**Marlee Ward**  
Well, at this time, the primary revenue builder for Metamorphoself is all one-on-one coaching. And this is the area of the business that is undergoing in Metamorphoself, as we speak. I'm actually going to be launching some new coaching packages that are going to deliver the services that offer and a variety of ways for very specific people because I found that in working with clients, there are really specific areas that keep coming up over and over again. And so, I'm going to now target some of
those specific ways that I help people so that people would know, okay, this is exactly what I need to work on and this is exactly how I want to do that.

So primarily, the coaching is where that comes from. But there are also some products that are in the works right now, one of which is a membership site and another which is an ebook. So those are two things that will be coming forth in the future.

But the reason that I chose to stick with coaching to begin with is because I believe that the best way that you can serve your target audience is by knowing what they need. And the best way to know what your target audience need is to get in the thick of it with them and find out what their problems are and find out what their issues are.

And so, even though I know that a lot of entrepreneurs struggle with [probably] marketing and productivity and organization, I wanted to get to the heart of the matter with people. And so, once I was able to do enough coaching sessions with people that I started to hear recurring themes and recurring issues with new entrepreneurs, I thought, “Okay. Aha, these are tense points. These are my pressure points.” And that’s the one thing that I will suggest anybody looking at starting a business or maybe somebody who’s struggling with finding the best way to serve your target audience is get in the trenches with the people that you want to help and try to figure out what those points are specifically so that you’re not guessing about what you’re bringing to the market place. So that you don’t spend six months to a year creating a product or creating a service that nobody really wants because that’s one of the things that you can do.

So the benefit that I have is that my healthcare marketing firm is still active and I have a very strong solid client base that provides me a very substantial revenue. So it enabled me to really take my time with crafting my products and services for Metamorphoself because I’m not under the gun to make money, you know, extreme money form the site in that way.

Danny Iny | And that narrowing down of focus is very consistent with the coaching that you offer. I mean, from looking at your site, there’s a lot of focus on helping clients find their sweet spot.

Marlee Ward | Right.

Danny Iny | So do you want to share with us what those sweet spots are for you? I mean, for people who might be listening to this should be like, “Dang, I should call Marlee.”

Marlee Ward | Well, I think that, first and foremost, the people that I find myself working with the most effectively are people that know in their hearts that they’re
fully committed to entrepreneurship. People that are on the fence about it usually don’t end up working well with me because I’m very action oriented. And so, if I’m going to spend a lot of time with you, helping you develop a business that is based on your sweet spot, then I need to know that you’re equally as committed to actually bringing it to fruition.

And there are a lot of dreamers in the world, and I think that’s a beautiful thing. But unfortunately, dreaming is not going to make your business. So first and foremost, there has to be the level of commitment to entrepreneurship. And then I would say the second thing is that there’s a struggle between figuring out how they can use their natural skills, abilities and knowledge and how to monetize that in an online business because that’s where a lot of the coaching and the structural training comes in where I’m able to help people create products, understand how to market those products, and develop a pretty solid business structure where they can start generating revenue.

So people who are primarily new entrepreneurs that are looking to build something and they need clarity and direction in that area and how to do those things, or people that have started something and they’re not really on track with where they wanted to go. Or things haven’t really turned out the way that they wanted things to turn out.

One client that I worked with who’s incredibly talented was doing a lot of Joomla! work. And he really has a burning desire to do comic work. And as we started our coaching process together, he became more and more clear that he was wasting his time with these Joomla! clients because they were driving him nuts. He was miserable. He was spending all these hours [they want] that he didn’t really enjoy. And meanwhile, his potential comic—and when I say comic, I don’t mean humor, I mean actually like drawing graphics comics—he wasn’t really bringing that at full scale.

And so when I kind of helped him figure out that he was really wasting his time with that, we set forth a plan for him to actually build a business around what he wanted to. And when we started going down that path, the enthusiasm that he felt for what he was doing and the drive that he felt for bringing that into reality was just bursting. It was unbelievable. And he had never realized how easy it was to monetize what he loved but he just hasn’t been able to put it together in the right way. And so he was just headed down the wrong path.

And I tend to be able to nip people in the bud so to speak, and turn them into [indiscernible].

Danny Iny
Okay. Marlee, we’ve talked a little bit about where people struggle and where they need help. I find it’s also helpful to explore some examples of
where people are doing things right. Whether this is after your intervention or just you’ve meet people and you’ve gotten to know them and you found they’re doing the right thing. People who are in the right direction, doing the right thing, they’re successful, they’re happy with what they’re doing. What do they have in common that might be beneficial for our listeners to emulate?

**Marlee Ward**

Well, there’s a lot that goes into that. But I would say that the first thing is that they’re consistent. I’m sure you can speak to this Danny because you’re the marketing expert here. But marketing is the lifeblood of the business. And when if [done right] and you do your marketing properly and consistently, a lot of the other problems that you face sometimes seems to solve itself. And that’s for various reasons.

But I think that the people that are very happy and that they are very successful, they’re consistent in what they’re doing and they have developed systems around the things that they do to help them continue to do revenue generating activities. So they’re not bogged down in the unproductive behaviors that you see a lot of new entrepreneurs get bogged down in.

And a lot of that has to do with their mind set and their mental state. And this is one thing that I integrate into what I do at Metamorphoself and what I talk about at Metamorphoself is related to personal development because the way that you develop as a person greatly impacts the way that your business will develop, particularly if you’re a solopreneur.

And so these are things that you have to pay attention to if you’re really going to be able to take your business to the next level and if you’re really going to be able to build this and support you. So I would say that people that are really happy and people that are really doing what they love and actually making money doing that are using the fundamental principles that they learned in a consistent manner over and over and over again. And they are not looking for with a bang, overnight results. They realize what’s involved and what they’re trying to create and they just keep bringing that same level of commitment to that time and time again.

**Danny Iny**

I agree with you completely. In a lot of ways, I think business is a lot like relationships particularly marketing because it’s really about customer relationships and communication and all the things that make relationships work. And just like a relationship, it is not an event but practice. It’s something ongoing. I mean, you can’t build a happy marriage by an intense weekend of talking to your spouse, it’s something that has to happen on an ongoing basis. So yeah, exactly. The same applies to your marketing and all the foundations for your business. They have to be
Right. And it’s learning to love the fundamentals because I know that when I first started learning about entrepreneurship, I had a shiny object syndrome. I was like, “Oh my gosh! look, that’s so cool. Oh my gosh, what is this? Oh my gosh!” And all these things kind of got my attention and if I had the financial capacity as [alluded] by every single program under the sun because they just all seem so fun and appealing. But what I began to learn was that as I was exposed to more and more, I keep seeing that, like, it all came back to these fundamentals. They might have talked about it in a different way or had different ways of implementing them but they all came back to the fundamental principles.

And when you start looking at the fundamental principles while also building a business of marketing, of managing your clients, of managing other people, it can start to get really boring. This is not fun. I want to do the woo-hoo stuff. I want to be on fire. And it can get old. You’re like, “Really? We’re doing this again?”

You know, one thing that I noticed, especially with new entrepreneurs in marketing is that they get tired of their own marketing very quickly. And what they don’t realize is that the people they’re targeting probably haven’t noticed you yet. And so before they even get primed, the time it needs to take effect and really start working, they want to do something different. And they haven’t even really gotten to a place where they can measure results from what they have decided to implement.

So being able to stay in that quote-unquote boring foundational place will allow you to do the more woo, bang stuff because you got a really solid foundation.
life that you need to work on, become better at, grow in, you need to give as much time to those areas as you do to the fundamental practices of growing your business because where one fall short, the other will suffer.

And it needs to be a joint effort. And so, if I can give just one actionable thing, it would be to sit down and assess what you really want for yourself, what that’s really going to require of you. And then set forth three or four steps that you can take to immediately start doing those things.

And I think that if you do those things, you’re going to see that everything, holistically, will improve for you; your business will improve, your happiness will improve, your personal development will improve. And the way that you show up to everything in your life is the way that other people will see that. I mean, that’s something that is very important in entrepreneurship, especially if you’re a solo entrepreneur; you are your business. And you need to make sure that those things are properly synched up.

So, do what you love, know what you want, and pursue that with a burning desire. And if you can do those things, you’re going to have incredible success in your life.

Danny Iny
Marlee, that was fantastic advice. I want to really thank you for taking the time to do this interview. I’ve enjoyed it. I know that it’s going to be very valuable to our listeners. I encourage our listeners to check out Metamorphoself, subscribe, watch the videos which are really, really well put together. Read the content, you’re going to enjoy it. It’s just a fantastic resource.

And Marlee, I want to wish you tons success with your business with the incredibly vibrant community that’s growing at Metamorphoself and that I’m looking forward to being a part of.

Marlee Ward
Thank you so much, Danny. It’s been a pleasure speaking with you. And I certainly look forward to seeing what you bring to the table with Firepole Marketing as well because you got a great thing going on there, too.

Danny Iny
All right. Thank you. Have a wonderful day.

Marlee Ward
Okay. You too, Danny. Take care.

Megan Dougherty
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