Tiffinbox

The Transcript - Audit of Tiffinbox.org By Danny Iny

Danny: Hi everyone, I'm very excited to be on the line today with Seshu from Tiffinbox. Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about what it is that you do?

Seshu: Well, hey Danny thanks a lot, first of all, for having me on your program. I'm a photographer, I'm a full time photographer and some time ago I decided to create a website for essentially myself, to keep track of all the things that are happening in the photo world, the photo industry. What quickly happened is that I noticed that people were more and more interested in what I had to say and what I was sharing with them so Tiffinbox quickly became more of a community website, and that's where we're at right now. Tiffinbox is essentially a website for photographers, and I'm truly blessed to have photographers from around the world email me and say, "Hey, I want to be a part of it as well." And so, that's what it is. It's a website where photographers can come and hang out and talk about things that are important to them, whether it be actual techniques of photography or on the business side.

Danny: And can you give us a sense of when did you start the site and how much has it grown?

Seshu: Well, let's see. I started it in 2003 so it's been around for a while. And I've had starts and spurts all over the place in terms of keeping up with the content and so I've taken more of a proactive approach to content creation really only in the last year and a half, two years and I've seen clearly an exponential growth in the traffic--in terms of monthly traffic--since putting more and more information out there on this website. So clearly, there is a connection.

Danny: Sure. And can you give us a sense of what the numbers are like? Or do you want to, would you prefer to keep that private?

Seshu: No, absolutely. I have no problem sharing that. I was just looking at it a couple nights ago, actually. We're right around the 7 000 - 8 000 mark right now for the month, from today on backwards. And I've seen it go past 10 000 in some months, and close to 12 000 in some other months. It really depends on how active the site is and how active I've been on the site. Clearly, with my running of a business or photographing for a private school, Tiffinbox is a labour of love for the most part, but I'd love to take it to another level.

Danny: Okay, so talk to me a little about: who is your target audience? Who is the perfect person to find your site and be on the site? What is it that you offer them that's a great fit with what they have and what they don't have, what they want, what they need?

Seshu: My target audience is typically a photographer who has already launched her or his business, has been a photographer for at least a year, maybe two years or so but is still sort of looking for solid information about the craft or the technique part of the business or the business itself, in terms of marketing or sales or whatever. In some respects it's somebody like me. Even though I've started for a while, I'm still learning a lot about how to do things and the pure explosion of information out there for photographers. Being able to curate that information and being able to feed that information back to people is what I enjoy doing. As far as a target audience goes, it's typically someone who's been at it for a few years, probably considers themselves a professional or wants to be a professional photographer. That's sort of the market I'm going for.

Danny: So when you say they want to be a professional, is that a measure of a skill level or is that a measure of what they do with their time?

Seshu: It's a measure of both I would say. You know, it's qualitative as well as quantitative; number of photo sessions they have in a month or a year, and also in terms of producing the kind of work that they want to produce so that they continue to make business for themselves.

Danny: Okay, so they want to be good at it and they want to make money doing it.

Seshu: Absolutely.

Danny: Okay, tell me about what you're doing to get their attention. I mean you know who you want to reach, you want to get their attention, bring them to the site. How are you doing that?

Seshu: Well, to be honest with you Danny, right now, much of it has been through guest blogging. I'm very active on Twitter, and again, have been very blessed to know a lot of cool people. I go to tradeshows and connect with people and I say, "Hey this is what I do. This is my website," and we keep in touch and sometimes I send them an email and say, "Hey, you want to guest blog?" and people have been very, very, very kind in terms of sending guest blog posts to my site. And so once they start posting to Tiffinbox, they tell their network and so on. So that's how that's grown as it has so far.

Danny: Okay, so when you say guest blogging, it's not that you're posting in other places to spread the word, you're inviting other people to post on your site.

Seshu: Right. So that's the first level, being able to bring people in. The next level or the next step for me is to guest blog on other people's websites. That's where, looking at your program for

instance, I was very excited about what you offer and as a photographer, I'm not a natural writer, you know, and I feel like that's where a lot of photographs are stuck in terms of posting to their own blog. Where, being able to write consistently and efficiently and at a level where it's interesting for their viewers, you know that's where I think a lot of photographers like myself are struggling and I feel like your program might help.

Danny: Okay, so you're doing a lot of guest posting, you're getting people to write on your blog, you're posting elsewhere, is there anything else that you're doing? Or is that it?

Seshu: Well, of course, posting to Twitter, posting to Facebook, getting people to retweet, and certainly sharing all those links back and forth through the social media spheres is where things are going at the moment. Totally open to any ideas that you have.

Danny: Here's what I'm thinking, and this is not my expertise, I'm not a photographer. But generally speaking, when you have large amounts of people who have a shared interest, they tend to aggregate around sources of information around that interest or places where they can express or experiment with that interest. Now, photography is very visual. There are big photography blogs: Digital Photography School, there's lots of others. But I would imagine that there is probably some way of leveraging the more visual networks like Pinterest, like Flickr, like Slideshare maybe, all these sites where people are going to go and look at pictures. Because the people who are going to go look at pictures professionally, because that is what they do, those are the people you want to reach. Now I'm not an expert on Pinterest or Slideshare or Flickr or any of those, you'd have to explore how could you go about leveraging those networks. But the first step is to think about where your audience is, photographers, where are they likely to go? Where are they likely to already be hanging out? Then it's just a matter of how can you get their attention? You might want to do--because you've already got an audience and that makes things a lot easier--what you might want to do is maybe have a contest; submit and vote for your favourite photograph. So let them tell all their photographer friends about your site. A way of harnessing the very visual aspect of the medium.

Seshu: Absolutely, okay.

Danny: Tell me a little bit about, how does the site make money?

Seshu: Right now, the site makes money essentially through affiliate marketing. Links, essentially strewn through blog posts and of course, people are told that they're affiliate links. That's really the only way at the moment.

Danny: What kind of stuff are you promoting?

Seshu: Software, tutorials that people have created, actual products, sometimes, when it comes to camera bags and things like that. And they've all been things that I've either tested myself or tried or have bought myself and that's when I say, "Hey, you guys come and check this out." I

haven't really gotten to the point where I sort of willy-nilly have people click on links that I have not even vetted myself.

Danny: Yeah, and you never should.

Seshu: Yeah, exactly. So that's where it's at. I fully admit that I don't have a system in place where I can quickly post an affiliate link into my blog post. I have to go looking for it through e-Junkie and what not and come up with that link and post it in there. So it's very manual.

Danny: Well, for what it's worth, I just have a .txt file for affiliate links that I can just refer to. You don't need to be very high-tech.

Seshu: Right, exactly. I have Evernote, so that's definitely a way to do that. I'm looking, and I'm wondering whether sponsors would be interested in a website like mine. People would sponsor a series of posts, or an entire month of posts, for instance. And every time I'd post something, they would have a mention at the bottom of the post.

Danny: You mention you've got affiliate links throughout blog posts and stuff. Is that just, you know, you mention a camera bag when you talking about whatever you're talking about and so that's a link, or is that like, you'll write an article saying "here's a great camera bag," or "here's a review," or something like that?

Seshu: It's usually a review that brings in those links. I try and keep it in context versus having to say: "Hey, by the way, I bought this bag, you gotta go buy it". You know, that seems a little off. And so the links that I post on my website are used in context. I don't posts the links willy-nilly just so that people will randomly click on it. I know most people want to have some connection to what they're reading, to say, "Hey, you want to explore this perhaps" and then I give them a choice and most people come through that. Reviews, and things like that.

Danny: So you do explicitly endorse products and say, "This is what I recommend you get."

Seshu: Absolutely.

Danny: And what have you found is your conversion rate?

Seshu: That's a great question, man. I wish I had those numbers for you. I'm not very good at tracking that.

Danny: But, ballpark, I mean you've got 7,000 people visiting the site.

Seshu: That's Twitter, actually. 7,000 followers on Twitter.

Danny: Ah, ok.

Seshu: To be honest with you, I don't know how to track it. Do you track it by post? Do you track it by product? I don't know.

Danny: It could be all of the above. And you'd probably want to track it by offers. So you've promoted these seven different things, for example, and how many of each of them are selling? And if something isn't selling, then either you're promoting it wrong or it's just not something that people want.

Seshu: Right.

Danny: And you'll probably get a lot of mileage out of just tracking what are people buying, what are people not buying, and spending more time promoting the stuff that people are buying.

Seshu: Yeah, that's something that I definitely have to do and I'm open to all suggestions of how to do that.

Danny: Okay, and we can talk about specifics but I'd start by just looking at the affiliate control panels and just getting reports on how much stuff people are buying. The other thing that you could do, do you know how to create a short link?

Seshu: Yeah.

Danny: You can do it with bit.ly, you can do it with a plug-in like [Pretty Link](#) or whatever, so create a short link for all of your affiliates' code links, and then you'll have, obviously, how many sales are made because you'll get that from your affiliate console. You'll also know how many times people clicked on the links and so you can get a sense of, you know, let's say you mention a camera bag. You're not endorsing a specific camera bag, it's just a camera bag, and you see a lot of people are clicking but nobody's buying. Maybe a lot of people are interested in camera bags but nobody wants to buy that particular one. Versus, you know, not a lot of people click but everyone who clicks buys; maybe you just need to get more people to click on it. So it'll give you a little bit more granularity, a little bit more visibility to kind of try to optimize and see where the process is working so you can plug the holes that aren't.

Seshu: Excellent, okay.

Danny: Let's talk about the next step. So, you know who your audience is. You have a sense of where to reach them. You're already doing a pretty good job and you're going to try some more visual places where photographers are likely to hang out. And you know what you're offering them. You've got affiliate links to training courses and cameras and camera bags and all the stuff that they would need.

Seshu: Right.

Danny: Any marketing at a high level is meant to go from, on one end, a stranger who's never heard of you at all, to, on the other end, this loyal, engaged customer who loves you, and is crazy about your stuff and will trust your recommendation no matter what. So, describe to me, the steps in the process. How do you go about creating this cycle of commitment and reward where they make a commitment, you reward them and you ask them for a bigger commitment to kind of move them along that scale?

Seshu: I don't have anything set up like that.

Danny: You must have something. I mean, people land on your site; they either buy or leave? Is there a third option?

Seshu: There is the option of signing up for a newsletter.

Danny: Okay, that's a commitment.

Seshu: But, that's not your typical carrot that I would love to offer them. I'd love to be able to give them an e-book for instance, and that's in the works. I'm thinking, I am working on an e-book that I can say, "Hey, sign up for my newsletter, here's an e-book." That's coming. Hopefully, that might be what converts even more people and brings more people into the site.

Danny: How many people are on your newsletter so far?

Seshu: We've got 290 people.

Danny: Okay, so, the numbers are small. You could be getting a lot more.

Seshu: Oh, absolutely.

Danny: And having an opt-in offer, having an e-book or something that they would find valuable, it's a great way to make that commitment easier to make. Let's say they opt-in to your list, how do you reward them for making that commitment? In addition to--you're going to give them the e-book--but what else? What happens after that?

Seshu: This is all an idea, it hasn't really taken shape yet. But it's something that I've been thinking about. I mean, I've got a fairly long history in the business and one thing I can do is offer some of my time. Whether it's through a webinar, or through a one-on-one phone call for ten minutes or fifteen minutes, something that really personalizes the experience a little bit more than just, "Here's another chat feed for you to read," or whatever. That's where I'm going, is where I want to be able to have them pick up the phone, call me and say, "Hey I've got a question about photography. Can you answer my question?" Hopefully, that's the route I'm going.

Danny: I'd worry about scalability a little bit there.

Seshu: Yeah, I know, I know. If I have a thousand people calling me, I'm not going to be able to answer everybody's phone call of course.

Danny: Yeah, but the flip-side is that you know, if you've got a thousand people calling you, you've got to have an awful lot of people on your list. In some ways, it's kind of like, let those be our problems. The flip-side of that is, you know, I answer all my emails. And that's something I make a point of and everyone who subscribes to my stuff knows that. When I send out an announcement, sometimes I'll spend half a day answering emails now. So it does add up, and so you've got to think about that scalability. I like what you described, the idea of doing a webinar, doing live trainings because it is a way for people to get lots of great information, lots of great value, but they have to make a commitment to show up. So you're asking them for a bigger commitment, you're rewarding them further. You're kind of training them that they should make commitments in this relationship because it's a good thing to do.

Seshu: Right. I completely agree. There's a certain process that I think I'm missing out on and I'm a total newbie when it comes to this stuff, obviously you can tell. I've been at it for a while as a blogger but I've just been sort of focused on trying to bring more content, good content for people to share and enjoy. But, in terms of monetizing it, that's where I've sort of dropped the ball. And I think there are things I'm learning from people like you, in fact, and you just gave me an idea. Being able to bring people to the door, to the table, and say, "Hey, eat the lunch. Eat the dinner." That's where I need to be.

Danny: Absolutely. And let's talk about what you're offering in term of the affiliate offers and stuff, because there are two kinds of offers that you can be making. One is very much based on an immediate concern: you know, my camera bag just broke. I need a new camera bag. I only need a new camera bag when my camera bag is broken, because the rest of the time I've got one and I'm fine. And that kind of an offer works really well through a site like Amazon. Because you go on Amazon, you search for stuff, you find whatever you need and you buy it. It works for Amazon, it works for eBay, it works for eCommerce, it works for Google; you search for stuff, you find it. It doesn't work as well for people like you and me who have blogs because your blog is like consumer reports. It's not where they're going to find information about camera bags; it's where they're going to find information about photography. So that's the kind of thing you might want to have ads on the sidebar kind of thing, "Check out the great camera bag, this is the one that I use," and point it to an article, but by publishing the article, the only people who are likely to buy the camera bag are the ones who are like, "I actually need a camera bag! That works out really well."

Seshu: Good point.

Danny: But there's other stuff that, because, I mean, you're giving them information, you're giving them advice, you're teaching them stuff, they're learning to trust you. There's other stuff that you can say, "You know, if you want to be a serious professional in this space, you need *this* camera bag. No serious professional can do without this camera bag." Now, with a camera bag, it's kind of a--actually, maybe not, I have no idea, that's not my space--but I would guess that with a camera bag it's a hard sell. But, if it's about information, if it's about training, that's really kind of an easy sell, it's like, "Look, you want to get into this business..." Basically, they know what the symptoms of the problem are but they don't know what the solution is. So, "I have nothing to carry my camera in," they can figure out what the solution to that should probably be: "I need a camera bag. I'll go look for one." But, "My photos suck." They probably don't know what to do about that. Or, "Nobody wants to pay me for my photos." That kind of stuff, if you come out and say, "Hey, there's this really great solution to your problem, I think you need to check it out." That's the kind of thing that I would expect would sell much better when you talk about it in your newsletter, on your blog content, when you kind of create a narrative story around, this is what they should be thinking about.

Seshu: I've actually just been contacted by a woman named [Angela Pointon](#) who is working with me to create a webinar series, actually. A three-part webinar series that will explore those business aspects, business concepts for photographers, actually. It's a small step towards that, I think.

Danny: I think that's a great idea. Is that something that you're going to charge for?

Seshu: Yes. It's going to be $10 for each webinar, or $25 for three of them in a row.

Danny: Let me suggest something around packaging and sales. Remember the chain of engagement, commitment and reward? Sending people emails, especially putting it on your blog and saying, "I'm doing this thing, who wants to sign up? Put your credit card details here." That's kind of a big jump. What if instead of that, you invite them to a free webinar, where you give some tips, and you say at the end, "I'm doing a paid series of three of these. And if you're interested, here's the page, $25 if you sign up now on the call, or $35 if you wait until tomorrow." First of all, everyone who signs up for the first webinar, that puts them on your newsletter, so you have their names and email addresses, you can reach out to them. And they're that much more committed; after they've gotten on there, they got all this great information, they're much more likely to sign up for the paid event. So I definitely recommend you do that.

Seshu: Okay. So it's like a two-step process, but you know, that makes complete sense to me now.

Danny: You win at the first step, because even though it's the first step, you've got 200 new people on your mailing list.

Seshu: Right. Good point. I will put that into action right away.

Danny: Awesome! And let me know. Email me, let me know what the results are, I'd love to hear about it. And it might be a little while until the video goes live, so maybe you could post under the video, what was the aftermath, how did it actually work. That would be really cool.

Seshu: Okay, definitely. Definitely.

Danny: So we've kind of fleshed out: you know who your target customer is, you know what you're offering them. You know where to get their attention. You have a sense of what that ladder of commitment and reward looks like, and we're looking at fleshing out those rungs. You've kind of got this whole process starting to take shape. I want to be respectful of your time and the time of the people who are watching this video so I want to ask just one more question before we wrap up.

Seshu: Sure.

Danny: You've been doing this for quite a long time. So, since 2003. So it's like a 9-year-old blog. You've learned a lot of things along the way. If you could go back in time to Seshu of 2003, say, you know, "This is some stuff you're going to learn over the next few years, over the next decade almost. It would be easier and cheaper if you knew it now." What lesson would you want to give yourself of 9 years ago?

Seshu: Oh, my god. It's a very, very simple one. Just start writing. Start writing and start writing and start writing and start writing. And create content that is useful. Because I mean, my earlier posts were, you know, they were just all over the place. I'll be honest with you. I have literally 1 600 posts on the site, but not every single post is really directed towards photographers. Initially, it was just like, politics and literature, and you know, it wasn't focused. So that would be two things I guess: write, and be focused. Those would be my takeaways from my own experience. I've found great success in focusing on photographers but I still feel like it could be even more refined, and even more focused, you now? Perhaps, again, maybe it could be just professional photographers or an entire gamut of photographers out there, or, professionals, amateurs, hobbyists, people who love a certain type of photography, whatever. There are so many things that could be done, and one of the things that I want to start doing is this business about A and B testing. Figure out, what works and what doesn't work.

Danny: Absolutely critical!

Seshu: Yeah, I mean I just wish there was a resource where I could say, "Thanks for teaching me how to do that!" I don't--I haven't seen one--have you?

Danny: Well, I want to wrap up this video but I'll stick around on the line--we'll chat about that quickly after.

Seshu: Awesome, thank you.

Danny: So to everyone who is watching this: thank you very, very much for your time and attention. And if you are a photographer, if you have an interest in being a professional photographer, both in terms of the skillset and in terms of getting paid for your photographs, then you're already on the site, but spend some time looking around. Maybe opt into that newsletter, check out Seshu's webinar training series because it sounds like it's going to be awesome. And thank you all very much for watching.