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**[00:00:20] Ryan Newman:** This is dare to disrupt, a podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman, and on the show today is Joe Pulizzi. Joe Pulitszi is the founder of multiple startups, including content creator education site, the tilt content entrepreneur Expo, and the Content Marketing Institute, which he successfully exited in 2016. He is the best selling author of seven books, including Content Inc. And Epic content Marketing, which was named a must read business book by Fortune magazine. Joe is a professional public speaker, having spoken over 400 times in 20 plus countries on content marketing, the creator, economy and entrepreneurship. Joe graduated from Bowling Green State University with a bachelor's in communications in 1995 and from Penn State with a master's in communications in 1997. Joe, I'd like to formally welcome you to the Dare to disrupt podcast. This is a first for us. You are the first guest we've had on dare to disrupt who has built their career in content marketing. So I'm excited to learn more about that. Thank you so much for joining us, Ryan.

**[00:01:36] Joe Pulizzi:** It is a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

**[00:01:38] Ryan Newman:** Well, Joe, I'd like to start as we always do, which is at the beginning. So can you give our listeners a sense of where those formative years took place and where you grew up?

**[00:01:46] Joe Pulizzi:** What it was like being a young Joe? Oh, geez. I grew up in Sandusky, Ohio, which is an hour west of Cleveland. So if you know Cedar Point Amusement park, I grew up right off the causeway there. Found my way to Bowling Green State University, which is just south of Toledo, Ohio. From our undergrad in communications, I did a couple internships in sports marketing. Wanted to continue that, didn't really know where to go, didn't want to get a full time job yet. Went on to Penn State University. I got my masters of arts in communication, had four really amazing semesters of teaching public speaking. What's funny, at that time, the legalization of marijuana was the most popular speech request that they wanted to do. And of course, you don't really have that anymore, but I had to. After the first semester, I had to say, no more legalizing marijuana speeches, please. We've had enough of that. But then I graduated from Penn State. I went on to find my way into communications and marketing, fell into publishing at a company called Penton Media in Cleveland, Ohio. My little department was called cutting custom media. And basically that's what we're going to be talking about a little bit, content marketing, where instead of advertising, we were teaching companies how to tell their own stories. And at that time it was through custom print magazines and then into podcasts and blogs and whatnot. And I just fell in love with the whole idea of content marketing, where instead of selling your products and services, you're, you're, you're basically talking about valuable information that your customers really want. And hopefully they become know, like and trust you as you build this audience and then you can sell them stuff. And I just thought that was absolutely the best way to market. And then that led me into, you know, launching a company called Content Marketing Institute and a bunch of other companies after that. And, you know, so it's, it's funny how, you know, I started in communication. I love the idea of persuasive communication, and I liked marketing, but I hated advertising. So I was like, finding content marketing was just like the perfect mix for me. And I've spent the last 20 years writing books, doing podcasts, and building businesses around that idea.

**[00:03:49] Ryan Newman:** Amazing. We're going to unpack all of that over the time we have together. But let's, let's go back to the beginning. First of all, were you a seasoned ticket holder

at Cedar Point?

**[00:03:57] Joe Pulizzi:** What's funny about Cedar Point is it's one of the oldest amusement parks in the United States. And my grandfather worked there, my grandma worked there, my mom and dad, my brother and sister, and of course I worked there as well. But probably starting in 4th, 5th, 6th grade, every day during the summer, my friends and I would go there and we basically spent our time there riding the roller coasters, trying to get into as much trouble as we can. And I, I, you know, I fell in love with the place and it was so easy to get to because I could ride my bike to the boat dock and the boat would take us over to, uh, to Cedar Point and actually loved it. And what's funny is my oldest child today is a huge lover of roller coasters. So we go all over the United States, whatever we can, and find these weird roller coasters to go on. So we've kept it in the family. Very cool.

**[00:04:44] Ryan Newman:** So you started out, you're growing up in Sandusky, Ohio. How'd you decide on Bowling Green as an undergraduate place? To go.

**[00:04:51] Joe Pulizzi:** I came from a very small high school, St. Mary's in Sandusky, and I graduate. My graduating class was 74 people. And I'm like, I really want to be around a lot of people. And I decided to go, let's go out to Bowling Green. And the other reason was probably Ryan. I didn't know what I wanted to do. So being a liberal arts campus, and they had a lot of different options, and I'm like, great, I want to go there. I want to get into some trouble. I'll find my way. And I actually didn't even declare a major until my junior year. And I only reason I declared a major is because they forced me to. They're like, you are not going to graduate, Joe, unless you declare a major. You're going to have to spend, like, another two years here. So I declared my junior year.

**[00:05:29] Ryan Newman:** So talk to us about that indecision of being forced to declare a major. And you still clearly had no idea what you wanted to do. What were some of those formative thoughts around that?

**[00:05:38] Joe Pulizzi:** Well, going to my counselor at the time, and I went in and I said, so this is the beginning of junior year. Can I graduate on time? And she said, absolutely not. There's no way you can do it. I said, what's the limited amount of time where I can graduate? And she said, well, you, you're real. Most of your classes are on communication. So I naturally were picking more classes around communication, persuasion, speech, those things. So, you know, whether I knew it or not, that's where I was going. And she said, okay, if you take some summer classes, you can graduate with a degree in interpersonal communications on time if you take these summer classes. So I said, sign me up. I'm going to be an interpersonal communications major. Which is funny, because now I love, I mean, everything, it's going back. Everything about what I've looked at was, I like to understand why people are communicating. I. My whole thing about marketing is how do you communicate to change somebody's behavior over a period of time? So I'm like, this was meant for me. So I sort of fell into it without even knowing it. I did graduate on time with that summer session.

**[00:06:42] Ryan Newman:** And then you mentioned, you referenced Penn State. Did you immediately go into a master's program after undergrad, or did you do something between.

**[00:06:49] Joe Pulizzi:** So at the summer, I was interning for the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball organization. As I was finishing at Bowling Green, I wanted to go into sports marketing, and I was lucky enough to get this internship. So spending time there, I realized that if you were going to get a job in sports marketing, you would not make a lot of money. That's just the name of the game. Most of the money goes to the front office and it goes to the players. So. And I'm like, okay, well, maybe sports marketing isn't for me. Maybe I want to do something else. So I was

hedging. I really didn't know what I wanted to do when I started that as well. I said, well, maybe instead of getting a job, maybe I'll go on and get my master's degree, because I wanted to continue this journey around communication. And I applied at Kentucky, Michigan State, and Penn State. So I kid you not, this is like a week before class is supposed to start in the fall of 1997, and I get a letter from Penn. I got. I got accepted. No one gave me a chance, except Penn State sends me a letter a week before. So we had somebody drop out of the communication program.

If you can come down here and you commit to teaching, we will give you a full assistantship. Wow. And I'm like, what? So, literally, the next day, my girlfriend and I, we got in a car and went down there. I got a place on Foster next to a sub. I don't even know if it's still there. There's a subway there. And I got the last efficiency available. And a week from that stint at the Cleveland Cavaliers, I was teaching public speaking at Penn State, not having a clue, really, what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. But, of course, loved my time at Penn State, fell in love with it and just. And actually having the opportunity to grow myself and teach and really learn the art of communication, it's incredible that I even got that opportunity, and that letter was perfect.

**[00:08:35] Ryan Newman:** Can you talk to us? What it was like those early periods of being a teacher, and was that something that came natural to you or.

**[00:08:41] Joe Pulizzi:** You had to work at? I was lucky and blessed to have the opportunity to, and I was so scared getting up in front of these kids who are three years younger than me at the time. So we were all about the same age. But here I am, I'm going up in front of these kids and trying to teach them, knowing pretty much nothing more than they do, but working out of the textbook. And I was forced into the situation of becoming confident, working on my public speaking. It's probably due to that early time of teaching at Penn State that got me into the whole idea of public speaking, that it gave me enough confidence to now, I mean, I've spoken probably 450 times in 20 countries, giving keynotes all over the place about content marketing. It started, that journey started at Penn state with a little teaching assistantship, grading speeches on legalization of marijuana. So it's, yeah, it's incredible.

**[00:09:32] Ryan Newman:** So you have this instinct that you've found your way into a natural talent, something you know you're good at. You know, you like the art of communication, perhaps even the art of persuasion. When did you really develop that sense that you wanted to put Mary that along with this idea of content marketing?

**[00:09:49] Joe Pulizzi:** How did that kind of come about? I'd like to say I made all the right decisions, but a lot of it was just the good luck. I got back, my girlfriend and my fiance moved to Cleveland, and I'm like, okay, well, after I graduate Penn State, I'll move to Cleveland. And I wasn't able to find a job. I was sending resumes out, and then a friend of mine said, joe, why don't you just go tempo? So I actually went to a temp agency. I worked some odd jobs at banks and doing some administration work, and I actually, it was tough having a master's degree and very little work experience at the time. So everybody said, oh, you're over educated and underemployed and whatever, but the temping really helped. And I got in a job at an insurance company working in their internal communication department. I just fell into it. And the first day I walked in and I started feeling my way around the department, and they were really into creating PowerPoint presentations and databases and working with the other departments internally. And that first day I got offered a full time job. And I remember I got the offer. It was \$25,000 a year with benefits. And I went home to my fiance and I said, they're crazy. Why they want to pay me so much money. Like, this is, this is nuts. And I took the job on the spot. I was so excited. I spent three years there and was able to work myself up to running that department, which was awesome. And what's funny is I started to do database work on the side. I learned to access databases and started to do some stuff on the side. And there was a little department that

Penton custom Media, Patton Big Media company, big publishing company. And they were looking for some database help. And I applied as a contractor for that. Well, I didn't get that job, but then they had an open position as a project manager in their department, and I applied for that and got that. That was in the beginning of 2000, and that started my career into learning advertising at events and communication. And then this thing that we call content marketing today but was not called content marketing, it was custom publishing, custom media. And like I said before, I'm like, you mean there's marketing out there where I don't have to talk about my products and services, I don't have to do the hard pitch. I could just drive and deliver value, and I get paid for that. And they're like, oh, yeah, this is it. And like I said, I'm like, I'm in. This is the greatest thing ever. And that began my journey into content marketing.

**[00:12:12] Ryan Newman:** Walk us through that business model.

**[00:12:14] Ryan Newman:** So this content marketing business model, who's the audience? Who's the one providing the payment? What's the service that's being offered? How close do you have to be to the product? Really take us through that.

**[00:12:23] Joe Pulizzi:** So when I started at Penn Custom Media, what we did is we worked with companies like Microsoft and Autodesk, Big B, two B companies, and instead of them doing traditional advertising, so that instead of them taking out an ad in one of our magazines or buying a booth at one of our big trade shows, they say, we want to deliver our own story, our own regular communications to our audience. So pet and custom media, our little internal agency, would come in and we'd work with them and say, okay, you want to do a custom magazine? We'll take care of the whole thing. We'll figure out what your story is. Find all the freelance writers. We'll bring a designer in. We'll figure out the production and distribution. We'll get the printer, we'll do the whole thing. In most cases, it was a quarterly print magazine. We would take their then database of their customers and we would send a direct mail magazine to those customers. And that's what we did. So we were like a little internal agency that nobody knew about in this big B, two B media company, because most people knew us for our magazines and our websites and our events, but they didn't know that we were doing this custom content. Well, what was so funny, Ryan, along the way is into 030405, and I'm going, and I'm talking to chief marketing officers and I'm trying to get into a discussion with them about, hey, what are you doing in custom publishing? What are you doing in custom media? As soon as I'm having that conversation, they're already sleeping. They're like, you mentioned publishing to a chief marketing officer. They're not interested. And I started to throw out some different terms and I said, well, what do you, what what are you doing in content marketing? They had no idea what I was talking about, but I said marketing. So it got their attention. And I said, there might be something here. But also at the same time, I realized that if they were doing any kind of content creation, that they were trying to build an audience, that they weren't trying to rent media, they weren't trying to interrupt people, they were trying to create their own value. There was nothing formal. Those departments were maybe publishing an internal magazine, they maybe had a newsletter, but it was probably not part of marketing. And it was all over the place and it wasn't organized and it wasn't measured. So then I thought, there's an opportunity here. Like, somebody needs to go out and create an organization to educate marketers on the practice and strategy of content marketing, of actually doing this and figuring out how do I create valuable and relevant education on an ongoing basis, position myself as the leading informational expert. And if I do that well, that group of people will come to know, like and trust me. And if they come to know, like and trust me, they might buy from me or buy more from me or stay longer as customers or whatever sort of the definition of content marketing. And that's when I, I left my executive position in March of zero seven, went on to create what became content marketing institute and a very, very tough business until 2010. And really when social media took off, all

these companies realized that, oh my God, we've got all these social media channels, but we don't have any good content to put in it.

**[00:15:16] Ryan Newman:** Well, I'd like to pause there and just really focus on that one point. You're at a content custom media company, and you then make the decision to take the great leap into starting your own company. What was that experience like? And what were some of your earliest thoughts? And did you have a safety net?

**[00:15:36] Joe Pulizzi:** I had the idea for an early content marketing play in 2005. So I'm at this publishing company, and I'm thinking, two years before I do it, I would really like to start my own business. I always wanted to start my own business. I come from a long line of entrepreneurs. My grandfather and my uncle were funeral directors. My father and mother owned a restaurant, and I really wanted to go into that area. But in 2005, two kids, they were two and four at the time. We were just getting started. We had no money. I'm like, I don't know if this is a good time. And then finally I just had a conversation with my wife, and I kept talking about starting something. I don't know exactly what it is, but I think it's going to be in this content marketing field. And she was wonderful. She basically said, look, if you don't do this, you're going to regret it the rest of your life. We'll find a way. We cut our expenses down significantly. We sold a car, we stayed in our little bungalow house, and we said, okay, we're going to cut expenses down so we can make this and go. I left in March of zero seven and left Penton, and I had an ongoing consulting retainer with them for about three months after that. So that was my little safety net of I'm leaving and I'm still going to have some money from consulting for three months. I was able to patch together a couple other clients that I had relationships with that I didn't expect to over that period to keep it going so where we would get revenue in, but we lost a ton of money. We were trying to build some online products and things that didn't really work out. During this time. The only thing I had going for me and my wife and I, who she helped me run the company. So we were, I was definitely a co founder. I had a blog called the Content Revolution, which basically I wrote in our article four times a week. And I had a newsletter about the practice of content marketing as I'm trying to launch, figure out these products and my consulting and my speaking and figure this whole thing out. Well, what's great is that we had about 10,000 people that signed up to get our newsletter. So there was an audience there. So I was doing my own content marketing, if you will. But I had yet to create any kind of revenue.

I had a couple customers where we were, we were figuring out what we were going to do, and I had one big customer that we were getting a lot of revenue from that left in September of 2009. And that was the point where I went and talked to my wife and I felt really sorry for myself and I said, I don't think this is going to work. I like really think I'm going to have to go find a job somewhere. And again, she was right there. That's why you have to have a supportive family when you launch a business. She said, no, like, you can't give up right now. Like, if you give up, like, who are you? Like, we're go big or go home. Like, what are we going to do? So the end of 2009 was when I had the idea and I started talking with a lot of the readers of my blog and email subscribers. And I said, oh, there might be an opportunity for a formal company that educates and does events and does a magazine and created like our own little media division for content marketing. So that's when I said, okay, I'm going to give it another six months. We renamed the company Content Marketing Institute. And I had these big goals. It's like, we're going to be the leading source of information online for content marketing. We're going to create the leading magazine magazine for content marketing called chief Content officer, which we did. We're going to create the leading event for content marketing, which we did, called content Marketing world, and repositioned everything. So from then fall of 2009, when I felt like everything was coming down around me and I was going to lose it, in May, we relaunched this whole brand called Content Marketing Institute. And Ryan, it took off right away. Like I knew we hit a home run because for whatever reason that resonated, that name resonated. And then we started to go big and, you know, five years later, we were a \$10 million company. If you're a small business

owner, you have to have patience like most small businesses fail in five years. If we didn't set our expenses so low and I didn't have a supportive family and we didn't put money away ahead of time, I probably wouldn't be able to make it incredible.

**[00:19:31] Ryan Newman:** And what's so fascinating about what you did is you basically became the leader and the authority of a burgeoning industry, and you were essentially creating a convening space for all these people to come together, as well as publications and education around how to train, how to do something that previously didn't even exist.

**[00:19:51] Ryan Newman:** So what's it like to actually sort.

**[00:19:54] Ryan Newman:** Of harness a whole entire segment of a new business channel and to really emerge as the authority in that space?

**[00:20:02] Joe Pulizzi:** I don't know. It's funny, I don't know. Feel so blessed. First of all, one of the greatest community on the planet are these group of marketers and content creators out there. They're just giving people, and to be part of that is humbling, but it's funny. It was, this was a good story was from September 2011, we were starting our first event, content Marketing World, which became like our leading driver of revenue. And I had the idea a year before and I said, well, let's do an event where we get all these people together and we can learn and train together. I said, do you think we can get 100 people to Cleveland, Ohio for a little event? And I get out there, I'm ready to go we've got a bunch of people coming in, and I'm ready to give the opening keynote for content marketing World 2011, which was our first one in Cleveland, Ohio. And I look out and I see 660 people. So this is sort of the moment when you feel like you might have made it. And my wife and I, we just broke down crying, like together, like we, that was the moment where we, we made it. It's funny because very popular marketing keynote speaker David Meerman Scott was going to give the opening keynote after me, and he's standing right where there's a little spot behind the curtain and we're crying our eyes out. David Meerman Scott's just looking at us like, not sure what to do with this. I had to pull myself together. I put on a, I had an orange NASA jumpsuit on, and I was about ready to do my, my introduction. I had to pull myself together. But to see that community come together and say it sort of felt like an unloved, unwanted, like, island of misfit toys, if you will, where these people in marketing knew there's something better or something different, I'll say better, different than advertising. And nobody in their departments would listen. And now they had a group of other people, and all we did was create the space where these people could get together, talk to each other, share their own challenges. And that little event that we created that we were hoping to get 100, 150 people to in 2015, we had 4000 people come into Cleveland, Ohio. And it still to this day was the largest business event in Cleveland. 4000 people coming to Cleveland is a big deal. And we're still proud of that.

**[00:22:11] Ryan Newman:** That's fantastic. You mentioned the Orange NASA jumpsuit. We're going to talk later about the Orange Effect foundation that you created. What's with Orange?

**[00:22:18] Joe Pulizzi:** One of the initial companies that I launched was called Junta 42. This was in 2007. We were like the eharmony for content marketing. It didn't work, but the colors were orange and gray, predominantly orange. And I'm like, well, I need to get a professional headshot. I better wear the company colors. So I wore an orange button down shirt with a jacket, and that was my image for everything that I did. And then when I got my first speaking request in the United States, I said, well, orange. I'm branding the orange. I better wear an orange shirt. So I wear an orange shirt. I get called for my first international gig. This is February of 2009. And they call me up because I wrote a book called Get Content, get customers that was doing fairly well. And they said, joe would you give the keynote over here in Brussels, Belgium? I said, yeah, happy to. They said, the only problem is we want you to wear a black tux. I said, I'll wear a

monkey suit. I'll wear whatever you want me to wear. If you're going to pay me to come over, I'm happy to do it. I go up, I get in the black tuxedo, I do the whole thing. I come down off a stage and there's 200 people there that I've never met before. And I had three people at that event were speaking English as a second language, come up to me and asked me why I was not wearing orange.

And I was like, what? I don't understand, like what, the orange. They said, every picture we see of you online is orange. You are wearing orange. And I had, I didn't deliberately do this, but I looked, it's like, that's absolutely right. Everything I did, I had this orange on. So I branded myself as orange. And from that moment on, in Brussels, Belgium, I went off the deep end with orange. I mean, if you look in my closet, it looks like that scene from pulp Fiction where they open up the briefcase and this big light of orange comes out of it. That's my, like, all I have to wear are orange clothes now. And I believe that anything that you can do as a content creator, as a public speaker, or as a brand representative to differentiate yourself, it will help you. And I believe we've gotten a lot of business because of that. So everything I've done, I mean, if you look at any business that I've created, from content marketing institute to the tilt to any of the other events that we've done, there's some form of orange, I'm wearing orange, and I will continue to do so probably until I die.

**[00:24:35] Ryan Newman:** You decided eventually to exit content market institute. Can you talk about just the drivers of that decision and what you ended up doing next?

[00:24:41] Joe Pulizzi: So, yeah, I'm a huge goal setter. I was writing down and keeping goals since January of 2008. What's funny is I read some books. I read think and grow rich by Napoleon Hill. I read Stephen Coveys amazing books. And I got to a point where I learned that what do leaders do? What do people that do great things do? Well, they write down their goals. They're very specific, and they review them on a regular basis. So that's what I did. I would create spiritual goals and career goals and wealth goals and physical goals, and I would review those on a regular basis. Well, my one life wealth goal was, and I wrote it in the past tense, and I wrote it in January of zero eight. I said that I have sold my company by 2015 for at least \$15 million. So that was my goal that I wrote and I didn't have. It's so audacious. I have two nickels to rub together. At the time, we were losing money like crazy. I didn't even know what business that we were in at the time. But I said, that's what I want to do. And I had that number with specific because I talked to my accountant, and I said, what do I need for, like, forever money? What do I need to do so that I can spend this time with my kids? I don't have to worry about. I create this generational wealth, and. And my accountant said, you need 15 million to take home ten. That's where the 15 million comes from. And so I would review that goal every day, and I believe I made decisions with the business, and my wife and I made decisions with the business to get to that goal. Now, we did not exit in 2015. We ended up exiting in 2016. But that was always the goal, to have some kind of exit so that I could remove myself from the business, create this wealth opportunity for my family, and then also, at the same time, spend more time with my kids. And I was able to take a full year off. I took a full sabbatical year in 2018. And I think the reason was, is because initially, I set up that goal for me to do so. And I know a lot of people don't do this, and they don't maybe don't think that far out. But I'm a big believer that if you review those goals on a regular basis, they that sort of work themselves subconsciously. You sleep, you think about these things, and you make decisions based on those, but you have to have the goal. You have to know why you're doing it. You have to know why you're getting up in the morning.

**[00:26:52] Ryan Newman:** One tactical question, because I get asked this question a lot as a fellow goal center, is when 2015 came and you hadn't yet sold your business, and yet you had it written down that you were going to sell it by 2015, did you just extend the goal by a year? Did you question if you should still keep the goal? Did you view yourself as a failure because you

hadn't achieved what you set out to do, kind of in that hard ink?

**[00:27:13] Joe Pulizzi:** Such a great question.

In 2013, I was looking. So we were growing. We were probably, like, five or \$6 million by then. We were doing very well, but I was looking at that goal, Ryan, and I said, I don't think we're going to make it. Like, I have to be honest, like, something has to happen. So we actually acquired, acquired an awards company. So we created the content marketing awards, acquired a West coast tech event to add to that. And I'm like, okay, we're getting there. And 2015, I'm like, we're so close. But I knew we were not there. And to be honest, I was a little disappointed. But at the same time, the business was really doing well. And so by mid, I knew that we were going to be there by the end of 20, 1516, and we went out for sale in the middle of 15. So I felt like, you know, I made some of those early decisions, and I kept that going. Basically, I extended, I said, it's 2015. I'm in the sales process. I'm actually talking to come. We got our first letter of intent to purchase the company in November of 2015. And then it took us seven months from that point to close the deal. So we closed in June of 16. So. So, yeah, I extended that. Felt confident that we were going to get this thing done. There were a couple times that I was really depressed because in the beginning of 16, I didn't know if the deal was going to go through, and I didn't want to start over again. And I have to reevaluate my goals and things. But we were able to get that thing closed.

**[00:28:36] Ryan Newman:** You get to that goal. How much time did you take to just sort of digest your success before you started your next venture?

**[00:28:42] Joe Pulizzi:** So I worked. A part of the sale was that I would only stay on for an additional year and a half. And for anybody listening to this that knows anything about earnouts or staying a part of company, if you can shorten that as much as possible, it's a good thing, because as soon as you sell, it's not yours anymore, it's not your baby, it's somebody else's, and they will make decisions that you don't agree with. Now, we sold the company to a wonderful organization, and the company's called informa. Now, they're great. They've taken really good care of that brand, but I knew that I needed to go, so I did that year and a half. Here's where I struggled. Ryan is as a goal setter, I'm like, what's the next thing? Am I going to write a book? Am I going to do this? Am I going to do that? And everybody was asking, what's next? And I was really getting over. I had a lot of anxiety in 2017 about what am I gonna do next? Like, what's the next big thing for Joe Pulizzi and my wife? Thank goodness I bring her up a lot because she saved me on quite a few occasions.

She said, don't put that pressure on yourself. Tell them you're gonna do nothing. Tell them you're gonna take a break. And that's when I started doing research on sabbaticals. I said, I'm gonna take a full year sabbatical. I'm not gonna do any, like, work work for a full year. Twelve months. And the first month of January, I'm going to do no electronics, no. No phone, no email. I'm going to do a full cleanse. Which, by the way, the first two weeks, Ryan, very twitchy. I mean, I'm a big. Was a big social media guy at the time, was very tough to do. So it took me a couple of weeks, but one of the best things I've ever done. My wife and I, we did something different every day. You know, we always had something to do. And in February of 2018, I took my dad to Sicily. He never met any of his family in Sicily. I was able to do that now that he's. His mind is not where it once was in 2018. And to do it at that time was such a blessing. And it was a great time for me to reset and then figure out, okay, what do I really want to do next?

**[00:30:41] Ryan Newman:** So you come out of that, your head's clear. What did you tackle next, and where did it take you?

**[00:30:45] Joe Pulizzi:** I wanted to do something that would stretch me creatively up to that point.



I'd written five or six nonfiction books. Pretty decent at writing a business marketing book, but it's something that I was used to doing. I wanted to do something that felt very uncomfortable, very different, and would make my brain work in ways that I've never worked before. So I ended up saying to my wife, what's your favorite book? And she said, I like thrillers. I said, I wonder if I could write you a thriller.

**[00:31:14] Ryan Newman:** Wow.

**[00:31:15] Joe Pulizzi:** During the sabbatical year, I started to read more thrillers and mystery novels and whatever. And so in 2019, I started writing my novel, which came out in the beginning of 2020 called the will to die. And so now I'm a fiction writer. It did actually fairly well. Probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do creatively, and the most fulfilling was. Was writing that, because it was the first time, Ryan, that I actually could give something to my friends and family that they could relate to. Nobody knows what I do. Like I talked to any of my family. Joe's in content marketing. What is that? I don't even know. Did he make that up? They don't know. But. But when you say, here's my novel, everyone can read a novel. And to share in something that I created with them was pretty powerful.

**[00:31:59] Ryan Newman:** So you write this novel, and then you're at that point, must be itching to get back into either contact marketing or some other vertical of it. So where did you go from there?

**[00:32:07] Joe Pulizzi:** To be honest with you, Ryan, I was going to just start writing more fiction. I was going to write a part two to the will to die. And then COVID comes along and I changed my work habits a bit and started to dig into the creator economy, and I started to get a lot of my friends and former colleagues to reach out to me. That said, they were struggling with making a living as a content creator and building a media business like my wife and I built. And I started to help them, and I wrote another version of Content Inc. Which is sort of my book around, you know, creating your own media company. And I said, oh, well, if I'm going to write a book, I should write a regular newsletter to help this audience. Created, put a little company together, created the Tilt, which is a newsletter for content creators to help them strategically think about their business. And that today has about 35,000 subscribers to it. So sort of a little bit different that, but sort of a hobby that grew as something I thought that was not, I didn't. Didn't ever plan to do another business. And so I got into that and I said, well, you know, as long as we're doing the book and as long as I'm doing the newsletter, we should do an event, too. So we launched an event. It was creator Economy Expo. Now it's renamed Content Entrepreneurship Expo. Our next one's in May of 2024. And, yeah, so kind of got back into it accidentally. And I got to tell you, that time, it was not a part of the goals. I did not have a goal to set up another business. If COVID didn't happen, it, the tilt and CeX would have never happened. It's just a response to that environment and people wanting information that they couldn't find anywhere else.

**[00:33:44] Ryan Newman:** Could you talk about the relationship between a content creator and a content entrepreneur? And more importantly, can you define all of this for us, for our listeners, and maybe even give an example?

**[00:33:54] Joe Pulizzi:** Sure. So, content marketing, first of all, is a very corporate thing. That is, you're a business that sells products or services and you're going to market a different way by not selling your products and services directly to them or advertising, you're going to create a newsletter or a blog or whatever to hopefully sell more products that you have. So that's a different thing. If you're looking at the creator economy or you're looking at basically full time content creators, this is what they want to do for a living. We call them content entrepreneurs. These are people that are maybe start with a YouTube channel, they start with a newsletter, they start with a blog, and they're trying to build an audience and they're trying to build what we call a

minimum viable audience, an audience large enough where they can monetize that audience. And generally these content creators, which you know, people will know is like a mister beast or they're your favorite TikToker or whatever, they monetize in a lot of different ways. They'll sell brand sponsorships, they'll sell advertising, they might launch their own event, they might sell training or courses or membership or books or whatever. And generally the average content creator that comes to our event, content entrepreneur expo, probably monetizes six, seven different ways. And you try to get up to a point where you're creating like a little media business. So that's where I like to use content entrepreneur instead of content creator. A lot of people say content creator. The only reason I don't like content creator, Ryan, is because anybody is a content creator who posts on any social media. A content entrepreneur tells me, you are a business, and you, your business approach is to build an audience. First that audience comes to know, like and trust you. And then because you find your true fans, they actually buy stuff from you. So that's where it's a little bit differently. And I'm trying to push this term kind of like we did in the past with content marketing. I'm trying to push this term, content entrepreneurship, to differentiate from the hobbyist or just the passing content creator to somebody that's like, hey, I do a podcast full time for a living, which is different than anyone else, just creating content out there.

**[00:35:55] Ryan Newman:** So today, in this current schema where you've got your own expo, you've got podcast, you've got the tilt, who is your ideal audience member? Who's the ideal listener for what you're doing? And what are the types of topics that you share and elaborate on in these different forums that provide a compelling reason for these folks to really dial in and want to listen?

**[00:36:17] Joe Pulizzi:** So most of the people that subscribe to our newsletter or go to our event, they have been creating content for one or two years. They haven't quite made it yet. They're not quite to profitability. They may be struggling a little bit. They may have doubts with what they're doing, but they're getting there. So what we try to teach them on is, okay, maybe you have a content niche, but you haven't niched down enough. You haven't found what we like to call your content tilt. What's your, what's your hook? What's your differentiation that will separate you from all the other content out there? What are some audience building strategies? How can you leverage social media to drive email subscribers, which we're a big believer in? We're like, hey, there's no problem with social media, but that's building on rented land. So how do you build your own direct connections with consumers through email so that you can control, you know, when you send them any kind of communication. So that's what we love to talk about. We talk about different revenue opportunities. And so a lot of people just say, okay, I want to sell sponsorship. How do I sell it? They don't know how to do that. It's like I want to launch my first book and sell it directly. How do I do that? So we talk about those types of things and we talk about like the business of it as well. Like what are the legal challenges? What are some IP protection things that you need to look out for? What are some financial things that I should know about when I'm thinking like a content creator? What are some tech, what's my tech stack look like? So we talk about all those things strategically on hobby to get you to profitability quicker. And our whole thing is we want you to be financially independent with this model. How can we get you to that point as quickly as possible so that you can do all the other things that you want to do with your life? Incredible.

**[00:37:51] Ryan Newman:** And for somebody that's listening to this, that is what may want to start becoming a content creator or content entrepreneur, what's the best way for them to start to get into your thought stream and into the flow of ideas that you're providing?

**[00:38:04] Joe Pulizzi:** Sure. Yeah. The newsletter, the business newsletter is [thetilt.com](http://thetilt.com) dot. So go ahead and sign up. It's sent two days a week. It's education about how to build your content creator business. And then my personal newsletter is [joe.pulitzer.com](http://joe.pulitzer.com) [pulizzi.com](http://pulizzi.com) dot. I send a

newsletter out about how I'm thinking about content entrepreneurship every two weeks. And then I've got my latest book called the content entrepreneur that just came out. And then, of course, our events like CeX, you can find them on either joepolitsi.com or the tilt.com dot.

**[00:38:32] Ryan Newman:** Incredible. Before we move over to the student guest, I wanted to ask about the orange Effect foundation. Can you talk a little bit about that and what the motivation for that was and what, what the purpose of that is?

**[00:38:41] Joe Pulizzi:** Thank you. Yeah. Near and dear to, to my heart. Our oldest was born on the spectrum, autism. And as we were working on aggressive speech and play therapy, our oldest couldn't speak words. Three years old, mostly grunts. So aggressive speech and play therapy was able to actually go to regular school by the age of six, was able to do that without a tutor by the age of eight. And the reason why was because, I believe because of this aggressive speech and play therapy when my oldest was very, very young, and during that process, I found out how many families could not afford. We were lucky to afford these services. They're very costly and unattainable by some families. And I found out during this process, a lot of families couldn't afford it. And that just devastated me. And I'm like, we've got to do something about this.

So we started a golf outing in 2007 to provide for those people who couldn't afford it. Didn't have insurance, didn't have grants, didn't have any other way to pay. Sort of the last resort. Formalized it in 2014, created a 501 c three called the Orange Effect foundation. And we're still around kicking today and growing. And basically we have four, I think, over 450 grants out to children in 39 states to pay for their speech therapy or their speech device when they wouldn't be able to get that any other way.

**[00:40:01] Ryan Newman:** Well, thank you, Joe, for taking the time today to share your entrepreneurial journey with me. I'd now like to hand things over to a current Penn State student, Riley Auer. Riley is a senior at Penn State studying computer science. His startup, bootleg boomerangs, sells high quality handmade wooden boomerangs. Bootleg Boomerangs has a large focus on content marketing with over 31,000 subscribers on YouTube. : Riley, I'll now hand the interview over to you.

**[00:40:26] Joe Pulizzi:** Riley. I love this already. I cannot wait for your questions.

**[00:40:33] Riley Auer:** Yeah, you already got pretty much the rundown. That's exactly what I do. And I also produce a lot of content to go along with it. And now I know what to call myself. I guess a content entrepreneur.

I'm not just a content creator.

Yeah. My first question is, I was really interested when you were talking about, like, you know, diversifying incomes and the revenue streams for these content entrepreneurs. And when I think of somebody like, you know, you mentioned MrBeast earlier, I think it's a little bit easier in my mind to see how he could grab a lot of, like, sources of income. I kind of struggle with my business in what other ways I could really, you know, diversify the revenue streams because I'm just so niche.

**[00:41:20] Joe Pulizzi:** Right.

**[00:41:20] Riley Auer:** All of my content is just about boomerangs. What do you think would be the best course of action?

**[00:41:26] Joe Pulizzi:** So you have it. Just a little more detail. Do you have a YouTube channel

right now?

**[00:41:30] Riley Auer:** Yeah, I have a YouTube channel, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat. Pretty much anything I can post on.

**[00:41:35] Joe Pulizzi:** Where are you having the most resonance? Like where. Where would you call your home base?

**[00:41:39] Riley Auer:** Definitely YouTube. I have more followers on TikTok, like, many more followers on TikTok. But I feel like the community I'm actually building is on YouTube for sure.

**[00:41:50] Joe Pulizzi:** Give me an idea for the people that follow. Do you know a lot of the people that follow you, are they following for entertainment? Are they following because they might be interested in buying your product? Give me an idea.

**[00:41:59] Riley Auer:** I think it's a little bit of both. I think the videos themselves are entertaining, but I do think that there's an overall reason that people are watching them, because they are interested in boomerangs themselves and maybe trying it, trying to learn how to throw one and maybe even buying one. So I think there is, like, that underlying interest. I think also there's just people who enjoy watching my content. But like I said before, all my content is just boomerang.

**[00:42:22] Joe Pulizzi:** So first of all, because all your content is boomerang, that is an advantage. Like, because you have a niche and because, you know, our whole goal is, can you be, like, the leading informational expert in your niche? It sounds like you can around this, this boomerang concept. So I would absolutely keep this going, keep doubling down on YouTube. Whatever you're doing, it sounds like you're doing it right.

What I want you to start thinking of is so all those social media channels that you talked about are really important and critical for what you're doing, but they're also not under your control because, you know, you could get up. I'm sure I have friends that have gotten blocked off of YouTube. It's like you wake up and you're like, hey, what happened? So we have to go in with the mentality of I might wake up tomorrow and I might not have access to these things and I built all this. So what you might want to think about is some kind of a direct offer, whether that's a boomerang toolkit or something, where you can get somebody's email address, like something from them, so you have permission to communicate with them directly. And I'm not saying you have to create an email newsletter, but if you look at, if you were going to go five years from now and like create a full like, Boomerang media company, the most important thing that you could do right now would be to create an email newsletter list about something. And it's probably really old school because I don't, I don't know how you use email, but if you're like my kids who are college aged kids, they don't, they use email to talk to the bursar or grandma.

That's it. But as you get into business and your thing starts growing, it becomes more and more critical because social media is just, it's all about ranking and they're telling us what's good content, what's bad content, and that's bad business for a content entrepreneur. So maybe just think about, don't have to do anything right now, but maybe just think about, hey, is there some kind of a cool email, deliverable or cool something where somebody can, hey, go to my website or go to this link and sign up and get this exclusive? Or it could be a membership down the road or something where you can cultivate your true fans. That's what we're trying to do at this point. You've got all these social channels and you want to get your true fans to someplace. These are the ones that are going to ultimately support your business and send you money around something that could be a Patreon account, it could be an email newsletter. I would focus on creating your videos and creating your audience on those social channels. But one thing has to be, you have to have control over that thing. So it has to be something separate outside of those

networks.

**[00:44:51] Riley Auer:** Okay, that makes total sense. And that's a really interesting way of looking at it. Like, you can post all day and you can try to figure out what the algorithm is looking for, but at the end of the day, it's not really in your hands. So getting that community in a place where it is in your hands is really interesting advice I've never heard of, and I'm definitely going to look into it. And that kind of leads into my second question. And I guess it kind of answered it. But I was wondering if you could give me any more tips and tricks for this as well. Like, I have a, I have a pretty big following, but I don't feel like I have, like, a very strong community right now. It feels like people just kind of come watch the video and then go, a few people that I know and they comment on a bunch of the videos, but I don't feel like there's like, a strong community and that's something I'm really looking to do. Do you think the best way about doing that was kind of what you were talking about earlier?

**[00:45:44] Joe Pulizzi:** I guess. I don't want to tell you to do anything else. What I want you to do is double down on home base, whatever that is. It sounds like that's YouTube. Where a lot of content entrepreneurs go wrong is they're like, I have to do all the things. And it sounds like you're already doing a lot. I would like you to maybe look at your YouTube and say, okay, how can I? Like, Mrbeast just came out and said he's going to post less but more quality. I don't even know how that's possible because he's already doing incredible quality. But, you know, that's a thing where you can say, okay, that home base, and then you can cut up all those clips and do whatever on the other social channels. But the main thing is, how do I get everybody to that YouTube? If you look at the time that you're spending on all those platforms, is that the right amount of time? Like, is there, let's just say x whatever. Is that a waste of time? Or is that not, like, just make sure that you're not spending time on things because three, four or five platforms is a lot already to go after. But once you get to a point where you feel like you have an audience large enough that will take the next step, that's when you actually could think about adding in some different types of components. Like, hey, maybe I can add in a, do you sell sponsorship already?

**[00:46:57] Riley Auer:** I don't do any sponsorships, and that's something I've.

**[00:46:59] Joe Pulizzi:** Okay.

**[00:47:00] Riley Auer:** It's weird because, like, I'm already a brand myself, right? It's not like the brand isn't me, it's the brand is boot, like boomerang. So it's just I've been hesitant and I don't know if I should be hesitant to work with, like, you know, other brands and sponsorships. But then again, I haven't really went down that path yet.

**[00:47:20] Joe Pulizzi:** So there's no one right answer to this, but if I was with the little that I know about what's going on, and you're already doing such good work.

Traditionally, with media consumption, once you build an audience on one platform, generally if you can get them to engage in your content in another way, that increases the loyalty tenfold. When we started, we started chief content officer magazine, the reason why I started that was I believe that if I got people to read the blog and engage in the magazine and like, listen to the podcast, they would become exponentially more loyal. And it absolutely worked. And those people became our best customers. And you could do a way where you could create something from the content you already have in the, and whatever style that you think would be cool, that they would want to get to take that relationship to the next level. And again, you're saying that you don't have anything to talk about, but you have a lot to talk about specific to this group of people that are your super fans. So what is something that they would really love to get an exclusive print book on XYZ, whatever that is, or something that would go along with maybe it's

cut like a boomerang or something, you know, whatever. You could do some really cool things in print and they would want to be part of that. You're going to do the first hundred of the first 200. Or maybe you just say, hey, I'm going to do it for a month, make it a little bit exclusive. But that's another way to get a little bit closer to those fans. It sounds like that's where you can't do yet. You can't identify your superfans. You know, you have them, you sort of see them in the comments, right. But you want to know for sure it's creating something offline where they can send you a little bit of money to support it. You're not trying to make a lot of money here, but you're trying to identify an audience.

**[00:48:57] Riley Auer:** So I sell my boomerangs to the people who watch my content. That's the only way people find my boomerangs, really, is through the content. But I've thought of in the past of maybe doing some type of service to, you know, once people get the boomerangs, it's somewhat difficult to learn how to throw them. I try to make that really, the whole process really smooth by making the boomerangs easy to throw and really documenting, like all the steps you need. But I was thinking maybe down the line I could offer some service where I could join a Zoom call with them trying to throw the boomerang and teach them how to throw it better. But I guess now even saying that out loud, that's kind of a. It would be a really slow process to build, like a big community.

**[00:49:42] Joe Pulizzi:** Well, I don't know about that. I think you might be on the right. So the other thing is you want to be respectful of your own time because you only have so much time and you want to be strategic about the business. But if you look at what a lot of the content creators and entrepreneurs in our community do, they have a membership group, and that membership group meets on a regular basis. It sounds weird, but you might have your own little vip group as well that you can get on a call with, that you've got the video on you and you're showing, and they can communicate with each other. That's going to be the power that's going to take your community to the next level where they can talk to each other, you know, talked with Ryan about content entrepreneur expo. We're going to, it's not a big community, but it's going to be about 400 content entrepreneurs that come together. And a lot of people say, hey, we go to events because we want to learn. Yes, the education is important, but they don't come to the event to learn. They come to network. They want to meet people who enjoy the same interests, that are challenged with the same things or whatever. And that's, if you do that, that's going to be critical. So whether you use a Zoom meeting for that or whether it's on Patreon, that might be it. You're thinking the right thing. But. But think more of how do I get these people together to increase the loyalty and ties and be able to do what you want to do.

**[00:50:55] Riley Auer:** So when I make content, I always try to make it super engaging, super fun to watch so people can just, you know, while they're swiping through on their phones, they can watch the video and enjoy it. But something that I've noticed is that I can get a lot of views on these videos, but my conversion rate, people actually traveling from the video to my website and purchasing the boomerangs is really low. And I think it has to do with the fact that I am not really pushing them to actually buy the boomerangs in the video. I'm always hesitant to do that because I don't want to seem like that's the only reason I'm making these videos. But it's crucial to this business that I increase the conversion rates, but I haven't been able to find that sweet spot. Could you give me any advice?

**[00:51:40] Joe Pulizzi:** It's a great question. And every content entrepreneur struggles with the same thing. Like what's the right balance? And I don't want to sell because I want to keep being informative and valuable and whatever. So what's worked for me and what worked, it's worked for a lot of other content entrepreneurs, is just separate the sales pitch from the valuable content. So you just keep doing your YouTube videos. If you're going to run an ad for your boomerangs, just slice it right in the middle, like, or do an update at the end, or do an update in the middle and say, hey now. Hey, you guys know I do these videos, whatever. And to support,

to make sure financially viable business here, I'm selling these things, and here's my sales pitch. So treat it like an ad. Like if I was going to do that with my e newsletter business, which I have, I would do, you know, valuable content. Valuable content. And I do an ad break. So that takes a lot of the pressure off you to say, you don't have to insert it persuasively into your content and change your pitch. Don't mess with that. So keep being yourself. Keep doing your thing, but just put in your little 32nd blurb. That's how media companies do it. Here's the show. Here's the commercial. Here's the show, here's the commercial. Same. That's the same thing you're doing. Everybody is used to that. That way if you did add brand partnerships as well, you could just add them right in line with your other pitches and it wouldn't change anything about the show.

**[00:52:57] Riley Auer:** Okay, that makes sense. One thing I do have to clarify, and this is, I think why I have an issue, is 99% of the content I produce is like short form content. So we're talking 30 seconds tops. So think, like, you know, of course, TikTok, YouTube shorts, Instagram reels. Like, that's where I really like doing very well online. I think because it's so much shorter, it's a little bit harder to kind of throw that in there. I'm guessing the overall principle would still be the same, though. Just maybe at the end, instead of making it 30 seconds, you would just make it 5 seconds, 3 seconds, and.

**[00:53:36] Joe Pulizzi:** I would test it. I understand how nervous you would be to do that, especially with the, with the short form. But I would look at, I mean, there's a lot of other short form video experts out there that throw in a little thing at the end, go here right now, put it in the notes or whatever, and do that a lot better than I know. But see what they're doing and see if that works. And if you know of a couple that are doing it, I think it's okay to reach out to them and see, you know, what kind of results that they've seen. But I wouldn't just roll it out. I would absolutely beta test it and test one here and test a little one here and, and see how it goes before you take it to the next step. Obviously, it's a lot easier if you had a longer form piece of content, a video. And I'm almost thinking that in the future you might do a show like, if you're familiar with like MatPat and game theory or something like that, you might say at some point you're going to do a 15 minutes show, which would be completely different, but that would also be a way to diversify and take it to the next level, and that would be where you would also draw in your superfans and also be able to sell to them. So maybe down the road you might be ready for something like that. Okay.

**[00:54:43] Riley Auer:** Yeah. Down the line, I am definitely going to do some longer form content. I really want to do like, so bring on, like, celebrities and teach them how to throw boomerangs and do like a pseudo interview throughout that kind of like hot wings if you've ever seen.

**[00:54:58] Joe Pulizzi:** Oh, yeah, yeah.

**[00:54:59] Riley Auer:** That's something I'd really, so that would.

**[00:55:01] Joe Pulizzi:** Be the perfect way. Yeah. So maybe you don't, maybe you honestly don't force it with, with the short form. Maybe, maybe you say, I'm gonna keep the short form pure.

That's working well. And then when I do launch the show, whatever the show is, then you naturally have that break to say, here's the.

**[00:55:17] Riley Auer:** And all I need now is for celebrities to sign up.

**[00:55:20] Joe Pulizzi:** It sounds like you're halfway there, man. It sounds like you're not going to have a problem. By the way, the hardest part is just actually asking. I think that you will find out that you, some of those celebrities are already your fans and you just need to reach out and ask and you'll never know. Like, I, I didn't think Kevin Smith for first content marketing world was going to say yes to speaking at content marketing world, but you reach out and you ask and it

works out. Okay.

**[00:55:43] Riley Auer:** Thank you so much for answering all my questions.

[00:55:45] Joe Pulizzi: Hey, great job. I'm going to follow your stuff.

**[00:55:46] Riley Auer:** Thank you.

**[00:55:48] Joe Pulizzi:** I cannot wait to dig in. Thank you so much.

**[00:55:53] Ryan Newman:** That was Joe Pulizzi, founder of Content Marketing Institute and the tilt. This episode was produced and edited by Katie DeFiore. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe to dare to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.