



## Rand Fishkin: “Start Me Up” Season 4: Episode 1

Speaker 1:

Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology, a series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans touching on war stories from the past, and practical advice for today. And now, here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.

Melinda Byerley:

Welcome back to another episode of Stayin' Alive in Tech. As I record this, middle of August, 2020, we're in month five of global pandemic, and I have a true confession for you. I recorded this episode—my second recording with Rand Fishkin—three months ago. Now, common wisdom says that you're not supposed to apologize for saying how long you've been offline, or why you've been away. But I think there's real power in being clear about what everybody's going through. We're all struggling with things in our own way. We're all dealing with things in our own way. I'm as privileged as anybody can be: business is going well, knock on wood, my family has been healthy and safe. I know how lucky I am, but I've got my own sorts of struggles and I'm sure you do too. So it took me a few months to get it together, to focus on this podcast. And I also have three more in the bag that I'm preparing for you.

Melinda Byerley:

So hopefully we are back on track with all sorts of goodness for you in this season of Stayin' Alive in Tech. Thanks for waiting for us; thanks for being there and listening and sharing our episodes during this somewhat unplanned hiatus. And we really are glad that you're out there. We're now in almost a hundred countries and it's a joy and a privilege to share these stories with you. And there are more to come. So let's talk about why I invited Rand Fishkin back in the middle of this global pandemic to talk to you. And the reason that I did was because he went ahead and launched his company, his new company SparkToro, in the middle of a pandemic. And I felt that there were lessons for all of us, not just in how the tactics of marketing in the world, in the age that we live in now, but also in leadership and in personal growth and how to manage through all of the changes that we're going through.

Melinda Byerley:



That's really been a theme of the last few episodes that I've had. And Rand Fishkin has some incredible wisdom and insight to share with you. I think you'll really enjoy this episode. So, to that end, the name of this episode is called "Start Me Up" for a number of reasons. One of course, although this is Rand Fishkin's second, I think company, he's starting a new thing. It's also the first episode of our latest season, and it's also the rebirth of the podcast for myself after this long, unplanned hiatus, and a chance to get going again. I hope you'll enjoy the episode and let us know what you think.

Melinda Byerley:

Rand, welcome back to the podcast.

Rand Fishkin:

Melinda, thank you so much for having me.

Melinda Byerley:

So when we last left our hero, that would be you, back in August, you're in the middle of beta testing a brand new product called SparkToro. So, for those who have not heard the other episode, or who've been living under a rock, or been a little preoccupied the last few months, let's talk about—first, tell us what SparkToro is.

Rand Fishkin:

Sure. It's a software product, a tool for audience intelligence, which means it is able to crawl a whole tons of data from the web and social media accounts, and then aggregate that so that you can search across them and discover behavioral attributes and sources of influence for any describable online audience.

Melinda Byerley:

Why don't you give us a concrete example?

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. Yeah. If you want to figure out what landscape architects in New Mexico, what websites they read, what YouTube channels they subscribe to, what social media accounts they follow, what podcasts they listen to, boom, you just enter it, and the data's right there. If you have a competitor or a competitive source of influence in your sphere today—someone was asking me about how to reach women entrepreneurs, specifically those who are interested in venture financing—and so we plugged in the Female Founders Fund and basically use them as a search vector and just said, "my audience follows the social account. I think their account is F-cubed, and you know, here's 7,000 people who follow that, and here's the sources of influence for that audience." So it's really, it's really



powerful, but super simple. You just search for an audience and the tool spits back lists of podcasts, YouTube channels, social accounts, websites that people follow in the order in which they are paid attention to by that group.

Melinda Byerley:

I love this, this is sort of like the long tail of content, like, how to find the niche audiences for different purposes.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. And you know, it starts, the top of any list is going to be the mainstream ones, right? So you see big publications that almost everyone knows about. And then, as you scroll down that list, you'll go from whatever it is, you know, "40% of the audience you want to reach follows these publications," and then 20%, 10%, and you find some real gems—oftentimes at the bottom of that list—that are great opportunities for whatever type of marketing you're doing. It could be: "Hey, I want to pitch to be a guest on that podcast. Hey, I want to sponsor that YouTube channel. Hey, I want to plug that social account into Facebook and do some Facebook advertising against that group's audience. Hey, I want to go and try and get those, you know, the person behind this powerful social account to amplify my message, or to be a guest on my webinar or whatever it is, right?"

Melinda Byerley:

Or my podcast.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah yeah yeah! Or your podcast. Right. So, the the marketing tactics that people do with the tool are very broad. It's really, we were trying to be the data provider, rather than prescriptive about how exactly you use it.

Melinda Byerley:

Perfect. Thank you. So let's talk a little bit about the product development process, and we're going to specifically,—because we're all about stayin' alive here—we're going to talk about launching in the middle of a pandemic, but I want to back up on the background. So, how did you know, independent of pandemic, when you felt like it was time to come out of the beta and into a launch? How did you make the decision? What type of metrics or even heuristics did you use as a team?

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, we actually, we struggled so much with that question, Casey and I agonized over it. This is back in October of last year that we ended up contracting with a consultancy called



Elevate. They're HeyElevate.com. It's Claire Suellentrop and Georgiana Laudi, and they've done work with a bunch of software-as-a-service product companies. And I'm, I'm just generally a huge fan of using consultants, right? I've been a consultant before. I know the power of getting eyeballs on something where those folks have looked at many, many different examples in recent times and have experience across that. And so, yeah, Casey and I basically talked to Gia and Claire and said, Hey, can you analyze our sort of beta usage data and feedback, survey results, all that stuff, and help tell us: Are we ready? And if not, what else do we need to do?

Rand Fishkin:

And so they did exactly that. They helped us come to the conclusion that essentially a lot of, most of the features were set. It was really some data coverage issues, some freshness issues on the dataset, and then the design. Like, literally the visual UI of the interface that was the piece holding us back. So we redesigned the product over December and launched it in beta again in January. And when we saw the feedback from those cohorts in January, we kind of all agreed, "okay, we're ready to go." And we did our first early access group in February, right before the pandemic hit.

Melinda Byerley:

So you did an early access. And so just to confirm, so you basically ran a survey, then you got results, you made the changes, and then you tracked the next cohort of new users in and said, "how did they react to the changes?" And does that improve from one survey to the next?

Rand Fishkin:

So we did more than just a survey. So we did do a survey for all the beta users. Most of them actually filled it out, which was pretty good.

Melinda Byerley:

I was one of them.

Rand Fishkin:

Oh, thank you so much! And then we did interviews with a bunch of people as well. And we did email conversations with a lot of folks, of course, as well as looking at user and usage data too. So basically like, how many times do people log in? How many searches they perform? Did they add things to lists? Did they, you know, come back, those kinds of things. And those metrics—along with the survey and interview data—told us, or rather told Claire and Gia, who've looked at lots of this stuff, "Hey, we're ready to go."

Melinda Byerley:



So what was the launch strategy? Again, pre-pandemic. So you get into, I think you said it was February, it's time now, what was the plan before?

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, so we basically had over the last couple of years, and this is something that I would urge every startup to do, even bigger companies who are launching a product, right? You build some excitement around something by teasing what it is that you're working on, and then having a place where people can subscribe to get notified when it's ready. And that's what we had done since, gosh, since March of 2018, right? Since I left Moz. So we had, I think, close to 20,000 people on that email list and those folks, we essentially segmented them into groups of about 2000 people each, 2000 emails each, and then sent them emails one by one, inviting them. So the first, the very first group that could kind of pay for the real product and sign up with the real tiers, that was yeah, at the end of February. And they got, I think it was a hundred dollar credit to try out the product.

Melinda Byerley:

I remember that. Yeah. It was just getting—and so there we are, it's the end of February. And where were you in your process when you realized, uh oh, the world is about to turn upside down?

Rand Fishkin:

This was probably right before that, we sent that early access email. Seattle was one of the—

Melinda Byerley:

The first, right.

Rand Fishkin:

Right. So yeah. So Seattle was the first reported case of coronavirus in the United States. And we had all those deaths at the nursing home, out in Kirkland, sort of that one, you know, one traveler from Wuhan who came here, yeah, in early February. And so we sort of knew this is going to be a serious situation. But we I'll be honest, we had no idea it was going to be as serious as it has become. So we were, I don't know, kind of watching it the whole time, but not aware of what type of a hit it would take. And I think, you know, very frankly, my expectation, I think most folks around the United States, around the world, was that the U.S. government and the CDC would do a much better job of leadership, and of handling the crisis than they have.

Rand Fishkin:



Right. I don't think anyone expected this level of, sort of a combination of incompetence meets politicization. And so we did not, you know, we were really not prepared for what happened in March, but we started sending those other early access groups. And Melinda, if you, if you look at a chart, you know, Casey put one together for our investors' update. If you look at a chart of the performance of essentially, I think he sent four or five early access group emails, and those emails' performance basically tracks the virus's seriousness in the United States, you can see—

Melinda Byerley:

You mean the people weren't clicking through or they weren't following up on the email as they got focused on the other things.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, so every, every metric open rate, click through rate, conversion to a free account and conversion to a paid account, that first cohort in late February, that first cohort was a nearly 5% conversion rate. And the next group—

Melinda Byerley:

Wow.

Rand Fishkin:

Right, the next group was two weeks later, like March 11th, and they were around 1.5%. And by the end of March into early April, it was more like 0.5%. So, you know, 90% loss in conversion rate with no difference in the group, right? This is the same, it's the same group of emails that are, you know, people are getting the first message inviting them. It's the same offer, right? The a hundred dollar credit, it's the same sort of positioning and everything else. It's just that conversion rates went from (laughs) you know, 5% to 0.5%.

Melinda Byerley:

I mean, I'm a founder and you've, you know, you've put years of your life into this thing, and here's the release. Could you talk about your team's mindset as you're going through this? I mean, you've been very transparent about your struggles with depression, but this is, like you said, something on a whole other level. What was your team's mindset? How did you overcome sort of overcome that?

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, I mean, so the team is Casey and I, right? We're a very, very small team, but you know, that being said, the team is also our families, right? So Casey's, you know, Casey and his wife and his girls out in Snoqualmie, they're about a 45-minute drive from us in Seattle.



And then Geraldine and I, and then kind of the people in our friend and family group around us that have been helping folks like Don Shepherd, who did our visual design and branding, and Christine Ryu, who did all of our UX.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, we've had, you know, this great group of people around us. And we all, I think we were all mostly focused on "What does the pandemic mean for us as humans, and people, and a country, and a world rather than what's going on with SparkToro?" Like, SparkToro just took a little bit of a backseat, to be honest. And I will say I had some rough mental health days, but they were mostly, for me, most of that was just, was not around the business. Right. It was around, gosh, I thought that once this pandemic became as serious and as obviously dangerous as it was, that more Americans would, I don't know, rally together, that it would reduce politicization. Not that it would exacerbate it. I thought that, even given previous incompetence, our government would step up more.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. I think that I just had a lot of sadness and disappointment and this, you know, this sense that Republican or Democrat doesn't matter, any president of the last century would have handled this pretty well. And not this one. And that was, that was really hard and heartbreaking to just kind of, I don't know, get my head around that and have weeks where every day the news was, I don't know, just, just beating you down and you kept looking for hope, right? I don't know if you're like me, but I kept looking for hope, right? Like some sort of signal to say, "Hey, it's gonna get better." And (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

(Laughs) I'm not laughing at you, this is the rueful laugh of understanding.

Rand Fishkin:

No, it is. Yeah. Right? And then you kind of get to a point where I think the hedonic treadmill kicks in and you are so used to how terrible everything is that you become more immune to it. And that's kind of where we got to. And then we did see some, you know, recovery in some sense. It's like the reason that we launched in on April 22nd is because, about a week and a half before we saw traffic start to recover, to SparkToro's trending section. And we talked to Courtland Allen, who runs Indie Hackers, and saw what's his name, Ryan Hoover, who runs Product Hunt. They were sharing data about their community's recovering. And so we, you know, we looked at that and said "Okay, people are interested in web marketing and software products again." Like, interest has returned. We're out of the slump of "No one's paying attention." I think we can launch and see how well we can do despite the situation.



Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. It's a different experience when it's just the two of you, because, I was leading a team. And so a lot of that, there were sort of two things on my mind in that first month, (I) was kind of like, "Don't die." Right? Look for, and I mean, as a company, like make sure we're shored up, you know, shore up our clients, take care of my team and on top of the other things. And so there was like, finding that line between when do you lead and how do you lead, and how visible should you be, and when, you know, at some point, I think it was probably around mid-April where the team's like, "You know, we've done enough SIM videos now, we're done, we're good." You know, "Don't need to see you quite as often." So, you know, you're right.

Melinda Byerley:

People did it adapt. It took a while. And I think also, we were a nationwide company, with people all over the country. So it was fascinating. Those of us on the West coast were in lockdown early. And people like in the South were sort of like, "What's going on?" And then watching the people in the Midwest have to be locked down, and then watching it go all the way into the South, and watching. And it's almost like we could tell them, we were running about two weeks ahead of it. We're going to tell you, "This is going to suck, like, here's what your next two weeks are going to look like." Yeah. So totally interesting to hear how different people have been dealing with this. So, good, I like hearing about how you were doing the research and saying people are like "When we got out of the ... okay, we're in this, how do we all work remotely?" Now we're here.

Melinda Byerley:

So, how did your launch strategy shift? Coming into April, you had the plans, you were doing the emails, you saw the response rate, conversion rates decline. How did you rethink your tactics? How did you go about the process of changing what you did?

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, so we basically did a few things differently. One was, we shifted from a focus on the paid accounts to a focus on the free account.

Melinda Byerley:

Say more about that.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, we did that mostly because what we saw was tons of people telling us in the early access period, "Hey, Finance pulled my credit card, I no longer have a corporate card. I can't."





Melinda Byerley:

Key cards are gone, yeah.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, right? The second thing we heard from a lot of folks was, "I'm not allowed to do new spending, our tool budget is set, we can't spend anything new. We just don't, we just don't have it." Or third, we saw that a large number—a scary, large number—of the email addresses in our database returned. Not an out of office message, but a "so and so is no longer with the company." Which is heartbreaking and really scary, and also a wake up call.

Rand Fishkin:

So we basically saw, okay, tons of people have no budget. A lot of them don't even have jobs anymore — a lot of the people who were interested in what we were doing. And so our job now is to give people this tool for free, in a much more generous way. So, in the early access period we had done, I think it was five free searches. And we showed a small number of results, like 10 of the first 30 results. And instead, we went to a model where I think we show like, 25 or 30 of the top 50 results, and you can run 10 free searches. We stopped gating the multiple account registration thing. So just a much more generous, free package in general. And we've seen, very few people kind of run out of searches on their free tier in a short period of time.

Rand Fishkin:

So that kind of gave us a good, good baseline. And then we also changed our launch messaging to be much less "Rah rah rah, we're so excited, isn't this amazing?" ... To a little bit more of a somber tone. We also added a, "Hey, let's make a donation to ..." We ended up using Give Directly, which is a great charity that operates worldwide, but has a U.S. Program specifically for folks who've lost a ton of their income and they're sort of hardest hit by the situation. It just gives them direct cash. And I'm kind of a proponent of the idea that people are responsible and that they do good things when given cash. And of course Give Directly's research shows that's the case as well. And so we worked with one of our investors, actually, Chris and Wayne from 97th Floor, and they donation matched. So we ended up donating \$20,000 to Give Directly, as kind of connected to our launch. We basically did a thing where for every person who tried SparkToro in its first two weeks, we made a donation of a dollar. And that's where we got to.

Melinda Byerley:

I thought that's such a clever thing. I remember also seeing you donating money for people who showed up to webinars.

Rand Fishkin:



Yeah, that's right.

Melinda Byerley:

And that's kind of one of the things that got me thinking about having you back. I just thought it was so clever and sort of like, you know, thoughtful about doing what you'd normally do, but finding a way to do good while you—

Rand Fishkin:

Well, yeah, I mean, a big part of us was like, gosh, how do we, "How do we get excited about launching a product in the midst of a pandemic when so many people are hurting?" And one of the ways to kind of almost get ourselves psyched up about it, to get me excited about marketing it, was to say, "Hey, this is actually directly connected to something that not only is helping whatever companies that still have money and marketers that are doing marketing," which I am excited about. Right? I'm proud of this product, but given the world around us, I felt like we needed something extra. I know I did. And so this sort of donation to help out was a good way to scale SparkToro's launch to be something bigger than just itself. And to let people feel like, "Hey, I'm trying this product, and also when I try this product, this great charity gets two bucks, cool." Right? And it takes me 30 seconds to give it a spin. Easy.

Melinda Byerley:

I'm fascinated by the model too, of inspiring yourself saying, "How do I get excited about another webinar?" So I'm not like "wah-wah-wah" about the product. (Laughs) Even though you're the founder, you should be excited. But it's kind of hard if you're anxious about the future of the world.

Rand Fishkin:

Right. Right. And I had that a bunch of times, you know, even at my Moz days. If I was not excited about a product that Moz was launching, I just, I couldn't feel ... you know, if I wasn't proud of it, I just couldn't get into this mindset of like, "Go amplify it, go share it everywhere, go put it in my presentations." I was almost embarrassed. I don't know.

Melinda Byerley:

I think it's hard to do good marketing if you don't love what you're doing. I mean, not to be self promotional, but we say it in our stuff. We drive growth for products we love, for companies we love. And I don't think you can be the best marketer you can be if you don't love what you're selling on some level.

Rand Fishkin:



Yeah. I think people can feel that inauthenticity. Right? It becomes very salesy.

Melinda Byerley:

Mercenary.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. Mercenary, pushy, right. Just not authentically: "I'm excited about this and maybe you should be too? If you're anything like me, I think you'll love this."

Melinda Byerley:

Am I being overly optimistic when I say I feel like some of the growth hacking stuff is going to be less popular, now that people are hungrier for authenticity in marketing and sincerity in marketing, or is that just wishful thinking on my part?

Rand Fishkin:

Let's see. I agree with you, but I think it's a little bit bifurcated. My sense is that the world of consumers and businesses, they're sort of ... I don't want to say bifurcated, but it's on a spectrum. And if one end of the spectrum is, "Look, the message has to be authentic. I have to resonate with the brand's values. It better be culturally and societally connected with what I believe in." And then the far right hand side or other side is like, "I don't care about any of that stuff."

Melinda Byerley:

Get the money in the till.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, yeah, right? Cash rules everything—that sort of mindset, not really caring about anything but the product itself or whatever the problem is and whether it's solved. I think that people fall along that spectrum. And if you're at the far left end, then I think that more authentic stuff is gonna resonate. If you're at the far right end I think it won't, necessarily. My sense is there are more people moving toward that authentic end of the spectrum, but that could be biased, right? That could be ...

Melinda Byerley:

Wishful thinking, our confirmation bias.

Rand Fishkin:

Right, right. The world we're surrounded by.



Melinda Byerley:

We want it to be that way.

Rand Fishkin:

I think there's money at both ends.

Melinda Byerley:

For sure. I mean, it's just, I know I personally have a lot less tolerance for anything that feels ... who has time for it? It feels like ... if you're homeschooling three children and holding down a full time job ... just don't really don't have much time for that.

Rand Fishkin:

There's, there's definitely that. I think there's also you know, you can see a significant shift in younger populations, right? In the U.S. and around the world where it tends to be ... Those people say they care more about that stuff. Brands that invest in it tend to do better. Things that are perceived as inauthentic tend not to work as well for folks under 40 or 50. So, probably that trend continues? But we'll see.

Melinda Byerley:

How are you measuring the success of SparkToro now?

Rand Fishkin:

So we use a tool called ProfitWell, which connects directly into Stripe, our payment processing system. And it is pretty easy to use and very nicely built. It lets us see and build goals, and then track our progress against that. We essentially have an MRR, a monthly recurring revenue rate that we want to hit, ideally. And it kind of helps us track against that and predicts ... It's kind of cool in that it shows you, based on what's happened the last 10 to 14 days, "Here's what we think will probably happen the next 10 to 14 days, and here's what that means for your month's revenue." So it does nice predictive projections.

Melinda Byerley:

That's super interesting. I don't know that tool. I'm going to go look at it.

Rand Fishkin:

Oh yeah. That's great. They did a terrific job. I think ... who is that? Patrick Campbell? Is that his last name? Out of Boston, but yeah. Great work there. And that has been a wonderful tracking tool for us. We're also, in a lot of ways, we're trying to be patient and ready for lots of upsets. Right? So our anticipation is that most of the economists who analyze the U.S. think that, because the country is opening back up again, we will likely have another very



heavy caseload of coronavirus, and that it will spike again. And then people will be scared and go back to quarantine. So we'll have a second wave, and that will probably hit the economy much harder than the first wave, and sort of lead to longterm budget cutting again.

Rand Fishkin:

And so we're sort of anticipating that, and just being, just being ready, right. If it comes, it comes. We'll, we'll find a way to weather it. We're keeping expenses very low. It's just, just Casey and I's salaries, and our healthcare, and the costs of keeping the product running. And then, yeah, we're sort of day by day, investing in marketing, investing in taking customer feedback and improving the product. I think we'll see more in September and October what the previous six months look like, and then try and budget more seriously for the future.

Melinda Byerley:

I have a theory too, that Q4 is going to get very interesting. Because a lot of companies, like you said, they're not spending more, they're holding the line on their 2020 budgets, but as they go into Q4, that's where I think the rubber is gonna meet the road for marketing agencies, for tools. It's going to be very ... I mean, maybe again, this is just my opinion, and this is because I know when accounts renew, but it's always done in Q4 and that's when I think the rubber will meet the road.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, yeah. That makes a lot sense.

Melinda Byerley:

Not to scare the crap out of anybody, but I think that's where we're going to really find out what's happening.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and I think it could be the case, right? I've seen other sort of commentators on the U.S. economy basically saying the U.S. might just be a place where people are okay with a very high infection and death rate, kind of like Sweden had.

Melinda Byerley:

(Laughs) Shaking my head.

Rand Fishkin:



Yeah. It's kind of hard to imagine, right? And so there'll be a substantive portion of people who stay home, probably yourself and myself included, who stay home working, you know, "Life in quarantine is okay enough, and we just deal with it. And we deal with the fact that it's really not safe to go out until there's a vaccine, which is probably sometime in 2021." And then there's a group of people who—either because they don't have the resources to be able to do it, or they don't want to—or they're a subset of the U.S. population who believes the virus is a hoax. Those people will just go out, and there will be a very high casualty rate as a result. And so you see this sort of weird economic picture, where maybe we have hit the floor, maybe we hit the floor in April or May, and then it's just a very long, slow recovery until the vaccine happens. And then maybe all that pent-up demand gets executed on.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, it's going to be interesting times in many ways. Asking you as a marketer, as someone who made your bones, as it were, in SEO and in working with Google. You've talked about how one of the roles of SparkToro is to sort of, I don't want to say free—and if I'm putting words in your mouth—to free us marketers and brands from Google and Facebook ... How do you think about how to invest in marketing right now? And what kinds? Is SEO still a good investment? How do you think about this problem for your own business right now?

Rand Fishkin:

Sure. The way I've been recommending folks think about it is: I wouldn't cut out any given channel. I think that investing in SEO or paid search or social content, email, what have you, any of those channels are still workable. I think what is definitely true on the SEO side of things is that, as we've seen in the last few years, the trend continues. It gets more and more competitive, which means it's harder to stand out. Google is taking a higher and higher proportion of the clicks for themselves, right? Entering market after market. That doesn't look to be ending. One thing I talked about last year was how every Democratic presidential candidate in the U.S. except for Joe Biden—and in fact, weirdly enough, the Trump administration—wants a serious investigation of Google's practices.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. That surprised me too. (Laughs) Wow, the Trump administration is investigating Google. Amazing.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. Right. And Biden is kind of the one candidate who I think, due to he and Obama's close relationship with Google for a long time during their administration, has sort of not taken a stance on that. And so the expectation is right. If he were to win the presidency,



potentially that investigation might go away and the monopoly practices would be less of a risk factor for Google. And thus, we probably wouldn't see that type of action impacting the SEO world. Whereas in another case it could impact the SEO world very seriously.

Rand Fishkin:

But back to "How do I think about doing marketing?" The big things I think about are threefold: One, I think every marketer, every company has to invest in a marketing flywheel that scales with decreasing friction.

Melinda Byerley:

Mmhmm. Yeah.

Rand Fishkin:

You can do that in a million ways, right? You can do that with any combination of tactics and channels, but it has to be something where every time you make an investment, it takes as much or a little less work from you. And it produces more results, right? And ads tend not to be great for that. And organic tends to be great for that, but that's not always true. Some people do great with ad programs at scale because their quality score goes up and their cost per click goes down, and they find ways to make better margins on the ads, et cetera, et cetera.

Rand Fishkin:

The second thing—in addition to that flywheel—I think every marketer has to think about is: Who still has money? Who in my audience is going to still buy my product because they have income and budget? And that is very different now than it was three months ago, and will keep changing.

Melinda Byerley:

And I think adding to that too, the companies have to be really clever and creative about that. We had a hard lesson I can tell you about sometime, reminding me that the coasts are sometimes getting hit worse than the middle of the country. And there are manufacturing businesses all around the country that are going "Great guns!" and need help right now. So, be clever.

Rand Fishkin:

Right? Yeah. There's businesses, and there's sectors of the market on the consumer and on the B2B side that are growing.

Melinda Byerley:



Yep. Look for the good news, in other words. Go seek out the good news.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. You might have to. I think companies have to consider changing the mix of four things: Their product, how their product works and who it actually serves. Their pricing; how much it costs and how it's differentiated there. Their positioning, what the product is positioned as against a problem in the market and against other potential solutions, competitors or otherwise. And then marketing channels and tactics.

Melinda Byerley:

We get so hung up on the tactics, and they're at the top of the pyramid. One CMO I particularly love who taught me that. Yeah. They're the last thing, like all that other stuff, the products at the base of that pyramid, you got to do those three things first, even though we spend all our time talking about channels and tactics.

Rand Fishkin:

Yep. Exactly. So I think those four things are things that have to shift in relation to, you know, who can still buy from us. And then the third thing that I'm telling a lot of marketers to do, and that we're certainly certainly thinking about, is: for customers who do not have the dollars right now, to invest in future pent-up demand, right? Build your brand with them, be generous to them, help them however you can, and know that in the future, as the economic situation recovers—and I believe that eventually it will—you can earn a lot of potential revenue and growth from that. So don't sleep on future customers right now, either. That's a great place to invest.

Melinda Byerley:

I hope you're enjoying this episode with Rand Fishkin. And if your company would be interested in sponsoring, Stayin' Alive in Tech, I hope you reach out to us and let us know. We'd love to have your sponsorship to cover our social media marketing costs, website, hosting, audio engineering, and more. Thanks for listening.

Melinda Byerley:

What's surprised you over the last ... I mean, we talked about the downside surprise, which is sort of the shock of discovering exactly how our administration was dealing with this problem.

Rand Fishkin:

Sure. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley:





Positive or negative, it was a surprise. But you know, as a marketer, how has this experience changed you, or what has surprised you about it?

Rand Fishkin:

Hmm, gosh, let's see.

Melinda Byerley:

I love to catch my guests in these crazy questions, I love it; it's my job.

Rand Fishkin:

(Laughs) Very, very well done. No, that's, that's super fair. Let's see. It has made me, and I think a lot of people, grateful for things in my life in a way that I don't know I ever would have recognized, certainly not to this degree. I am so incredibly grateful for the literal decades ... I had two decades where I got to travel around the world and speak to people and meet people and build relationships and, you know, shake people's hands and give them hugs. And create friendships that have been incredibly meaningful to me, and I think have been meaningful to those people too. So that I think that sort of emotional reflection on things I'm grateful for that really hit home. And if this pandemic had not happened in my life, I don't know if I ever would have considered that the way I have now.

Rand Fishkin:

I'm also extremely grateful for the timing. Geraldine and I, in large part, thanks to the fact that we both had book deals ... What was that a couple of years ago? And those books got published and, and we got some money from that. And sadly, Geraldine's father passed away and left us a good bit of money, which was a total surprise because we thought he was broke. But that enabled us to buy a house in Seattle, where real estate prices are crazy. And this house has been just a blessing. It's got a little shed in the back where the previous owner converted into an office. We call it Shed Toro, but with offices.

Melinda Byerley:

Nice! I want a "she shed" so badly. (Laughs)

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah! Let's get you one. Home improvements are up like 60% or something.

Melinda Byerley:

Speaking of looking for the good news. Yeah, exactly.

Rand Fishkin:



There you go.

Melinda Byerley:

Jigsaw puzzles are also way up.

Rand Fishkin:

(Laughs) Yeah. I mentioned to you, I think, that we had a puzzle making customer come through SparkToro last week.

Melinda Byerley:

(Gasps) I have to see this! I'm a huge fan. Yes.

Rand Fishkin:

So I think that gratefulness is something really powerful and positive—and surprising. Very surprising to me. I don't know that I ... certainly the first few weeks, the pandemic, I didn't have that. All I had was dread and horror. And now I have this fondness around it.

Melinda Byerley:

In our weekly Agile sort of stand ups, I remarked as a blocker, one of my blockers this week is that time has no meaning.

Rand Fishkin:

(Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

Like, I don't know what day it is. I don't know what time it is sometimes. It's kind of wild. But in some ways, life has slowed down in a really interesting way. I mean, not forever. There are things I'd like to be doing, but yeah, there's been some relief and just slowing down again, with an awareness of how lucky we are. Let's stipulate that we are aware that there is deep suffering out there. So this is not like, "Wahoo, look at how awesome our lives are," but think about, you know, we're all trying to survive. And one of the ways we do that is to focus on what's working. So, it's a blessing if you can see it that way.

Rand Fishkin:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, it's been weird. I know I mentioned to you before the call that we lost a family member and a friend of a friend to coronavirus in the last couple of weeks. And I don't know, those have been really sad. And at the same time, also helped us appreciate why we are staying the hell home, why we are wearing masks the one time every two weeks we go to the grocery store or pharmacy. I really have this sense that for people who



care deeply about other people, even people they don't know, now was a time when we kind of reflect on that, like no other.

Melinda Byerley:

So Rand, what's next for SparkToro?

Rand Fishkin:

In a lot of ways, it is wait and see, and more of the same, right? Keep making the product better, keep getting the data better. I'm going to keep writing blog posts. I have so many that I want to get live. But at the same time, I think for us, it's also a time to be as human-centered as we can. So trying to be even more generous than we would normally be around our launch, trying to recognize that people are in pain and suffering ... like they never have been before. And that even little things that we can do to make a difference can be helpful. And so Geraldine likes to say that my response to the pandemic has been agreeing to do everything I possibly can and filling up every hour of every day, which is partially true. I'm probably busier now than I have been at any time since I was maybe even CEO at Moz.

Melinda Byerley:

I'm surprised by that too, by how I thought I worked hard before. I don't think it's just emotional baggage. It seems like there's just physically more hours. I haven't figured out why. It just seems like there's more.

Rand Fishkin:

Well then there's so little separation right? Between the work hours and the not-work hours.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. So Rand, as we close up here, what are some of the companies or types of people you especially think would like SparkToro? So, if you're this kind of person, come check it out and say you know, "Rand's especially interested in hearing from you and getting your feedback."

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah. I think it's a little bit less for us about who you are, and more about the problem that you're trying to solve. So if you have an audience that you run a reach on the web and you don't just want to throw money at Google and Facebook to target them, we would love to hear from you about how SparkToro has or has not helped you find the sources of influence for that audience, and what you've done with that data. You know, we've heard



from folks who were using it super creatively to do Facebook ad targeting better, and to refine their audiences. We've heard from folks who were using it for PR.

Melinda Byerley:

PR, I definitely believe in for that huge, yeah. Including the influencer programs too.

Rand Fishkin:

Sure. Yep. So we've had some folks use it for literal influencer marketing, kind of finding those individuals. But a lot of folks doing more creative things with it, like a co-marketing arrangement with another sort of non-overlapping competitor in their space, competitor for their audience's attention in their space, but not direct competitor. Some really clever B2B programs on that. Some clever consumer stuff. We've seen some entrepreneurs and founders use it for persona modeling, which makes total sense, right? Because your persona has all this, you know...you want to know what sources your audience pays attention to. We saw a bunch of those people who basically just used it to go follow the same publications and people that their audience was following, so they could be kind of swimming in the same lake with them. And understand what they were paying attention to.

Melinda Byerley:

Twitter in particular, I've loved. It's like a form of list, but it's very focused. It's such a great way to understand an audience, to live in their world, to hear their words exclusively and let them wash over you and influence you.

Rand Fishkin:

So weirdly enough, there's this niche of consumer research called market research, and market research tends to be like extremely focused on just surveys, right? It is just survey distribution and taking, and I didn't really understand this world very well. And I thought in my web marketing world, that marketing research was a much broader thing, but you know, online, it generally is not. There's this sort of community around it. And so I was able to essentially do exactly what you described: start following a bunch of sources in that world. And then I literally was just having conversations with them on Twitter and LinkedIn mostly, and got invited to a couple of old podcasts and got amplified by some folks in that world. And that sent some market research people in our direction. Now I'm doing a webinar in June with some of the companies in that space, which is cool.

Melinda Byerley:

And so our listeners, I assume, can find more about you at ...

Rand Fishkin:



Sparktoro.com, absolutely.

Melinda Byerley:

And you can follow Rand on LinkedIn and Twitter. He's really good at using both for different reasons. And he does not pay me to say that, it's the truth.

Rand Fishkin:

(Laughs) He does not, he does not. You got to keep the expensive expenses low in startup mode.

Melinda Byerley:

That's right. Rand, I can't thank you enough for coming again to the podcast. I'm excited to see where SparkToro goes. We need it. I'm glad to hear that you guys are doing well. And I hope you'll come back and visit us again as this whole situation evolves.

Rand Fishkin:

Yeah, I would love to. I really appreciate you having me on, Melinda. Thank you.

Melinda Byerley:

Thanks.

Speaker 1:

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