

SEASON ONE - EPISODE SIX

BEHIND *the* MEMBERSHIP

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Callie: Welcome to episode six of Behind the Membership. In this episode I'm talking with Christopher Sutton from Musical U, about his experiences of running his membership site over the last few years. Christopher also talks about how his team helps him to create his membership content and to actually run the membership site and the different ways that both he and his membership site have evolved since they first started. We talk a little about adding a premium offering to your membership as well. This is a great episode and Christopher shares a lot of really useful tips for you. So Enjoy.

Theme song: Welcome to Behind the Membership with Callie Willows. Real people, real stories, real memberships.

Callie: Today I'm joined by Christopher Sutton from Musical U. Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Christopher.

Christopher: My pleasure.

Callie: So your membership is Musical U. Can you start by telling us a little bit about the membership, what it offers, who it's for?

Christopher: Sure, well first of all, let me say thank you for having me as a guest on your show. I'm a big fan of everything you and Mike do on the Facebook group and The Membership Guys podcast and inside the Member Site Academy. It's a real pleasure and all that to be here. As

you said, yeah, the Musical U is the company and the name of the membership site. What we specialise in is helping musicians develop the inner skills of music. There's plenty of websites out there to learn how to play guitar or how to play piano. We don't teach the kind of instrument technique. Instead we fill in what is often a missing piece for musicians which is how do you understand what you hear in music. We teach them the skills they need to play by ear or improvise or create their own music.

Callie: That sounds awesome. I mean as you said it sounds like quite a unique idea because there are a lot of memberships out there for the instrument side of learning music but I don't think I've come across anybody else doing quite the same thing as you. What gave you the idea for that membership?

Christopher: It's a slightly funny one because this area which is traditionally called ear training is something that's always been around, you know, literally during like hundreds of years it's been a part of music education but if you look around online it is relatively underserved and it is a niche where you don't find many membership sites or products or courses. There are some certainly but not that many and it's a bit bizarre because it's such a powerful skill and it is such a traditional part of what makes a good musician. That was really the genesis of my company. In 2009 I kind of stumbled across the ear training after literally two decades of learning music. I finally discovered there was this missing piece that would let me do all the stuff I always wanted to do. I looked around online and found there was just nothing good for it, it was all very kind of heavily steeped in music theory and it was dry and repetitive and I found the process rewarding but very frustrating. That was what really caused me to start my company and create the first products with the idea that this should be much more well known and much more enjoyable for musicians to do.

Callie: Awesome. How long has Musical U been up and running for now then?

Christopher: The company got started in 2009. The company was called Easy Ear Training. Over the years we experimented with different types of

product and got to know the market and how to serve the customers better and eventually in 2015, we launched the membership site Musical U and ended up actually rebranding the entire company as Musical U.

Callie: Awesome. You're in that two year zone now.

Christopher: Yes.

Callie: From the sound of it, have you found much has changed then between year one and two of the membership?

Christopher: An awful lot, yes. I think it's been a real learning curve. There were lots of things I had figured out after I guess six or seven years of running the company but there were certainly lots of things still to discover when it came to running and marketing a successful membership site. I think some of the biggest eye openers for me were that marketing a subscription product is definitely more challenging than marketing a one time purchase product or even we got started in I Phone apps and you couldn't ask for an easier sell than getting someone to buy an I Phone app. Certainly you can do it badly but in the comfy area of the app store where everyone already has their credit card details in there, it's relatively easy to persuade them to spend a dollar and buy your app.

When we moved into info products, that became a bit harder. We were trying to sell through the website to sometimes cold visitors and I learned the hard way that it takes a real skill to write good copy and to nurture a relationship to the point where someone is comfortable to buy. I don't think I'd really appreciated that when it came to running a membership site, actually you were taking it much further and you were asking someone to sign up for recurring billing and that again just required a lot more persuasive copy and clearer value proposition and ongoing nurture to get them to the point of being ready to join your site. Certainly the first year of the site was heavily focused on that marketing and figuring out how to get new members to sign up. We had a reasonably successful launch to our existing email list but after that there was a lot to figure out in terms of how to keep new members coming in.

Callie: Awesome, so before we delve a bit more into that kind of getting and keeping members, let's talk about a few practicalities with the site first. Is the site permanently open or do you work on a launch cycle?

Christopher: Permanently open, so I had kinda experienced the roller coaster of periodic launches in our years of doing info products. We had downloadable training albums and audio enhanced e books. For two or three years that was the focus of the company. With each one we would do a big launch to our email list and publicly and it would do pretty well but then sales would drastically drop off in the meantime and obviously that's similar if you're doing a limited sign up period with your membership site a few times a year. I guess it's partly a personal thing, that just didn't work for me. Like I'm not someone that thrives on that pressure and excitement and I definitely am someone who gets frustrated when things drop off in between. Definitely part of my motivation with starting the membership site was to create something more stable and sustainable and ongoing compared to that roller coaster of launches where each one might be a hit or a miss.

Callie: Yeah, I'm definitely with you there on the launches. Is this a full time business for you or are you still selling other products, doing other services as well?

Christopher: This has been my full time gig since I think 2011 and more and more over the last couple of years we've focused our product offering on just this membership site. We did technically have a portfolio of iPhone apps which as of yet aren't fully integrated with the membership site so arguably we still have several products but really Musical U, the membership site, is our all in one solution that we are promoting everywhere we promote things.

Callie: Awesome. I do always think it's easier if you're just trying to promote one thing than when you've got like lots of different products.

Christopher: Absolutely, that was one of the major benefits for us of moving to the membership model it allowed us to just put all of our efforts into one basket in a good way. Up until that point, I literally had more than a dozen products, barely of which had their own dedicated email courses and it just meant my marketing system was a bit of a

nightmare. It worked and each part had been optimised and that was fine but particularly when we were still launching individual info products, it just became more and more complex and that went for our customers too. If they came to know our brand, they'd still be faced with the decision of which product is right for me? How do I figure that out? Moving into the membership site model and having what's sometimes called one hero product where this is the thing you recommend your audience sign up for, it just simplified things drastically both for our customer and for ourselves.

Callie: Yeah, that simplicity is always such a nice thing both for you in terms of managing things but also for people, as you said, they don't have to decide what to buy, it's kind of is this the right thing for me or not as opposed to which of these things should I buy? What about pricing with the membership, how do you price the membership and has that changed much since you've been up and running?

Christopher: It's definitely varied, I guess we did market based pricing to begin with. If you look around, there are as I said lots of music related education membership sites and those are mostly focused on learning the instrument so it's a bit different but if you look at our typical customer, they are an adult with some disposable income, some hobby time for music and we're asking them to give up some of their time and some of their hobby budget as it were for this membership. That put some limits reasonably on what you can price. I think we launched at \$19.95 a month for our regular membership and that has since increased to \$29.95 a month, mostly in reflection of the greatly increased content inside the site now. We have 45 training modules on various topics. I think we launched with about 20. The site has improved dramatically over that time. As you would know, you need to kinda constantly stay aware and reevaluate and try and find the sweet spot in terms of how many people purchase versus how much they're paying. I think at this point I'm very comfortable that what we provide is certainly worth a dollar a day to the people who make use of it. I think that \$29.95 a month price point is pretty good for our core membership.

Callie: Cool, and do you have a community element to the membership or is it mainly just the courses?

Christopher: It's absolutely heavily focused on community and that was inspired a little bit from the advice you often hear around membership sites which is that people come for the content and stay for the community. I had in mind if we were trying to keep people month after month, it was gonna work well if we had a community they were actively involved in but actually was driven much more by the customer needs, whether they know it or not. We had learned over the years was that a major problem for musicians with ear training is that they don't have the ongoing support they need to succeed. We had developed some very successful I Phone apps and info products and the feedback we got on each product was great but it was clear from some of the follow up emails we got that what people really struggled with was overall how to plan their training and how to make it work day after day, week after week and what to do if they get stuck and where they can turn to for help.

A big motivation for me having been doing this email support I guess for free over several years was to actually provide that as part of the products. So rather than saying "Look, here's your downloadable, go use it." To provide that community where they can get expert help from the team and also have other musicians training around them so that they don't feel alone, they don't feel stuck or frustrated and when they're using all of this great training content we provide, there's actually a way to make it work week after week, month after month.

Callie: Yeah, I love that approach. Is that onsite forum that you have or are you using a Facebook group? What kind of community is it?

Christopher: It's onsite so the company is as you probably picked up on with the I Phone apps, we're a fairly tech heavy company. My background is in computer programming and audio research and development so I'm a geeky guy by nature. I really wanted a neat integrated site where everything felt cohesive and more and more we've managed to accomplish that. That's definitely been a journey of development but to make it literal, we're running a buddy press and bp press forum that's tightly integrated with the gamified learning environment we're using so it's all word press based. We've done quite a lot

custom work to make it all kind of interweave so that the community feels like part of the training and vice versa.

Callie: Awesome, so you mentioned gamification there, how are you using that in the site?

Christopher: In literal terms and technical terms, it's based on LMS and badge OS for the gamification with some custom computing underneath. Really that's about two things, one is it's about rewarding members in a clear and visible way for their training results, successes, and some people will say they have no interest in that, they don't care about virtual badges and that kind of thing but I think any human, they want some acknowledgement when they accomplish something whether that's a progress bar or it's a little pop up or it's something in the community where other people can see they've achieved it or it's another badge on their profile page, some acknowledgement that you've put in the effort and you've accomplished that milestone I think is a really powerful thing in e learning. The other aspect to it for us is that it provides us a unique way to, as I said, integrate the community and the training so we also have awards for community participation, you earn points for your forum posts. We give out like most engaging and community superstar type awards to acknowledge that and that's all part of the same gamification system which I think provides a neat way to say this is all part of one thing. This is all part of your membership. This is all part of your development as a musician.

Callie: Yeah, and I think having that kind of, as you said, that reward, that recognition for members can really make all the difference when it comes to kind of just keeping them motivated to keep on learning or keep on interacting in the community.

Christopher: For sure and it's something we dug into heavily in our I Phone apps too. Our first app had a very simple kind of difficulty levels system as a traditional video game would but when we developed our signature app a few years ago, we took it much further in taking advantage of what modern gamification teaching tells you. For example, in that app, you get a point or two every time you sing a note so whether or not you passed the level, whether or not you get the star, every time

you do something, you get a little spark of acknowledgement for it. That's something we try and do inside our membership site too is just say it's not just about hitting those milestones, it's not just about whether you pass the quiz or not, the fact that you are here and training and you've done it yesterday and you'll do it tomorrow, we recognise that and we acknowledge that and you should see that as valuable.

Callie: Yeah, recognition's such a powerful thing. The site sounds really great but has actually creating the membership site, running the membership site, been how you expected? What's kind of been the biggest challenge you've found along the way over the last couple of years?

Christopher: I think in a lot of ways it has been what we expected and I think it has hit the top level goal for us which was provide much more effective training for our customers because, as I mentioned, it's much more supportive, it's much more structured and cohesive and it's all in one package and provide a better business model for us because we'd had that rocky revenue from info products and the apps are a bit more stable but still a bit unpredictable and obviously the recurring revenue, it's a lot to easier to project cash flow and that let's you grow your business in a much more confident way. In terms of top level results, I'm very happy with how it's gone. There certainly have been challenges and I think probably the most prominent one I didn't anticipate was that ... I don't think this is something people warn you about but they should, that the downside of getting better at your marketing is that you start to acquire less committed customers and any business have a mix of customers from the super fans to those who just kind of speculatively on impulse but we found the more we dialled in our content marketing and email marketing and the better we got at converting people to that purchase, the less committed they were walking in the door.

That was a big problem for us in particular because I was determined to provide a very flexible training system. Some membership sites are just community and people show up and there are things you can do to improve retention for sure but they basically are there for the forums. Others are very course based so someone will come in

knowing they want their SEO course or the how to build your own car course. They're gonna come in, they're gonna start that course, they're gonna plod along. In our case, I knew from our experience developing these kinds of products that every musician's different and the skills they want to develop are different. While the training material we provide can be common across all of our members, people were gonna come in wanting a very different mix of that training and want to use it in a very different way. What we built is a very flexible system and that's great and for the first year or so that worked really well for our members.

As we moved into the second year after I'd done a lot of work on conversion optimization and improving the member acquisition, it became clearer and clearer that the people walking in the door were not the kind of motivated self driven, self guided learners we'd had to begin with who are gonna rock up and take charge of their learning. We were starting to get people who really expected, with no disrespect, to be spoon fed. They were people who wanted the teacher to tell them what to do and as you would know well, Callie, like that's a very different user experience to try and design and we were kind of saved by the fact that we offer a very personal help and support and guidance. When members did get stuck, as long as they were willing to say "Hey I'm confused." Or "I need help." We could jump in and help them and that kinda kept us going for year two but I didn't want that to be such a manual effort every time and I wanted the new member experience to be really smooth and slick even if they were coming in requiring that kind of step by step handholding. That was the big challenge that I didn't anticipate but the new member experience we were gonna have in year two was gonna be so much more challenging than what we'd seen in year one.

Callie:

Yeah, that's a really interesting point actually and I think a lot of membership sites will experience that as well and like you said it doesn't necessarily get talked about that actually as you grow then you will get that difference in your customer base and what different members need. It sounds like the main way you've kind of dealt with that is by having that community aspect where you're helping them and supporting them there and providing kind of the, okay, do this, then this, is that right?

Christopher: I think that's been our safety net, that's kinda how I see it. I'm very glad we offer that and it works well but I don't see that as a scalable solution and I really want our membership site to grow by 10 or 100X in the next couple years because the market certainly can allow for that and so I've always been thinking how can we make this not automatic but kind of self serve so that we are there to help when there's a specific question or something unique that the member needs. Really if they're like most of our members, the system should work automatically for them as it were. Yeah, the community and the team support has been our safety net but I've done a lot of manual work to kind of redesign our site navigation and try and improve our new member onboarding in particular. We hired a great UX consultancy to help out recently. They came in and did a one week audit and really dug into what was it that was confusing new members and what we could do to change it. I have a fantastic laundry list of things to change and improve now that will hopefully help with that because it's not an impossible problem. There's a lot of things that now need to be redesigned with a very different mindset of what we can expect from our new members.

Callie: Yeah, and I think that's great that you actually brought somebody else in to look at that for you as well because I think the problem you have when you're in your own membership day after day is it's too easy to kind of forget what the new member might see and experience and things.

Christopher: Absolutely and it's painful, as I'm sure you would know from the Member Site Academy, we all want our membership sites to be perfect and we all have in our heads the idea of how it should work and so anytime a member is frustrated or confused, it's hard not to take that personally and be like "But we designed it like this, that this is how it's meant to work, why don't you see that?" It can be brutal to, for example, watch screen cap user experience recordings where you use a service that lets random people come in and try out your site. When you listen to them talking through their thinking, you're just like "How are they possibly coming at it from that mindset?" But of course, that's exactly the insight you need to be able to step back and see it with fresh eyes and put in a design that makes it work, even if

they're coming from a completely different mindset then you were expecting.

Callie: Yeah, definitely. Okay, so what's been your favourite part of running the membership site or your highlight so far?

Christopher: I suppose it comes back to what I said our top level goals were in the sense that a major highlight has just been how much more effective this is for our members. I had been very happy with the products we developed and the results they got for people but I had also been continually frustrated by knowing that it wasn't getting them all the way there. It would teach them this one skill but it wouldn't get them to the point of standing up at a jam session and improvising a solo. I love that we are able to now take a new member, help them figure out their goals, help them plan their training and then be with them week after week, month after month until they get to that amazing, inspiring goal. I loved seeing that and I loved putting a team in place that can help support people in that way.

The other aspect, the business side of things, it's been amazing to actually be able to project cash flow. when you're running an app business, you can only guess and when you're running info products on a launch level, you can only hope so I think having the stability of income from the recurring revenue, it's really transformed how I can run my business and how I can plan for growth and in particular how I can hire a team because if you're gonna say to someone "Look I can pay you this much month to month." You need to know you're gonna have the money to pay them. Yeah, it's been transformational for the business just to have that more predictable revenue stream.

Callie: Yeah, I think the doors that that opens up when you get to a place with your membership site where you've got that consistent growth, that consistent income coming in, the added flexibility that that gives you for scaling the business further, for growing your team and things, it's quite a unique business model in that sense I think. Okay, let's shift gears a little bit now and talk about what you're doing to actually grow your membership. In terms of getting people through the door, bringing in new members, what's one thing that's working really well for you at the moment?

Christopher: I guess there are two ways to answer that, one is the big picture, what is our strategy and one of them is I can give a kind of tactical level thing that's been useful. In the big picture, what is working, what has always worked is a combination of content marketing and email marketing.

Callie: Yeah.

Christopher: If you ask how do we get new members, the short answer is the vast majority will come across our website through organic search traffic or through our apps. We reach roughly 120,000 per month through those two media. Then the step two is email marketing. Once they discover some of our content, we try hard to get them onto some kind of email sign up that provides more information for free and more value and helps to start that relationship nurture. Then we have offers in place to hopefully convert into membership if it's a good fit for them. That's a very high level overview of our funnel, it's content discovery through organic means, email sign up and then email nurture to the point of becoming a member.

The more tactical level thing I suppose is what's worked well for us is offering a trial period, a paid trial, we do it for one dollar for seven days. That's not something that's available publicly on our website. It's only available through email courses and various places. I referenced before how it's a higher barrier to entry to try and make a sale online for a subscription product. That trial definitely brings the barrier down a little bit because are still signing for recurring billing but they feel like I've got this one week to try it out. If it doesn't work, I've only wasted a dollar. Callie, you and Mike are big proponents of offering a rock solid guarantee and I'm 100% on board with that but even with the most generous guarantee you can come up with, people feel I think a social resistance to asking for their money back or definitely not everyone does but some people do.

Callie: Yes.

Christopher: Even if you have a rock solid guarantee and you say "Look, just sign up and if it doesn't work, you can get all of your money back." I found that wasn't enough and offering the trial I think just makes it one notch easier for people to be comfortable with taking that risk even if

it's not a risk because of the guarantee, they feel like it is and feel like it's a gamble. They don't want to feel silly for having to ask for their money back and so making it just a dollar, for us that's the right balance. If we let people in for free, our community would become a nightmare. You only need to look at You Tube comments to see the direction that would go but in terms of protecting our community's quality and also lowering that barrier to entry for people, a dollar for seven days seems to be the right balance for us in terms of offering a trial.

Callie: Awesome, and did you test out things like different trial periods and costs and things or did you kind of do that first, that worked and you stuck with that?

Christopher: We've only experimented a little bit with that. We've done different trial periods for the dollar and in general with our email based offers, we've done a lot of experimentation around offering bonuses and offering discounts. I feel like there we've played around with the price value trade off quite a lot. In terms of the trial specifically I don't think we've ever tried a trial for something other than a dollar because as I said we don't want to do the free trial and our monthly price point's only \$20 or \$30 so it doesn't seem to make sense to do a \$10 trial.

Callie: Yeah. Cool. One thing I noticed as well is on your website when you go in as a cold member, you have a great little quiz or I think you call it a checklist personalization for new people coming in. How's that worked for you?

Christopher: That's worked really well, it's kind of the epitome of what we've managed in email marketing and this is definitely an area where I've had to scale up over the years and the business has benefited as I've gradually figured out how to be less rubbish at it. Going back to 2009, when we launched our initial website, we did have a newsletter sign up and people could sign up for our email list. As you can imagine, not many people did. Eventually we moved to a much more incentivized and valuable email opt in where they were signing up for a training crash course and they would get 10 days, 10 emails, it would teach them the fundamentals. Then a few years ago, we started to

experiment with something a bit more personalised. We had what we called the course finder where we took the six email courses we'd developed at that point and we put them into a Ryan Levesque style survey where people could kind of answer a few questions and get told this is the email course for you.

That was great because it made use of our existing email courses in a way that was much more effective for getting people to sign up and I think what I learned from that was that there's real value in that kind of diagnosis. Psychologically if someone comes to your website and they feel like they've been understood and they feel like they're getting a recommendation that is personalised to them, that seemed to work really well in terms of getting them to enter their email address and get the value we were waiting to deliver. That was a great learning point but I was still a bit frustrated because they weren't really adapted to the person. We gave them the best of six options but it was clear from the answers people were giving that they weren't always the right match and I wasn't really happy with how each of those email courses matched up with pitching Musical U because most of them had been written before we launched the membership site. Then trying to bolt on a product promo, it was a bit awkward.

I guess about 18 months ago maybe, maybe less, maybe only a year ago, we created the current opt in which we call the musicality checklist and the idea is to give people a self assessment of where their musicality and their musicianship currently is and what they can do to improve it. Again, this is kind of a survey based approach. If someone comes to this opt in, it walks them through a series of questions and for each skill, they say I can do this or I want to do this or neither. The upshot is we then have a really in depth profile of them as a musician. What that allows us to do is immediately deliver them a personalised PDF that gives them some next steps on each of those areas they're interested in and then do a personalised email follow up that doesn't bombard them with irrelevant information but instead gives them just the emails, just the information that's relevant to them and allows us to kind of position Musical U in the most effective way.

It's really the automated version of what I would do in person if I met a musician and they were like "Well, why should I join Musical U?" I would first ask them a lot about who they are as a musician like what do they actually want to learn, what do they want to achieve and then I could explain a little bit about what we have at Musical U and why it's relevant and why it might be a good option. This email marketing funnel allows us to do that in a very personalised but automated way.

Callie: Yeah, that sounds awesome. Like I'm a big fan of segmentation anyway but it sounds like you've kind of gone that extra mile for the extra personal element there in that initial kind of checklist and quiz there which is great.

Christopher: Yeah, and it's almost beyond segmentation in a way because what we'd done up until that point was fairly simple stuff like tagging people based on the links they clicked or in that course finder survey putting them into buckets, one of six buckets. This kind of personalization, effectively you're creating over 60,000 segments. We ask them 16 questions, they each have a couple of answers and that means we kinda have 60,000 plus buckets we're putting people into. It's really a genuinely personalised profile but thankfully the tools we have these days allow us to implement the automation in a way that doesn't require 60,000 email courses. We just have a lot of decisions that say if they answer this, do this and so it creates the end result of a fully personalised experience.

Callie: Yeah, I think seeing that decision matrix you've got in your email marketing system would make my head explode.

Christopher: Well, I guess that's one area where it helps to be a computer programmer by background and I kind of thrive on pushing the automation tools to their limit but it's certainly not beyond reach of anyone. Anyone who's comfortable with gravity forms or a CRM like infusion soft or drip that let you do tag based segmentation, it requires maybe a little bit of custom coding that you could easily hire out but we found it to be so much more effective than the simple segmentation we'd been doing previously. I'd say it's well worthwhile

exploring if this is the kind of experience you want to offer to cold visitors to get them into a personalised sequence.

Callie: Awesome. I think as you said it's a little bit more work but the Internet's becoming such that there's so much out there now that the more you can personalise things for people, the more you're gonna stand out and the more people will find value in what you're offering as well. I think that's an awesome approach that you've got. Once someone joins your site then, what do you do to keep them coming back for more? What's your top retention tip?

Christopher: I guess for you there are two things. My top tip, it sounds like a bit of a cop out but my top tip is just to make the product really good. For us that means trying to make sure their training is as effective as possible because ultimately if someone is getting the results they came for, and if they're seeing those results and getting the benefit of them, they're not gonna quit, right? I think where a lot of membership sites struggle and certainly where we still struggle sometimes is if they're not getting those results, what can you do to keep them around long enough to get them back on track. That's a whole separate issue but number one priority for us is just making sure if someone signs up to learn X, we do whatever we can to make sure they do learn X.

The secondary thing for us is I guess addressing that second area of your safety net if that's not working well and for us, that's community. That's making sure they feel part of something, they feel seen and respected and they're interacting so that even if time get tight and they don't have the opportunity to do their 10 minutes of training every day this week, they get our weekly update, they see one of their friends inside the site has posted a new discussion, they have a reason to come back and do something a bit lighter, something that keeps them engaged in the website, in the membership site, and keeps them feeling like they are a member, they are part of something so that then when time does allow, when their enthusiasm returns, or when we are able to do something to reactivate them and get them training again, they're still with us rather than having hit cancel because they didn't find time this week.

Callie: Yeah, so you're kinda using that community as that kind of taking over essentially to keep them engaged, keep them feeling like they got value and enjoying the site even if they're not necessarily making use of the training.

Christopher: Exactly. I think I kinda see it as trying to provide a warm environment. So if they feel like they're still in the room, they're still aware of everything that's happening, then even if they didn't make progress in their training this week, they're gonna be a lot less likely to say "I'm not getting anything from my membership." My experience as someone who's bought a lot of memberships for a lot of products, if it's just the product, if it's just this is the training and if I'm using it, I get value. If I'm not using it, I don't get value. It's gonna be very quick to pull that lever and say I didn't use it this month, I'm gonna cancel because I'm wasting money. Whereas if you're integrated, if you're getting updates, if you're feeling like you're learning or absorbing information or useful entertainment even through the membership site, then the training is certainly not secondary but it means there is something to feel like you're getting value for your payment each month even if you're not using the main thing you came there for.

Callie: Yeah. Delivering that value's what the membership's all about at the end of the day. Yeah, I love that approach. Let's talk about life as a membership site owner now, what does a typical day actually look like for you now you're running the membership? I know you were mentioning before we started the interview that you're over in Mexico now, does that affect what your day to day life with the membership looks like?

Christopher: Oh for sure, Callie, like I'm just sat on a beach sipping Mai Tais and passive income. I just wait for the dollar bills to roll in, that's why we're all here.

Callie: That's how it works, isn't it?

Christopher: Yeah. I think fortunately I did not have that expectation going into this so I have not been disappointed. I think my day to day has definitely transformed because going back a few years, I was hiring a lot of freelancers but it always on a project by project basis and so it

really felt like the company was me. I was for the most part making the products and I was doing all of the project and people management to make that happen. As I said, the revenue was very unstable so that put a lot of pressure on me to make sure I could pay the bills each month. Through starting the membership site and growing it, my day to day has transformed in that that revenue predictability has allowed me to hire a team with some confidence. So at this point, I have five part time people working for me, four of them doing around 20 hours a week and one doing a little less than that.

Now it really feels like a team, like it feels like we are all on this mission together and things are gonna happen even if I'm not making them happen which is fantastic. More and more over the last year as that team has grown and become more stable, I've been trying to get a lot of the day to day work off my desk, the stuff that is easy to delegate, the stuff that doesn't require my particular expertise, I've been trying to find ways to hand that over to my team. That means that my weeks are looking a lot more flexible. I think before there was always such a stream of work that needed doing and there was mostly just me to do it. I was not quite in reactive mode but my agenda was basically full from whatever was coming up and I would get the work done day after day. Now we have a team call on Monday mornings and I tend to spend the last 90 minutes of each day on what I consider the catch up work. I'll catch up on what's been going on in the community. I'll answer any student questions that have come up. I'll do my email support for people on our free email courses and I'll check in with my team and help with anything urgent that's come up.

Apart from that, my days are fairly clear and that lets me split my time roughly half and half between people management and project management so whatever my team is working on I necessarily need to play a part in that in supporting them and guiding them. We still have freelancers contributing to there's quite a lot of that management work that's still on my plate. The other half of the time is freed up to do what I think of as kind of the big picture strategy work so that might be making substantial changes to our content marketing strategy, it might be setting up joint ventures and partnerships with other music education providers. It's the stuff that I feel is really

gonna move the company forward. That's what I always struggled to find time for before. Like previously I could get that work done but it meant nothing else got done. It was a matter of will we make the next product or will we take a few weeks to really figure out the big picture strategy whereas now that can become a part of every week and it feels like the business is on a much better trajectory for that reason.

Callie: Yeah, so having that team's really kind of freed up what you're working on essentially. What about with content creation? Is that you? Is that the team? Is that a combination?

Christopher: It's rarely me at this point. Even from the beginning in 2009, I was quite new to this area of ear training and while at this point, I modestly consider myself an expert, early on I definitely needed to hire people to write the articles for our website and that was kind of a selfish thing in the sense that I was learning as I hired expert music educators to write about this. From the beginning, we've had freelance writers contributing and those are typically qualified music teachers who have expertise in this area. Over time we've scaled up. So I think we started publishing two articles a week. We dropped back to one for a while in 2015. Alongside starting the membership site, we scaled up to publishing seven times a week. At this point, I think it's five days a week publishing original material and that's really required a lot of outsourcing.

We do combination of content so I think we have original article per week which will be outsourced to an expert writer like I mentioned. We have one remaster where we revisit old content and improve it and republish it, something bigger and better. We have one interview or guest post. We have one post that's more about the membership site or offering a preview of what's inside and then on Friday's we do a roundup post which is chance to recap what we've published and also showcase some of the best music education content we found on those same topics during the week. It's a mix of content. I sometimes write the Musical U related ones but I'm not writing much of it myself. My team, we have a content editor who's responsible for managing all of that content calendar and doing a bit of the editing and formatting work. Then he has a content assistant who is doing a

lot of the legwork in terms of bringing things up to quality and illustrating them and that kind of thing. That's basically handled by my team at this point.

Callie: That's really interesting because one of the things you'll typically find with memberships is that the content has to be done by the person actually creating the membership site. A lot of the time it's based on their expertise so I find that great that you've managed to create such a successful site without all of the content creation being on you.

Christopher: Yeah, I think where I'd have to admit a weak point is that I think the student support inside the membership site is still on my shoulders so when we launched the site, it was to a large extent repurposing all of the great content we'd built up over the previous years. I was the editor as it were turning the old articles and info products into training modules and at this point that's on someone else's shoulders and we're outsourcing some of the actual material development for new training modules. When it comes to the day to day answering student questions, that's still mostly me and I guess that's a little bit because of what I touched on earlier that every member is a bit different and so the questions we get, some of them are very much based on the training modules so it's can you explain this bit or what do you mean when you say this but some of them are things like I want to be able to play by ear at the jam session but I have these three restrictions, what should I do about it, how should I plan my training. At this point, I feel like I'm the only one with that kind of bigger picture view of everything we provide and how it fits together to be able to answer that in a useful way.

Callie: Yeah. I don't think being quite present in your community is a negative at all really. A lot of members, that's probably what they love about the site is that you are the one answering their questions there and things.

Christopher: Yeah, it's been an interesting one to try and find the balance on we're definitely not a company where I am the guru and people come to our site because they want to be just like me. I've worked really hard to avoid that. I think where I do make that connection is by saying

"Look, I relate to where you're coming from. I went through exactly that experience." But I never hold myself up and say "Look, I have perfect ears, you can have my ears." I am not that hero character that is particularly prominent in the fitness world where you want to be just like that guy you see photos of. I think a lot of the membership sites are like that too where people join because they're inspired by the particular person. I've tried to avoid that because I'm not the perfect example of everything we teach. Like I said, I've been standing on the shoulders of giants in terms of hiring more expert people than myself to develop a lot of the material.

I am cautious to always be there and be present and particularly for the email monitoring, having a personality, having the emails come from a particular person, having a real person, in this case, myself answer any questions that come back by email. That's super valuable but I'm cautious not to go beyond that and say "You are becoming a member to get access to me. You can be just like me." That's not the marketing strategy we use. It's been interesting to find that balance. The benefit is there definitely is more future to delegate some of these student support questions and already some of the easier ones are tackled by my team and certainly any of the kind of tech support questions are handled by someone on my team rather than myself. I feel like there's an opportunity there to scale beyond me being the but as it stands, I'm still playing that part of the go to expert for answering questions.

Callie: Yeah, and it does sound though that you've built the membership in such a way that it is very scalable because as you said you've not put yourself as the figure head, as the inspirational character that people want to be and things and you already have your team in place creating the content and things. Actually it sounds like you've kind of created the perfect scalable membership in a lot of ways which is what a lot of people actually struggle with is getting that scalable element to it.

Christopher: I hope so. I think it's a challenge for us at the moment in that I believe the product is very scalable and I believe it works well enough that I am very happy to go out there and try and scale it. The catch is that as I told you about earlier, our main customer acquisition is through

organic search traffic and that is something that does not grow rapidly overnight. So it's a slow and steady grid for us and a lot of the challenge for me at the moment is finding ways we can scale up on marketing quicker than relying on that organic growth because the product is there and waiting and could easily serve 10 times as many people tomorrow and so that's really the focus for me is trying to find new channels or new strategies that will let us grow faster than the organic traffic alone.

Callie: Are you going to be testing out things like Facebook ads, messenger bots, things like that or are you sticking more to the less pay to play kind of strategies?

Christopher: I have spent far too much money on Facebook ads to in good conscience continue to do so. I've had some fantastic results and I've been lucky to learn from some great teachers and resources. I feel like we have given Facebook ads a great go but I don't believe it can be profitable in our market for our product. I think the combination of being a niche within a niche in the sense that we're not teaching guitar, we are actually one small aspect of people's music hobby and a subscription product. It's incredibly hard to convert people via Facebook ads. We've done reasonably on email opt in but found that the leads we got via paid traffic did not convert to purchase anywhere near the way the leads we got from organic traffic did and we found that there was some benefit in doing kind of retargeting to nurture leads in a different way alongside our email nurture but ultimately that was not profitable either. We got some good results, encouraging results, enough to continue spending money for some time but ultimately I have to admit we have not found a campaign that's profitable and scalable on Facebook.

For us, the focus is on doing whatever we can to amplify and accelerate our organic traffic because content marketing is certainly a strength for us and it's where we've seen good results. Anything we can do to improve our SEO and improve our content publishing but also this year I'm very much focused on joint ventures and partnerships because there's so many people who have a very similar audience to ours and we can benefit by cross promoting or collaborating in some way that serves the customer as well as grows

our businesses. We've been pretty good over the years at establishing really friendly relationships with one of the layers in the music ed market online but I am not a sales person by background and as you know, if you're approaching someone and saying let's collaborate in a business sense, it's essentially a sales conversation. You need to nurture that relationship. You need to call them back week after week. You need to gradually design the project and get it done. I'm finding that's a whole new learning curve for me even when you have a warm content and a fantastic proposal for them, it's a lot of legwork to make that happen. That's the challenge for us in growing this year I think.

Callie: Yeah, I think two things stand out to me from that. The fact that, A, you've tested the Facebook ads and things because I think we see so much out there now about "Oh, you just need to get on Facebook ads and things like that." Yeah, they can be great for a lot of people but they're not always the case especially when you have got quite a tight niche I think but I love that you've been testing that and you've done enough to know that actually that's not the best route for you. Yeah, those joint ventures I can see that working really because yeah, we know a lot of music membership sites but they don't actually tend to talk about the actual learning of music or creating of music and things. I can see there being quite a lot of cross over there for you.

Christopher: For sure. That's the great thing for us is that our product is relatively unique in the sense of providing that ongoing support and training for this particular skill set but is very much complementary to the vast majority of music products out there so that we're not competing with them. It's very much something that would be beneficial to their audience and work well alongside what they're already offering.

Callie: Yeah, no, I look forward to seeing how that pans out for you with the joint ventures and things I think.

Christopher: Yeah, I'll post some updates on the member site academy.

Callie: Overall, what impact would you say having a membership has had on your life and your business?

Christopher: I think purely positive. I hope it's been clear from my conversation that this has not been an easy home run, no bumps along the way kind of journey. It is its own type of product, it is its own learning curve, both from the product development and from the marketing and from the ongoing customer support. It is a beast of its own so it's definitely something that has been interesting and challenging to do but in terms of the results and the impact on the company, I couldn't really have asked for better. At this point we're able to serve several hundred musicians in a very personal and in depth way. We're able to deliver much better results to the customers. We're able to plan much further ahead in terms of how to improve that product, how to market it better. I've been able to grow the team because I actually know how much money we're likely to make next month and it's just ... I wouldn't say it's taken the pressure off and certainly hiring a team brings its own kind of pressure but it has taken a lot of the stress out of the day to day because things are more predictable, they're more stable, and you're able to take that longer term view on how to grow your company.

Callie: Yeah. That's a pretty nice place to be I think definitely.

Christopher: It's definitely a big step forward from a few years ago anyway, yeah.

Callie: Yeah, I think that's the thing, you know, it often is a slow burn with membership sites I think to get to that point or to that point where you have that stability and that being able to look forward and have the freedom and stuff but once you get there it's one of the best business models I think.

Christopher: I'm with you.

Callie: Obviously I'm a fan anyway. Okay, so going back to the beginning of Musical U then, if you could actually reset and start again, is there anything you would do differently do you think?

Christopher: I think if I could wave a magic wand, it would have been really useful to have the insight early on that just because our onboarding was working well and just because members were figuring out our flexible training system, that didn't necessarily mean it was the right design. If I had known a year in the customers we were getting were

going to behave very differently, I think we probably could have designed things differently from the outset that would have saved a bit of hassle and probably saved a lot of memberships along the way, fewer cancellations, better retention. I think, yeah, if I could offer any tip to the audience, it's that if you're in that first year do just be aware that the better your marketing gets the harder you're gonna have to work at making that new member experience phenomenal and making it as smooth and frictionless as possible.

The other thing I think on a tactical level is just I wish I'd been a bit quicker to experiment with offering a trial. I think in my head I was reluctant because I imagined it would have to be a free trial and I knew that I didn't want that impact on our community but ultimately that has been our best converting offer is that one dollar seven day trial and I think we combine with the discounts so then your ongoing payments are a bit lower. If I had adopted that strategy a bit earlier, I think that would have helped us to grow faster.

Callie: You mentioned I think that that trial, it's not a public trial, it's just available through people signing up to the email list, right?

Christopher: Exactly, yeah. I think I particularly because we've had this issue of members coming in a bit less committed and our UX not being quite up to that challenge, I've been hesitant to put that trial public just because I feel like we do need that opportunity to nurture people a bit and explain the product a bit before we offer them the trial so that they come in at least having a better sense of what they're getting into even if the barriers get a bit lower in terms of commitment. Whereas I think if we put it front and centre on the website, it would just make a lot more noise for us in terms of support and the experience for the majority of people coming in would not be what we want it to be. I think for now anyway, it's the right balance to let people come in by email, get to know us a bit, we get to serve them a bit and explain the product a bit so that when they take that trial, they are coming in with a better sense of what they're buying.

Callie: Yeah. I think one thing that's kind of come across throughout this whole discussion is that you really know your audience quite well and what works for them when they're in the membership in terms of

how they sign up and how they use the site afterwards. I think that kind of seems to have helped you evolve the site a lot more for the benefit of the audience.

Christopher: It definitely has and I talked about one of the major benefits being that ability to be there day after day and serve them and support them. One of the nice side effects is as you say it's so much easier to design product extensions and improvements and redesign the marketing when you have that ongoing relationship with customers compared with, for example, selling them an app or an info product. You might get a support email, you'll probably only get kind of a five star and one star responses that people who hate it because of this or people who love it and just want to praise it. With the membership site, you're exposed to everything all the time so you see all of that three star stuff where they're figuring out how to use it but this is a bit confusing or they're getting stuck at this point. You really can't avoid understanding their experience both in terms of how they came to you and how they're using the product. That's certainly a huge advantage over other types of product.

Callie: Awesome. What's next for Musical U? What does the future hold for you?

Christopher: Well, one big focus from the marketing side of things is as I mentioned before the joint ventures and partnerships. I'm doing a lot of work at the moment to try and figure out who those right partners would be and how to best approach them with a win win proposition. If we happen to have any music ed membership site owners or product owners in general listening to this podcast, please do reach out. In terms of the product, we actually just made a major improvement in our second year, going into our second year for the anniversary we introduced a new membership tier which is about providing a bit more instrument specific training.

Callie: Awesome.

Christopher: That involved hiring four resident pros for guitar, bass, piano and singing who are now producing monthly resource packs for those instruments. That's a quite significant change to our product and what we offer both in terms of marketing the product. It's off to a

good start but we're still kinda dialling in how that all fits together but that's not holding us back. We're actually about to launch a top priced tier which is more of a kind of concierge service so that people who really want that in depth personal support like a weekly check in call and access to a member of the team directly to guide that training, we're offering that now as a top tier price option.

Callie: Awesome. It sounds like you're doing some great things there and I look forward to seeing how that kind of grows for you because I think those two additional membership tiers sounds like they could open a lot more doors for you as well.

Christopher: I hope so. From a purely business perspective, our lifetime value's been pretty solid but pretty steady and so this is partly a way to see if we can boost our average revenue per customer but it was actually driven much more from the product side in terms of members asking for "Well, how do I actually play this on guitar?" Or "Can you give me any tips for doing this on bass?" I'm very excited about those instrument packs because they address that particular pain point and similarly for the concierge tier we quite often have members saying "This is great and I can ask a question in the community but I really need someone to just kinda check in with me once a week." Or "I wish I could have a call and just really discuss all of this." Yeah, but those are really driven by member demands which hopefully means they'll be a positive improvement for everyone.

Callie: Yeah, so that was gonna be my last question but just going from what you said there, in terms of the top two level tiers, you mentioned there that they've come about from member demands. As you know Mike and I are very much about memberships always evolving, so do you think going back to what you could do differently, would you launch with those from the start now or would you still create them later based on member feedback?

Christopher: I would definitely create them later. We actually did launch with a regular and a premium tier and I think that you can launch from the start because it's so responsive, you're kind of saying we will be here to help you in whatever way is needed. For the instrument packs, it would have made our products so much more complicated and for

me hiring four truly excellent world class people who specialise in the kind of stuff we do was not an easy task. That was a substantial project and does complicate the product and the marketing. I think one of the big benefits for us launching the site was to make it as simple as possible in terms of here is the one stop solution you need. I think it was the right choice to leave it til a bit later til the core product was dialled in before adding that.

Callie: I always get interested in how people decide to evolve their membership so I just thought I'd throw that in there. Okay, so before we go, first of all, thank you so much for sharing your journey so far. A lot of great advice and tips in there but if anybody wants to find out more about your membership and you, where can they connect with you?

Christopher: Sure, so the website is musical-u.com and if you hit the contact page there and type in a message for me, it will get routed to me. I'd love to hear from any listeners of the show if you have questions or feedback or ideas, please do reach out. I guess the other answer is you can get to know more about me and my business in the member site academy. I'm a big fan and yes, if you have any questions or want to discuss things a bit, that's a great place to do it. Like you, Callie, I really love to hear from other member site owners, membership site owners and I love that community for that opportunity just to get a peak inside some other membership sites and get the insights and tactics that can help you grow your own.

Callie: Oh, thank you, the \$20 is in the post. That's been awesome, so thanks again so much for taking the time to do this, Christopher. It's been great having you on the show. I'm really looking forward to what happens next with Musical U.

Christopher: Thanks. Well, it's been a real pleasure to be here, thank you for having me and yeah, I'll continue to be a big fan of the podcast and everything you guys do.

Callie: Huge thank you again to Christopher Sutton for joining me on today's show and I hope you've enjoyed listening and you've picked up a few tips for your own membership site. You can find out more about Christopher and check out Musical U at musical-u.com. You can head

on over to [themembershipguys.com/btm6](https://www.themembershipguys.com/btm6) in order to pick up the show notes and any links mentioned in this episode. That's it for me. If you've enjoyed this episode or you'd like to discuss anything that Christopher talked about, then please head on over to our free Facebook group @talkmemberships.com. I would love to hear your thoughts. Take care and thanks for listening.

Theme song:

If you'd enjoyed today's episode of Behind the Membership, we invite you to check out the membersiteacademy.com. The member site academy is the essential resource for anyone at any stage of starting, growing and running a membership website. Whether you're still figuring out what your idea's going to be or whether your website is already up and running and you're just looking for ways to grow it and attract new members, then the member site academy can help you to get to the next level. With our extensive course library, monthly training, exclusive member only discounts, perks and tools, and a supportive active community to help you along the way with feedback, encouragement and advice, the member site academy is the perfect place to be for anyone looking to start, manage and grow a successful membership website. So check it out at membersiteacademy.com.