

SEASON ONE - EPISODE EIGHT

BEHIND *the* MEMBERSHIP

SHANNON ROGERS
HANDTOOLSCHOOL.NET



- Callie: Welcome to episode 8 of Behind The Membership. In this episode, I'm talking with Shannon Rogers from the Hand Tool School. Shannon has a slightly different membership model to the norm, and in fact one of the things that we discuss in this interview is how he decided to add a membership element as essentially an upsell to his existing courses. Shannon's also a master at community building, and has some great retention tips to share with us. I think you're really going to enjoy this episode, so let's get started.
- Speaker 2: Welcome to Behind The Membership with Callie Willows. Real people, real stories, real memberships.
- Callie: Today I'm joined on the show by Shannon Rogers from the handtoolschool.net. Welcome to the show Shannon, and thanks so much for joining me today.
- Shannon: My pleasure Callie, thanks for having me.
- Callie: No problem at all. It's always great to speak to you. Your membership site is the Hand Tool School, which is kind of a does what it says on the tin kind of name, which I really like, but can you tell us a little bit about the site and what it offers first of all.
- Shannon: Sure. It's all about woodworking but specifically woodworking without power tools. We do things the way they did it in the 18th century and prior to that. It's not because we wish we lived in the 18th century. I love my internet. I broadcast live and stream live, and all that fun 21st century technology stuff in my own shop, I just don't happen to have any power

tools. It kind of appeals to, well everybody really. Anybody who sits at a desk in front of a computer all day, or doesn't physically make anything. I pull people in left and right all over the globe who feel like something's missing in their life, and they want to actually build something. It may be that they want to build something out of wood, maybe they want to build something on metal. If it's metal then I say, "Okay. Well, I know a guy. I'm a woodworker." But also the hand tool side of things, it provides a deeper connection to the craft I think, than the big loud machines creating all kinds of noise and dust, and you kind of feed a board in one side, and it comes out the other side. It's machining, it's not really woodworking. I'm going to get in trouble for that. My power tool friends are going to send me hate mail for that, but it's more about craftsmanship.

It's about kind of taking a step back and building on fundamental skills that will only make you frankly a better woodworker later on. Because there will always be a time when the machine fails. Either the tool is not big enough for the board you want to run across it, or I won't go to a certain angle, or some other technical thing, and I see so many people who are like, "Well, I guess I can't build this now." It's like, "Pick up a chisel. Pick up a saw," and people look at you like you've got three heads. Like, "Say what now?" It is really much a lost art. It was every crafts ... not even a craftsman, every human being in the 18th century knew how to handle a saw, because if you couldn't cut down your firewood, you froze and you died. I mean these were essential skills that every single person had, not just cabinet makers and joiners, farmers you know, although I ... was there such a thing as a housewife in the 18th century? I don't even think so, whatever.

Callie: Totally.

Shannon: Everybody had these skills, because it was necessary for life, and we've just lost them. We are fortunate now that we are in a society where we can have free time, and we don't need to know how to pick up a handsaw, or a chisel or anything like that, but I think our DNA says ... the cavemen in all of us says, "I need to bang on something. I need to sharpen tool with rock, and make fire." That's what the Hand Tool School is about. It is about teaching woodworking kind of ... I even hate to say the old-fashioned way. The traditional way of woodworking. It's a long answer.

Callie: No. That sounds awesome. I have to admit like before you join the Academy, it's not something I'd ever of thought of as a niche but actually [inaudible 00:04:14]-

Shannon: It's a niche within a niche actually.

Callie: But actually like hearing you talk about adding things up, that that makes a lot of sense. Would you say your members are predominantly therefore doing woodworking as a hobby, rather than it being kind of a site for professionals, or do you have kind of a mix of both?

Shannon: I think it's ... no I don't think. I know. It's mostly hobbyists. It's mostly people who have a day job somewhere, nine times out of ten, it's something you know in front of a computer. There are quite a few of them whose aim it is to become a professional, they want to throw off the day-to-day and build furniture for a living. To be perfectly honest, the hand tool approach, it can be very difficult to make money that way. Let's be real. Machines do make things heck a lot faster, hand tools don't have to be slow, but when time is money it's a little tough for a professional cabinet maker, furniture maker to make their living. But I've had some pros who have come in mainly because they don't have time to learn to use these things, and they know that it would make them better in their professional job. A few of them have come in and picked up some of those skills along the way.

Callie: Cool. This is purely just out of interest for my ... I'm imagining that the site is predominantly male members?

Shannon: Yes.

Callie: That sounds a little bit wrong there.

Shannon: No. No. It's unfortunate. The funny thing is it's not entirely male, but I think I could count on two hands the number of women in the school, but man they are some of the most amazing craftsmen. Like some of the most incredible stuff posted in my community forum is from the women in my community. I'm always like, "Oh yeah. Girl power." It's exciting to see that, and it's such a ... the guys in my community are so excited that there's a woman there. They're like, "This is so exciting. This is so great. Welcome. Welcome. Welcome." All the women in like community feel very, very well cared for, shall we say, but it's a male-dominated industry. What can you say?

Callie: Yeah. I think there's definitely, you know, in the same way you don't get a huge amount of men in kind of the Knitting memberships and things like that.

Shannon: Yeah. Very true.

Callie: I think there's kind of that more natural divide.

Shannon: There's a long going schism between the knitters and the woodworkers.

Callie: Oh really?

Shannon: If you look at the podcast ratings in the iTunes library, you'll see this war between the knitters and the woodworkers there. It's been going on since like the late 90s.

Callie: Okay. I'll try not to put my foot into it too much there then.

Shannon: Right. Right.

Callie: You've got a slightly different set up to most membership sites in the Hand Tool School. You've kind of got your semesters, which you are essentially standalone courses, and then you have the apprenticeship, which is the more recurring traditional membership element. Is that right?

Shannon: Correct. Although I would call apprenticeship closer to coaching than I would a traditional membership, in the fact that it's not ... well I mean so many of the memberships that I'm a part of, it's kind of a ... it's either an all-access thing, or it's like a levels and you've got this recurring content that comes out. The content that I create for apprenticeship is directly related to what is going on in the apprentices shops. So whatever they're working on, whatever they're struggling with, that content is created to address that particular issue. It's coaching on mass if you will, scaled up coaching. I make that distinction just because I'm actually toying with the whole idea of an all-access kind of as an alternate product. In one of my sales videos, I liken semester's to the textbook and apprenticeship to the study group.

Callie: I love that.

Shannon: While I think that works really well, I also think that there's a room for super-secret third option of all access, come in and binge and go nuts. But that's for the future.

Callie: Okay. So how long's the school been up and running for now?

Shannon: We launched in October 2010.

Callie: Oh gosh.

Shannon: Yes.

Callie: Seven years.

Shannon: Yeah. Kind of nuts actually. As you probably know I did a massive kind of redesign and almost a relaunch almost a year ago, 363 days ago to be exact.

So yeah, almost exactly a year ago I ... I didn't shut down by any means, but I kind of stopped producing content, and completely re architected everything, added in that recurring apprenticeship option. I consider even though the site is seven years old, I'm kind of on reset, and I'm on one year at this point the way I look at it.

Callie: Cool. What actually you know ... so you've obviously done the big reset nearly a year ago now, but going back what inspired you to create The Hand Tool School in the first place? What was that kind of initial spark that made you go down this path?

Shannon: Sure. Well I started a blog, renaissancewoodworker.com back in 2008 and it was mainly ... at the time I was doing kind of semi-pro furniture making, and I kind of wanted a place where I could highlight the stuff that I was building, and blogs were all the rage at that point. My thought was, well this could be a place where customers could see all the work that goes into, "Why does that piece of furniture cost so much?" "Well, here's all the work that goes into it." Very quickly discovered that no one really cares, they just want the piece of furniture, and the people that cared were the other woodworkers. You were getting all these questions about, "Well, how did you do that, or why did you execute that particularly joint that way? How would you go about building this?" Then suddenly all you're doing is talking to your contemporaries, rather than your potential customers. I was like, "Okay. That's cool. I'll do that." It was a fun way to kind of share and touch base with the community, which frankly was very, very new at that point.

Then I'm a ham. I have a performance degree actually, so I have no problem getting in front of a camera, or getting in front of a microphone, so I was like, "What the heck? Let's start a podcast." Started as an audio podcast, The Renaissance Woodworker. Went heavily video about a year into it, and I just started building this community of people that really liked what I was doing. At the time I was probably about 50% of my work was with power tools, and 50% with hand tools, but I was quickly falling off the cliff down the hand tool rabbit hole. That resonated with my audience. They really liked seeing these techniques, and even then ... I mean there's been a bit of a renaissance in hand tools. There's a lot more manufacturers that are bringing out new tools. There's a lot more people writing about it. I am certainly not the only hand tool only guy out there in this little niche, but back then there wasn't anybody.

There's a guy on public broadcasting here called Roy Underhill. He does a show called The Woodwright's Shop. It's been on the air for about 36 years, and that was it. They don't even carry it locally. My local PBS doesn't carry it here. I mean that was the only way you could get this information, and it was a 22 minute show once a week, no time to actually get into any techniques.

So the more I began getting into this, the more I began really enjoying it, and realising there was just not even a paucity of void, of actual hand tool instruction. I said, "I need to tap into that," and the membership site, the school model was really a way to kind of monetize that, because anybody who's run a YouTube channel knows that it's a heck of a lot of work to make a living on AdSense revenue. You can live off vending machines, you know, 50 cents here or there. That's about it.

When you get into the upper echelons of millions of subscribers, it's a different game, but in this particular niche that's hard to do. It's really hard to do to get a subscriber base that big, and even then you're on somebody else's playground. Recently YouTube changed some algorithms and lots of people lost a lot of revenue because of it. To me it made sense at the time to build kind of a little walled garden, to build an actual school, to the point where I put school in the name of the site, and believe me I caught a lot of flack for that early on. "Who is this jackass? Who is this guy who thinks that he can teach? He's only got like one more year of experience than I do."

One of the things in the Internet, is all you need to know is just one more thing than the people you're talking to. That really carried me a long way, and here we are seven years later, and I can honestly say I am a much better woodworker than I was seven years ago. It was funny, because about two years ago, I used to be really kind of timid about the school side of things. "Yeah, I'm Shannon. I run The Hand Tool School." I called them members, I didn't call them students. I still call them members. Because a lot of them are just good friends of mine, but they are students. About two years ago, I flipped a switch and said, "You know what? They're students and I'm teaching them," because I have learned a lot in seven years.

I've improved as a craftsman. I've also dramatically improved my teaching ability, my teaching skills, and I'm constantly getting feedback from members about you know, "I've been struggling with this for years, 20 minutes you explained it in such a way. You're a great teacher." Okay. Call a spade, a spade, I'm a teacher now, and this is a school. Since that inception other membership sites in that niche have sprung up. Several of them have fallen by the wayside, but nobody so far nobody ... everybody's falling back in the traditional kind of membership model of, "Here's a project. Here's a bunch of videos in that project. Here's how you can build that project." Nobody has really tried to tackle the school mentality of a curriculum, of lessons, applied projects, another lesson, another applied project. So far I'm the only one doing that, so we'll see how long that lasts.

Callie: Did the idea for that ... so you're the only one doing that. Did that idea ... was that just coming up from how you wanted to kind of teach people, or how you would have wanted to have learned?

Shannon: Good question. It's because the format for instruction at the time was very quick. Very quick format. A lot of high speed, and it's still very much the same. A lot of sped up video, maybe some voiceover, mostly just music and not a lot of instruction, actual instruction. Not just, "Here's how I cut this," but here's why. Here's why it's important to do this. Let's peel back and go to the underlying reasons, nature, physics, whatever of how this steel interacts with this wood fibre. Nobody was doing that, and they're really in YouTube, on the iTunes library, there just wasn't the place to do that to get that detailed. Plus to get that detailed requires a lot of work on my part, so I needed to go to a premium model. I needed to have a paper instruction.

Going back to the whole, just know a little bit more than people you're talking to, going the project model of, here's a project and just and just build this, required a lot more, not so much knowledge, but a lot more of the ... let me just put it this way, it required a lot of people to actually want to build that exact thing that you're building. It took a lot of time for me the creator to kind of alter it, because you get this questions like, "Well I want to build that but, I want X, Y, and Z added on to it. How do I do that?" So then I was doing all this stuff for the project, we'd been doing all this consultation work at the same time, it just made much more sense to kind of skip the whole project and focus on the lessons behind the project.

That's really where the school model came out. I certainly build projects, but it's less about the projects and more about the skills, and in many instances I'll tell my students, "This is the hard way of doing this. Like if I had to build this again, I would not do it this way, but you know you got a walk before you can fly. Learn to use a chisel in this way and trust me, there'll be a time three years from now, when you're like, "Oh crap. What do I do? Oh wait. Remember that lesson Shannon taught me, and he said never do this again, here's an example of when you can do it." That was the main reason that I went with the school mentality, to kind of get away from ... well look at it this way, when you're a beginner you have more questions than answers, right? So when somebody presents you a finished thing, whatever it is, a finished sales page that converts, it's like, "Well, how did you build that sales page? Why did you have that element behind that sales page?"

Then you get into the details of, "Well you know, certain people click certain things here, certain colours resonate with your certain audience." Those are the lessons behind that finished project. That finished sales page. That's the stuff that really allows you to go out and build your own thing. Not build my thing, and that's what I didn't want to do. I wanted to free people up, to have the hand skills to build whatever they want to build. Because that is truly one of the beauties I see of working by hand, there are no limitations. You can build anything you can imagine, because there's nothing more

straightforward than a chisel, and if you know how to use a chisel, you're golden. So yeah. That's a really long answer to that question, but yeah.

Callie: I'm starting to wish I had some tools myself now.

Shannon: See? That's what it's all about. Just get me talking, I start to get excited and form at the mouth when I talk about hand tools.

Callie: I injured myself hoovering though, so I don't think putting tools in my hands is probably a good idea. Mike might not like that.

Shannon: Oh well. Yeah.

Callie: Anyway, so with the semesters and you had the pattern going with the content there and the community and things, what made you decide to actually add in that apprenticeship option as well?

Shannon: When I started the school the tagline was, The Hand Tool School, the world's first virtual apprenticeship. That also got me in a lot of hot water, from the establishment. The established cabinet makers and the media they didn't like that, but it was always my intention to create an atmosphere of apprenticeship. The old-time guild systems, and master and apprentice, which over in the UK you guys actually still have that. We don't have that over here, not so much. There's only a shadow of what it used to be. I wanted to create that atmosphere, but that's really hard to do. You're talking one to one education at that point, so I had to scale back and just do more of a traditional course layout.

As technology changed, as marketing automation became more democratized, it used to be this \$10,000 a month type tool, as it became more accessible to automate things, to do more one-to-one marketing, in case your audience doesn't know, I also have a day job, I'm the director of marketing for a Lumber Company, so if I get a little marketing speak that's that hat coming on and the hand tool that coming off. But I started to look into some of the automation and the ability to tag users, and be able to speak to them based on what they just did. They just clicked on a video. a tag shows up on their profile, and now I can send them an email or send them an on-site message saying, "What did you think of that video?" Or more importantly, "Any questions after that video? Anything you're concerned about before you tackle the project in the next video?"

Then I started to say, "Okay. Well here's a way that I could actually make an apprenticeship relationship exists." It's scalable. It allows coaching of one to many, certainly one to one would be wonderful, but the price point to make that work per user would be probably cost prohibitive in our market space,

so it just hasn't really worked. What caused me to refocus was seeing these tools and recognising that it actually was possible. As George Lucas said, I needed to wait until technology caught up. Unfortunately, he didn't wait long enough before he made those prequels, but that's another issue. I began to look at how could I structure a coaching programme, and a lot of it hinged around having a good community software that will allow easy ... everybody to have kind of their own little corner of the community, you guys call them progress logs, I call them apprentice logs. That was kind of the centre of communication.

I was then able to create videos that responded to whatever was going on there, and then do live broadcasts every month that specifically address questions that people have going on in there. All the while, this tagging and stuff is going on in the background, so every single apprentice ... it's ridiculous. Some of my guys had been with me a full year, they've got like 300 tags associated with their name. But I don't need to pay attention to that, I've got software that's paying attention to it, and suddenly the coaching becomes a matter of just responding. That sounds a little shady actually. Before it would be kind of having to stay on top of people and, "Are you working on this? Are you working in this? Do you have questions about this?"

It's less me asking you if you have questions, and me responding when they have questions. Because the software, the automation, is asking the questions. The software is touching base with them after every video they watch every week saying, "What's new in your shop? What's going on? What can I help with?" And all I'm doing is just checking my inbox, and responding, and occasionally saying, "You know what? That's a good idea for a video." Like my content Trello board is just coming straight from my inbox, over to Trello. Because my members are feeding me what the next video should be, and all I have to do is hit reply, or go over to the community and hit reply there and say, "Okay. Here's your solution to that problem. Have you thought about this? Have you thought about that," which if you think about it as a typical membership site owner with a community, that's all we do anyway.

Check in with the community, unless you're not that type of owner, and you're ... I'm very much a part of my community, and apprenticeship they're there for me, so yeah. It was this light bulb moment. It was like, "Okay. I can do this. I can actually create an apprenticeship now just by building out that web of automation and then as I go forward every new piece of content that gets created, gets hooked into that that web." Really it's not ... a web is a little too complex. It's really just recurring tags that kind of send out to go under the hood. I have eight different emails that are written, that all say pretty much the same thing, just worded slightly differently. What did you

think? What are you working on right now? Where do you need help right now? It took a long time to write them, because they really do I hope come across as someone actually just wrote this and send it to me, but those various tags that trigger when they click on certain things, when they watch certain videos it drops them into a loop that then sends them recurring emails once a week. Every single one of my apprentices is hearing from me via email once a week, to prompt them to if nothing else just go in and update their apprentice log. Because then I get a notification, I read it, and I respond.

Callie: I love how you've brought automation into helping make this work for you. Because I remember when you first talked about doing the apprenticeship and thinking that that was going to be a huge undertaking, but I love the way you've brought the automation in to make those aspects of it where it doesn't necessarily need that personal input from you, so much easier.

Shannon: I mean don't get me wrong. There are 86 emails in my inbox right now, because I have a specific inbox for apprentice logs. 86 people ... Oh 87, so there are 87 things, but the cool thing, it's amazing how much my community supports one another. I can't remember the last time I was the first person to show up and respond. It is shocking to me. I actually probably should have a stern talking-to with some of my members. Like, "Get in your shop man. Get off the community." It is incredible. Somebody will post in their log, and I'll show up, and I've been very transparent with my apprentice saying, "Sometimes I'm there five minutes later. Sometimes it might be a couple of days," and I have what I call the bat phone. I have a specific contact button. If you have an issue, and like I can't go any further until I hear from Shannon, use the bat phone.

At first, I was like, "Oh Geez. This is going to be crazy," and it's funny how people are afraid to use it. Like, "I'm so sorry I clicked on the bat phone," but I'm like, "That's what it's there for." I do know that if there is an absolute, "I really need to hear from you because I just screwed this up," or, "The glue drying. My god man, help me," that button is there, and there's a whole separate inbox for that. Literally that sees like three mails a week at this point. Knows when they come in and drop everything and see to it. So the expectation is that I may not get to it right away, but it's incredible.

It'll be like an hour later, and there's four other responses from other members of the community. It's this really cool thing where I have the hand tool school community, but then I have the apprenticeship community. It's a group within the group that are really supportive, and oh by the way, the greatest marketing tool ever. Because it's like new semester members will join and the Welcome video prompts them to go introduce themselves in community. They introduce themselves, and four or five people show up,

"Hey. Welcome aboard. Good to see you're doing this. Try this project. This project, oh and you've got to check out apprenticeship." It's like, "This is awesome. All my people are doing all my marketing for me."

Callie: Yeah. We love it when members market the site for you.

Shannon: Oh yeah. It's great.

Callie: Speaking about the community there then, so you've got the semester members in the community, and you've got a separate kind of sub community for the apprenticeship members, is that apprenticeship community completely private to the apprenticeship, or can the semester members see what's going on in there as well?

Shannon: It is private. It just doesn't even show up. I toyed with the idea of like having the headings visible, so people know it's there, but that ended up being a little bit more technically daunting than I wanted to tackle. I may do that eventually just ... it's kind of the, "Hey. Here's what you're missing type thing," whereas if it's completely out of sight, they don't really know about it. I do that just because ... well internet forums in general are kind of a Wild West. They can be a little scary, people can be rude. My community is a closed community, which automatically generates a lot more proper conduct. The apprenticeship community is even ... I hate to use the word better, but even more supportive in that respect, because these are people who not only have paid to be part of the community, but that have also continued to pay monthly to be part of a very specific learning environment.

Keeping, I hate to use the word outsiders, but call it what it is, outsiders out of that community has helped to foster that atmosphere more than anything else. Because there are a lot of people who join The Hand Tool School who ... well, not just The Hand Tool School, any membership site, who watch the videos and never take action on anything. They don't build anything. It's entertainment and that's cool. The people in apprenticeship are really there to take action. They're really there to further their skills. They have goals in mind. It's one of the first things that they're presented with when they join is, "Tell me what your next project is going to be. What are your bucket list projects? Let's build a road map to help you get to that project, that third project. That fourth project," and a lot of ways it's kind of a repeating thing. They finish that project, and there I am five minutes later, "Great. What's the next project?" You know, and helping them through that.

They're actually producing stuff, and the worst thing is the armchair woodworker. The armchair quarterback. The armchair marketer. The guy that shows up on YouTube and starts every sentence with, "You should," or, "It would be better if," and keeping that sub community private, has

eliminated it entirely, and it's turned it into a family more than anything. I don't know what my total ... a total apprenticeship right now is still really small. It's like 108 people, and like every one of them is a friend. It's very cool. I don't think that would happen, if it were just anybody could pop in and see what's going on there.

Callie: Yeah. I love that. It sounds like you've kind of taken the people from the main membership, the school, that really got that focus and that was very as you said specific goals, and you've made that more exclusive area, so they can flourish essentially.

Shannon: Yes. Absolutely.

Callie: I really love that.

Shannon: That's a good way to put it.

Callie: Would you say that most people who come to The Hand Tool School join for a semester first and then go to the apprenticeship, or have you found that people come straight into the apprenticeship as well?

Shannon: I mean it's still early days with apprenticeship, but based on the last year, the semesters are still the number one product. There's still a lot of people that come in, and the structured curriculum really applies to them. Apprenticeship is very freeform. I'm constantly saying apprenticeship is what you put into it, because again the content is very based upon what's going on. It is a lot of, "I need a lot of input from you," whereas suppressors show up, watch some stuff, here's the instructions on how to build it, and it doesn't really require any skin in the game on the user's part. At the same time, people love lists. They love to be told what to do, especially when you're new to something. You don't want to go, "Well, should I be doing this, or should it be doing this?" Semesters are very much, "Watch this. Then build this. Now go watch this, then build this." That structure is great. That is no question. That's what pulls probably 90% of the people in.

I do offer discounts on semesters for apprentices, and I am getting more people who are looking at it. Because frankly the discount is such that you save so much off the semester. If you bought apprenticeship and the semester, you're still actually spending less money. It's like \$5 less, but it's kind of a no-brainer. Sign up, get a semester and access to this enormous content library, and kind of drill direct access to me. Yeah it recurs every single month, but you know what? There's nothing that says you can't cancel it after a month, and maybe you kind of got that initial over the hump kind of consultation. I have a hard time envisioning a time when apprenticeship will outpace the semesters, and if it does, I might need help.

Callie: As much as we talked about you having a lot of automation in place there, I do know that you're one of the most hands-on people I know, when it comes to actually jumping in and helping your members in certain things.

Shannon: Yeah. Eventually probably what will happen is I'll have graduates, and those graduates can come in and I'll end up bringing them onto my team to help me I think in the long run.

Callie: I love that idea.

Shannon: Yeah. Well, I've always been a promote within type person, and they understand the philosophy in the environment, and what we're trying to do at the school, so that's something I've been toying with, because ultimately from a fiscal perspective, there is a fixed price point on apprenticeship. It's something that I really struggled with, how to price it, because the woodworking world is cheap. I mean the prices that we charge for our online stuff is a shadow what you find in like the business sector, in the marketing sector. A \$500 product, \$1,000 product nobody even bats an eyelash. \$50 a month, no big deal. There is nobody charging \$50 a month in the woodworking space for a membership. \$30 a month, which is what apprenticeship is, is I think the most expensive option on the market that I know of.

A lot of them are \$19.99 there's actually very few that are recurring for that matter. There's one that's \$10 a month, there's just no way. I could not do what I do for apprentices for \$10 a month. \$30 a month is kind of pushing it, so what that means is it does limit just how much time I could spend. If I suddenly had 500 apprentices, it would be difficult to maintain the same kind of close-knit community, so essentially I think what's going to have to happen is apprenticeship will be segmented into levels. Apprenticeship journeyman, master level, you know to stick with the same nomenclature of the apprentice system. That will be like your bronze, silver, and gold level of membership, which still means you know ... from my perspective it still means 500 people, it just I'm giving more to 50 of those people at the gold level, and some more down the line. That's where the graduating and apprentice to journeyman could then maybe mentor apprentices, or a team of journeyman could mentor apprentices or something like that. It's a Ponzi scheme basically. No. It's a pyramid scheme. That's what it is.

Callie: I love that you've already thought this through though, of what you might do as the site grows and you know that kind of, it's not necessarily going to be sustainable, just you. [inaudible 00:35:56].

Shannon: Right. Well, thinking it through and doing it as you know are two different things. You may remember I had a recent epiphany in your own community

on membership academy, which if you don't know, I'm an Academy member. You should all be Academy members too.

Callie: I'll get you \$20 in the post.

Shannon: It was one of those things where I started looking at revenue and recognising that semesters and my courses for lack of a better term, are drawing the lion's share of the revenue. There is no such thing as passive income, but they're pretty passive income. Semester one was created seven years ago, now I do think I'm going to have to do some updates just because HD wasn't even a big deal back then. There're some technical updates that have to happen, but for the most part, I'm making money on semester one, and I haven't produced a bit of content for that.

There's a lot of community stuff going on, but that's all passive, and that's that's really nice, and the more semesters that I can create, the more revenue that I'm going to generate. Every time I put out into semester, I have a huge spike in sales. So it's something that I can't neglect, but there's no question where my heart is. Apprenticeship is just ... it's the best thing I ever did, as far as my own passion, my own involvement and challenge in what I do day in and day out. That's just a lot of fun. I've just discovered I really enjoy teaching, is what it comes down to.

Callie: Yeah. I love that, and is the kind of obviously and I'm always impressed by the fact that you have a full-time job as well while you're doing all this. I have no idea how you find the time to be honest, but is the end game for kind of The Hand Tool School to kind of be your main thing that you're doing?

Shannon: Yeah. Absolutely. It probably would have been a while ago. Seven years ago when the school started, I was working for a digital marketing company, and it was terrible. It was a great learning experiences put that way, I learned a lot but just working day in and day out was just miserable. Wake up with a migraine headache, go to bed with a migraine headache, just not good, and that's what really said I can do something with my following. If the Renaissance would work, or the community that I generated on that website, I can monetize that. I started that and did pretty well actually in my first year because there was already a community that had been established, and two years after the school started, I actually got laid off from that digital marketing job. Last in, first out type thing. It was a small business. We lost one of our biggest clients and like 30% of the company revenue went out the door, and guess who went out the door with it?

As I was walking to my car with the iconic cardboard box in hand, [inaudible 00:38:59] in the box, I got a phone call from a recruiter, for a lumber company, who wanted somebody that understood digital marketing and

wood. I was like, "You've got to be kidding me." In the staffing industry they call that a purple squirrel, or a one-eyed cat. He understands wood, woodworking, and digital marketing. Yeah. That just doesn't exist. This was Thanksgiving, so the holidays were coming, I interviewed the day before Thanksgiving. I was offered the job the Monday after Thanksgiving, and I absolutely jumped all over it. It was an opportunity to run a marketing department, to build a website, and be an army of one marketer. Had it not been for that job, I probably would have tried to make The Hand Tool School full-time at that point. It would have been tough looking back on it and seeing what the revenue was in the first couple of years, although you know, if you can dedicate all your time to it, who knows what that revenue could be.

Because my day job is in the lumber industry, it directly relates to what I do at The Hand Tool School, so much so that my boss has actually offered to buy the renaissancewoodworker.com several times. As his marketing director I told him that's a bad idea. As much as it might personally benefit me financially, that is a bad idea. Two different market segments, not a good idea. But because there's a lot of parallels, I do have a lot of flexibility to play around in my forum while I'm at my day job, to work in other woodworking forums at my day job. I'm constantly swapping code back and forth, from the lumber company website, to my various websites. I have a lot of the same plugins. They're both WordPress instals across all my stuff, so there's a lot of leeway there to kind of play back and forth.

If it were a strict separation of day job and night job, I don't think I could do it. I don't think there's a way that I could possibly be able to manage it. Because it is relatively parallel, and because it is a ... it is a great job. Running the marketing department, and kind of no one understands what I do. I am far and away the most technical person in the building, and I'm really not that technical of a person. You know, "Hey. What are you doing today?" "Well, I've got to tweak this JavaScript here." "Well, you lost me. Move on. Go ahead." I have great freedom to do what I'm doing that ... it's a fantastic job to hang on to. It gives me a little bit of street cred as well. Some of the naysayers and doubters The Hand Tool School, now look at it and go, "Heck. He works in the lumber industry. He knows wood. He knows his stuff."

I kind of always have known wood. I mean that wasn't ... now I just have kind of an insider's perspective, which adds a little bit of credibility to what I'm doing. In the end though, something's got to give. We're very close to a breaking point now, you know I have some very specific financial goals that I need The Hand Tool School to hit and sustain before I will turn one off, and turn the other one on full-time. It's a great situation to be in, don't get me wrong. If it were a bad job I would have dropped it long ago, but it's not. It still provides challenge and stimulation, and it is nice because a lot of ways it

can be a testbed. Because I get to work with some more expensive marketing tools that a corporation would buy, and I get to see could this be scaled, or is there like a non pro version of whatever it is. I used active campaign at the lumberyard long before I used it at The Hand Tool School. I have a slightly lesser ... I have a pro version at the lumberyard, I have whatever the non pro version is at the day job, so there are certain advantages there.

Callie: It sounds pretty much like it's as perfect a combination as you're going to get really.

Shannon: Yeah. I mean it's tough. Anybody who has started their own business, or has that entrepreneurial spirit, cringes at the thought of going into a company and reporting to other people, and dealing with office politics, and that is tough. Because I've seen both sides of that, and I just see how much time is wasted in the typical corporate job. That does drive me a little bit nuts, but you know, it's good for me. It builds character.

Callie: Definitely. Okay. So let's change focus a bit now and talk about what you're actually doing on an ongoing basis to grow The Hand Tool School. We have touched on this a little bit throughout, but in terms of bringing on new members, what's one thing that's working really well for you?

Shannon: Live. Which should be no surprise to anyone who ... unless you're under a rock, live video, live-streaming is so incredibly effective. The credibility ... remember when I talked earlier about the flack that I caught early on about, "Who is this jackass? Who does email?" Get me on camera and throw questions at me, and you'll see that I know what I'm talking about. That sounded really arrogant.

Callie: [inaudible 00:44:20].

Shannon: That came off really bad, but I mean that ... forgive me for going marketing speak. The authenticity of live, really has driven a lot of traffic to the site, and a lot of people converting. I do a live broadcast for the general public every single month, eventually I'll probably go to twice a month, probably very soon, because frankly it's a lot less work. There's no editing on the back end. It's fantastic. I generally will pick a topic, and I will dedicate an hour of a live stream to that particular topic. I'll do a demonstration and I'll open up for questions, and answer questions. I've been pairing that for all intents and purposes with a Content upgrade. I've been repurposing archived content in The Hand Tool School that has previously never been available. There's my marketing speech. It's the Disney Vault tactic. It's coming out of the vault. Get Bambi. It'll go away soon," in your special plush VHS cassette tape box.

I'm pulling content out of the archive and repackaging it as a standalone lesson, and selling it for 10 bucks, 15 bucks, kind of trip wire type prices. But it is directly related to that demonstration that I just did. It's kind of, "If I were to go for another hour, this is what you would see." That has generated a fair amount of revenue. I think in the total picture, I think it's about 6% of the total school revenue. It's not a huge amount, but in order to buy it, they have to create an account. When they create an account, they go into the automation web, and then they get a series of five emails each with a video on it, that talks about the why. Why is The Hand Tool School here? Why should you care? Why you should be a member, and how you're going to be a better woodworker when you become a member.

Those emails in video format, that makes a huge impact. I'm told time and time again that that sequence really convinced me, but this is something I need to try. But I also get time and time again, people going you know, "Wow. I just watched your live session. You really know your stuff. I'm going to look at The Hand Tool School now." It drives so much traffic that way. So much more than any sales video, any sales email could ever do, and if nothing else, it dumps people into those lead sequences, because they bought that tripwire, or they just were intrigued by something I said, visited the Renaissance Woodworker site, which is really my marketing site. The Hand Tool School has its own marketing as well, but both of them tie into the same email list. So somebody may visit a live session and get something out of it and go, "I want to learn some more from this guy. Let me join his email list." Depending on where they join, there's a different sequence of things that that caters and then nurtures them through the system. It's incredibly effective.

Callie: Awesome. I am a little scared to ever look inside your active campaign account now. You get migraines. I think my headache is fine.

Shannon: Yeah. Thank goodness they came out with those goals thing, because I had way too many if-else things going on, it was ... when you have to zoom out like six times with no automation, that's a cry for help right there.

Callie: Yeah, I know that feeling. When somebody joins your site, how are you keeping them engaged? I've got a feeling you're going to say through the community here.

Shannon: Yeah. It's a huge aspect, and it's something that ... in theory you know you, we've all been told community ... what's the term? Show up for the course, stay for the community?

Callie: Come for the content, stay for the community.

Shannon: Right. Yeah. We all know that to be true, but when it happens, you're like almost shocked by it. Like, "Holy crap. Like people are sticking around because of the conversations going on in the community. Again, because my semesters are a structured curriculum, I keep them engaged through the automations that are responding to the videos that they have watched. Every video that they watch drops a tag into their profile. You really want to get technical. It drops a tag into their profile ... Certain videos are different, but it drops a tag into their profile after they've watched a video for a certain amount of time, or a certain percentage. So it's not tagging them, they just clicked and went away. Actually it does, but that's a different tag. I haven't done anything with those tags yet, but I have negative tags at the same time saying they didn't watch that video. I'll figure something out what to do with that later, but the sequences that are generated, I have automations for every product.

There's a semester one curation sequence, that waits for a tag to be applied when they've watched the first video. It sends them an email saying you know, "In summary, this is what we talked about. Any questions on that," with a link to the specific forum thread for that lesson. You know, "Come over here. There's some other conversations going on about that." Then kind of some pre-work for the applied project. That's keeping them very engaged, because every time they're watching something, they're getting a communication from me prompting them with you know, "Answer this question. Answer this question. Go and do this, or go and download the parts list for the project you're about to build. Your next step is going to be this project, so go do these things to help you get started on that."

The metrics on that track very, very well. The open rates are through the roof on that stuff, because it is truly one-to-one communication at that point. Every single bit of content, every video on my site, has a button at the bottom. There are no comments on the WordPress site itself. Every video has a button at the bottom that says, "Let's continue this conversation in the community." Actually it says something different for every page. It's usually related. If they just watched a lesson on chisel techniques, you know, "Let's talk some more about chisel techniques in the community." So it's all very, very related and focused, instead of it just being a generic, "Go to the community button."

There's a call to action if you will at the bottom, which drives people from that lesson, to a discussion in the community, and the rest of it just takes it from there. Because people are talking up a storm about those chisel techniques, and that raises other questions. More importantly it raises questions, which I can then turn around and say, "You know what? There's a lesson on that if you go over here and click on that," which drives them back

into the lesson, which it's all a wicked ... web is a good term for it, now that I think about it. It trap them and sucks them in.

Callie: I love that. Okay, so going back to the beginning of The Hand Tool School, if you could reset and start again, what's the one thing you would do differently? I know you kind of did reset a year ago, so maybe you've already done it.

Shannon: What I did a year ago. You know that's a good question. I still very much stand by the curriculum structure of things, and I still very much like that I have both a recurring option and a transactional option if you will. Because that from a content creation side of things, it's also ... it's different for me. It's a different kind of Tambor to each thing I create, so that definitely keeps me interested. What I would do besides getting the apprentice of things started earlier, would be probably to focus a lot more on ... something that I've been doing lately is tapping into my community in real life situation. Fostering meetups to build that community first and foremost, but not just ... I mean certainly there's nothing wrong with just the, "Hey. Let's get together at a bar and share a drink," but focus meetups.

I just recently hosted, for lack of a better term, a tour of a local museum. The Winterthur Museum. They've got 115 rooms and over 90,000 pieces of furniture. It's owned by the DuPont family. It's just this mecca of 18th century furniture up in Delaware. I called them and I booked a custom furniture makers tour, and I got 15 members to show up, and it was ... it cost money. They had to pay admission. It was only \$37 for three hours of focused guided tour, but you know if you did a meet up at a bar, you got to buy your drinks and your appetisers, it's the same type of thing. It was phenomenal. It was an opportunity to meet face to face 15 people and their spouses in many instances, because they brought him along, because it's a beautiful, beautiful place. We got to talk furniture and woodworking. We had lunch together. It was just an incredible experience.

When I went to Membership Intensive with you and Mike in San Diego, I did a meet up after we adjourned, and we went to a local sandwich place, and then we went back to a member's shop, and we had like an impromptu guild meeting if you will. It was just incredible, and the relationships that I've built from those to meetups have been so strong since then, and gave me so much insight into what changes I need to make technically content wise, to the sites. Things that if you're ever in a face-to-face discussion with somebody and they're like you know, "I've been meaning to write you about this. I've been meaning to email you about this," and those little things that you forget, but when you're face to face with somebody, you get honest feedback. Very candid feedback. Man, the stuff that I learned from those two meetups, and I've done a third one since then, has just been invaluable.

The whole what I talked about earlier about the printer shove, journeyman, and masters level, I got affirmation on that idea, 100% universal affirmation that it was a good idea.

What used to be this kind of thing in my head that, "Maybe it would fly. Maybe it wouldn't," not only did I get affirmation on the idea, but I got some direction on price points as well, from the horse's mouth. So whether it's a meet-up or conference or something, the in real life thing, it cannot be overstated how effective it can be. You want to talk about live-streaming breeding authenticity? How about live face-to-face? That's even more effective.

Callie: Yeah. I'm a big fan of the Meetup kind of approach, and I love that you've taken it that one step further there, and you've actually ... you've taken them to somewhere that's relevant to the membership site and things like that. I really like that you've gone out and kind of did the extra.

Shannon: I mean hopefully it won't be awkward, but you never know. Like if you do a meet-up at a bar it's kind of like you know, or is anybody going to show up? What are we going to talk about? Plus it's loud, and you end up having a conversation with one person, while this other guys over here you know doing it somewhat contextually related. I mean we've all been taught that in marketing, right? Send them something that's relevant. It also just makes it a lot more fun, a lot more exchange of ideas. Yeah. I didn't do any of that early on, and I attribute certainly these member meetups or something, but also getting out and going to conferences for the general public. I've attended a couple of woodworking guilds, I've actually been paid to speak at some guilds lately. That's been fantastic.

I was the typical internet businessman early on, just kind of in my shop, and in front of my computer, and banging away on Twitter and Facebook, and some other apps that no longer exist. That's great and you can build that community, but it's not really the same. I think the fastest way to get your raving fans is face-to-face.

Callie: Yeah. Sometimes you've got to take the online offline, in order to kind of superpower things I think.

Shannon: Yeah. Absolutely.

Callie: Yeah. We've touched on this a little bit before, but what's next for you and The Hand Tool School? What's the future got in store?

Shannon: I am ... doing George Lucas again. I'm working on a prequel. I talked earlier about how I might want to revisit semester one, from a technical

perspective but also my techniques have changed a little over the last seven years, and I've learned a lot both about teaching but also about how a beginner to woodworking thinks. What they approach, what their questions are, and anytime you've done something a long time, you tend to forget the real basic stuff. The stuff you just take for granted, and I learned there was a lot of ... not a lot, but there are holes in semester one that don't address some of those real fundamentals. I am in the process of filming a prequel semester 0.5 I hope to release that in August, and I'm really excited about that. Because it's a niche of my industry that the total absolute beginner, "I don't have anything. I don't have a chisel. I know what wood is, but that's about it." It's exciting.

For the longest time people talk about woodworking is dying, you know, the majority of the demographic and woodworking are gray-haired men, puttering around in their shops. They're all retired. My demographic is squarely in the 30s. These people are young, and there are more and more young people, 20-somethings and teenagers coming into the craft, because the Internet has opened up this world. I think going back to that whole DNA comment, the caveman must build stuff. I think that has become even more apparent that we need that, and the maker thing, the maker movement has become really, really big. There's all these people coming into the craft that are so much less informed than my original customer base, my original target audience, that came out of the woodworking blogosphere if you will. Nobody even pays attention to those blogs anymore. They all come from YouTube. It has democratized getting that information to the point where they have no idea where to begin.

This semester truly starts from nothing, to the point where I went to my in-laws place in Maine to film it, and will be going back in August to finish filming it, because they have a garage with nothing in it. One of the problems with my videos is I've got all these tools. I've got this great workbench, I'm sitting at it right now, surrounding me, and people look at it and they get intimidated, and go, "Yeah. If I had all those tools, I could build that." Or, "Man, I've got to have all those tools to do that," and then they go on the internet and they find out how expensive tools are and they go, "I'll save woodworking for retirement." That's exactly what we don't want to happen. It's actually kind of fun, because the intro to that semester is filmed here in my shop, and it talks about what I just said, and it poses the question, what would I do if I didn't have any of that?

Bam! Cut to Maine to an empty garage. What if all my tools were gone? It's just this cool little fun film thing, and I proceeded to build several tools that I think a new woodworker should have, using three tools that you picked up at the regular old hardware store, for I think less than \$25. They get to see how it's done in a complete blank space. I think that will really attract a

whole new demographic that ... maybe I doubt that. Maybe they have heard of me, maybe they haven't, but they've been thinking, "Well, I'm not ready for that yet."

Callie: Yeah.

Shannon: When it comes to broadening my niche, my niche within a niche that's the way to do it. It's to tap into the people who feel like they're not ready yet, or don't have the skills to do that yet.

Callie: That's for the Callie's that kind of sat there listening to this and thinking, "Well, that sounds kind of cool, but I don't even know what a chisel is so."

Shannon: Exactly. You know? And these are the things that I forget about. I'm really excited about it. I think that that's going to bring a lot of new people in, just based on how many current members I have who are excited about it. It's a little alarming. It's like, "You guys know all this stuff already," but I guess it's encouraging. They like me enough to buy stuff, even if they don't need it. I think maybe it may be a Star Trek thing, where I just created an alternate universe, and that was going forward with two Spock's or something like that. Did I just get too nerdy there? I did, didn't I?

Callie: Yeah. It's fine.

Shannon: Semester 0.5 may spawn a new line of products that are in that universe if you will. That go on a different tangent, that maybe the current semester 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 don't necessarily address. I don't know. We're going to see where it goes. We're going to see what the response is, and what those people want to learn next I think, more than anything.

Callie: Interesting times. I look forward to seeing where that goes for you.

Shannon: Yeah. It's exciting.

Callie: I feel like we could carry on talking for ages, because you've got so much good information, but I'll let you get on with your day, but we'll have to have you back to talk some more, because I know that you've got a lot of good stuff there as well.

Shannon: I'd love to. It'd be fun.

Callie: Yeah. Thank you so much for joining me and talking with me. As I said, lots of great stuff there, and I love hearing about that journey and what you've got planned in the future especially as well, because I think you know it's so easy to kind of not ... to have something good that you've got and that'd be

enough, whereas you're constantly innovating and making changes, which is one of the things I love about watching kind of the progress of The Hand Tool School. You're constantly kind of innovating that.

Shannon: Well, credit where credit's due, that's you guys. That's you and Mike.

Callie: Thank you.

Shannon: Here's the public service announcement people, so tune out if you want, but The Hand Tool School, stagnant was a good word for it. No. I mean that sounds awful. I was creating content, I was putting stuff out, but there wasn't really anything innovative going on. It wasn't until I stumbled on this podcast called Membership Guys and I thought, "Who is this weirdo? What's up with that accent? Let's check it out further." Then suddenly there was this membership site on membership sites, and the innovations, and the ideas and a lot of the stuff that you guys put forth is what more than anything forced me to start questioning what I was doing. As much as I am passionate about woodworking, it reignited passion in problem-solving, and figuring out how can I innovate, how can I take this to the next level, because while The Hand Tool School was very innovative in 2010, it quickly became commonplace. I think we're back to an innovative stage, where the apprenticeship is totally innovative. Nobody's doing it. That's what's exciting. So if nothing else, that's the community that you and Mike have fostered, that has continued to challenge me and push me forward, so thank you.

Callie: Well, thank you. That's lovely to hear. Okay, so I'm blushing now. Okay. So before we go, if anybody's listening to this, I'm thinking I really want to learn more about Shannon, and about The Hand Tool School. Where can people connect with you?

Shannon: Well, certainly handtoolschool.net is where the school happens, renaissancewoodworker.com again I still maintain a YouTube channel over there, I put out a video a week over there. I'm not blogging as much as I used to. but there is ... what year is it now? There's almost 10 years of blog content over there. RenaissanceWW on Twitter, I've got Facebook pages for the Renaissance Woodworker and The Hand Tool School. You can find me on Instagram. Actually I'm on Instagram more than anything now, just because we're working is so visual, also a RenaissanceWW.

Callie: Cool. I'll make sure to put those links below the video for everybody as well. That's all awesome. Thank you so much again for your time Shannon. It's been great having you on the show, and I look forward to having you back to talk even more in the future.

Shannon: It was such a pleasure, and welcome to podcasting. I'm excited you have your own show now.

Callie: Yeah. I'm not sure it was a good idea, but we'll see how it goes.

Shannon: Who cares what anybody says, as long as you're having fun, right?

Callie: Yeah. Exactly. Okay. Thank you so much Shannon.

Shannon: Thank you.

[Music]

Thanks once again to Shannon Rogers for joining me on today's show. You can see more about Shannon's semesters and apprenticeship programme over at handtoolschool.net. You can also find that link, and any others mentioned in this episode over at the show notes at the membershipguys.com/btm8. If you'd like to discuss anything that Shannon mentioned in this episode, then do head on over to our free Facebook group @talkmemberships.com I'd love to know your thoughts on this episode, and your biggest takeaway from Shannon's journey so far. That's it from me. Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Behind the Membership, and I will see you next time.

Speaker 2: If you've 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. So whether you're still figuring out what your idea is 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. Check it out at membersiteacademy.com.