Mitch Joel

When Google wants someone to explain the latest developments in marketing to the top brands in the world, they bring Mitch Joel to the Googleplex in Mountain View, California. Marketing Magazine dubbed him the "Rock Star of Digital Marketing" and called him, "one of North America’s leading digital visionaries." Mitch Joel is President of Mirum – a global digital marketing agency operating in close to 20 countries with over 2000 employees (although he prefers the title, Media Hacker). He has been named one of the top 100 online marketers in the world, and was awarded the highly prestigious Canada’s Top 40 Under 40.


Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined. Rethink what’s possible. Push the boundaries. Break new ground.

My goal everyday is to make people feel, or think.

When I saw the internet, I knew that that was going to change publishing forever. I just felt it.

By falling down a lot and having to keep getting up.

The work that we do, feeling good, but the marketing of the work can actually feel good to us, and also to the people receiving it.
Mitch Joel is one of the leading voices in digital media. He is the host of the Six Pixels of Separation podcast, author of 2 bestselling books and co-founder of Twist Image, the leading Canadian marketing agency that was acquired last year by the largest agency conglomerate in the world to form a global agency called Mirum where Mitch serves as president. On today's show, Mitch and I explore some of the most important existential questions that modern, online entrepreneurs have to struggle with and come to some inspiring and insightful conclusions. First, we dive into where this all began, in his childhood but not the way you might imagine.

As a kid, I was always really interested in media. I remember being very young, and I'd look at magazine articles or things on the news and not wonder about how to become famous like the people being interviewed but rather who is that person and how do they get conversations with those interesting people?

Starting with that early fascination with the media's special access to brilliance, Mitch followed what would seem to be a very indirect path to where he is today passing through a number of different career directions along the way. Mitch uses the term squiggle to describe it.

If you look back, you go, oh my God, it's crazy. He was a music writer, he published magazines, he put this thing on the Internet, he worked for a local newspaper, he then went to a meta search engine, he then went into mobile, he then went into PR, he then started a label, then ... It's crazy but again, if you can look back on it, why I call it squiggle is because there's still threads that go through it. There's still the thread of media, the thread of marketing, the thread of content.

Along with those threads, was also the pattern of being repeatedly ahead of his time and seeing what others just couldn't see yet. For example, embracing Napster and other streaming services while working in the music industry. It was professional heresy at the time,
but he simply knew that something like that should exist. This has been Mitch's pattern for the last 25 years, seeing the industry reimagine itself before others catch on to where it's all going. I prodded him for insights about how the digital landscape it changing for online indie publishers like the bloggers and podcaster that we serve at Firepole Marketing. So many people believe that the era of opportunity has passed, but I really wanted Mitch's take on whether it was too late and too saturated for someone new to be starting out online.

MITCH  This is something I was writing about before it became a real thing. It was the idea that we have a publish button. Traditionally the publish button, printer, it doesn't matter what, TV show, audio, it doesn't matter, I call it the button, was a coveted, respected thing. You had people who had spent their careers thinking about every single time you hit that button, is it adding value to whoever is going to consume it? We quickly shifted to a place where it became ubiquitous. It's everywhere, whether it's a simple tweet or a Facebook update or a long blog post or a podcast like this. When you are creating content like that, and anybody is and can, I feel personally like the respect of that button, of the person's time consuming it went away, not in an evil way.

It just went away and because you have access to what I would call free impressions, a tweet is a free impression, as long as you can build an audience, why not just pound them out there? You could quickly just say this is a quality versus quantity conversation, and I think that that's a fair conversation to have. I just believe that the vast majority of brands fall into the world of, content is just another form of advertising so let's put out a lot of it, as much as we can because it's free to do. However, I also believe that there are brands who are smart enough to know that the cream rises to the top and that over the years, which I would say has probably been the past 10 years primarily, some have gotten exceptionally good at creating content that is at par or better than those who really had a foundational respect for the publish button, and they're reaping tremendous rewards.
In the cataclysm of all of that, there's just a ton of stuff, and it is really hard for a consumer, and when I say consumer, I mean somebody just flicking through their Facebook news feed to siphon it all, to filter it all, to get through it all. Again, this is nothing new. It's not something that I came up with it. The books like "The Filter Bubble" that came out forever ago. It's tough. We live in a place where there's a ton of content being created. A lot of it is pure junk, but there's also a ton of content being created that's really, really good. When you mash those 2 together, and you can't make heads or tail of it, 1, it's hard for the consumer to figure out what's great and what's not great, 2, it's hard to really know what's real and what's not, what's been embellished and what hasn't. It's a complex world.

The competitive landscape and the ability for a brand to do exceptionally well has significantly lowered, which means you're seeing a higher level of quality output. It's harder to get to the top. It's harder for the cream to rise to the top. There's a lot of cream at the top, but there's still a lot of great content even though a lot of people think that's not true.

DANNY We've seen the life cycle of the market in fast forward because of the pace of the Internet. A new market space opens up, and the first people to rush in have tremendous results because their share voice is enormous, and they don't even have to have even incredibly high quality. They publish stuff, and it can be rough, and it can be raw as long as it's interesting and hits a nerve, they're going to do great. Other players see that opportunity, and they rush in as well. The quantity increases, so you've got to work harder to stand out and at some point, even the great quality stuff is very abundant. Like you said, the cream rises to the top but then there's a lot of cream. In a world with a lot of cream, what does that mean for indie publishers?

MITCH It's a hard question to answer because part of the thing with this is that a broken clock is right twice a day. You can have people publishing a ton of crap but twice in that stuff might take off to the races for who knows obscure- You get so dumb sometimes, you do something radical, this is never going to work, and it totally works. There's that level of complexity. In terms of indie publishers, I think
what it means is still the same thing as it's always meant. Indie is still indie. Take my music pedigree, which is for a decade plus of being in the music industry. For every independent band that got signed to a major label and became a breakthrough star, there were still 1,000s upon 1,000s of indie bands who were really happy having stickers and hats and merch and going on the road and building web teams and still having that independence.

You said, earlier, you know, Mitch, you wanted to do this big company, and Jon Jans and people like that supported- You're right, there are those ... It's the same thing with indie. You have the same ability as an indie publisher than you have ever before. I would argue that being indie has never been easier/better because the publish button isn't relegated only to people who can afford it. It's for anybody. An example of indie that I love is I love Etsy. I think that's a great business model, but Etsy ... It could be eBay, it doesn't matter. You're an independent painter living in some rural city in some major state in the US.

You hope one day to take this collection of paintings and go to the local coffee shop and have them hung on display, and you hope that based off of some sort of business agreement that you’ve made with the owner that they hold the paintings and if they sell them, they get a commission or whatever it might be. It's a slog. Your ability to take a picture of that now, post it on Instagram, put it on Etsy and sell it to a global marketplace, to frame it and tag it and put it in the right genre, people who might be looking ... It's a crazy world we live in so to be an indie in this world is unbelievable if that's what you're trying to do. Again, going back to the what do you want? Do you want to be a small business? Do you want to have global domination?

DANNY  Where do you draw the line? It's easy to be indie and harder to get bigger. Let's look at Jon Jans, great example, running a small team but massive influence. Is Jon indie? Where do you draw that line?

MITCH  Where you draw that line, you just have to have a business you want. It ties back to a bigger thought, Danny. The bigger thought is you are able now to build a business around the lifestyle. While you could've
done this a long time ago, it was a lot harder and the barriers to enter were a lot higher. When you say, where does it end, where does it begin? It's actually choice and that's the big thing. That's the big thing that people don't get. They can take your stuff, I've known you for a couple of years, now we spend a lot of time together. They can take your courses, and they can chart their own lives. Now maybe there would've been someone who had self-published or done publishing in their local community that they met at a library event and blah, blah, blah.

The ability to access information courses, great types of work to get you on this type of trajectory where you're build your work against your lifestyle is very, very new. The challenge with it is like anything else, it's scary. People believe, well, I have to go to this company because they're giving me the salary, and I call it the allowance model, and I talk a lot about it in my work too, it's the allowance model. Mom, dad, I need some money. If I do my chores, you give me the money. I broke out of that, literally. When I was doing the stint, when I got laid off, and I was doing the stint in the PR firm, I realized I am tired of asking a parent for money, and the parent was just a euphemism for a boss. I was tired of it.

I realized as a growing person that only I should be responsible for my financial outcome as much as possible. It's not as obvious as it sounds. It's about control. It's about lifestyles. It's about desire. There's no right or wrong, what's the line between indie and not, it's what you want to do. You might start off taking a couple of your courses and building a really good business and realize, I'm making 1,000s upon 1,000s of dollars every month, and it's really working out for me. Then you might say, how do I scale this? I could actually get an office, take on these types of clients. You can do that now, and it's a choice. I don't know that it's as programmatic as, this is for that person, this is for that person.

You know probably many people who take your course and are really just content making more money than they did at their regular job, and they have more time at home, or they're working from home, or they're able to just do things that are very, very simple in their lives.
that are actually huge to them. I like to be home for dinner as much as possible. These are little things, but they have a monetary value now that transcends what we used to consider workforce, and it does that because the ability to generate income now has really changed.

DANNY The reason I wanted to talk about this is that a lot of the people who are listening to this, they are in a position where they want to start something, they want to build a business, they're looking at the trends and a question, a fear that a lot of people have, is it too late for me to start blogging? Is it too late for me to start a podcast or whatever the channel might be, a YouTube channel, whatever it might be. Is it too late? Is there too much cream for me to even get noticed? My strong conviction is that, no, it's not. On the other hand, just looking at this podcast that we're relaunching, this is a much more heavily produced podcast. We've got a person whose full-time job is to do this. There's a lot of editing. There's a lot of work that goes into it. I'm wondering, is that ...

Certainly, I know this is because it's the kind of podcast I want to do right now. It's the kind of contribution I want to make. I don't know if it's necessary. I guess that's what I want to dig in and hear from you. Is it too late to ... Can the next Seth Godin start a blog and just start talking about something whether it's in the marketing space or in whatever, green juicing or craft or whatever? Is it too late? Is it too saturated? What do you think of that?

MITCH I used to think that if I had to start my blog, Six Pixels of Separation now, I don't know if it could be what it is or has become since I launched it in 2003. I layer that against a really recent thing that happened to me. I was in San Diego for Social Media Marketing World, and I became very close with someone whose name is Mark W. Schaefer, and Mark has a blog called, "Grow." It's not fancy, it's not over the top. It's straightforward. It's not like it's this beautifully designed, it looks great, it's fine. I first met Mark because he violently disagreed with a lot of the stuff I was saying on my podcast and because I am the way I am, I said, "Why don't you come on the podcast so that we can debate this stuff?" He came on, and we started
And if you’re loving the podcast and you’ve got a moment to spare, we’d “really” appreciate a short review and 5-star rating on iTunes (if you think we deserve it).

doing stuff.

Obviously, he kept up his blogging and social media stuff and connecting to people on Twitter, responding in his comments and being very active in his own community. I got to Social Media Marketing World several years later, so it hasn't been that long, and he's on the main stage. Everyone knows who he is, everyone is running over and asking him for autographs and pictures with him. It really took me aback in a very ... 1, I was super proud to know that I caught on to that talent early on and saw that he was this really, really smart guy. Yeah, no, I looked at him and when he started and I would think, if anybody would’ve said, hey, I’m going to start this blog like that, I’d be like, you're crazy, it ain’t gonna work.

Again, clearly cream, rises to the top. He works the system really, really well. He's very, very passionate about it. He's very sincere about it, it's very true. He is super, super smart, and he was able to do something like a blog in a world where I would've thought, I wouldn't do a blog, maybe Instagram or Twitter or YouTube, I don't know. No, I think that clearly he proves that you can, and I think that there are others who come out and prove you can. I’ll tell you something else, Danny, I know people who are massively great and huge and build substantive audiences and just let it go for whatever reason, work, they got tired of it, fatigue, I don't know what. I watch these people now who are still super smart struggle to maintain their audience. It's a duality. There's a story of consistency and perseverance, which is a huge component of this channel to can you start it now and do it?

I think the answer is clearly if someone like a Mark Schaefer can, and there are others, yeah, I think anything really is possible if you have not just something to say but something that people want to connect to. The thing about this is people want silver bullets, and they want to hear how easy it is. We were acquired WPP, which is the largest advertising network in the world. It'll be a year in May. People say, I want to do that on my own. I want to try and do that, and I want people to do that. My comment that I tell to everybody is I hope that everybody has moments like that in their lives. If you work hard, you
deserve it. What I don't think they see is the 15 years of running just that 1 business, forgetting the years before that. It's still time-consuming. It's still hard. It's still a lot of effort.

Even watching Mark produce content and connecting to him on the back channels and having those conversations, he's just in it, and he's at a different stage of his life. He has 2 grown kids. They're empty nesters already. He lives in Knoxville, Tennessee, so he's not in the middle of the pressure of New York City or silicon valley. He's built, again, he very consciously figured out how to strategically build a new career off of the lifestyle, and it worked so amazingly well for him. For every Mark, there's a bunch of people who can't pull it together. Again, we also look at examples and go yeah, you can totally do this, but there's a lot of people who have failed at it. I'm not saying that Mark is better or anything else.

My theory is when I talk to people about all this stuff, I always say the same thing. I don't believe there are that many rules. I believe there's a lot of exceptions, a lot more exceptions than there are rules. It's hard for people to hear that because they want to know that it's a point A to Z. Again, go back to squiggly, there's a lot of exceptions and not a lot of rules.

DANNY It's skyhooks and cranes. I don't know where I read this. It was a philosophy book forever ago. I was probably a teenager but this idea that a sky hook is an imaginary thing. You can't put a sky in the sky and use it to carry yourself up really high but if you want to get to a really high place, a crane can do it. If you go to a job site, the way that the really big cranes get there is that smaller cranes build them. You can have a smaller crane and build a bigger crane and build a bigger crane, so you can get to that crazy, in your case, acquisition by the biggest ad agency in the world after 15 years if you go through the steps along the way. Like you said, a lot of people try and a lot of people fail, but I think it's not just that they fail. I don't know every in and out of your story, but I'd be shocked to hear that you've never failed anything along those 15 years.
MITCH It's all failure.

DANNY Likewise. There have been tons of failures. An idea that I've become very enamored with lately, it's that failure is only failure if it happens in the last chapter, otherwise it's a plot twist. People close the book. They close the book way too soon. Is it fair to say to summarize where we've been going with this, the landscape has changed. It's not a brave new world or a wide open market space where anybody can jump in and just be an overnight success by virtue of having a massive share of voice. If they keep at it, and they do the little crane and then the medium sized crane, then the bigger crane and when one of those cranes break, they don't close the book, they just keep on going. It's still eminently doable.

MITCH It is. It's such a fragile thing though, Danny, because ... I love Seth Godin, and I think he's just completely perfect as a package and roll model for people who are even interested in the greater world of what you offer and understanding how to be that thinker that can monetize and build audiences. I just think he's spectacular, and he wrote a very well-known book called, "The Dip," when to stop and when to keep going. Again, I don't think it was the first time anyone ever wrote about this, but he writes about it in a concise and clear way with fun examples. I read the book, and it's one of the most profound books because there are moments in it where you're like, yeah, it's so true and then moments where you're like, I might have listened to that book, and I might not be here if I did that.

DANNY The thing is, how do you know which is which?

MITCH That's the thing.

DANNY You don't know if it's a dip or if it's just going to suck forever

MITCH Yeah. When you say it's only a failure if it's at the end, the answer is, well, when is the end? This is the thing that I struggle with. I love Howard Stern. I love Howard Stern's celebrity interviews. He had on Billy Idol. At the end of this long hour plus conversation, Howard...
was like, this is just the craziest story. You're some punk in London getting spit on in these concerts, punk was all about spitting on the performers back then, all the stuff he went through to be there. It's just madness that you're here and that it worked, and you're successful, and you're an icon. Billy Idol, maybe to a small way of thinking, just chalks it up to self-belief. It just was one of those things. How often do you hear something in an interview, you read content all day, that just really sticks with you.

It just stuck with me that self-belief is such a strange thing. I just knew that what we were doing was the right thing and the right for the industry. You push at it, and you blog about it, and you talk about it. You bang this drum for this company, you try to push it forward as we did here. Self-belief is self-belief. You could be a lunatic and completely off your rocker and just have no attachment to reality and it could've been me, it could've been Billy Idol. It is. It's a very fine, fragile line, and it's very ... I think the hardest part about doing all this stuff is not only having the self-belief but being able to be a third party. It's being able to step out of your situation and look at it objectively as potentially a consultant and say, if you were consulting this situation, what would you say to it?

Even then, how often, if you listen to the consultants, how many businesses would be around? All the businesses that we admire, and we appreciate and laud up as these amazing businesses now, are all based off of people who kept going when everybody said ... Amazon makes no sense. Jeff Bezos was in the middle of doing e-commerce when the entire industry collapsed, and a million players died, and he kept going selling books. It makes no logical ... You look back now and go, what a business. When is that self-belief exactly on point and when is it the death of you? He could've been destitute. There are a million guys like him who are, I wouldn't say destitute, but probably close to it. It's really hard to say.

It's really hard to say, if you're Steve Jobs, to say, I can make a better mp3 player. The market was completely saturated. Don't think for a second it wasn't. When the iPhone came out, there were Smart phones. It's crazy to watch and say what company would be able to
do that? These are the unique ones, they are. It is such a fragile thing, and I wish ... Why I hate doing these interviews and why I was really struggling at the beginning when you said, talk about yourself in this positive way and blah, blah, blah. It's that. I don't think I have anything different than anyone else. I don't kid myself into thinking, well, it's all me, and I'm so smart, and it was so strategic and so well-planned. There's a lot of luck and a lot of timing and a lot of help and a lot of little, nuanced things that happened that are probably in the subconscious of things people did that aligned it.

Like you said, there's tons of mistakes. It's a bloody battlefield and to this day, it's a battle. It's a battle as much today as it was day 1 when there was nothing. Listen, do I think that that's part and parcel of what makes people go? I do. Do I think that I'm unique? I do a little bit. I do see a lot of peers, friends, family members where I wish I could almost give them the red pill, blue pill, help them out of the Matrix. I think you're working too hard, but they say, "Mitch, you're a workaholic." It's different. It's very different when you're working to try and get to the end of the day or to the weekend or to the family vacation versus working because you're doing the things that you are so passionate about, and I hate that word.

Just that you really are doing the things that you are meant to do, I call it the work you were meant to do versus passion, and you are reaping rewards from it, some financial, but it's not all financial, it's not. Again, it's a crappy thing to say because people go, it's always financial. You'd be surprised. I know for myself at least, I was willing to sacrifice the financial part of it to be doing the things I wanted to do.

DANNY  Here's the x factor. You've got the failure that just happened, we said failure is only failure if it's in the last chapter, so failure just happened. Do you keep going or do you not? The self-belief is really about the last chapter. It's about what the last chapter is going to be but the thing is you don't know how long the book is. You don't know what's going to happen along the way. It's about the discovery and being willing to gear up to read or write or experience another chapter when you don't know how it's going to go, you don't know if
it's going to go up or down, and you don't know how many chapters are left before that end result. It's the combination of the belief we talked about in what the last chapter is going to be and the perseverance, the dedication, the grit to gear up and try again even though you don't know if the next chapter is going to be any better.

I think you are, I won't say unique because you're not the only person that's done this, but certainly exceptional in the willingness to gear up again. I think that's what makes a lot of entrepreneurs special.

MITCH  Yeah, for me, the way I would define it is a little different. People say to me, "What was your exit strategy?" My joke is that starting the business was the exit strategy, not having to be an employee, all that stuff and ironically, here I am, an employee again, a different type but still an employee again. It was that. That was the exit strategy. What I feel worked for me is that instead of looking and saying, the beginning is a lot of fun and it'd be great to either sell it or have an exit or whatever it might be and then do something else, which is I think a very common way to thinking, my attitude was always, you have to enjoy the process. The process for me really is ultimately the work. It's waking up everY day and looking at the blank screen and thinking, what are you going to do? It's looking at the challenge of existing clients and thinking, what can you do to help them be better? It's how do I get newer clients?

Instead of focusing too much on the field goal at the end and the end of the game, I just try to enjoy each play and each moment and try and ... It's a cheesy line, but I really do want to suck the juice out of life, and I spend a lot of time thinking about, am I better off doing what I'm doing right now or should I be doing this other thing whether it's going to see my kids or this other project, and I do. I often will base it off of what I feel I should be doing, and it's dangerous because sometimes that can work out and sometimes it can be a flub. I'm lucky that it has worked out, and I think for me at least that it's the process of it, so I would call it the middle that I do well. I do very well, I think in the middle, which is just taking the time to do the work and to just try and do the best work and to keep at it and keep at it. It's the infamous line, Winston Churchill, if you're
in hell, just keep going, or whatever the line.

Again, part of that bothers me a lot because I would love to get to the point where our world wasn't so driven by that success. I think that there's a lot of people doing interesting things whether it's teachers or even musicians that it's like, we look at it and go, it's hard to make a good living doing that, but it's important work. It's important work for our society and for our culture. I think as you come out of the tunnel of working as many years as I've worked too, you want to get to the place where the world is a better place. This is why people, in my world at least, they wind up doing the advertising agency thing and then becoming customer advocates or they wind up going off and doing nonprofits because you then want to start doing the work that quote, unquote "matters." I think that that's a really valiant thing, and I think that's important thing too. It's a different type of world we live in.

People like you and I doing the work that we do, it's so new and unique that we take it for granted, but it is, it's new and unique. It's not easy, it's not obvious, it's not simple, it's not do this, get that. People will try this and fail miserably. Again, it's just not as easy as it looks. Interviews like this make it seem like, wow, success but like you said, every day I wake up just as anxious as I was when I didn't have anything because you want to do good things. I do believe that the people who quote, unquote "win" are the ones who get back in and keep doing it and are willing to take the criticism and not being right all the time. That's what it is.

DANNY     Awesome. Thanks for coming on the show.

MITCH     Awesome, great talking to you.

DANNY     That was Mitch Joel, sharing piercing insights about what reimagining yourself into an entrepreneur in today's world is really like. One of the things that I personally appreciate the most about Mitch is his appreciation of nuance, which just won't let him take a subject and oversimplify it to make it sound easier or more
straightforward than it really is. Today we explored some of the big questions that entrepreneurs ask themselves and hazarded some thoughts about what the answers are. Of course, ultimately being an entrepreneur in an industry that reimagines itself on a daily basis, means that you have to use your best judgment to reach your own conclusions.

If you want Mitch to keep on prodding you to think bigger and more deeply about the world of digital media, check out his books, "Six Pixels of Separation" and "Ctrl Alt Delete" and his excellent Six Pixels of Separation podcast, which is the only podcast that I listen to religiously.

Voiceover  This has been Business Reimagined with Danny Iny. Join us next time as we talk to Tad Hargrave.

TAD HARGRAVE  At a certain point in the conversation, he just stopped, and there's this frustration in his voice. He's like, "Can you stop wheeling and dealing me?" It just hit me so hard because here's this person who babysat me as a kid who's a friend of the family who's such a good man calling me out on wheeling and dealing him.

Voiceover  Spread the word about our new podcast and don’t forget to subscribe on iTunes so you don’t miss an episode. Learn more about us at firepolemarketing.com.