



Episode 26



Tom Fishburne

Tom started cartooning on the backs of business cases as a student at Harvard Business School. He launched Marketoonist to help large and small businesses such as Google, GE, Kronos, Motista, Rocketfuel, reach their audiences with cartoons.

Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined. Every week we talk with thought leaders and revolutionaries who are bringing innovation to their industries, like today's guest, cartoonist Tom Fishburne.

Tom

It's a real interesting time in cartooning. I feel like there's never been a greater need for it, but yet there's, in some ways, never been a lower appreciate for it in the traditional markets.

Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined with Danny Iny.

Danny

Tom Fishburne is what he calls a marketoonist, a marketer who speaks to his audience through cartoons and he's doing it at a time when cartoons are very unappreciated by traditional media. In fact, Tom felt the first ripples of that shift at the very start of his career.



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Tom

I dreamt about being a cartoonist. I used to read cartoons pretty regularly and I thought about that a lot. Then my heroes of cartooning all retired the year I graduated from college, Bill Waterson, Gary Larson, and Berkeley Breathed, they all quit in 1995 and I thought, "Maybe that's not such a good idea."

Danny

For five years, Tom didn't draw, but in the year 2000, he started making comics for his business school newspaper, and even started his own newsletter when he took a job in marketing. It just so happened that the founder of a company he wanted to work for, Method, was a subscriber, so Tom sent an application with a unique cover letter.

Tom

I drew a cartoon loosely based on that 1984 Apple computer ad of going up against big brother. I basically put Method in the role of the challenger brand taking on the big cleaning products companies. I sent that to him just as my cover letter, introducing myself and he told me later it felt like these weekly cartoons he'd been subscribing to were suddenly talking directly to him.

Danny

Tom eventually joined the company. Working at Method, he found a very unique way to blend his cartoon skills with his marketing skills.

Tom

When I started blogging in addition to cartooning, I could use the cartoon to poke fun at the problems, to parody a pain point and then I could use an article to think about a potential solution to that and shine the light on companies that are doing things differently. It was a great fit when I worked at a company like Method because we were a challenger brand taking on big consumer products companies and being successful because we were exploiting some of the weaknesses of big lumbering companies and older ways of thinking about marketing. I didn't want to



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just have a poison pen, if I didn't also have some suggestion or recommendation about how to think about a marketing situation differently.

Danny

Tom also filled his nights and weekends with comics, even moonlighting to help companies like the Wall Street Journal Asia reach their audience through cartoons. With some hard work and dedication, Tom was eventually able to step away from being an employee and became the CEO of his own cartoon marketing agency, which is a little bit surprising because very few people have been successful enough to make a living doing this.

Tom

I tell you, in the world of cartooning there's a split between those that are trying to make it work with the traditional models and then those that are trying to come up with new models. I'm seeing both, there's two sides of the picture there. On the side of coming up with new models, I think it's really exciting and there are a lot of cartoonists figuring out new ways to do it. The biggest question is how do you make money at it? There are a couple of models that have started to come to the fore, mostly around giving the work, somehow, away for free and then building up an audience, then trying to sell things to that audience, whether they're t-shirts or books or collections or whatever. That's working for a few cartoonists, but you have to hit some scale before you can actually make it pay off. That keeps a lot of people from doing it full time. There are a lot of people who are doing it more nights and weekends like I was doing.

The other part of the picture, which I mentioned earlier, is that the business model for me is to actually use cartoons as a medium for marketing communication. That's been something that I've seen a few ... I think we're at the early stages of appreciating how cartoons can work as a medium in marketing and that there's a lot



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of opportunity there. One of the exciting things for me is I've started this business has been to start to grow it over time where I'm actually able to hire other cartoonists to work with me in this business and leverage their talents, which are in storytelling. I really do believe cartoonists are some of the best storytellers, and leverage some of my background and experience in marketing. Most of the cartoonists I work with, they don't really understand marketing or want to understand marketing and so I've been able to work with cartoonists and find projects that leverage their talents and plug them into this bigger opportunity of marketing storytelling.

Danny

What's coming to mind for me is a question around cartooning as an art versus a skill. I could see a scenario where you're doing your cartoons because you love it and you like your style and you like your message. Then being hired to do that for other people, I could see that not being as much fun. For other people I could see it being, "Hey, this is something I'm good at and something I can get paid for." What's your take on that in terms of your experience, in terms of the cartoonists that you work for? How is it seen and experienced? Is it an art, is it a professional, or is it somewhere in between?

Tom

I think it's all of the above. I think it's important to have both ends of that continuum in your life. Most cartoonists that I've gotten to know, they have their own passion projects and then they have the work that pays the bills. It's important to maintain the passion projects even as your day fills up with the work that pays the bills. The ideal scenario is to be able to, I think, use your talents across all ends of that spectrum. That's certainly been my case. I've been trained in marketing, so I like marketing. I also like cartooning about things that I want to cartoon about that



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aren't related to marketing. For me, it's been important to strike the balance where I have room in my schedule for all of those.

What I think is harder is when you have a third leg of that stool, which are horrible jobs that you don't really care about at all to pay the bills. There was a New Yorker cartoonist I was working with and I asked him when he'd have some time to make some changes on a campaign. He said, "I'll get back to it. I'll have time tonight as soon as I get off my construction job." This is a guy who's in the New Yorker every other week and he's working construction to pay the bills. I feel like that's such a waste of talent. He's doing that not because he loves construction, but because of what I was talking about earlier where the traditional markets of cartooning are in decline. There's not as many available markets to properly deploy those talents as there have been at different periods of history in the past.

I felt like if the opportunity's there, if there are markets that take advantage of, that cartoonists can use those markets to bring their talents to market, that's a happier picture. Ultimately, I think you're right, I think it is a mix. You want to have time for the projects that really come from the heart and find a way to make a living doing what you love and that's a tricky balance. For me, I feel like I've been able to find it and for a lot of the cartoonists that I'm working with and other cartoonists who are finding other ways to do this, they're finding that balance. It's a constant balance and it takes a lot of effort to make sure that you don't lose the joy and the passion of cartooning by going so hard in direction of the business model. It's a balancing act.

Danny

How are you making such a, because you are, you're running an agency, you're doing great. How are you making such a great living doing this when there are, I would imagine, very experienced and talented cartoonists, if the guy is working for



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the New Yorker who's got to have a construction job to pay the bills? That sounds like a disconnect to me.

Tom

It's totally a disconnect and it's purely by the fact that I happen to have come from both backgrounds, from cartooning and from marketing and that I can speak both languages. A lot of the cartoonists that I know, including people from the New Yorker that I was talking about, they don't know, nor are they really interested in, the world of marketing and business. That's not why they do what they do. When I work with them, they're excited to have that part of it taken care of for them. My goal would be to continue growing this agency so that I could provide opportunities for a lot of cartoonists who aren't interested in marketing or in advertising and don't see what I've been able to see by just fortune of my background and the fact that I've worked in marketing and was foolish enough to go to business school to ultimately become an cartoonist.

By virtue of that experience it's given me a little bit of insight into how best to use these cartoons. That ends up working pretty well as a team approach. Like I said earlier, there are a lot of ways to be successful as a cartoonist, but we're at an interesting place where the traditional established markets are in decline and the new markets aren't fully realized yet. You have to be a bit of a cartoonpreneur to make it work and think as much about the business model as you do about your art. A lot of the cartoonists that I've gotten to know aren't as interested to coming out with a new business model. If I'm able to work with them and plug them into this thing that I've been starting to build, then that's been a good fit for everybody.

Danny

Cartoonpreneur sounds like it should be a book you should write, or a comic book that you should write.



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Tom

It's a really good idea. I talk to a lot of cartoonists about this. One of the most wonderful things about making this career decision is that I've been able to meet a lot of my heroes and meet cartoonists who are so talented, sometimes because they come across with what I'm doing and they want to learn more, sometimes because we work together, sometimes because their cartoon gatherings that I get invited to. It's a real interesting time in cartooning. I feel like there's never been a greater need for it, but yet there's, in some ways, never been a lower appreciation for it in the traditional markets.

I'm talking to a lot of cartoonists who pull at least one all-nighter every week to crank out what they need to do because their traditional markets are struggling so much. There's a cartoonist I know who he works in newspapers and has two full time comic strips drawn in completely different styles in newspapers just to keep it going. That, I think, is a really challenge and it's part of what motivates me to do what I'm doing, that hopefully as marketers realize even further the potential of cartoons as a story telling medium it can provide more opportunity for new cartoonists.

Danny

Talk to me a little bit about the process, because I have no expertise in this whatsoever. Looking at a comic strip, it looks like something that you should be able to put together in an afternoon.

Tom

Yeah.

Danny

Which I would imagine, though, it's not the case. What's involved in putting a good comic strip together?



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Tom

The hardest part is the simplifying part of it. I'd say if it looks like it was done very quickly, that's a good thing and that's the result of a lot of effort to get to that point where you could simplify a joke or a cartoon to its bare essence. That's the hardest part. I'd say a lot of cartoonists starting out, including myself, we put too much into it at the very beginning and over the arch of someone's career you see a gradual thinning out as they get better at simplifying the ideas into its bare essence. My favorite cartoonist of all time is a French cartoonist named Jean-Jacques Sempé who many of his cartoons don't have any words in it, it's just a picture, but the picture without any words is enough to get across the message and the humor and everything. He does a lot of New Yorker covers, and he's just brilliant.

For me, the process of coming up with a cartoon, I break it up into pieces, there's the incubation period with whatever material I want to draw cartoons about, there's the period when I'm coming up with sketch ideas. Then there's the period where I narrow down to what I ultimately want to draw and then there's, finally, creating the actual cartoon. Then I'd add on top of that thinking about how to get your message, your cartoon out there. You used to just submit a packet to a syndicate and now you have to think about how your cartoons are received by an audience and how you've managed that. Each one of those stages I think about very differently. It actually even helps me when I'm working on material to work in different parts of a room and different times of day. For me ...

Danny

You're not the first person that I've heard say that. They do, I think, something very similar at Disney.

Tom

Oh, interesting. I didn't know that.



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Danny

I might be misremembering. I don't work at Disney or anything like, but I seem to recall someone telling me very much the same thing, that they have in their creative process, there's the place where the ideas are developed and there's a different room where it's torn apart, a whole process around that.

Tom

That's interesting. I'll have to look into that because I'm fascinated by that process. When I was just drawing one cartoon a week, I could wait for the serendipity moments that would come in the shower or going for a run or whatever. Now that my output has to be so much higher each week, I have to be much more structured about it. I have one room with a huge whiteboard where I first sketch out directions on a project or themes that I think could potentially turn into pain points for cartoons. That's a lot of mind mapping and that part of the process where I basically surround myself with stimulus and try to really immerse myself in whatever I'm trying to create cartoons about. That's the first stage and that's on a big whiteboard and I take pictures of the whiteboard and I have stacks of things that I read as stimulus.

Then, the second stage, when I'm coming up with ideas, it helps that I do this part the same time every morning. I always block the first two hours of every day to do this. There's a special chair. I always listen to the exact same album, even, and I have stacks of index cards on one side. I arrange it into what's worked best for me to come up with ideas and then no matter what happens in that two hours, I stay for the two hours and I just come up with stuff. I try not to get my editing mind in the way. I write whatever comes to mind around these different themes and around the stimulus that I had previously prepared to get ready to sit in that chair. At the end of the two hours, I may have something and I may not and I come back at it the next



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day. It's a multiple day process where I pick up where I left off and take the ideas forward.

Then I go through an editing process where I look at that whole stack, I find connections and maps, and out of that I start to get cartoon ideas and decide which ones to take forward and edit them to make them simpler, try to think about how I can look at the joke in different ways, try to make sure I'm not taking the most obvious approach, but instead thinking to the less obvious ways to bring that particular idea to life. Eventually, at the end of that I have a stack of sketches that are ready to ink and visualize. Then I move to another part of the room, which is really the drafting table, where I start to really block out the art and actually draw the final cartoons. Then the final stage is publishing it and getting it out there and seeing if I can stimulate conversations with an audience. In that case, I'm much more analytical and I look at my Google analytics and I look at share counts and that kind of stuff to see what resonated with people and try to leverage all that for the next time.

Those are all the different stages and I almost feel like I'm a different person in every one of those chairs, because I'm playing a different role. When I'm creating, I don't want the editor in the room. When I'm editing, I want to think more about the audience and about the patterns and what I've done last time and ask the devil's advocate questions. It's all compartmentalizing the creative process for me.

Danny

You're visualizing that you're different people to a certain extent, but you're running an agency. Correct me if I'm wrong, in point of fact, at some stage it actually is different people.



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Tom

It is, yeah. I was thinking about the question from the standpoint of when I would do everything start to finish. There's some projects where I do, by compartmentalizing the creative process that way, that helped me when it came time to start growing the agency beyond myself because then I could start to think about other cartoonists who play those different parts. I experimented with different ways to do this, including bringing on cartoonists who would mimic every one of those different stages and I ultimately found that there were certain cartoonists that I really liked for the idea creation side, and others that I really liked for the illustration side and it didn't have to be the same people, it could be more of a team approach.

There are cartoonists that I work with that that stimulus process, coming up with what themes we're going to parody in cartoons, I will do that with the assistance of a creative producer that I've started to bring on to the team and then we'll hand that off to a cartoonist to help come up with ideas. I'll still come up with a few of my own and then we package those and share those with the client as part of that editing process. Then when we get into the actual illustration side, now that we've started to grow the studio we can have different illustration options, different illustrators who have a different approach and we can find one that matches the brand the best.

That's been a fun part of the process to think about how to bring those sketches to life with different illustration styles that best match the project and the brand. My experience growing the agency has been a direct extension of my experience as an individual cartoonist, but it's been figuring out a way to scale and not lose the creativity and the quality of the work and get distracted by all the project management. I'm fortunate that the cartoonists that I've been able to work with are incredibly talented. That's been a lot of the fun is, is for me is to think about how to



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get the best work from them and how to give them the right ammunition that they need to be really creative and successful at coming up with great cartoons.

Danny

If a company has engaged your agency to create marketing cartoons for them, how many people will touch that cartoon before it is delivered to the client?

Tom

Anywhere between three and five at different degrees, but I'm always the point of consistency throughout. A lot of my role has evolved to more of an editor, although I still do a lot of cartooning myself. The cartoon editor of the New Yorker, Bob Mankoff, still does a lot of cartooning himself, but what I really admire from him is how he's been able to inspire and elevate the cartoonists that he works with. Every week at the New Yorker, cartoonists come in with all of their work and he sits down with them and reviews all the sketches and pulls a few aside and gives them pointers and feedback and overtime he can help bring the best out of them. That's my goal is to try to do the same thing with the cartoonists that I work with. It's been getting to know these cartoonists overtime to get work that best fits what I think will work from a marketing perspective and using that side of my background.

Danny

This is fascinating to me. It sounds like you've still got your hands on all of the projects. I don't know if you plan to scale your agency to a point to where that is no longer the case. I guess what I'm wondering is, how can someone create a good cartoon about something without having subject matter expertise?

Tom

That's a great question. I had some questions about that when I started because my background is in marketing, but there are a lot of sides to it that I don't have experience with. The more I've done this, the more I've realized is that there's something things that are just universal in humor even if you're very domain



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specific in the execution. That's been a lot of the fun, actually, and the variety that when a new campaign comes along and I don't have any experience with, finding the humor and coming up with something that that audience will find funny, that's a lot of the fun challenge for me.

One of the first projects we did was with a real niche that I've never even heard of, an industry called E-discovery, which is basically when companies sue each other there's a discovery period where they have to exchange documents. That used to happen in paper form, but suddenly it was happening electronically, because everyone stored everything electronically. This industry developed to help companies exchange documents electronically and it turned out that there was a lot of humor in that, largely by the fact that lawyers are not the most tech savvy people in the world. Having lawyers having to understand specific document formats when they're agreeing what to exchange back and forth, there's a lot of inherent humor intention in that. You can do a little bit of reading and understanding on the subject to get to a point where you can get to cartoons that are really relevant to that industry.

That first stage that I mentioned where we're doing the incubation and really understanding the themes and the pain points that could turn into humor, that stage is so important. I used to do that just myself, for my own cartoons, and now, in bringing on other cartoonists it's taken on another level of importance, because we try to not only create a brief that can help them understand this market, but also take it to the next level and think, in all of this research on this company and this industry, what are some of the themes and pain points that can lend themselves to cartoons? What is the Wikipedia stub of an idea that could potentially turn into a cartoon. When you properly go through that work, and it's hard, but it's so valuable,



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then cartoonist can look at that and immediately get to work and it gives them something to work within. That's been really effective for us.

I've mentioned part of the team that we've brought on is somebody who is acting as a creative producer, and so they've been working with me through a lot of that process and helping write that perfect brief that we give to the cartoonist on the team. That's been a way that we've started to scale. As you mentioned at the beginning, I currently have my fingers on everything. I intend to grow the agency, but I also want to be very involved in everything as far as translating between the cartoonist and the marketers, because that's really the benefit that I've been able to bring is be able to live and speak in both worlds. I've realizing overtime, there's certain things in that process that I don't necessarily, myself, need to be involved in every detail.

As we've scaled, and tried to do it deliberately very slowly, it's struck a nice balance where I can be involved in the things where I can really feel like I can add some value to the process and things where I don't, or where I can find people who could do a far better job than me has been opportunities to take it to the next level.

Danny

Tom, this is fascinating and this conversation hasn't focused where I thought it would, which are great. Those are usually the best conversations.

Tom

Great.

Danny

I thought we'd be talking a lot about ... because the theme of the show is Business Reimagined ... I thought we would be talking a lot about the reimagination of business communication and a little bit about marketing through cartooning, and



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we've talked honestly very little about business communication, quite a lot about the reimagination of marketing through cartooning. Mostly, and this is what I'm hearing you be most passionate about, it's the reimagination of the cartooning industry. Where do you see the focus of your work landing between those three camps?

Tom

Wow, that's a big question. It's been an evolution for me too. I'd have to say that whenever you start a business you have certain goals and expectations and as you get into you have to throw those out of the window and write new ones and be adaptable and figure out where the opportunities are. For me, I'm coming at this as a cartoonist and as a marketer, and so I'm very interested in the state of cartooning and where that's going and the history of cartooning. There were periods of time in American history where cartoons and marketing had a real direct link with each other and a lot of campaigns were done with cartoons in mind. I even found an advertising agency in the 1950s that was entirely focused on cartoons.

There are some interesting precedents that I just find fascinating, and so I think a lot about that side of things, the state of the cartooning industry in general. For me, the big focus of the business really is on how businesses can communicate and some of that has been a little bit serendipitous. When I started this business, I had never heard the industry term 'content marketing' but it's flowed into that quite well. That as I've thought about cartoons as communication devices, it happened to coincide in the period where a lot of businesses were starting to think of themselves as publishers on communicating in a variety of different ways and developing an audience directly and cartoons have happened to fit pretty directly into that shift that's happening in marketing and business communication in general.

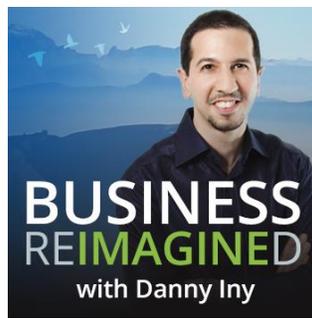


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That's probably where I'm spending most of my effort and time is spending time with clients on helping them think about how they connect with their audiences and cartoons are one of many medium that they can use to do that. I happen to think cartoons are particularly good ones and they work within a content ecosystem quite well, but I also have a passion for, at the larger sense, how brands can communicate with audiences. That's really what I've done my entire career as a marketer is think about how to connect with audiences. It's been a nice serendipitous connection with my cartooning that that's what I try to do as a cartoonist as well.

Danny

That was Tom Fishburne, reimagining the way businesses engage with their audiences by reimagining the cartooning industry. Now, where should you, our listener, go from here? For starters visit marketoonist.com where you'll find Tom's cartoons that can educate and inspire you about marketing and that you can model what you might try in your own content marketing mix. If you want Tom to help you build those cartoons, than reach out and tell him that Danny said, "Hi." Beyond that, I want to encourage you to think about the disruption that Tom is bringing to his industry and what the analogs might be in your own industry. Often the best ideas come from watching someone in a related space break new ground just as Tom is doing.

Voiceover

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Business Reimagined. It's been an exciting year for us here at Mirasee and we look forward to an even better year in 2016 and you can look forward to guests like Jeffrey Reddick, creator of the Final Destination film franchise, Jason Zook, who made over a million dollars wearing t-shirts and selling his last name, Steve Kamb of Nerd Fitness and many more like



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them who are reimagining the way business is done. We'll see you next year. Learn more about us at Mirasee.com.



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