

Membership Site
MASTERS

STU McLAREN

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MASTER #3 – THE COMMUNITY CULTIVATOR

An Interview With Jon Bard From CBIClubhouse.com

STU: Welcome ladies and gentleman. My name is Stu McLaren, co-founder of WishList Member and joining me today is Jon Bard, the founder of CBIClubhouse.com.

Now this membership site is very unique because it was created for a very tiny niche. But even though it's a tiny niche, Jon has done phenomenally well to not only cultivate a community of thousands of people but to also turn that into a very profitable business as well. So Jon, welcome.

JON: Thank you very much, Stu.

STU: Before we get started, I mentioned that CBI Clubhouse caters to a very tiny niche. Can you talk to us about who it is that you're serving and what is CBI Clubhouse?

JON: Sure. CBI actually stands for Children's Book Insider and we've been in business since 1990, and for most of the time we were basically just a straight-up newsletter.

It is a newsletter for aspiring children's book writers. So anyone who wants to write a children's book can come to us and we'll give them the information they need to get started. We'll help them along the way with writing tips and then also helping them get published and market their book.

For all those years it was an offline publication. Now, we are online.

We've been online since 1995 – or actually really going back to 1990 with CompuServe and AOL - but we've been online since 1995 but it was purely as a promotional tool to sell subscriptions to our physical newsletter. However, with the advent of WishList Member, we were able to really reinvent ourselves and that's where the CBI Clubhouse membership site came into play.

STU: To give everybody and understanding, this was an offline newsletter that you have been selling for quite a long time, and then you transitioned and moved it online. Can you talk to us about why you did that and what was the thought process there?

JON: We came to the realization that the traditional newsletter model was dying. And it's dying for good reason. Content is cheap. The content is everywhere. And trying to get people to pay for content is awfully difficult unless you really, really have something unique or you are just a true marketing wizard.

We felt that we were sort of on the downward curve of a model. And so I began reading about membership sites as well as reading books like "Tribes" by Seth Godin (I'm a big fan of Seth Godin). These things certainly got my attention.

I came to the realization probably around the same time that you guys were launching WishList Member, which at the time we had no idea about, that the future is in community; that what people really will pay for is not specifically content but content within a framework, and the framework being community and expertise at their disposal.

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It's essentially the ability to have a guru or an expert take you under their wing while being surrounded by other people who are going through the same adventure with you. That's valuable and that's something that people will pay for and will continue to pay for while telling their friends about.

In the beginning, the idea of the membership site was really to continue doing the newsletter. The newsletter is still the focal point of our membership, but it exists now purely in electronic format (PDF), and it is now part of an overall larger experience, which is the Clubhouse.

The Clubhouse is our membership site which has lots of content, but also has the opportunity to interact with us, to ask questions, and to form critique groups with other members (which we call Fighting Bookworms). We are Fighting Bookworms. Other Fighting Bookworms can connect together, do things, share ideas and even connect in the “real world”.

What we really were able to do thanks to WishList Member was jump off a downward curve and leap on an upward curve. It was a pretty dramatic change for us, but, our members loved it. They were knocked out by it.

“We were able to jump off a downward curve and leap on an upward curve.”

It has also significantly increased our income and we did it in the heart of a recession so we absolutely know it was the right thing to have done.

STU: I want talk about the structure of your membership before you came online and after. Initially it was an offline newsletter and then you transitioned to moving it online.

Was there a difference in the way that you priced the offline newsletter and then when you moved it online, was there a difference in the way you priced that?

JON: Yeah. The thing about working within a writing niche is that it’s a wonderful niche and the people are great, the subject matter’s wonderful and there’s not a tremendous amount of competition within this particular niche. That’s the great part.

The bad part is, writers don’t spend money. They are very price sensitive. I mean, when I look at some of these people in a Forex Trading market or Marketing niche, and they’re charging \$2,000 and \$3,000 and \$5,000 for courses I’m shocked. If I try to sell something for \$2,000, people would just drop dead! They can’t even conceive of something like that.

So, we basically had to go for volume in terms of customers and not price. But before we launched the electronic subscription, the physical newsletter was about \$27 a year.

Right now, there's two ways to become a member of the online site. You can pay for a year in advance at \$42.95 or pay month to month at \$4.49. Either way you look at it there's a pretty significant income rise for us on individual customers.

On the other hand, customers are getting tremendously more value with the online site than they were getting before with the physical newsletter so it works out for everybody.

STU: I just want to get clear on your pricing structure. Were you charging \$27 per month for the offline newsletter?

JON: No, no, no! That was \$27 per year.

What they were getting was basically, an email from us once a month saying the newsletter's ready to download, here's where it is, go and get it. That was just really as far as our interaction with them went unless we had come out with a new eBook or some sort of backend product.

Today, we almost have a daily conversation with our people because of the membership site. So as a result, the value being so much higher, that now instead of the equivalent of being \$2 in change a month, it's \$4.49 a month or, as I said, \$42.95 for the year.

STU: Awesome. This is a really important lesson for everybody because you're going after a different strategy of a lower price point but a lot more people.

I know through our previous conversations that you have a lot of people in your membership with over 4,500 paying members. I definitely want to talk about the dynamics of managing a site with thousands of people but before we get into that, I also want to talk about how you are adding add a lot more value. Because as you mentioned, today you're doing more than just publishing the newsletter.

Can you talk to us a little bit about the different types of things that you're doing within your membership site?

JON: Originally we filled the site with a lot of content that was from our back issues because we had over twenty years' worth of content.

So when we added new content to the site it was in the form of an article or it could be a guest article from somebody else.

Now, we do a lot more video. These are quick videos where we collect questions and then we answer them on video. We also have a regular podcast where we interview other authors, editors and agents. We transcribe these interviews which then produces two pieces of content – a pdf transcript and then the audio interview itself.

I also like to do screen capture videos (using Camtasia) where I'll show people how to set up their own blog or how to create an eBook or how to use a particular site that's interesting. Or we'll visit a publisher's website and I'll walk our people through it. Camtasia videos are very easy to make and very powerful. We also publish a variety of eBooks on various subjects that our market would be interested on.

There's such a range of ways to create content now that it's really just a matter of finding something that interests people, and then presenting it in a multitude of different ways. And that's really what we try to do.

One thing to note is that there's a certain maturity level that a site will reach. Sometimes, you have to almost throttle back on the new content because people become overloaded with it. CBI Clubhouse has been completely online for three years now. So when we add something we try to make it really impactful and we try to let it stand on its own for a little while.

In the beginning we were just trying to overload people because we wanted them to go 'Wow!' when they got to the site and saw all the content. Now we are much more mindful about preventing "content overload".

“Now we are much more mindful about preventing content overload”.

STU: You just mentioned a whole bunch of things that people get inside of your site and I know people listening or reading this interview will be thinking “Wow! He's providing all that stuff for less than five bucks a month!”.

It really is a tremendous value and I can see how a low price point makes it much easier to over-deliver. Would you agree?

JON: Yeah, but I'll tell you my one concern with over-delivering and it's not even over-delivering; it's just the nature of the beast with membership sites.

If you have so much content on your membership site, it becomes trickier to develop backend products. In that, I could come out with a new eBook but my people will say, "what, I haven't even gotten through half of the stuff on the site. Why should I be buying more content?"

"If you have so much content on your membership site, it becomes trickier to develop backend products."

You have to really rethink your backend strategy, which is something we're deep in the middle of right now. I think that's where perhaps webinars, individual coaching and mentorship programs come into play.

My only concern with having a lot of content is not being able to sell more things on the backend.

It sort of limits your ability to create backend content and sell it effectively. On the other side, my thought is "Yes, let's overload people. Let's make it a complete no-brainer."

My attitude is if you come to our site and you claim to be interested in writing children's books, even if it's just a peripheral interest, and you're not willing to try it for \$4.49 based on everything that you see there, you probably aren't ever going to write a children's book. So, it's okay. Don't join.

But we really want to just kick people over the head saying, "Look, you can't possibly not do this." That's our mentality and with our market it's worked.

STU: Let's touch on that because you mentioned you have a lot of content inside of your membership but yet, when you have a whole lot of content, members can get overwhelmed.

Overwhelm can often be a top reason for people cancelling, especially within the first month (ie. They don't know where to start). When there is so much content to access, they get overwhelmed and then they bail.

Can you talk to us about that and how you prevent that from happening within your membership?

JON: Yeah, and it's still a work in progress and it has more to do with the limitations of WordPress than anything else but we keep experimenting with a number of things.

For example, we have a little "Quick Start" guide that we send people when they join. We also have a welcome video and a bunch of other things.

But at the end of the day the reality is, it's not as easy to create a clean, organized, easily accessible content site with WordPress as it is with traditional HTML. It's paradoxical but it's just sort of the truth. I mean, there are only so many things you can do with categories and tags as opposed to physically creating separate standalone sections.

We're still kind of fighting with that. We want to have a lot of content and we want to show a lot of content to people who are coming there who haven't joined yet. But, we don't want to make people throw up their hands and go "My God, there's just so much here."

So we have our ways. We use categories and we have things broken out but, it is a little bit tricky, simply because WordPress was meant to be a blog format, not so much a magazine content-site format.

But I think it's getting better and there are more opportunities available within WordPress to break things down so we just keep battling away.

I think that what you have to do on your site is literally use the language, "Feeling overwhelmed? Don't be. Click here". That is a word that people are going to say. We know that. That's an objection so we have to answer that objection.

***"...use the language "Feeling overwhelmed?
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So, one of the first things people see when they come to our site is literally a little thing in the sidebar that says "Feeling overwhelmed? Click here". By clicking that it brings them to a video where we talk them down and into the Quick Start guide. It seems to work, but it's not perfect yet.

STU: I want to touch on a couple of things when it comes to the type of content that you've got within your site. Whenever you have thousands of different members within a site, you're obviously going to have people at

different levels. You're going to have people who just have an "interest" in maybe writing a children's book and then you have people who have a lot of experience writing a children's book.

How do you go about deciding what type of content that you're going to deliver within your membership?

JON: We try to balance it as best we can but we also have the recognition that the majority of people who are coming to us are beginners. So we have to take care of them. We tend to use the newsletter, which again is a standalone PDF that you download from within the Clubhouse, for more advanced content or for more intermediate nuts and bolts writing kinda pieces.

We occasionally pull content like that and put it on the Clubhouse, but what we really want is for people come to the Clubhouse on the first page to see "Okay, there's a lot of things that speak to me. I don't know much yet but I can see where they explain it and where it's very accessible".

The people who've been with us for a long time, they know where to look for the more advanced content, for the market news and that sort of thing.

Again, it's also a work in progress. As I speak to you right now I'm taking a break from re-inventing and re-strategizing how we present our message.

The publishing world has changed so dramatically that we have to now think about how we can make it simple and make people understand what their options are.

Not to digress too far but very quickly, there's this notion with a lot of people in the traditional publishing world that the "end" is nigh. It's all over and the print book is dead and publishing is dead. But the information doesn't go away, it's just provided another way. That's why now authors need to think like an entrepreneur. It's about publishing your own eBook, your own app, your own print-on-demand book, and going out and marketing it, promoting it and then following up.

Writers are becoming business people and that's really the direction we're going to go. We want to make that very clear that no matter what level of experience you have, when you come to us we're going take you by the hand and we're going to get you published. You can do it yourself now and we're going teach you how to market it and sell and build a career.

That's the sort of thing that even advanced writers need to have their hands held on. Because they're not used to that kind of a new reality. So again, it's like everything in that I could use the phrase 'work in progress' for every question you ask, but that's the way it works.

STU: Well I think that's important for everybody because, a lot of people don't launch their membership site because they're waiting to get it absolutely perfect, and the reality is, you and I both know, it's never going to be perfect.

There's so much that can be done to improve a membership site and I think that's a valuable lesson for everybody listening here today.

JON: You can't possibly predict what your issues are going to be. I'll give you actually a good meaty tip to people here because it's something applicable to anybody who has a WordPress-based membership site.

The number one nightmare that we had at the beginning, for months, was WordPress's built-in password recovery concept. If you've ever used it, you'll know that when you reset the password, WordPress sends you this incredibly ugly-looking generated password with exclamation points in it and parenthesis marks and all that. This freaked our people out.

I was spending days just creating new passwords for people and responding to them. Then I found a plug-in, which I'm going to absolutely recommend everybody use. It's a free WordPress plug-in called "Improved User Experience" and, boy, does it live up to its name. It basically replaces the WordPress password system with one that allows you to reset your password by simply sending you a link to a page where you can type your own new password.

"It's a free plug-in called "Improved User Experience" and boy does it live up to its name."

The minute I found that, I saved probably three hours a day of sending out emails to people. And it's worked ever since.

That's the sort of stuff I'm referring to. You never know what your issues are going to be, but you have to just trust that solutions are out there.

Just launch. Just do it. And fix things later.

STU: That is awesome. I'm definitely making a note of that myself.

I want to shift gears a little bit and discuss one of the things that is unique about your site – the fact that you have built a community with thousands and thousands of members.

Now managing a site with thousands of members is completely different than managing a site with hundreds of members. Some things are the same but the dynamics of having that many members can certainly makes things different.

Can you talk to us about what types of things are different when you've got thousands of members and what are you doing within your site to keep it a community even though you've got so many members?

JON: Sure. Well, certainly one practical reality is the more members you have, the more customer service issues you're going have. Even with that password plug-in we just talked about, I still constantly get people with all sorts of things like "I can't log in", "How do I register?" etc. We're looking to outsource all that stuff because frankly I'm tired of dealing with it. But that's a good problem to have. The more people you have, the more emails you're going to get. That's just the way it works. That's probably the least glamorous part of it.

“One practical reality is the more members you have, the more customer service issues you’re going to have”

In terms of how having thousands of members affects the overall “feel” of things, it hasn't been that dramatic for me.

One thing is – and again it's within the certain limitations of WordPress – is that WordPress is not a social medium. It's not like setting up, say, a Ning site or something like that where it's all about people connecting with each other. It still has a certain level of 'top to bottomness' about it, meaning, we're at the top, we're sort of filtering out information to people and they can comment on it and go on the message board and talk about it. But there's really not a great desire, I think, among our people to spend all day on there, private messaging each other and setting up your own pages. You can't do that within WordPress without BuddyPress.

In reality, I don't think we've tried to build it into a social network. We don't want it to be that. That's a lot of work and it's not really what we're about. We're an educational site. So that actually makes things quite scalable.

That's one of the beauties of WishList Member. It's very scalable and in a lot of ways, the experience now and the experience three years ago for the individual user is largely the same. Of course, there's more of them and so there's more activity on the message boards and such, but it still has a nice "homey" feel to it. It feels like a little shelter from the rest of the internet and that's what we really wanted it to be.

STU: Well you guys do a very good job of cultivating that community and encouraging that.

You referenced at the beginning of the interview that you call everybody the "Fighting Bookworms". I gather this evokes a sense of pride and helps to create a real sense of community.

What other kinds of things do you do within your site to create that rich community?

JON: We have recently started profiling our members more. This is sort of one of those community site one-on-one kinda things that we just missed. But we've caught up with it.

"You have to make your members the stars".

You have to make your members the stars. Now if you come to our site you'll see we have a rotating image at the top of the sidebar where it rotates in and out covers of books that our Fighting Bookworms have gotten published. So we feature our members by doing interviews, podcasts and video interviews with them.

When we first started, we tended to go out of the community more for interview subjects, which was fine because we attracted some big names in our industry. In the beginning we needed to have the big names to add credibility to the site. But now we're really starting to turn inward by interviewing our own people and making them the stars. I think that's really important from a social proof standpoint so that people understand what we are teach "works".

We also have a Shoutbox, which is a widget plug-in in the sidebar. This adds a real time message system where people can type in a message and it sits there for everyone to see. It may be a question or a comment. But every couple of days we get on there and answer people's questions that they've asked.

That's tremendous value considering they're paying \$4.49 a month to then get expert answers to their questions. But again it adds social proof. It shows that people are active and they're interested. And it also shows that we're responsive to them. They're smart questions that people are asking and when newcomers come there they see, "hey this is a serious site". These are people who are really doing it.

We didn't have all that at the beginning. Again, it was very much "Hey, here we are; listen to us". But the way we're bringing our people in now is through that sort of mechanism.

The other thing that we're ramping up again is to do is more of a cause-related kind of program, where we're going to try to get behind a program for, let's say, children's literacy, and give our members something important to do.

We realized that it's important to give your folks some responsibilities. They want it. They want to participate with others but you need to give them the direction.

We're talking to some folks now but ultimately it will probably be something related to children's literacy and we're going to try to mobilize our members to get behind it. So I think that will have a lot of impact in terms of building community.

STU: Awesome stuff. I commend you, Jon, for all that you're doing, and I love hearing that, because I think too often we focus on a membership site because it's our business and our revenue stream, but the community is really the thing that drives all of those things and the more you create the community, the more time you can spend on mobilizing your members. Plus I think it will go even further to enriching the bottom line.

The thing is, the "community" aspect of your site is what really becomes the glue of what your site is all about.

JON: Absolutely.

STU: One of the other things that I noticed you do well on your site is highlight the current month's content in your sidebar. I think that's a really elegant way of reminding the members of the new value you've added to the site this particular month.

Can you talk to us about how you communicate with your members and how you show them all of the new content that you have added?

JON: Well the first point of content is when the newsletter is up and ready they'll get an email about that saying "Hey, come and download it".

Then, we'll also highlight some of the new content in those emails that's been up on the site and also highlight some of the more interesting threads on the message board. The key is, we give them direct links to all of that.

One of the other things that we're working on improving is creating more points of contact and then really making those points more efficient. Again, one of the beauties of WishList is that it does offer a lot of points of contact. You can control where people go after they log in, after they register, what they see based on their levels, and of course there's all the email broadcast functions and the generated emails that go out.

"One of the beauties of WishList is that it does offer a lot of points of contact."

Right now we're really in the process of taking an inventory of all that and asking ourselves "Are we making the best use of that?".

When we send a message out – even if it's a lost password recovery message – we are now asking ourselves is there something in that message saying "Hey, by the way, did you tell your friends today about the CBI Clubhouse? Here's a link where you can send a referral message to five people".

I think it's really important to use those opportunities and it's real estate we all have. The question is: Are you using your real estate to your best advantage? My honest answer about myself is "No, we haven't been".

"The question is: Are you using your real estate to your best advantage?"

So we're going to go piece by piece through every contact point available to us and see what can we do to tighten our bond with our members; to promote backend products; to promote upsells; to highlight the new material and to overcome reasons for cancelling. These are all things that I think have to be done.

It's one of the unsung parts of WishList that maybe we don't nearly use enough to its advantage and that is all the contact points available to you. So you have to optimize them.

STU: Jon, I can tell you're a seasoned veteran of membership sites just by that response. A lot of times when we're starting a new site, we're so focused on the structure of the site in terms of the way it looks and what membership levels we have, the content, and of course the marketing.

But we lose sight of all, as you said, the little opportunities, the points of contact, that can have a big difference when it comes to the overall experience that a member has within the site.

As you were saying that, I was smiling, because I'm thinking 'Damn, that's exactly what we need to be doing more of as well!'

JON: That's the thing. And I think it's really more just about being an entrepreneur than anything else, which is, you never stop learning.

You never stop being a student.

You can't beat yourself up because you didn't know something a month ago that now you do. You just do it.

For example, what I've been doing the last month is I've been taking days off and absorbing myself in the work of Jay Abraham, who I think is just the genius of geniuses. I've been reading page after page and making notes. And then I have this notebook full of stuff to do as a result of it.

I periodically have to do that. I have to step back because I know one one-millionth of what I need to know. So I'm constantly trying to learn and I don't beat myself up for not initially knowing something.

That goes back to what you're saying about "just launching". You can't know everything. You can't have everything buttoned up and perfect. You just have to launch and learn as you go. Have the patience to learn on the fly.

The other thing I think is actually pretty important, especially for new people, is you need a thick skin when it comes to cancellations. Because the first few times that people cancel it stings. I mean, it's like knife to your gut! Oh man, it's almost like a personal rejection. But of course it's not because people often times tell us why they're cancelling and for the most part it's, "I

thought I want to write a children's book. I don't really think something I want to do right now".

I can't argue with that person. I can't persuade that person back. I mean, that's fine. That's absolutely a legitimate reason to leave. And usually, 99% of the time, that's what it's about, it's something like that. It has nothing to do with you and oftentimes people are very complimentary, even when they leave.

Reality is, the more successful you get, the more people are going to cancel. It's just a numbers issue. And you have to be completely dispassionate about it. It's not a problem. Nobody possibly could run a membership site without people cancelling.

***“Don't worry about cancellations.
Just keep getting better.”***

So if I had one piece of advice beyond “just launching”, it's don't worry about cancellations. It's fine. Just keep getting better.

STU: Well said, my friend. I remember the first cancellation I had from one of my membership sites. I was dumfounded. I thought “what's wrong with the site. I don't get it. I don't understand!”.

JON: Yeah, because you get so close to it and you think that it's the greatest thing ever and anybody who wouldn't want to be a member is crazy.

People have perfectly legitimate reasons and we find that we tend to get our cancellations after the 1st of the month. It made us think about it. People just got their credit card statements and after looking at their credit card statements they're cutting out everything that is not absolutely necessary.

Those folks will sometimes share this with us and we'll give them a few free months. We'll say “Hey, if you're really committed to being a children's writer, I don't want to lose you. We'll take care of you for the next few months. We'll carry you”. Those people end up being very, very loyal customers and they tell their friends. So, there's opportunity even in cancellations.

“There's opportunity
even in
cancellations.”

STU: You bring up a really good point, in that a lot of times we can take it personally that somebody's cancelling. We almost want to end the relationship with that person forever. It's like they slapped us in the face saying that, "Oh your membership's no good". But that's not really the way to approach it.

As you said, by reaching out and "being human" can go a long way and many times that person will come back when the time is right for them.

JON: Sure. And that's why it's important when people cancel not to delete them from your member base. Just move them to a different level. We have a different level we call 'hold'. We don't call it 'cancelled'. They're on hold because we expect them some day to come back.

"That's why it's important when people cancel not to delete them from your member base."

The reason why you don't want to cancel them is because within WishList you have the broadcast email function. And so you can go back to those people with special offers. One of the things that we do is we sometimes just send them a gift. We say, "Hey, I know that you're not currently a Fighting Bookworm but we're still thinking about you and we hope you still want to write. Here's an eBook that you might enjoy". This helps just to stay on their radar.

Then when you hit the entire list op with an offer, you usually get a pretty good response (even from people who are "cancelled"). We brought a lot of folks back that way. So I think that's another thing: Don't look at these people as cancelled; look at them as temporarily taking a break from you. And keep them there, stay in touch with them and then give them a good offer.

STU: I love what you're doing there from a marketing perspective and I want to dig a little deeper.

Because of your experience marketing and selling your site for such a long time, can you share with us some other marketing strategies that you use to get new members? Then we'll talk about some strategies that you're using within your membership to keep people interested.

JON: Okay. First of all, we did have a little bit of an advantage – well a big advantage. Which is we had our original site, which has been online since 1995 – Write4Kids.com – and because it's aged and loaded with targeted content, it has search engine rankings that are hard to beat. I mean, if you

type in anything relating to writing children's books it's going show up as number one.

That's a blessing but it was also a curse. The CBI Clubhouse exists under a different domain and a different server and it's a different thing.

If you're interested to see how we did they can just visit Write4Kids.com.

Ultimately, what we had to do is keep all the content on Write4Kids because we didn't want to lose our search engine rankings. But the home page of Write4Kids is essentially a referral page to the Clubhouse. You get there and it says, "Hey, were you dreaming about writing a children's book? You've come to the right place. Check this out. [Click here](#)". Then you're brought to the Clubhouse.

That was the way we massaged that. It was a little tricky but we still get tremendous amounts of traffic from that, just purely from search engine rankings.

Then of course we do things like guest blog posts, and guest articles. Those can be very effective and absolutely work when done on targeted sites.

We've also experimented with using social media as a way to attract new members. We have ten thousand Twitter followers and we have two thousand Facebook friends. With that said, I'm coming to the realization that the social media thing is fun, but as a marketing tool it's on its way to being drastically overrated.

Social media marketing is a time sucker and I'm moving away from it but I'll probably try to just come up with a smarter plan to really make the most of social media without getting too in to the weeds on it.

Then referrals, which is an area that we really need to improve on. We're developing a reliable plan to get more referrals and to create more word of mouth by giving our people something to talk about to others.

Writers tend to be introverts and loners and they don't really by nature want to go out and spread the word about something they like. They kinda like to keep it to themselves. And so we're working on ways to make it easier for them to go out and tell the world about us.

Right now that's really how we get most of our traffic.

STU: Membership site retention is certainly the number one battle that most membership site owners have, and to me, that's the battleground that can make or break a membership.

So much focus is traditionally put on getting new members in but I want to encourage people to shift their focus to taking care of the people that have already joined your membership. That means focusing on retention.

What kinds of things are you doing within your membership to maintain interest and keeping your members part of your membership every month?

JON: Well again, the first thing that everyone has to realize is that there are some people that you simply can't keep because, for whatever it is you sold them on in terms of their interest, the interest doesn't exist anymore. There's absolutely nothing you can do.

But what you can do with those folks though – and again what we're going to start doing – is say “Hey, sorry we weren't quite right for you but I hope you enjoyed your experience. Who do you know that might like this membership? Click here to our referral form”.

By doing this, you can still get something positive even when people are leaving. Otherwise, I think a lot of membership site retention comes down to involvement. One of the reasons we want the “cause-related” thing, apart from the fact that we believe strongly in children's literacy programs, is we want people to bind, not just to us but to each other. We want to create an environment whereby if they left they'd miss it. They would be saying to themselves “Hey, I had all these folks that I was working with on the Fighting Bookworms and we're doing cool stuff for literacy. I have a critique group there and all sorts of other stuff and I can't leave that”.

“We want to create an environment whereby if they left, they'd miss it.”

So that's definitely I think an important thing.

Bind them to each other. Bind them to you.

We do our best to really be personal and even with all our members we're always happy to answer emails when people send them to us and we answers those questions on a Shoutbox. The more people feel they have a connection

to you, the more they're going want to stick around because they don't want to lose that connection.

“Social proof” is also important. If your members are discouraged, even if they're at a stage where it seems like it's never going to work out for them, I think it's really important to let them know that other people just like them have succeeded using the information you're giving them. It's really important to let them know that because it gives them hope. And if there's hope, they'll continue to stick around.

STU:: Well, one of the things I also want to ask you about is your “CBI Challenge”. Can you share with us what that is, how do you do it, and the impact it has on your membership?

JON: Sure. It was inspired by Ed Dale and the 30-day Challenge, which I think is just a wonderful thing that he does. It's a fun internet marketing step-by-step program for newbies wanting to learn how to market on the web.

All we really wanted to do was give new people a starting point. When there is so much content within a site, even with our best efforts, it can be hard to always make it clear what path your members should take.

“When there is so much content within a site, even with our best efforts, it can be hard to always make it clear what path your members should take.”

The Challenge is meant to be a path. It starts at the very beginning of, “how do I come up with story idea?” and goes on to subjects like “What kind of children's book should I write?”. The whole thing has twenty modules.

Each module has some articles, perhaps a video, a link to the message board where people can discuss it with others, and an exercise. It's all self-done in that we don't grade their exercises or anything. But it starts in the very beginning and then it goes to the last module, which covers “how to start marketing yourself once you've gotten your book published”.

We tell people when they start with us go to Module 1 and start there. Take a week and just spend the time going through the modules. You of course can sample around the rest of the site and read whatever's interesting

to you, but at least with the Challenge you've now got a path through the membership.

That has been pretty effective for us and it's been a really great sales tool because again it's sort of banging people over the head with value.

As far as other marketing elements go, I would encourage people to go look at our sales page. It's really worked out very well for us and converts very well.

It starts off with a little picture of a cup of coffee and is says "See this? This is a latte. It's creamy, it's frothy, it's delicious. It costs about \$4.50 and you could drink it in about 5 minutes and forget about it. Now look at this:". Then we have the newsletter, the CBI Clubhouse logo and we have the CBI Challenge logo. Then we explain what each of the items are. We say "see these things, they'll help you get published and they cost about the same as that latte every month".

It becomes very, very clear in regards to the value right off the bat. Actually, in a number of our testimonials people rephrase the latte example back to us, so it's definitely something that's stuck with them.

Of course that's a standard marketing approach but look to come up with your own version of what the latte is. It just makes it easier for people to visualize the value you are offering. So for us, one side of the scale is a latte or a hamburger of whatever it is. The other side of the scale is all this stuff, including a course, training, expert help, etc. Are you kidding me? It becomes an absolute no-brainer.

STU: Certainly the no-brainer pricing, as we talked about earlier, goes a long way to making it an easy buying decision. You've certainly done that with all the content you've have within your membership site.

But I love what you're doing with the CBI Challenge. Giving new people a clear path provides direction. That's really important for membership site owners, no matter what level or no matter how aged your membership site might be. If your members don't know what to do next then they're going to feel lost and they'll cancel.

"If your members don't know what to do next then they're going to feel lost and they'll cancel."

I think that's a really valuable learning lesson for everybody.

JON: It's certainly been something that people enjoy and encourages engagement. People will let us know how their progress is going; "I'm on Module 6 right now", "I'm on Module 10 right now". It gives people a feeling of a home base within their membership.

STU: Lastly, as we begin to wrap up Jon, I want to talk to you about some of the plans that you have for the future. Then I'm going to give a recap of everything and then come back to you for some final thoughts.

First, before we get to the recap, can you share with us some of the things that you're looking to add, subtract, experiment with or looking to improve within your membership site?

JON: I think for us, because of the low price point, the big push has to be backend products, upsells and generating more revenue.

Again, if we were charging \$199 a month I guess I wouldn't be worried about it, but because we're not, we do have to do what we can to increase the lifetime value of each customer while giving them something that they really need.

I mentioned earlier that one of the pitfalls of a site like this is when you're giving so much content it becomes very difficult to sell more content to these people. They've already gotten the huge mega-order of French fries and they're a third of the way through it. At that point you're not going to be able to sell more French fries at that point.

So, what you have to do is come up with things that complement the content inside your site. For us, and I think for almost any information-based site, what we've learned is that people really, really want personal attention and personal access to the experts within the site (and they're willing to pay for it).

We have a mentorship program that has been very low key, but it's going to become much bigger. People can, at various levels from low to high, gain real access to an expert who can take them by the hand as opposed to simply just reading the material on the Clubhouse.

I think that's the future. What people want is community but what they want even more is access to the guru. They want that expert. They want somebody who's got their back. So, a lot of our backend products will be focused along those lines. Whether it's individual coaching or whether it's an

inner circle kind of group or through interactive webinars. It's going to be a lot more hand holding and personal attention. That's really where we're going now.

The other thing, just in general, is to just continually improve what we already have. Like I said, hitting every contact point, improving the referral system, making the site clearer to understand, making a clear path through membership, etc. Membership sites are constantly just a work in progress.

***“Membership sites are constantly
just a work in progress.”***

STU: Well, Jon, I want to thank you so much.

JON: Actually Stu, I want thank you. I've said this to you in the past but I want to thank you on behalf of a lot of people who had the opportunity to re-invent their business because of what you guys have done. The way you've priced WishList Member and the support you give and the fact that we keep getting updates, I just think you're really to be commended.

You've impacted a lot of people. And I know, we were able to jump off a dying curve and onto a thriving curve and the reason we could do it was WishList Member. So thank you.

STU: It means a lot to hear you say that and I really do appreciate it.

I'm going to give everybody a recap of some of the things that we've talked about and then I'm going to hand it back to you, Jon, for some final thoughts.

----- JON BARD INTERVIEW RECAP -----

We've been talking with Jon Bard, the founder of CBIClubhouse.com, which is a membership site that helps children book authors create their children's book, publish them and sell them.

Now, this originally was an offline membership, and it started way back in 1995 and transitioned to an online membership around 2008.

The difference here is when you hear Jon, at the beginning he said “content is cheap.” One of the things that he realized was that the future is in creating community. Creating a framework which people can learn and interact with others and go through that adventure with each other. He said the original newsletter itself just became part of the membership site. Now the community is really the glue that keeps everybody there.

The tough thing for them though was that they are catering towards writers, specifically of children’s books. This type of market just doesn’t spend a lot of money, especially in a tough economy. To get over this, they priced their membership at a low price point. It’s less than \$42.00 a year or \$4.49 a month.

The focus for them was not on a high registration price but more on volume. They needed to get a lot more people into their membership and they’ve certainly done that. They now have thousands and thousands of members that are a part of the CBI Clubhouse community.

Originally they filled the site with old articles that they had from their back issues of their newsletters, but now they have a whole lot more in terms of content. The key is that they’re providing it in different formats as different people learn in different ways.

Jon said, “we have articles, videos, podcasts and audio interviews, eBooks and reports.” He said he even provides screen capture videos showing people how to do different things and use different tools. All of which is focused on helping his audience write their children’s book.

The key here is they have a wide range of ways to deliver their content and they find out what people want, how they want it and then they deliver it to them.

But that comes with a warning. Jon said, “Yes, you can pack your site so full of content and over-deliver and over-deliver, but you can run the risk of a couple of mistakes.”

“One mistake is having too much content.”

One mistake is having “too much content”. This makes it very tough to create backend products. The other thing is, too much content can also overwhelm your members – and overwhelm leads to cancellations.

There are a number of things that CBI Clubhouse has done to prevent overwhelm with its new members including:

- 1. Creating A Quick Start Guide** – This is something that helps walk new members through the key steps for success. It gets them taking action right away.
- 2. Welcome Video** – This welcomes new members and reassures them that they've made the right decision in joining this community.
- 3. More Organized Content** – Jon and his team have worked hard to try to organize all of the content so that their members can find what they want and they can find it easily.
- 4. Use The Language Of The Market** - The other key thing is Jon uses the “language” of the market. Specifically they have an area on their site that says 'Feeling overwhelmed? Click here.' They're answering the objections upfront of their members and they're giving them clear instructions on what to do next.

With a site that contains thousands of members, it's inevitable that you'll have members with different skill sets. Jon's site is no different. They have people who are just beginning. They also have very advanced users. But he said the majority of their members would be considered “beginners” and that's what his site caters to.

They do have areas of the site where the advanced members know they can access more advanced content, specifically within the **PDF** newsletter that goes out each and every month.

However, at the end of the day, Jon repeatedly indicated that your site is always going to be a work in progress. He is always asking himself “how can I simplify the site? How can I make it easier for my members?”.

He said one of the things to realize is that you can't always predict the issues and problems that you're going to have when you have a membership site.

One of the biggest headaches for him in the beginning was just the WordPress password retrieval process. It was a nightmare in the way that it operated and the types of passwords that it was creating for his members. This one issue alone caused a lot of confusion and therefore a lot of support.

But there was a free plug-in that was available that immediately made Jon's life a lot easier. It's called 'Improved User Experience'. It saved him upwards of three hours a day of support, just with one simple solution.

Jon went on to explain that although you can't always predict the types of issues you're going to have within your membership site, be sure to look for a solution regardless because they are out there. The point being, don't be afraid to launch because of "potential" issues.

Then we talked about the dynamic that he has within his membership site when dealing with so many members. The great part is that running a site with thousands of members is actually very similar to when they began with just a few members. The site is scalable so it's easy to grow. They don't have a lot of social elements that require more hands-on attention which makes his site easier to scale. Because of that, it really has maintained a consistent feel throughout it's time online.

One of the things that they do to cultivate community includes creating a profile for their members. This was a very important distinction that Jon made in that he said it's important to make your members the stars of your site. Feature them in a prominent location and make them the stars.

In Jon's case, they feature the books that their members are publishing as well as conduct interviews with their members. He said before they looked outside of the membership for guests that they could interview and work with. He said that was important in the beginning because they needed to get credibility. They needed to have some big names within the community. Now, they find a lot more of their people within the site for the in depth interviews and spotlights.

They also use Shoutbox, which is a method to collect questions from their members and a way for them to respond and answer them. By answering the questions, it shows the community that you're listening, that you're aware, you're there for them and that you're certainly looking to help them.

The other thing that Jon said that they're looking to do as far as cultivate their community is to really get behind a cause. He said give your members some responsibility. It helps mobilize your members so that they're there for so much more than just the content. They're there for each other and they're there and working together for a particular cause.

"Give your members some responsibility."

In terms of communication, CBI Clubhouse communicates often with their members. They send an email to their members every time a new newsletter is produced and they then highlight content, hot discussions and generally inform their members of what's going on.

One of the things going forward that Jon wants to implement are more points of contact. Even with little things like the page redirects within your membership site or your lost password email. Any type of communication that is being sent to your members, whether it be spontaneous piece of communication or automated, be sure to look for opportunities where you can highlight other content, overcome objections, encourage referrals, and upsell different products or services. Look at all the points of contact and look for areas where you can improve.

Another thing Jon shared was the importance of taking a step back and looking at your membership site from a big picture. Often we get so close to it, and we're deeply involved in the details. At the end of the day you just have to launch your site. You're never going to have it perfect right from the get-go.

Jon said that you've got to be aware that you have to have thick skin regarding cancellations. Don't take it personally. Look at it as an opportunity.

One of the things I loved was Jon's description of his 'hold' level. They don't call it a 'cancel' level. Instead, they have a 'hold' level and they still communicate with those people so that they stay on the radar of those people. In fact, sometimes they send them free gifts just to stay on their radar, and this certainly goes a long way to continuing that relationship - even if somebody cancels within their membership.

**“They don't call it a
“cancel” level.
Instead, they have a
“hold” level..”**

As far as marketing goes, they certainly had an advantage with the fact that they had a sister site called Write4Kids.com, which was ranked really well within the search engines for this particular market. Even to this day they continue to use that site to channel people from the search engines to CBI Clubhouse.

In addition, they also do things like guest posting on other sites to help generate more traffic. One thing however that Jon did not agree with was the use of social media for marketing purposes. He believes that social media is

very overrated from a marketing perspective and that the time would be better spent elsewhere.

The big thing that they're looking to focus on moving forward is generating more referrals. They plan to create more word of mouth by making it easy for their members to spread the word.

“Some people just won't stay, and that's ok.”

As far as retention goes, Jon made it clear that some people just won't stay and that's okay. You can still use that as an opportunity by asking who do they think would be interested in this particular site? That was a very important little marketing message there.

He said also developing a common cause binds your members together. If they left, you want them feeling like they would miss the community aspect. The stronger the connection they have with you and the others within the site, the less likely they will leave.

Jon went on to say that utilizing social proof works well for retention. Show that your other members are having success using the content shared within your site. Showcase your members often and you'll find your retention will go up.

Another retention strategy Jon uses is the CBI Challenge. This gives new members a clear path of step-by-step instructions of what to do when you're at different points. It provides them a starting point to work from and people can go through the material at their own pace and along the way, they can discuss and share their experiences.

As far as conversion tips and tricks go, one of the things that worked really well for Jon on his salesletter is they have the “latte” comparison. It makes it easy to see the value built within the membership and it makes the decision of buying or joining the membership a no-brainer.

Moving forward, some of the things they're looking to do is to create more backend products to increase the lifetime value of the customers and to generate more revenue.

Now they're coming up with more complementary products and what they've noticed is that people will pay for more for personal access. People like having access to the expert who will help take them by the hand and they are willing to pay extra for that access.

So there has been lots of great information shared by Jon and I truly hope that while reading this you have taken some notes and action points upon which you can apply to your own membership – I know I have!

----- END OF THE INTERVIEW RECAP -----

STU: Jon, I want to thank you very, very much. As I was going through that recap I kept thinking, there are so many good nuggets in here and things that I can immediately apply to my own membership.

Now I'd like to get some final thoughts from you.

What advice would you give for people who are starting a new membership or who already have an existing membership to make it that much more successful?

JON: First of all I would invite any of the WishList folks who have questions or thoughts or need a little advice of their own, to go ahead and just visit the site, CBIClubhouse.com. Use the contact form and drop me a line. I'd be happy to talk to you. Also people who have joint venture ideas or anything like that. I'm always listening.

The key advice I think I would give is for people to understand what it is that you're really building.

What we mean by community. The metaphor that I like to use is 'gated community'. The internet is still this giant, sprawling, ugly, crazy city with all kinds of neighborhoods that you can't figure out and where you're constantly getting bombarded.

You're getting emails from everyone and everywhere you go there's information overload and social media this and social media that.

What you really want to create with your site is a respite, an oasis, a quiet place where people can go and get what they need. A place where they know they're not going to get spammed, because it's a closed community.

What WishList does very, very well is keep those unwanted people out.

One of things we do is when people sign up, we require their usernames to be their real names. That way people actually have to stand behind everything they post. You're not going to get just a lot of silliness and arguing and flaming when you do that. It creates a safe place for our members. It's a quiet, calm place. It's a respite from the rest of the world where they're surrounded by likeminded people.

That's why we give them a nickname. That's why they're the Fighting Bookworms. I highly recommend that people come up with a fun nickname that people will want to call themselves and create an image to suit that.

Create a nice, calm, quiet oasis from the rest of the internet where people will feel good about being. Where they'll take a break from their day to come there and look at the content and see what other people have posted on the message board and feel like they can breathe.

I think no matter what kind of material you're providing and what kind of community you're trying to build, keep that thought in mind. Make it a quiet, calm, gated community where people can take a break from the rest of their day. That will become very, very valuable. As valuable as the information you're providing.

STU: Well said, my friend.

I couldn't agree with you more. An awesome interview and I really do thank you, Jon. You certainly have a lot of experience with this and I really appreciate you sharing it with our listeners.

JON: My pleasure Stu.

Profile Information

Name: Jon Bard

Website: www.CBIClubhouse.com