



[Welcome to the Writers' Rough Draft Podcast, where I climb behind the glamorous book launch world of successful writers and entrepreneurs and into the mind of folks like you who are just getting their start. Equal parts witty writing information and unabashed content curiosity—with a healthy dose of laughter thrown in—my conversations with these pros shares some of the trials, tips, and techniques that others have used to help you build your writing and content and establish you as a leader in your field.]

[I'm your host, Elisa Doucette, and I'm here to talk about all of that and have some fun with Ann Handley today. You can find the links, resources and transcript of our chat on the website at CraftYourContent.com/episode18.]

Elisa: Ann Handley is a best-selling author, veteran digital content creator and manager, columnist for multiple online and print publications, and former business journalist and editor. She serves as the chief content officer for the award-winning marketing site, MarketingProfs. Her recent book, *Everybody Writes*, has hit bestseller lists across the country, including the Wall Street Journal. Previously, she co-authored the wildly successful book *Content Rules* with C.C. Chapman, just gone on to be translated into nine languages. Her articles and columns have appeared in multiple places such as Entrepreneur Magazine, LinkedIn Influencers, The Huffington Post, Mashable, American Express Open Forum, and more.

She's been named a top blogger and the most influential woman in social media by Forbes. Previously, she pioneered the art of Digital Marketing by co-founding the company ClickZ, one of the first interactive sources of interactive marketing news and commentary. But my personal favorite adoration of Ann comes direct from a simple quote tossed on her Twitter profile, where she states she is “waging a war on content mediocrity.”

Thanks so much for taking the time to chat with me today, Ann. Is there anything I missed in there?

Ann: Oh my gosh! I don't think so, no. But I thank you for that. That was a very, very generous introduction.

Elisa: Definitely not generous. It's mostly all pulled from your “about” pages and the stuff you've done, so it's just all condensed into a really long narrative.

Ann: All right. Well, it's thorough then.

Elisa: So, starting at the beginning of that narrative, because you do have an extremely storied and tenured experience in online marketing and content. How did you get started in all of this? Take us way back to the beginning.

Ann: Oh, well way back to the beginning when I was eight years old, I wrote in my diary that I wanted to be a writer. But I spelled it with two T's, so I wanted to be a “writer”. I've always wanted a writer. I've always wanted to be a content creator in the modern vernacular. And when I was in elementary school, I started collecting pen pals. I would go out and just get pen pals from all over the world; so I had a pen pal in Malaysia, I had one in Australia, I had one in New Jersey—of all the foreign places—just all over. At the height, I think I had somewhere between eight and ten.

The reason I did that is because, to me, I always needed an audience for my writing. And so at the time, being a child growing up in the Boston suburbs, the only audience that I could really think to create on



my own letters was through pen pals. So things like writing in a diary or keeping a journal were never interesting to me. What was interesting to me was writing and producing content, so to speak, for other people. And so that's the way and I sort of grew an audience.

Elisa: That's really interesting, because it does speak a lot to the types of writing and content that you do—that you started out, granted, writing for an audience, but you started out communicating with people rather than starting out writing stories and different things.

Ann: Right. And the funny thing about that was that I always had... one of the things that I talked about in both books (both in *Content Rules* and *Everybody Writes*) is, I talk a lot about telling true stories well. So for me, the idea of creating fiction never held much allure; it's always been about non-fiction for me. I always wanted to share real-life stories; whether that's on behalf of myself or brands or whatever. And so when I was a child, when I was doing this whole pen pal routine, it got boring to me writing for eight or ten or twelve times about my life in all these various letters; so instead, I started inventing lives to write about. So I invented this version of reality of my own truth.

And to keep it all straight, I had a notebook where I write down who are my siblings, who are my pets, where do I live... Am I on a farm? Am I in an apartment? It's pretty complicated and pretty weird when I think about it now, but on the other hand, the narrative that I think applies just as well to today was that I was always writing it to an audience, being very clear in what I was communicating, how I was communicating it and at the same time, sort of telling this story of my life. Of course, most of those lives were invented at the time, which I don't do anymore. But it was a great lesson, I think, in sort of creating what marketers would call a “persona,” and then writing to that audience. So having a very audience-centric point of view was sort of always my jam, you know?

Elisa: Yeah, definitely. And you also had the kind of brilliant... I have to say, when I was as an eight-year-old, I told a ton of stories. My parents like to share the story of a fourth grade project where I got up and read a report that I had written, and read literally three pages of this report, sat back down at the table and the teacher walked over, picked up the paper, and realized I had only written a paragraph.

Ann: Oh, okay.

Elisa: So just on the fly, I've made up the entire report to like, read out loud at parent-teacher conferences...

Ann: Wow!

Elisa: Which, my parents tell that story, I think like half in pride and like half in like, “Our daughter may be pathological.”

Ann: Wow, that's amazing!

Elisa: There's like a thin line, but...

Ann: Geez. I thought it was pathological with the pen pals.

Elisa: But you were smart enough to do the research and the organization to keep it all in track as well. Which is kind of brilliant for an eight year old; we're mostly worried about things like, “Don't eat too much mud.”



Ann: Well yeah, like if you think about that, I mean, I had a content strategy almost for everybody. It's like, I laid out the kind of information that I was going to give them and what I was going to do. I sort of had a whole plan around it, which sounds pretty hilarious, actually. I still have that notebook, by the way, and someday I'll have to share it. But I do think that the idea of really writing for an audience (since we are all business people, since we all represent an organization of some kind), I think representing with your audiences in mind is a lesson that I learned really, really early on.

Elisa: So kind of fast-forwarding from the eight-year old with the pen pals and the notebooks to like, high school and university, how did your writing change and grow from that first pen-palling experience?

Ann: You know, I never really studied writing in school. I mean, I was an English major, so I studied a lot of English. And I was a journalism major, so I studied traditional journalism and communications and that kind of thing. And one of the reasons why I never really took to journalism—although I worked as a journalist for a number of years when I was both in college as an intern and then just after I graduated—I started on working for a business newspaper in Boston, and then eventually went on to become a freelancer for lots of different publications including the Boston Globe. So I did have a career in journalism, but honestly, it's like it never quite fit my storytelling soul, you know? It always felt to me like it was just too fact-based. I needed time to sort of tell the story, the setup. To sort of build that rapport with an audience. Which you don't really get in journalism, I mean, traditional journalism and hard news journalism.

Elisa: Well, yeah, there's that kind of fourth wall and objective and...

Ann: Yeah. I was always much more interested in the feature writing kind of thing; of telling the stories of really interesting people, and connecting those people with an audience. I wanted to let the audience know why you should care about this issue or this person as opposed to just straight reporting. So I didn't last for very long in news; they transferred me almost immediately to features because that's really where my heart was.

And so in high school and in college, and just after college, I did a lot of journalism-ish sort of stuff and then from there, went on to—as I mentioned—doing lots of freelance writing. When my kids were born, I stopped working full time for newspapers because it was just too hard for me to try to balance all of that. It was just easier to have a freelancer's life at that point.

And then in 1997, when my now eighteen-year-old daughter was a newborn, I founded a website, as you mentioned, called ClickZ.com, which really became one of the first sources of online marketing advice for businesses and organizations.

Elisa: How did you make the decision? I mean, 1997—you were right on the bubbling, cutting edge, kind of one of the pioneers who was smart enough to know what was coming. How did you get to be so smart?

Ann: I love this interview! I'll listen to this when I'm having a bad day or when I'm feeling stupid and fat. You know, I guess it's following my gut. You know, really, that sounds kind of cliché, but I think it's very true—my learning to trust my instincts. You know, I had an instinct that journalism was not going to be the place for me. Because even then in 1997, journalism was changing; newspapers were contracting, they were laying off lots of editors, they were offering early retirement to some of my favorite editors of



the globe. So I had a sense that things were really shifting there. And from a personal point of view, my heart wasn't really in that either (for the reasons that I've mentioned) but also for my own personal family reasons. Like I said, I just didn't think I could sustain that.

And so when the internet happened, I just was like, "Wow!" I mean, it just hit me. This is a really, really interesting place to be a publisher essentially. And so the idea of being able to publish and grow audiences directly without having to go through a traditional publication like a newspaper or a magazine... You know, to me, that was really, really exciting. So the fact that my business partner and I at the time could just put up a publication (which was a newsletter essentially or a website) —I was just like, blown away by that power.

And honestly, not to sound too Pollyanna, but I still am. I still am blown away by the fact that we live in an age where we can build audiences ourselves directly, without going through some sort of gatekeeper; without sort of having printing press in a distribution network. You know, just do it yourself! I mean, that's an amazing opportunity, and I think we're only beginning to understand really what that means.

Elisa: Speaking of this "understanding what that means" kind of thing, in 1997, what did that mean? I mean, I was also beginning to get online. I've found the brilliance of the internet called Geocities.

Ann: Oh, yeah!

Elisa: Which, unfortunately, is not nearly as prolific as yours, but I had some awesome sites with some great dancing unicorns and sparkles. But you kind of saw beyond the sparkly dancing unicorns. How did you build up this kind of audience in this world, when everyone else was just kind of staring with big-eyed wonder at what was out there?

Ann: That's so funny that you mentioned Geocities. I remember about Geocities and AngelFire. The original Netscape Navigator—remember how that looked? And I was almost allergic to that kind of stuff because I didn't have a technology background. As I've said, my background was in journalism and so that almost confused me. I didn't quite get... You know, remember the websites that they were so confusing and the looked... You went through them and it's like, "What do you do now?" So my philosophy—and actually, it's something that I've carried through to this day—was to be much more of a traditional publisher.

So, the early iterations of ClickZ looked like a magazine homepage or a magazine table of contents. So that's essentially what it looked like, and then you would click through. That was our model, was to really think about how we can use the web for our traditional publishing. And I don't know that it was really based on anything other than: that's what I knew. That's what we were comfortable with. And my job, my role there as Chief Content Officer, was really to handle the content side of things. I didn't touch the technology side of it. And I really didn't understand it because it was all very nascent for everybody, but it was especially new to me, because as I've said, my background was so heavily entrenched in publishing that that's where I actually went when I went online.

Elisa: So in a place where everyone else was, as you said, putting up these hideously cluttered and scary various websites and different things, and you were really kind of stepping out on a ledge a little bit and putting out this more content-based world, how did you feel about people kind of taking that stuff in? Like you really were doing something different than what everyone else was doing. I think that's



something that's sometimes scary for people as their creating content or finding things to say, is being that person who's kind of going against the grain— in an elegant way. Not like, “I'm so cool, I'm usurping the man,” or whatever way.

Ann: Yeah. I don't know that it was as much going against the grain. We didn't have any sense that we were really pioneering, at least from an approach; we didn't have a sense that we were pioneering that. I mean, there were certainly other publications who we were inspired by at the time, like Salon for example; the very early iterations of Salon was a publication that I looked at quite a bit, because first of all I liked it, I read it, I had respect for it. But also their approach in a different industry—I mean, in a different vertical. They were general news and culture and that kind of thing. But it was very similar to ours, in a sense that having a traditional journalism approach to online publishing.

And there were other publications that were in our verticals; ChannelSeven was another one. They're no longer around, but they were very similar to what we were doing at the time. Industry Standard was another one; they were looking at the technology and internet space—the digital space. So there were other publications, so I don't need to say that we were the only ones who were approaching it that way. But I do think that in online marketing, what we were trying to do was really teach people how to use the internet to market, and through giving them information that they would find useful, which was essentially what I still think the best publications out there do.

Elisa: At that time, there weren't... and maybe I'm misremembering it, is you know, a few years since 1997, and, of course, we're both so young that we were like, barely even there when it was happening but people weren't making a lot of money online with that kind of stuff. They were more just putting out content and experiencing like the excitement of, as you said, people actually being able to—around the world—read whatever they said with a click.

Ann: Yeah.

Elisa: So you've got a houseful of kids, you're doing freelance writing work, you are also running this business... How did find ways to cram that all into a twenty-four-hour day?

Ann: That's funny. When I think back on that now, it was kind of insane, because as you mentioned when we first started talking about ClickZ, it was pre-bubble—Amazon was like \$350/share or something like that—it was insane. There was all this activity, and everything was very frantic. Everything felt frantic online. And as I said, at the same time, I had young children at home and it was kind of nuts. So, I think we used to joke that we were powered by Starbucks. I seriously think, like, I barely slept during those years. They burned me out pretty bad because it was three years that I had ClickZ, from inception to time that we sold it, to what was then Internet.com. And it was a lot. I felt completely burnt out. And then after that, I took two years off, essentially to recover, to reconnect with my family and also try to get a little bit of my soul back. Well, I exaggerated; I didn't lose my soul, but it definitely was a very sort of frantic period, and I felt very stretched, so I just needed to take some time and recover a little bit. And then started looking around and got into—at that point, I joined MarketingProfs, CEO and Founder Allen Weiss, who [17:21] when I was at ClickZ.

Elisa: The burnout... that's something that I definitely struggle with myself, is kind of this “push me, pull me” of trying to get stuff created and be the idea person and get stuff done. And then also running the business side of things because, shockingly, the world works in the way that you need money to do



things. And then also, this really random other piece that some people like to have that's called, like, having a personal life.

Ann: Yeah.

Elisa: And I think that many people who are trying to wear all of those hats (or even some of those hats), hit this kind of “burnout” place. Do you remember anything specifically other than just spending time with your family, and kind of regrouping and everything, that kind of pulled you out of the burnout and back into a place where you actually wanted to start doing this stuff again?

Ann: Well, it's funny; I never really stopped even during those years at ClickZ. When I was at ClickZ, I wrote a weekly column. I was always still writing and creating content about lots of things. That, to me, is just something that I do. The writing and the creating aspect—I need to do that, so I just do it. And I also did that even when I was refueling and recharging. The business part of it was the part that I really felt burned out on. Leading a team and running, it takes a lot out of a person—especially during those years when it was so sort of insane. There's this tension to it. So I think just not having to deal with that and just letting it go, sort of [19:00] it off like a second skin, that actually felt really good. And then to me, the piece about creating, I do that for joy. I would do that no matter what. You know that saying, “Do what you do for money what you would do anyway”? I've completely just butchered that quote.

Elisa: You rewrote it to be wonderful, we'll go with it.

Ann: I wrote it to be 95% more awkward. But I do think that there is a lot of truth to that. “Do what you love and the money will come” is probably another way of saying it. But I would be a writer and a content creator whether I get paid for it or not. So I think that, to me, is the key. That's never anything I had to recover from—that's what I use to recover. If that makes sense.

Elisa: Yeah. Definitely. So now you're at MarketingProfs, you're working as their Chief Content Officer. What does that look like? What does a Chief Content Officer for an organization do? I think lots of people would love to have one or work with one themselves.

Ann: Yeah. I think it depends on the organization. I mean, I gave myself this title. I always say that I was the world's first Chief Content Officer when I was at ClickZ. I sort of made it up and now it's become sort of a thing and lots of organizations have Chief Content Officers. And so I've been in marketing since 2002 and I've been the Chief Content Officer here for as many years.

So what it means to our organization is essentially a person to head up all the content here. So that means that everything that we publish or produce in any way—so, our podcasts, our seminars, our live event in the fall that we do every year in Boston, anything that we publish on the website—all of that is under me. And I have a team of incredibly talented and wonderful people who work with me to actually produce it on just sort of, you know... I'm pretty much just helping them in whatever way that I can, and otherwise, just staying out of their way.

Elisa: I find that working with teams of people, that somehow ends up being the best way to lead them: is kind of just giving them stuff and being like, “Just let me know if anything breaks really bad.”

Ann: Yeah, and the other thing is (and I know you'll appreciate this is too) is it's like marketing process is virtual. And I think the big reason why I've been able to sort of maintain sanity here in ways that I just couldn't when I was at ClickZ, I mean, in part because the place is different. But you know, I mean in



other ways, growing business is growing business. And MarketingProfs is a very profitable, growing business; we now have about forty people who work here. So it's not a small startup anymore; we don't have a handful of people working in a garage.

But what does help me in terms of keeping that sort of balance, not only in my life but also that balance that I need to sort of give myself space and time to write, so what helps me is the fact that we are virtual. Like, right now, I will just paint this picture for you because I think you'd appreciate it, but I'm sitting here like in my pajamas, essentially. And there's a fire going because it's really cold here in Boston. I'm in my living room and it's very, very peaceful and very nice. And so I balance that and using all kinds of digital tools, online tools, to connect with the teams who are part of MarketingProfs. And also, I do a little bit of travel. So the balance in my life is actually pretty nice right now to sort of maintain and sustain all of that.

Elisa: Well, I don't wanna take that balance away from you, Ann, but I'm going to because I think that's a perfect segue into the next section of this interview, which is a fun little game I like to play with folks. It's super easy. Over the next two minutes, I'm going to ask you a series of either/or questions, so you have to choose one or the other. We're completely uprooting your sense of balance, I'm very sorry.

Ann: Okay.

Elisa: But I want you to answer with the first thing that pops into your mind. And we're going to try to get through as many as we can to get a little sneak peek into the secret thoughts of your writer's mind.

Ann: Oh, lord. This fills me with anxiety, I have to tell you.

Elisa: As I've said, it's super fun. And the questions are pretty easy, so you'll be fine. Are you feeling ready?

Ann: All right, let's do it!

Elisa: All right. Let's go. Pen or pencil?

Ann: Sharpie.

Elisa: Mac or PC?

Ann: Mac.

Elisa: Coffee or tea?

Ann: Coffee.

Elisa: Night or morning?

Ann: Oh, my god. It's like between 10:00 and 10:15 in the morning, that's my only good time.

Elisa: Good writing or correct writing?

Ann: Good writing.

Elisa: Noise or silence?

Ann: Silence.



Elisa: Lefty or righty?

Ann: Lefty.

Elisa: Weird or typical?

Ann: Weird.

Elisa: School or no school?

Ann: I would have to go with school, I think.

Elisa: Outside or inside?

Ann: Outside for sure.

Elisa: Clean or messy?

Ann: I would say an ordered messy.

Elisa: Teacher or student?

Ann: Student.

Elisa: Town or city?

Ann: City.

Elisa: Trains or planes?

Ann: Oh my God, trains, by far.

Elisa: Skiing or surfing?

Ann: Surfing.

Elisa: Fantasy or reality?

Ann: Reality.

Elisa: Love or money?

Ann: Always love.

Elisa: Introvert or extrovert?

Ann: Introvert.

Elisa: Good content or good marketing?

Ann: Well, actually I think those are the same thing in my world, but I would say good content.

Elisa: Smile or game face?

Ann: Smile.

Elisa: Call or text?



Ann: Text.

Elisa: Money or fame?

Ann: Fame, probably.

Elisa: Be older than you are now or younger than you are now?

Ann: I don't know. I'm kind of really happy where I am. Can I do a third by on that one?

Elisa: Sure. You're actually the third person to say that.

Ann: Really?

Elisa: Yeah. Think before you talk or talk before you think?

Ann: Overthinking before I talk.

Elisa: All right, there is two minutes. So the time is up, but we did cut off right before my favorite question. So since it's my show, I'm going to ask you it anyways.

Ann: Okay.

Elisa: Have a dragon or be a dragon?

Ann: Oh! That's a good one! I would like to have a dragon, actually.

Elisa: I like the appeal of being able to use the power of a dragon.

Ann: Yeah! Because who doesn't want a little dragon, like, sitting on the couch next to you? That would be nice.

Elisa: Exactly. And I spent far too much on beauty products to ever have to deal with scaly skin, so.

Ann: As soon as I said that, by the way, my little dog who was sitting on the couch beside me just gave me an eyeball. She's like, "What?!"

Elisa: "What are you talking about, mom?"

Ann: "What dragon? I'm here! There's no room for a dragon."

Elisa: "I will eat the dragon." [25:35]

Ann: That's funny!

Elisa: Well, thank you again for taking the time to join me today, Ann. Where can folks find your writing and business and other things?

Ann: You can find anything that you wanna know about me at annhandley.com. Or you could just listen to your lovely intro again, because that pretty much says it all too. But no, I'm at annhandley.com. I'm on Twitter as [@annhandley](https://twitter.com/annhandley) or [@marketingprofs](https://twitter.com/marketingprofs). So, either one works, but you can find all of that at annhandley.com.

Elisa: Fantastic. And do you have any parting thoughts, kind of any wisdom that you could impart to me or for other listeners on the show?



Ann: So one of my mantras for 2015 is that we don't need more content, we need *better* content. So I would encourage anybody who's listening to this who is creating content or who has created content—either on behalf of themselves, or maybe directing it on behalf of their organizations, or whatever—to really try to internalize that in 2015. To really, as you said, you know... I am waging a war on content mediocrity and I just feel like we don't need more content—we need better content. So I'm imploring everybody in 2015 to really adopt that as well.

Elisa: Fantastic! Well, thank you so much, and have a great day!

Ann: All right! Thank you so much for having me.

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[Outtake]

Elisa: It's like, well, just don't write mediocre content; write actual good shit.

Ann: Right! Don't suck!