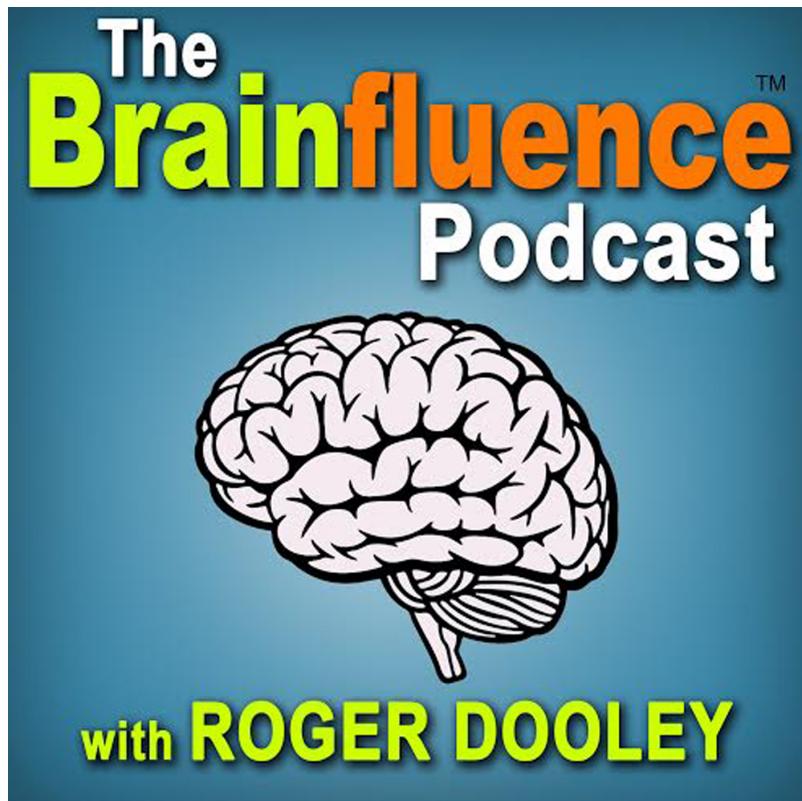


How to Grow Your List from 500 to 250,000 in Three Years with Nathan Ellering



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Roger Dooley

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How to Grow Your List from 500 to 250,000 in Three Years with Nathan Ellering

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. Today's guest is Nathan Ellering, and he's going to teach us how to attract new readers and subscribers. Nathan is a writer and marketer, and he heads up CoSchedule's Demand Generation Team. In just three years, he's grown the CoSchedule blog audience from 500 to over 250,000 monthly subscribers. He's also a prolific guest poster with content insights like MailChimp, Social Media Examiner, Spin Sucks, MarketingProfs, and more.

Nathan is going to share the exact techniques that led to the amazing subscriber growth at CoSchedule, or at least as many as we can cram into the time that we have.

Remember, that we always post a transcript of our conversation on the show notes page at RogerDooley.com/podcast, so if you forget some nugget of wisdom from Nathan, you can go there and read it or download it. Nathan, welcome to the show.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, thanks for having me, Roger. It's awesome to be here.

Roger Dooley: So Nathan, just to set the stage, what kind of business is CoSchedule? Just so our readers can understand what it is that you're trying to draw first your readership, and ultimately presumably you want to convert those readers into buyers.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, yeah, definitely. CoSchedule is a marketing calendar tool and what we try to do is to help people

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organize all of their marketing projects and social media projects all in one place. So, it's kind of like a collaboration project management tool, but specifically built for marketers to help them hit their deadlines. It's a piece of software.

Roger Dooley: Great. So, it's mostly a B2B product then?

Nathan Ellering: That is exactly right, yep.

Roger Dooley: Okay, well great. Nathan, it sounds like you were pretty much at ground zero when you started at CoSchedule, at least in terms of blog subscribers. Was the reason the subscriber list so small just the age of the company, they hadn't been around for long? Or, was it lack of good content? Or, not enough emphasis on conversion?

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, I think basically right when I started, we were brand new. When you're brand new, you need to start communicating that you exist, right? So, that was our problem at the beginning. I don't even know if that's a problem. That's just any business when you're brand new, you have zero ... We had zero page views, we had zero email subscribers, we had zero customers to begin with, but we started building that by publishing content right off the bat.

Roger Dooley: So what were the first steps you took to really start the flywheel going? Because I think we've all had those situations where we've got a website that's doing very low traffic and we put content out there, and it really doesn't seem to get traction for a long time. I mean, eventually maybe Google finds it and you get a trickle of visitors and it grows slowly and organically but now at the kind of rate you're talking about, so what are some of the first things that you did to generate that immediate demand? 'Cause

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of course, once you have traffic, it's in certain ways easier to get more traffic, but what are the first things you did?

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. Actually, we published content before we ever wrote a line of code for the software that we provide. So, when we started, what we wanted to do was find startup companies would call a "product market fit." We started writing about the idea behind the tool right away, just to see if there was even an audience who would be interested in that.

So, that's a unique thing that we've done, is we didn't just run with this idea and build something and invest lots of money and lots of resources, lots of time into something that we didn't know was going to be really, really powerful and really useful for our audience. So, we went after finding the audience before we even built the product.

So, some of those early posts were just like, "Hey, wouldn't life be nice if you could do this?" We just basically tried to get blog comments and then we'd jump on those blog comments and say, "Hey, tell me more. You gave us this idea. Would you like something like this?" It was a resounding yes or no, and we, from the very beginning, focused on gathering feedback. Even from very few people who would have found our stuff, but that feedback helped us publish more content that was essentially helping us build out the idea behind the product.

So, even though it was small at first, we knew if we could get even a few people interested that there were probably other people who had those similar problems, similar ideas, looking for similar solutions, that we could build,

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basically snowball that audience. So, that's how we started.

Roger Dooley: So it sounds like really there was two takeaways there. One is to just start the content marketing process really early, because I'm sure in 9 cases out of 10, a product is developed and they go to the marketing folks, say, "Okay, you need to get some content marketing going for this new product" and at that point, they're already behind the eight ball in terms of getting a flow of leads in. The other thing is to actually use that content as a point of interaction for designing the product and figuring out what features and so on are most important. So, two good lessons there, I think Nathan.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, absolutely. Just to continue talking about that for a second, Roger, is that a lot of companies who build the product first and then tell marketers to go do their thing, how do they know that their audience actually wants the product to begin with? So, that's the point of doing that, is like your early audience, even when they're not customers, are potential customers. They're prospects, and they're literally telling you exactly what you want in their product, and if you can build something that they already know and want, you're just catering to their needs. It makes the sale way easier. It makes marketing later on easier, which I know we're going to get into, too.

Roger Dooley: Quick question. How did you foster that interaction? It seems like these days, interactions on blogs are down quite a bit. Some blogs have eliminated comments just because they didn't feel it was adding value to what they were offering, and they were tired of dealing with spam and promotion and so on.

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I would say the more common problem is that people read stuff, but they don't bother to comment. How did you foster that interaction?

Nathan Ellering: Essentially what we did was we just published something like, "Wouldn't life be great if you had something like this?" We just literally in the blog post asked the question like, "Leave us a comment" or, "What do you think about this?" We asked for it. It was the call to action. Like, the call to action was not to buy a product, it was not to subscribe to our blog. It wasn't to get on our email list. It was to give us your feedback on this thought.

That's something that we do still to this day, is that every piece only has one call to action. It exists to do one thing, because the second that you ask someone to subscribe to your blog, to buy your product, to share that post on social media, to do whatever else it is, you're inundating them with too many choices. So, what is the number one thing that you want your audience to do? Make that the only call to action in the piece.

Roger Dooley: That's an important point, because I think that if you visit most blogs, you will see prominent calls to action to subscribe everywhere. You'll see them popping up in your face at the bottom, on the side, and maybe at the top, and who knows where else. So, having said that, how do you then build your subscriber base if you're not really focusing on a subscribe call to action?

Nathan Ellering: Right. So, let's fast forward just a little bit here. After we figured out what CoSchedule's audience really wanted in a tool, what we did right away was we shifted our focus. So, phase one was just finding the opportunity. Like, is the audience out there? It's going to be a small audience

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for anyone starting. I mean, you're thinking maybe a couple hundred people would be pretty big actually, because all you're doing is talking about a product.

The way that we built the email list then was like, "All right, we have the product side figured out. Let's start building that. Let's start shipping those features and functionality as fast as we possibly can" and marketing took a pivot. Marketing pivoted to being like, "All right, let's quit writing so much about our product because it's just me, me, me" and we started focusing 100% on the audience.

So, a framework or hack that we came up with is this idea behind the content core. The content core is like that perfect balance between the topics that you want to share or cover, and providing information that your audience literally cares about. So, for an example at CoSchedule, we want to talk about managing marketing projects, right? 'Cause you can do that in CoSchedule, but what we found out from our audience is that they actually really care about just getting organized.

We'd publish topics like, "How to organize every marketing project with a specific process" or something like that. We used this content core to bring people in the door, because we were talking about topics that they really cared about. Then, we changed our calls to action from, "Provide us feedback in the comments" to being every single piece having a specific, what we call ... We actually call it a cookie, 'cause we want to give them something sweet, but the industry has dubbed this term as a content upgrade or maybe bonus content.

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What we'll do is for that piece, like marketing project management, to get organized, we'll provide a free template or kit, like maybe multiple templates, editable templates, things that people really want to execute the advice we're providing. We'll provide that in the form of gated content, in a way. We'll give you these templates in exchange for your email address. When we did that, not just for a blanket pop up that says, "Hey, here's a free eBook."

When we made these templates, these kits, these guides, specifically for every single piece, the context was there, and the number of email subscribers just skyrocketed.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. I think there's a general feeling in the industry that content upgrades are the thing that converts best, assuming they have some value. First that the content itself is valuable and people like it, but then also that the upgrade is somewhat useful, that that converts way better than any kind of other more general appeal to conversion.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. I think that ties into our overall marketing strategy, too, because we are marketing marketing software to marketers, and it's a very ... The industry is bloody with competition, if you know the blue ocean strategy. So, one of the ways that we want to stand out is by publishing the best marketing content on the internet. We won't settle for anything less. It doesn't make sense to publish "Me too" content, so we always think about ways that we can make our stuff better.

So, to your point, the value that is actually useful, that we just didn't throw something together in two minutes, and put it on there, or gate that, because guess what is going to happen? That experience is going to be terrible for the

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person that download that, and they're not going to buy from you anyway. So, we always think about the value that we provide through our marketing reflects in the product that we sell too, so I mean, that's just like a lot of psychology at play there, too.

Like Roger, it's so much fun to talk to you, because I think about the halo effect all the time, and with the halo effect, I think of every single one of our blog posts being the homepage of CoSchedule.

Roger Dooley: One thing about your helpful posts as opposed to the posts that are at least somewhat related to your product, they I'm sure are infinitely more shareable. People aren't going to necessarily share stuff that's talking about your product or features, but if it's something that's truly helpful as to when should you post on Twitter and that sort of thing, they're much more likely to share that with their network.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, absolutely. We definitely notice shares increase over time. Actually, that whole build up was a lot of fun. When we started, there were very few page views, but it was valuable page views. That was the thing that we were focusing on at the beginning, but then after a while, my only goal before we even got to email subscribers, my own goal was to increase page views. Because I saw unique page views as basically votes that, "Hey, I actually like this content. This is good stuff." So, just focusing on that was the right approach for us for a very long time.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. That's really a pretty good metric. I mean, obviously you can look at things like time on site and how far people read and so on, but as a quick and dirty metric, page views is not all that bad. So, I looked in Google and they

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have in your blog section about 1200 pages indexed. Now, there's some post index pages there and author profiles and other stuff, but how many articles do you have? You must have quite a few articles already.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. Man, I don't know. Hard question. I think it's like 500+ blog posts by this point, over the course of three years.

Roger Dooley: Which is not a bad total. How frequently do you try and publish a post?

Nathan Ellering: We are very consistent with the way that we publish. We'll publish at least two of our content marketing style posts, which are always targeted at keywords, and generating the email list. At least two of those every single week. We publish a podcast every single Tuesday. We publish a product blog post which is still continuing to this day, from our early beginnings, like this idea that we need to be communicating the value that CoSchedule provides to the blog audience, that our Demand Generation has built, so we'll publish one of those a week, if not two of those. A lot of times we'll get at least three to five pieces every single week, and some weeks we get up to 10.

Roger Dooley: Wow. Okay, so that's an aggressive schedule, but clearly it's working. How did you see the growth that you experienced occur? Has it been more linear, more exponential?

Nathan Ellering: It has been just very steady, I would say. So, a lot of people like to knock consistency. Like, why publish consistently? You should just publish good content. Well, I argue you should publish good content consistently. That's a great way to build some stamina. So, the way that we did this was this commitment to consistency

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helped us publish lots of content that is all targeted at ranking for very specific keywords.

When you rank for specific keywords, and you rank for not just one, let's say you publish one blog post a month, but you published 20 blog posts a month, and now you rank for 20 blog posts, because you committed to consistency, you have that much more opportunity to bring in organic traffic to your content, that actually from people who actually want to find it.

So, the consistency approach has been a huge part, coupled with search engine optimization, to influence the number of page views, which subsequently influences our number of email subscribers, which subsequently influences our number of customers.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well, it's a good transition because I was going to ask you about SEO, and you've already said that one key to good SEO isn't necessarily so much optimization but just getting a lot of high quality content out there that relates to the keywords that you're targeting. Some ways this probably outweighs any kind of tweaking the page content, but I'm sure you do that, too. What do you do from say an on page SEO standpoint?

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. I mean, when we look at keywords, something that we do all the time is we'll find ... You had brought up the best times to post on social media earlier, Roger. So like, "The best times to tweet." What we found, for example, is we'll target a core keyword, so best times to post on social media. Then, underneath that core keyword are these LSI, latent semantic indexing, or related terms.

So, what we'll do is, to get into your point, is we'll use that core keyword in our page title, in our URL, in our headline

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or H1, and then we'll use all of these LSI, like "The best times to tweet," in our H2. "The best times to post on Facebook," in our H2. What we'll do then is we'll be able to rank not only for that core keyword, but for all of those subsequent smaller keywords, because Google knows that they're all related.

That helps us for even a single blog post like that one, to get literally 200 to 300,000 page views every single month.

Roger Dooley: And that's, you certainly have to love free traffic sent by Google. I mean, you can't always count on it, but when it happens, it's nice. Is there a tool that you use for identifying your keywords and related keywords and so on?

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. We used to use Moz and I think Moz is a great tool for anyone just beginning. It's really easy to understand. But the second that we started getting really robust about this, we switched to Ahrefs. It's a little more spendy but it's 100% worth it for finding these LSI terms, just like a super SEO nerd thing to say, but it works extremely well, that strategy. You can do that strategy with any keyword tool really, but Ahrefs makes it pretty simple.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, there's some good advice right there. So, you've got the content covered by creating this great content, and informing it with your SEO, and you're optimizing your pages. Is there any particular tool you use for that? Is the blog in WordPress?

Nathan Ellering: Yep. We use WordPress.

Roger Dooley: And Yoast probably, or some other tool for on page stuff?

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Nathan Ellering: Exactly, yeah. We use Yoast, and then what we do is we just have a commitment as a team to include those terms. So, what we do is we really strategically choose those terms. We spend a lot of time finding them and then we just trust the team, the writers, to incorporate them in. So, something that we do, this is just like an interesting quip I guess. There's this quote that I love from Abraham Lincoln. He said something along the lines of, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I'll spend the first four sharpening the ax."

Our content can be up to like 14,000 words for a blog post. We will spend so much time just planning it, so that once it's time to actually create it and execute it, it goes extremely fast. We have this, what we call a standard of performance, that we commit to for every piece, to make sure that it is the best piece on this topic, on the internet, that is optimized for keywords, that is optimized to convert any traffic we get into email subscribers. We just commit as a team and we trust each other to do that, and that's been a huge part of our success.

Roger Dooley: So, it'd be fair to say that one key part of the approach to building the list is to create really epic content, first of all. Make sure it's optimized for not just some primary keyword or phrase, but also related keywords and phrases, and then to have a content upgrade as part of that, so that when the traffic rolls in from Google, you're hopefully converting a good chunk of that.

Let's move on to social media. That's certainly another part of the strategy. Is there anything that you do in terms of using social media to drive traffic? Either in terms of sharing, encouraging others to share, and so on?

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Nathan Ellering: Yeah. This is really great. So, we love social media at CoSchedule. It's one of the things that we do all the time. So, I did a lot of research on this topic a while back, and I found out that most marketers, a majority, I think 77% of marketers, spent tons of time creating their content, and then they only share it to social media one time. I was like, "One little tweet for hours that you spent on a piece of content?" Plus, a tweet only lives for 15 seconds. The chances of your 20,000 followers on Twitter all being on at the same time and seeing that, very little.

So, I did a bunch of research and I did a bunch of case studies, and found out that you should just simply share the content that you create to the social networks you use more than once, and you can get up to 3150% more traffic within a single week. That's been a huge part of our strategy.

Roger Dooley: Do you basically use the same text, or do you try and vary the content of the tweet? Both to look different, if somebody's looking at your feed, and also just to hit different audience hot buttons.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. We definitely vary it. So, while you're sharing the same piece, the same core piece of content probably to the same network multiple times, what we recommend is obviously staggering it out throughout the week, and then also switching up the messaging, and the visuals that you do. So, some things that we've noticed perform really well are quotes. A lot of times when you're writing content, you're going to include a quote from someone.

Like, in this episode, we could use the quote from Abraham Lincoln, or since I'm a guest, maybe you could include a quote from me as a tweet. Or like, variance of

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your headline work really well. Not just sharing that same headline over and over again. Controversial stuff works really well, so if you have anything in your content that goes slightly against the grain, that can work out really well for piquing people's interest.

We found out that questions work really well, so those close ended questions that make people answer basically yes or no performed way better for getting traffic. So, example there would be like, "Are you getting the traffic you should be? Yes or no." If you don't think that you are, you're going to answer, "Well, I don't know." So, there's like an inherent promise there that behind this click, I'm going to learn how to get that traffic that I should be getting. Close ended questions work really well. Those are some of the ones that I can think of off the top of my head.

Roger Dooley: I look at that post that you're referring to, and one of the things that surprised me was the level of engagement on the second and third and fourth days, often was not much lower than the first day, which is say contrary to sending out an email or something. It's one and done. The first day there's a high level of engagement, and then after that it drops off, and you couldn't really keep hammering your email list without getting a million unsubscribes.

But in this case, if the tweet generated 15 clicks on the first day, it might generate 15 on the second day, and then again on the third day, mainly because it's a different audience that's seeing it. It's not, "Oh, that thing again." It's something new and different.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, and I think that's the other thing about staggering it over time. Like, let's say you sent your first one right when

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your piece of content published, and it published at 8:00 a.m. in the morning. Well, people have their habits, and you might only hit those people who are looking at it right then. Again, a tweet, I think the lifespan is less than 15 seconds.

So, the second time you share it, why not share it around noon or something when people are taking their lunch break? You probably will hit a different audience among your same follower base who didn't see it the first time, and likely not the same audience who has already seen it. So, there's some social grace to make that happen, too, right?

Roger Dooley: Yeah, and I guess the question, what's the best time to tweet? Is really sort of a non-question because the correct answer isn't 11:37 a.m. It is multiple times during the day when different people are looking, and also there's geography, too. Depending on whether you're dealing with international followers or not, their schedules are going to be way different than your folks in the states.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, definitely. Like, Roger, before we started talking, you said you have a global audience. So, something that would work well for you would be it's very socially acceptable to tweet up to 15 times a day, especially when you stagger it out. Now, that's not sharing that same blog post or that same podcast 15 times in one day, but to share 15 different pieces, and then to stagger your tweets throughout the entire day of a 24 hour cycle, to hit your global audience. That would work really well.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. I was listening to a podcast, I forget who the individual was, but this was a person who had a lot of followers and engagement and whatnot. Probably, I don't

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know, I'm thinking a six figure Twitter following, and what this person was doing was recycling a few hundred tweets, like the same tweets, which to me, seemed like a really annoying practice, but when you consider how Twitter, how few people see any given tweet, and how much churn there is.

Like, in my case, I've got a lot of followers, and a fair number of people I'm following, so I see only the tiniest fraction. In fact, in some tools, I pretty much turned off my whole feed just to follow a few lists, because it's just too distracting. The pace of updating is too fast and you really don't see much, so I'll see people when I fire up the web app, it shows you people that you're following, including probably some of their promotions, too.

What would you think about that strategy of saying, "Okay, I've got this base of some hundreds of tweets here that lead to my useful good content. Let's just keep replaying that 24/7?"

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. I think it's really smart. Something that I say all the time is that content is data. A social media post is data. If you know that that one is connecting with your following in some way, why not recycle that specific one? We already acknowledged that your audience, the concept that they'll see that same thing that you just published, if you recycle it a month later, it's pretty low. The thing is, every single success can help you have more success. Every failure can help you do better next time.

So, what I say all the time at CoSchedule is once we have a big win on something, we will milk it until it's dry. So yeah, I believe a lot in social media automation for that reason, too. I probably won't get into here, but another

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example of this is just to bring up that post, that blog post that I wrote about, the best times to post on social media, we saw that take off. So, we doubled down and we went from I think the original post only analyzed 10 different studies.

I went out and researched and brought it up to 20 studies. Then, what we did was we saw that it was so successful, we decided to write the same post, but for email, the best times to write post on email, or to send email. Then, we applied the same theory to how often to post on social media, and all of those posts have done extremely well. They're all following that similar structure, so basically to reiterate, content is data. Use what you've learned to improve in the future. When you see something work, milk it until it's dry, and then figure out the next thing.

Roger Dooley: I think there's a nugget of information there to the fact that if you've got a successful piece of content, that you can improve it, change it, and republish it, and you're creating good value. It's not annoying. It's a good thing for your readers and it may bring in even more readers, particularly if you've had a chance to say optimize it even better for SEO, or if you've added a better content upgrade, or a content upgrade. It's really a win/win all around.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah. We do that all the time at CoSchedule. One of the things that we talk about is maximize what we have. It's one of our frameworks. Like, we run our company entirely on frameworks, and that's one of them. Maximize what you have. Just because you published a blog post or a social media message months ago doesn't mean that it could have just as big results now.

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Something we do all the time now is we'll repeat webinars. Like, today actually. I'm doing a webinar that I wrote a year ago. From this one webinar that we haven't done in a year, we got 1000+ new subscribers out of the thing, and I didn't have to do anything. Like, it's already there. I'm just going to show up and talk about something that I've already talked about before.

It helps me get 10x results with 10% of the work. So, I definitely advocate that. Optimize what you have, republish it. The chances of your audience who are most active right now having seen that piece that you published a year ago are very slim. Roger, you had mentioned if it still provides value, why not do it? That's what it's all about after all.

Roger Dooley: Nathan, we've been talking mostly about blog posts, although you just brought webinar. How much of your focus these days is on other types of content like audio and video? Do you see that changing and shifting over time?

Nathan Ellering: Yes, I definitely see that shifting. So, this is kind of an interesting thing, but it is my job to make myself obsolete at CoSchedule. When I started at CoSchedule, it was 100% focused on the blog. Once we figured out how to get page views and email subscribers out of it, I knew, train someone in to do that, so that's what we did. We hired someone in to take that over.

Then, it was my job to figure out what my job was. From there, we started doing ads, paid ads. Google advertising and Facebook advertising. We found out that that was a 10x thing, so we hired Rachel in to take that over. From there, we tested courses. We found that courses, as a

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multimedia thing, combined with live workshops, written lessons, videos, Facebook group, that worked really well for generating results. So, we hired Jordan in to take that over, and now it's my job to figure out what the next big thing is.

So, in this whole time, we've been doing podcasts the whole time. We've been doing webinars the whole time. What we're always after is what the next 10x thing is that is scalable, that will help us be the next step up to help us reach our goals that much faster. Right now I'm in this period where we're trying to figure out what that is. So, to answer your point with multimedia, it's not even really about the medium for us, but it's about what that test is in some ways.

So, something that I just did was you know that SEO's a big play for us and SEO right now rewards written content. So, we published the ultimate guide on marketing strategies, something I've never seen anyone do before. There's always these crappy blog posts and we're going to publish the best one on the internet, and I didn't want to write 20,000 words in just one post, so we did a micro site around it with 10 chapters. That's my next 10x test. Let's see what we can do there.

From there, we've got ideas for more tools. That's something that we do that's multimedia, is we'll launch something like a headline analyzer to help people. Instead of reading a blog post about headlines, why don't you just type out your own and we'll tell you if it's any good? We're going to have more tools in the works. Those are the things that we're after. What are the things that no one else in the industry is doing because they're

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really hard to do, but our audience will find the most value out of them?

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, that's probably a good point to wrap up, Nathan. Let me remind our guests that we're speaking with Nathan Ellering, Head of Marketing Demand Generation at CoSchedule. Nathan, where can people find you and your content online?

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, you can check us out at CoSchedule.com.

Roger Dooley: Okay. We will link there, and to any other resources we talked about, I know we had a few good tool references and whatnot, on the show notes page at RogerDooley.com/podcast. And, we'll have a text version of our conversation there, too. Nathan, thanks for being on the show.

Nathan Ellering: Yeah, Roger. Thanks for having me. Just want to say I've been following you for years, so it's fun to finally connect and to have this chat. This was great.

Roger Dooley: Great. It's been a blast, Nathan.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.