

Episode 20: Debbie Gartner

Lauren 0:01

Welcome to the Launch Your Blog Biz podcast. I'm your host, Lauren McManus. I used to be a full time tax accountant and CPA with a whole lot of limiting beliefs and "I can't's" whenever I thought about starting my own business. Fast forward a few months, and I quit my job after starting and growing my first blog to six figures in just a year. This is my space to share and yours to listen and grow about how to build and scale your own blogging business and design a life on your terms. Let's get started.

Lauren 0:35

Hey, y'all. Welcome back to the podcast. I hope that you're having an awesome day today. I have another awesome episode for you, today I have Debbie Gardener here. Debbie is a blogger at The Flooring Girl, and she's been a blogger for a while, like back since 2010 actually. She started out as a home decor blogger, but y'all there's so much more to her story now. I cannot wait for Debbie not only to share her story with y'all, but also just to listen along because she gave me a sneak preview over email and I was just blown away. In today's episode, we're gonna be talking about all kinds of stuff, getting out of debt, SEO, affiliate marketing, lots of failures, and some even greater successes and I'm so excited about it. So on that note, I'd like to extend a really warm welcome to Debbie. Welcome, Debbie.

Debbie 1:32

Thank you. Thank you so much. I'm so honored to be here as I've been fans of both you guys for probably about five years at this point. So it's really, really nice to be here.

Lauren 1:41

Oh, that's so awesome. Well Debbie, you're also my first official guest on the podcast outside of just the people who are part of my internal team, so go easy on me and I really appreciate you taking the time.

Debbie 1:53

Oh, awesome! I'm like doubly honored. So that's really, really cool. So thank you.

Lauren 1:58

Awesome. Well, we have so much to share today, or you have so much to share. So first of all, I'd like to just get started with telling everyone about where you were before. And really kind of how you got into this whole blogging online business world.

Debbie 2:14

Sure, yeah. I basically started blogging in 2010 and I started my own website, *TheFlooringGirl.com* in 2011. Back then I did not even know that monetizing was a thing but I kind of heard "Oh, blogging is the next big thing." I was doing, you know, Twitter and other social media and anyway, I learned how to blog. My goal was simply to help my local flooring business. So I had a local shop at home flooring business where I would go to people's homes, and advise them on the floors that made the most sense, whether it was hardwood or carpet or tile, find the right samples, and then, you know, manage the whole job.

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Debbie 2:56

I did not physically put in the flooring, because that would have been a disaster. But I was really good at home decor. So I was simply looking for ways to better market my local flooring business. And hence I started a blog and I learned SEO very early on, back then there were no courses or books or anything like that, but I read every single article I possibly could anywhere on the internet. I tried things myself, and lo and behold, I started to get good traffic. And it was really funny.

Debbie 3:33

It took a while at first but then I got better and better. Then all of a sudden, the phone starts ringing and my assistant is like, "What the heck did you do? Like I can't stop the phone from ringing." So I was getting local customers. What was most interesting too, is the leads I were getting, or the appointments were much higher quality leads than the leads I got from any other lead source, whether I paid for them or I was on Angie's List and people you know, pick me because of the reviews or anything like that. So that's really how I got started.

Debbie 4:06

Then at the very end of 2016, my life kind of fell apart. And I'm not allowed to go into any details because of an agreement that I signed. But basically I found myself without my business, I had to make that choice. I couldn't do flooring for two years so everything I've been doing for the last I don't know, you know, eight or 10 years down the drain. And I had no means of income. I had a blog, like that's all that I had. I knew how to do SEO. But I decided maybe I could try to monetize because I had read about these other people who are making good money with their blog and I've already done the hard part.

Debbie 4:49

I knew how to get SEO, I knew how to get traffic. So that's kind of where I found myself and I was \$238,000 in debt.

Lauren 4:58

Wow

Debbie 4:58

It was really bad, and I live right outside New York City so it's not cheap to live here. I had no income coming in, and I own my condo, I had three weeks worth of savings and that's it. I thought I had more money than I actually did. So I had to figure out, like, how to just write the ship. And it was hard, because I was literally crying every single day. Every day, multiple times a day, and I couldn't believe what I had done to destroy my life. So it was hard. Then I decided that I would, while trying to monetize my blog, take on two part time jobs to help pay the bills because I, I think I needed around \$10,000 a month, which, you know, sounded impossible, considering I didn't have any way to make that money.

Debbie 5:58

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So I basically took on two part time jobs, I knew how to blog, I knew how to do SEO. So I did some freelance blogging and SEO for local businesses, not for bloggers, just local businesses. Then I also took on a part time job selling painting, because painting and flooring go together, like you need to coordinate the jobs together, you need to coordinate the colors together. So that's what I did. And then I tried to figure out how the heck to monetize my block.

Lauren 6:30

Wow, wow, that is, that is a lot. That is a lot. I mean, you've been through a lot, and you haven't even started monetizing your blog yet properly. But I like your story and kind of how you started because we've had other students as well from our courses, use their blogs to also supplement an actual, you know, real job, or physical job out in the real world. You know, for instance, we have a student who did that with her hairstyling business, and she used SEO and a blog to get clients.

Lauren 7:02

I know I personally, definitely look at companies that have great websites, when I'm looking for even getting my hair done, or any kind of service to me. If I can just find out information online about a company before I go with them, regardless of what it is, even choosing insurance if they have a really user-friendly website, it matters so much. And I think that there are so many people that ignore it. And you know, maybe in like restaurant businesses, it's not as important, but just things like having information online can really help. So it's really awesome that you were able to solve that problem of getting more clients by just reaching out into the online world and getting them that way. So that's awesome.

Debbie 7:42

There are different ways to do things. I mean, I had a website, but you know, it was for flooring, and I wasn't allowed to do flooring. So that didn't help that much but for a normal person that totally would help. So like I said, I had existing traffic because I had written on my blog for years. So I just turned on the ads right away And I monetized in many different ways, which we'll talk about in a minute, but that was like the easiest thing to do, the most passive. And then I think the first month, it was only a partial month that I had made some money on Amazon, too. That was my first affiliate partner.

Debbie 8:21

I think I made \$1,100 that month. But during that time, I was basically closing down my business and everything. And so that's kind of how I got started. I was just trying to learn and learn and learn because my blog posts were not set up to monetize or to sell anything from affiliates. I mean, I didn't even understand affiliate marketing that well, I just took a course but that was you know, my experience, quote, unquote and I just had to figure it all out. And it took months. I mean, it was very slow. Unlike other new bloggers, I actually had some money coming in the door.

Debbie 9:00

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So new bloggers will be thrilled with \$1,500 per month, right? But I wasn't because I needed \$10,000 a month. So it was a means to an end but then you figure, okay, I made after a couple months or maybe three months, I was making \$4,000 a month doing freelancing and then two to \$3,000 a month doing the painting and then I had \$1,500 here and just learning and learning, but I was working like insane hours and not getting enough sleep. I'm probably just like the two of you guys. But I was so poor at the time, I basically would spend no money on myself except for food and the mortgage. That's how bad it was.

Debbie 9:48

Everything in my entire place was broken and it continued to break over a couple of years, like no dishwasher. There wasn't baseboard heating from the building so that at least kept me alive and I didn't freeze over or anything like that. But like that was it. So I said, "The only money I can spend is small amounts of money for my business." Things like hosting and stuff like that, and a little bit here and there.

Lauren 10:17

Wow.

Debbie 10:18

Yeah, it was really hard and I had to be creative too. Because, you know, I do think that having courses and books really helps you, but I literally had no money. So it's like, what am I going to do? So I tried to get creative and at times, I would kind of trade some of my services because I knew how to do SEO really well. So you know, someone had a Pinterest book, and then I couldn't afford it. You know, it's only I don't know, at the time it was probably 25 or \$37. But like, that was a huge deal to me. So I said, "Okay, you know, can I trade you? Like, I'll teach you how to do SEO? And then I'll read your book, and then I'll learn how to do Pinterest"

Lauren 11:00

You're bartering. You're bartering, for blogging products.

Debbie 11:03

Totally, totally. Yeah and I made some friends in the process, too. It worked out well. It's like the only way that I could get any information. Because you don't realize how much you don't know until you don't know what you don't know. You know, these courses are very helpful and they will teach you stuff so much faster than trying to figure it out for yourself. All the good stuff was really like behind some paid course, or book. And I literally had no way that I could afford it until my friend helped me out a few times. So it meant the world to me.

Debbie 11:43

Then I started to blog about painting because it went with flooring. So I said, let me give that a try and then that did well. I got SEO traffic on that, I did better on Pinterest with that. But in month 11, I had my first month, that was I made \$3,300 in profit and then I just worked harder. Then December came and I made \$4,100. I'm like, "Oh my god like this is starting to work. Like I'm starting to understand this." It becomes you know, rinse and repeat. So I just focused on

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Amazon at first, I know you guys aren't big fans of Amazon. But Amazon was really, really good to me.

Debbie 12:29

I think it varies by niche.

Lauren 12:31

I agree with that.

Debbie 12:32

Yeah, it completely varies and you totally need to diversify, no matter what. Not just your types of income, but the affiliates that you have. But somehow the work I did kind of bubbled up in Google and everything started to become cumulative. And I made \$4,400 that month, so I was totally excited. And things just gradually kept building. At that point in time, I only had two sources of income and that was affiliate marketing and ad revenue. So by the end of July, I basically got up to \$10,000. I made \$10,100, which is my original goal.

Debbie 13:12

Then I made like \$12,000. And then oh, sorry, I also started doing SEO coaching for people. So I started teaching people over the phone, bloggers how to do SEO, because word got out that I knew how to do SEO. So all these people booked appointments with me. And then I got too booked up. I was booking people out three months ahead, like that's how busy I was. So then someone said, "Oh, why don't you create a book? Or course?" Maybe they said a course. I'm like, "I can't, like a course?! Like what the heck, I don't even have an email list. How am I going to sell my products to anybody?"

Debbie 13:51

So what you'll hear is I've done everything backwards in this business and without a plan. Later, I took your guys' course, which helped me understand how wrong I was. But I knew that, I knew enough to know that I was wrong. And then someone said, "Oh, you can just have affiliates sell your product." And I was like, Oh yeah, and she's like, "And I'll sell your product because I have an email list of bloggers." So I was like, Okay, so let's give that a try. So I created a book. My first book was, *The Backlink ebook*, which at the time no one was talking about, they would just say, "Oh, just, you know, do this and then get backlinks."

Debbie 14:30

They wouldn't tell you how or where any specifics. So I was like, let me do something like that, because it's different from the stuff that's out in the market right now. So I did and then I had a few bloggers, you know, promote it. And I made like \$6,000 the first month when I launched without an email list. So I was totally floored. I'm like, "Oh my god, like I guess you can make money with products. I guess all this stuff people were talking about was right, and I was just oblivious to all of this." Then I launched a second book, which is easy on page SEO. And it did really well. And I just got there through, which is very unusual, but I got there through word of mouth.

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Debbie 15:13

And people who, you know, read the books will just say really great things about it unprompted in these Facebook groups and it just started to take off. And then when you have two books, I did better on each book, because some people want the first book and some people want the second book. But then many people wanted both of the books. Then I learned how to bundle things together and cross sell and all that sort of stuff. But at that point in time, I basically got up to \$24,000 a month, and so it was the beginning of my third year. I got there, and I just, I couldn't believe it.

15:51

Since then, I've basically now had at this point in time, 32 months in a row, where I've earned more than \$20,000 a month. So I finally was able to pay off the debt and I did that in three and a half years. I had also at that point taken your course, we should talk about that, Six Figure Blogger, which I absolutely loved and transformed my thinking. I said, "Okay, I know I need to do more products, I need to focus more on email, I need to do even more funnels, I need to come out with another book, or course or whatever the heck is going to be." But I'm like, I'm gonna put together you know, a four month plan. And here's what's going to look like I'm going to do this. I don't know what this is. But I know I need to do something like that. Hopefully, that makes sense. But that's what I did.

Lauren 16:42

That's amazing. I mean, goodness, you've said so much. I'm not sure what to even interject about. But you know, at one point, you did say that you had done things backwards or different. And, you know, to be honest, as you're sitting here describing it, I really don't think that it sounds like it that much. Because, you know, maybe you had to pivot a few times, many times, but you did still start out monetizing. You started out with the traffic side first, which is what we try to remind our students to focus on in the beginning, mostly just because you can't make any money without traffic anyway. And traffic is really harder to do than the money side of it.

Lauren 17:23

So you did start out that way. Then you started out with Amazon affiliates, which is also where Alex and I earned our first bit of income. We've definitely earned up to \$1,000 in a month with Amazon just at the height of our traffic on our health and wellness blog. And from there we did, we had originally actually thought that we were going to become millionaires from Amazon Associates, because we know that there are people out there making 10s of 1000s of dollars a month from it.

Lauren 17:48

But then we moved on to selling other affiliate products to diversify, which is also what you said you did. And then of course, eventually you move into creating your own products. So you have followed the system, you've just pivoted a lot based on everything that you've been going through.

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Debbie 18:04

Yeah, so I mean, on Amazon, I was up to on an average month, like \$7,000 a month, which was, you know, nice.

Lauren 18:13

Wow, that's a lot.

Debbie 18:15

Yeah. And it was pretty consistent except for the holidays, it would go up even higher to be like nine or \$10,000 a month.

Lauren 18:22

Can I ask what types of products you were selling on Amazon?

Debbie 18:27

Basically, what I found worked really well for me is if I could sell products that were in that, let's call it 80 to \$120 range, not just the \$10 products. Originally, when I started it would be like doggy socks, hardwood cleaner, and everything related to that sort of stuff. And it would be like \$8 here, \$10 there, although you do get money for all the other stuff they buy. But when I was able to shift my focus to be like, "Okay, let's try to, if we think about the cookie being 24 hours, it has to be something that is more profitable and brings in more, but is not too high."

Debbie 19:10

So I'm not going to sell a \$1,000 product there because people don't usually make those decisions. I can't even talk, decisions in 24 hours. So I need something lower price, 80 to \$120 seemed to be the sweet spot. Then you just have to figure out what makes sense, you know, with your blog and your topic. You don't just randomly, you know, pick stuff. So when I started doing that, then things started ticking up. Then I just created more posts like that and I said, "Okay, I know I need to diversify beyond Amazon."

Debbie 19:45

So it's not like I need to always use Amazon. It's like what am I doing for my customer? What is the question I'm trying to answer? Because they don't care that I make money or if I make a bigger commission or smaller commission, that doesn't matter to them, they're all in it for them. So my job is to figure out how to solve their problem, write a post about the problem, and then give them the best solutions for that, whether it's from Amazon or rewardstyle or it doesn't matter. As long as I find a place for them, and I can recommend what the better product is.

Debbie 20:28

My whole thing is like, figure out what's right for them, not what's going to make you the biggest commission. I mean, you might prioritize your time a little bit like, I think that this post will do better than that, therefore, I'll do this one before that one, but it's never, "Here's the best product because I make the highest commission on it." It's like, "No, here's the best product because

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this will solve your problem. And by the way, it's a good value for you. And I'm telling you where to get it less expensively, so this is good for you." That makes sense.

Lauren 20:59

Yeah, definitely. And I think that a lot of times, it really takes experience to truly understand that because, you know, I can explain that to my new students. And I thought the same thing when I started, but I think that it's one of those things that you really learn more over time. You learn about what just feels right, and which just doesn't feel right, when you're writing content, or creating any type of content. Of course, there are products out there that could make you a lot more money and there are products that maybe just aren't as good for your audience. But of course, they could make you more money.

Lauren 21:39

Often in the beginning, we're more likely to error towards those products, just because we want money and to be honest, almost because we don't even really know our audience truly that well yet. But the more you get to know your audience, the more you get to know your own business, the more you get into your groove with your business, the more these things just sort of fall into place and they just make sense. It's almost more like a gut feeling.

Lauren 22:04

I know that Alex and I have pivoted away from certain products or certain services, sometimes even after recommending them for a while, because they just, they just didn't go in a direction that we felt really good sharing with our audience anymore. So I really liked that. And a lot of what you were just saying about matching your content with the problems that people are facing, this is a really, really big thing that Alex and I teach about on our website, in our courses everywhere, and especially Six Figure Blogger. So I love to hear what your experience was with that course, because I know you talk about it a lot, and you're always praising it. So

Debbie 22:41

It's my favorite course. Seriously, it is. I'm not just saying that because if you go back to my emails I've written over the last few years, you will see that again, again, and again, my favorite course. So I came from the standpoint of, you know, being completely in debt, not having any money and having to find good value. That doesn't mean don't invest in any courses, but everything has to be of good value. And I love your Six Figure Blogger, because I thought it was one of the strongest value courses out there. First of all, it completely changed my way, and how I thought about email marketing, and how I think about funnels.

Debbie 23:21

So funnels used to be a really bad word for me. And I'm like, I can't do that. I'm not gonna trick anybody into buying because I just, that's not me, I can't do that. And then I realized after reading that stuff, I'm like, "Oh, it's not really tricking somebody." Rather, it's guiding someone on the right path, in the same way that I would do for my real life flooring customers. I would never say, "Buy this, buy that." I would ask them questions and say, "Oh, given what you told me, I

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think that this is probably the best solution." And by the end, they would come to that conclusion as well and say, "Oh, where do we sign up?"

Debbie 24:00

And I would never say, "Oh, buy from me. Are you ready to buy?" They'd always say, "Oh, how do we get started," which you know, was great. But yours is the same sort of approach. It's, I am here for my customer, I cannot blow that trust. Because if I recommend a bad product, people will stop trusting me. They won't pay attention to my recommendations or they'll unsubscribe or both, so I am here to serve you essentially. And that is the philosophy that you guys were teaching. Then I realized, okay, it's not just a funnel to get them to buy your first product but to go back to let's think about the lifecycle of my customer.

Debbie 24:39

Now they bought the product. So what happens after that? I want to understand, Okay, well, what else would that person need? Like what's the next best product or solution or how do I get feedback, how do I improve the product? Then you guys had some really great tips there on affiliate marketing as well. You had tips on how Do sales pages, which I stink at. But I was like, "Oh, I already have a product. And now I am just going to improve what I already did." So I improved the funnel that I had and I created a post funnel, and I improved the sales page.

Debbie 25:17

Within a month, I made an extra \$2,000 a month, like straight to the bottom line. I mean, it was incredible. Not from creating a new product, but just from improving what I had already created and thinking about things differently. And okay, now if I understand the key pathway to this is the funnel and the email list, then my question becomes, how do I get people on my email list? And it's not just anybody to my email list, because this is not just a numbers game. This is about getting the right people on your email list. That make sense?

Lauren 25:55

Yeah, yeah. I love all of that. It's why I tend to not think about funnels, and all of that is so much sales and marketing, but it's more just communication. I mean, yeah, look, sales and marketing matter. You do still have to pitch a product in that funnel, right. But it's so much more about providing value to people and reaching them and communicating with them. And you don't have to do that in an overly salesy way. And I don't think that you should, because there's enough people already doing that out there.

Lauren 26:68

People want to know that you are an honest person and just trying to help them. And this is more about what we talked about in Six Figure Blogger, just the honest communication. And well, next, Debbie, I want to start shifting gears and I wanted to ask you, you faced a lot of challenges throughout your journey so far. And some of them are seemingly insurmountable, like that amount of debt, my goodness, but you kept pushing through all of them. So I want to ask you, do you have any advice for anyone listening who might also feel like they're facing

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some pretty tough challenges to beat? Or maybe perhaps, what do you attribute to getting yourself through those obstacles and not quitting?

Debbie 27:08

Right, right. So I kind of felt like, I had no choice like I have to do this. I mean, in general, you need to have some grit. I remember watching a video on one of the TED talks about grit, how that was often more important than people's IQs, or something in terms of their success in life. So I, I kind of had to just do it, but also at the same time had to psych myself up. And so I would have different mantras or songs that would help me out. Like, Glory gainer, I Will Survive. You know I would just play that and just psych myself up, or like Apollo 13. I love that movie.

Debbie 27:53

And, you know, failure is not an option. I would say that to myself, failure is not an option and so that really helped. The other thing, which I think really helped me, is breaking it down into smaller tasks. So I, like \$230,000 sounded impossible, insurmountable, I'm like that's just never going to happen. So I said, I'm, I'm going to lie to myself and the lie I'm going to tell myself is that I only have \$68,000 in debt, because that was the immediate debt that I had to take care of, the other stuff I still had five years to do. So I then put it together on a piece of paper, I basically wrote it on there, and I had a spreadsheet.

Debbie 28:40

But then each month, I would go back and I would cross out that number and see my progress. But that's what I did, I had to lie to myself. Once I started blogging more, I made more money and the debt kept going down. As the debt went down, the amount of interest I was paying on the debt went down too. So it became a snowball sort of effect and then I was just more motivated. But at some point, you're going to get to that point where things just start getting easier, the interest goes down, and every time you're making a mortgage or debt payment, you're paying down more of that interest. So you just made more progress.

Lauren 29:17

Yeah, it's always easier to move the snowball once it starts going, right? Whether it's paying off your debt, whether it's making money or anything. So there you go, y'all just put on I will survive, like blasted all morning long every day and you'll be fine. No, but I really, I do like what you said about deciding that failure wasn't an option, because that's also what Alex and I did in the very beginning. And I suppose it was easier to do that because for us our reasons for why we wanted to do this we're just so great that, you know, working the regular jobs just wasn't an option for us.

Lauren 29:54

And even though our first blog did fail, those first few months were pretty scary. We just knew that we're not going back, we're going to figure this out, even if we have to change multiple times. And thankfully for us, we did have money saved up, and we were able to live rent free for that first year. So we had a much bigger buffer, I suppose. And I know some people just don't have that option. Well, Debbie, one last question, then where can our listeners find you?

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Debbie 30:25

Oh, yeah, good question. So my site is *TheFlooringGirl.com*. And I think Lauren, you're going to post some stuff in there, I have a free SEO course. Also, I have a free guide on Amazon and how to do better on that. So if you can post those links, that would be really great. If you go to my website, *TheFlooringGirl.com*, there's only one place you can find all my stuff about blogging, and that is on the homepage, on the eighth button that says, "My Books and Courses." So I hide it, I deindex everything there from Google. But that's the only way to find my stuff if you're interested in it.

Lauren 31:07

Awesome. Yeah, I will definitely share all of the resources in the show notes. So make sure you check those out. And wow, what an incredible journey that you have been on so far, Debbie, and you're still just so successful. So I can't wait to see what is next for you. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Debbie 31:27

Oh, you're welcome. My pleasure, I'm so honored and so glad to finally meet you. I met Alex in person a couple of years ago and it's just you guys are really real people so I appreciate that. Thank you so much for having me.

Lauren 31:42

Oh, thanks so much. Alright, y'all. That's it for this episode. I will see you next time.

Lauren 31:49

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