

THE PODCASTERS' DILEMMA

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Two experts have begun podcasts in order to provide greater impact. In spite of their expertise, both have found themselves stymied by unexpected hurdles. How could this be so difficult? Amateurs were successful all the time.

Now they were at a crossroads. Should they continue or just give up? Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. But what do they need to do differently?

DR. GERDES: THE LEADERSMITH PODCAST

Darin Gerdes was a tenured management professor in South Carolina. He has worked hard at his craft. He was a respected teacher. He has built academic programs in organizational leadership and he has won several academic awards inside and outside of his university.

“Podcasting was never a childhood dream,” he said, “I mean, my 7-year old wants to become a famous You-Tuber like Mark Rober, but we didn’t even have the internet when I was a kid.” He hadn’t really considered podcasting until about a month before he launched his podcast.

Since 2012, he wrote a blog (www.daringerdes.com) where he mused about leadership. There was no particular agenda; he just wrote about ideas that he found interesting. About four years ago, he became the educational director for a local networking group in Charleston. Many of his posts were written for the group and posted on his blog. It was a win-win situation. The group benefitted from his

expertise, and it kept him writing even when he didn't feel like it. More importantly, it kept him tethered to reality, so he did not get a case of ivory-tower-itis.

The blog was never well-known; Gerdes knew how to write, but search engine Optimization and social media marketing were never a strong suit, and these are required skill sets in the 2020s.

COVID-19 BREAKS OUT

In February of 2000, Gerdes monitored the news of COVID-19 and began to wonder how much it might affect the country. He was just looking forward to spring break. But spring break was extended and faculty and students around the country were plunged into a strange season of working at home during quarantine.

Quarantine changed things. "All of a sudden, we were trapped at home," he mused. "We were in constant Zoom meetings and I thought, 'How hard can podcasting be? I am doing this anyway for class.'" He noticed that during the shut-down, even professionals on the Tonight Show were broadcasting from home.

By early April, Gerdes began toying with the idea of starting a podcast. He talked to a former student who was fairly successful with a podcast and this conversation made him take the idea more seriously. As soon as the spring semester ended, Gerdes began his podcast.

THE LEADERSMITH BEGINS

For a few weeks before he began, he watched a number of YouTube videos to teach himself how to podcast. Most of the YouTubers said similar things. Gerdes learned how to do the basics, and he determined that he would start and improve along the way. He wouldn't wait to do things perfectly. He embraced the advice that "your first episodes will be your worst episodes." As a management professor, he believed in the concept of continual improvement.

He knew what he wanted to name his podcast. He had been referring to himself as a Leadersmith for a number of years on his blog and in his bio for speaking events. By Leadersmith, he meant someone who helps others become better leaders. After all, as a management professor, this is what he did in his day job.

He focused on the type of person that would be in his graduate classes. They are primarily early to mid-career managers. Most of them came back to get their graduate degrees because they were hungry to learn so they could move into greater leadership positions. Gerdes decided from the outset that he would focus on all things related to leadership. He knew his audience, and he ended each episode with

a quotation for contemplation and an admonition to “be the leader that you would want to follow.”

He tested his equipment and found that he really did need a better mic. He tried to think through what his show should feel like to the audience. He knew that it was important to keep to a schedule and he maintained it. He published five days a week over the summer and scaled back to three times a week when the semester began.

RESULTS

In the beginning, he recorded daily. This was feasible because he recorded short episodes of about 15-20 minutes on average. A few dipped below 10 minutes and a few were just over a half hour, but his goal was to keep them short and focused.

From the beginning, he decided to record video and use the audio for the podcast. Since, he had the video anyway, he posted the video podcast on YouTube. By January 1, 2021, he had recorded 128 episodes, but he was disappointed by his results. He had approximately 4,000 audio downloads and more than 2,000 on YouTube. This is far fewer than he anticipated based on the number of episodes.

Gerdes was trying to build an audience. He knew that he wanted to write, and he knew that book contracts are often based on the author’s audience or reach. He hoped to build an audience with the podcast and leverage that into a book contract. However, Gerdes also knew that he is not a Kardashian. He was neither podcasting about a tech nor a fashion (the two big categories), so he did not expect a huge crowd. However, he thought he should be doing better than *this*.

After all, he had moved through the right steps. He identified his audience, stayed on message, ensured that sound was good, placed the podcast on a number of directories, etc.

NOW WHAT?

What he doesn’t know is if his podcast is not well-received, or if it is just not received. That is the question. He doesn’t lack for content. Do people dislike the podcast or have they even heard it? This is a discouraging. It is frustrating when he puts his heart and soul into an episode and then look back at his stats and see that only a few people listened to it. He is not so discouraged that he plans to stop, but he doesn’t know what to do from here. He knows that he doesn’t know what he doesn’t know, but he does not know how to do any better.

KENNY EMBRY: BALANCING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

“If I would have known what I would gain, I would have started much sooner.”

Kenny Embry is a Communication professor at Saint Leo University in Florida. After working in television in the late 1990s, he received his Ph.D. in communication in 2007. He has been teaching since 2001.

Like Gerdes, he too, recently began a podcast. As a communications professor, he watched with great interest as podcasting grew in popularity, displacing blogging. Embry first began thinking about creating his own podcast in 2017 but felt ill prepared. Over time, he purchased microphones and other equipment, but much of it sat unused.

In 2019, his university undertook an academic review of the communications program. One outcome of the academic review was an overhaul of the curriculum in order to update and modernize. Embry saw the traditional field of mass communication was being disrupted by digital tools such as desktop video and audio editing software and distribution channels which replaced television channels and radio stations with Internet websites and network feeds. The communication jobs his students usually pursued such as broadcasting and public relations looked different because of these trends. So, to address these changes, he and his colleagues put together a new slate of classes. This included a podcasting class Embry would teach.

By December of 2019, Embry outlined his podcasting class syllabus. In the early spring, Embry was reading up on podcasting, learning what he could from books and well-known podcasters, but he still didn't have a podcast of his own. As an academic, he was used to researching a subject before taking action. At least, that is what he told himself.

He also began attending the Florida Podcasting Association meetings in Tampa. It was an opportunity to network with people who hosted their own podcasts. The group hosted shows which represented many different interests including veteran issues, real estate advice, golf course reviews, and life coaching.

COVID-19 BREAKS OUT

In March 2020, he attended Podfest, a national conference for podcasters held in Orlando, Florida. It would be the last conference that Orlando convention center held before everything shut down for COVID. About this time, his wife began to prod him about starting his own podcast. After all, he had been talking about it for

a couple of years. He had the equipment, and he had certainly gained a great deal of knowledge. More to the point, the time was right. During COVID, wouldn't people have more time to listen to podcasts?

He had a general idea what he wanted to talk about. His podcast would be called *Balancing the Christian Life*. He would talk about applied theological ideas in an easily digestible voice. Eventually he included the concept of digital discipleship. Recognizing his father was getting up in years, he decided he would record a conversation with him and use it as a podcast episode. While it would be months before this episode would actually air, this was his first foray into podcasting.

In the meantime, Embry to lay the groundwork for his podcast. He got the right jingle, had a WordPress website developed, found a podcasting company to host a podcast, and systematically laid the foundation so that everything would be in place.

BALANCING BEGINS

Embry would finish the spring semester in May before he began podcasting. He spent a great deal of time writing out a script for the first 10 episodes which were solo podcasts that laid out what his podcast was all about—developing spiritual maturity.

The first episode launched on June 20th. Since then, he faithfully put out an episode each week. By his tenth episode, he began interviewing others. On October 2, he published his sixteenth episode. It was an interview with Dr. Gerdes. And, while it was a long time in the making, he finally published his interview with his father in his nineteenth episode later that month.

RESULTS

By January 1, 2021, Embry had published 28 episodes of *Balancing the Christian Life*. It was not a bad start for the new podcast. It was well received by all those who have listened to it, but he has only had 3,500 downloads of the podcast. This was disappointing. As he considered those numbers, he thought about the words of Buzzsprout marketing head, Alban Brooke. He said you can either broaden the message and attract a larger audience, or serve a smaller audience more, but ask more from them.

NOW WHAT?

Embry is wrestling with this concept, but he is wondering about more than that. He is wondering if it is worth the effort. He put a lot of effort into finding the right

guests, organizing a quality episode, and editing the podcast. But he does not seem to be getting the traction that he thought he would be getting.

He knows that he needs to market, but from what he has studied, he is unsure of which direction he should go. He could learn more about search engine optimization (SEO), but again, where would he find the time? He could spend more time on social media, but that time would have to come from somewhere else. He could pay someone to do this, but the podcast is not a money-making venture—at least not yet. He hopes that someday, it will pay the bills, but for now he is subsidizing the podcast himself.




He is willing to put the inputs in, but he wants to be sure that if he puts time or money in, he will get more out. He enjoys the process, and he wants to make the podcast successful, but he is unsure of which direction to go.

CONCLUSION


Gerdes and Embry are very different. Where Gerdes jumped in, Embry carefully studied the process. Gerdes's strategy was to create a large catalog of shows quickly. Embry took a quality approach. Gerdes could build the large catalog quickly because he focused on short (15-25 minute) episodes. Embry developed fully-scripted episodes, then transitioned to a longer interview format. Gerdes's goal is to develop a large audience. He is only half-heartedly interested in monetizing. Embry's goal is to monetize, but to do that, he needs a larger audience. In another way, they are very similar. Unlike many would-be podcasters, they are legitimate experts who have something to say. As professors, they are both more than comfortable talking for long periods of time. For both, podcasting is a side hustle, not their day jobs. Both hope to make monetize eventually. Both want to grow their podcasts, but this is where they are stuck. They do not know how to scale. What should they do? Should they do the same thing or pursue different marketing strategies?

EXHIBIT 1

The Leadersmith Podcast

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Apple Podcasts Preview



THE LEADERSMITH
@DARINGERDES with Darin Gerdes

100 episodes


In this podcast, we discuss all things related to leadership. I can help you become the kind of leader that you want to follow. We will talk about leadership in business, the home, and politics. Your host: Darin Gerdes.

The Leadersmith

Leadersmith | Darin Gerdes

Business

★★★★★ 5.0 • 12 Ratings

[Listen on Apple Podcasts ↗](#) 

SEP 11, 2021

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IN AFGHANISTAN WITH DAVID HAJJAR [Episod... >

In this episode, I continue my conversation with David Hajar as he helps us understand what will happen in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. David has been involved in relief work for 35 years with the UN, USAID, and similar organizations. In this episode, he gives us a more practical view of what i...

[▶ PLAY](#) 37 min

SEP 4, 2021

UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN (with David Hajar) [EPISODE 187] >

In this episode, I have a fascinating conversation with David Hajar. David has worked in relief work with the UN, USAID, and similar organizations for 35 years. He is a native of Lebanon and lived there during the civil war. In this episode he gives us a philosophical overview of the middle east to help us...

[▶ PLAY](#) 30 min

AUG 28, 2021

LEADERSHIP IN BRITISH LITERATURE (WITH JEFF CARLUCCI) [EPISOD... >

This is a continuation of my discussion of Leadership in British Lit. with Jeff Carlucci in the last episode. Jeff has been teaching literature since 1982. He will recap his thoughts from the last episode and provide new insights that have emerged from British Literature and his time teaching (since 198...

[▶ PLAY](#) 27 min



EXHIBIT 2

Balancing the Christian Life

Balancing the Christian Life

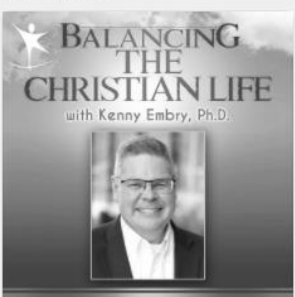
Balancing the Christian Life helps Christians be better Christians. It focuses on practical ways to improve relationships with each other and God, and what it means to be a digital disciple.

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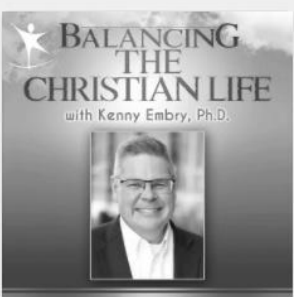


Sept. 10, 2021

Digital Literacy: Summing it up

So what is digital literacy and why is it important for Christians to understand? This week I asked my buddy Mark McCrary to inte...

[→ Episode page](#)

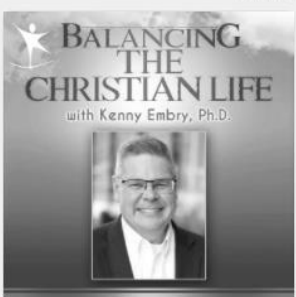


Sept. 3, 2021

Reading the Bible...on Facebook

This week I wanted to talk to three people from an online group of Bible students. The argument I hear a lot is social media is l...

[→ Episode page](#)



Aug. 27, 2021

The power of one, a conversation about a year of podcasting

You'll have to indulge me this week. I'm talking to four podcasters I know ONLY as voices on earbuds and faces on a screen, but t...

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