



SPI 301

How a Data Scientist Pivoted into a New Brand (And Won a Tesla Roadster)

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Ben Sullins: Yeah. I can't believe it. I think this year, today, we have through my code, I have about 67 people that have bought Teslas with it.

Pat Flynn: That's crazy.

Ben Sullins: Which, I mean, so that's, you're approaching \$7 million in product sales through one affiliate.

Pat Flynn: Guys, affiliate marketing isn't just for referring people to your favorite hosting company or your favorite product on Amazon. Ben Sullins at Teslanomics, which is a YouTube channel, was able to refer 67 people through his code to buy 67 Teslas, and that allowed him to win the brand new Tesla Roadster. We're gonna get into that story today, but first, let's kick it off with the music. This is episode 301 of the Smart Passive Income podcast. Stick around.

Speaker 3: Welcome to the Smart Passive Income podcast, where it's all about working hard now so you can sit back and reap the benefits later. And now your host. He still gets so nervous, he wants to throw up before speaking on stage, but he can't stop there anyway. Pat Flynn!

Pat Flynn: What's up, what's up guys? Thank you so much for joining me today. My name is Pat Flynn. I'm here to help you make more money, save more time, and help more people too. Before we get started, please make sure you hit subscribe to the podcast, 'cause we got some great stuff coming your way. In today's episode, we're talking with Ben Sullins, the founder of Teslanomics, which isn't what he started out doing. He actually had nothing to do with Teslas. We're gonna talk about how he sort of, I don't want to say accidentally, but how he just stumbled upon the signals in his existing YouTube channel to make a complete shift and pivot into the Tesla space. And as you heard at the beginning, he's been doing very, very well. And was so, is doing so well that he was able to refer enough people to get a Tesla Roadster for free, even before we all knew what a Tesla Roadster was. And if you hadn't seen the reveal that Elon Musk made, this is now my new dream car, besides the DeLorean from Back to the Future, right? But this is now my new dream car,

and Ben has it now for free when it becomes available, one of the founders editions. It's just such an incredible story.

I was actually fortunate enough to meet Ben in person at one of our San Diego entrepreneur group meetups, which happens every first Wednesday of the month in downtown San Diego. He came by, he introduced himself, very humble. I was like, "What do you do?" He was like, "Oh, well I do data analysis and data science, and I keep, I'm just an Excel spreadsheet nerd." And I was like, "Okay. What's your YouTube channel?" And he said Teslanomics. And I said, "Tesla? Like, Tesla the car? Like, Elon Musk Tesla?" Although he pronounces it in a different way, and we actually get into that a little bit in the show here today, 'cause it's just very curious. He says Tez-la, and I say Tes-la. Potatoes, potahtoes, nitch, neesh, whatever. But again, we're gonna get into his story here.

But then he tells me all that he's doing on YouTube and how big he's grown his channel in such a short period of time. I just had to learn more, 'cause as many of you, as many of you know, I'm getting big into YouTube starting in February, so that's another thing. If you haven't done so already, make sure you check out some of the more recent YouTube videos I'm doing. I'm sort of warming up the subscribers there for a big run starting in February. We're shooting for several videos per week that are gonna help you grow your online business. So make sure you follow me on YouTube as well. That's gonna be at SmartPassiveIncome.com/YouTube. And we'll share all these links in the show notes and such later, so we'll get to that.

But for now, let's just dive right into the interview with Ben Sullins. Again, Teslanomics. Gosh, he has me saying it Tez-la now. Teslanomics on YouTube, and Teslanomics.co is the website. So here we go.

Ben, welcome the SPI podcast. Thanks for being here, man.

Ben Sullins: Dude, thank you so much. I am so glad to be here. I've been a fan for a long time, so it's kinda surreal.

Pat Flynn: I appreciate that. You know, when I met you, I knew we were gonna be instant friends when you told me that you had a YouTube channel about Tesla.

Ben Sullins: Yes.

Pat Flynn: 'Cause Tesla's one of my favorite things, and it's the closest to having a DeLorean that I can have right now in terms of the Tesla acts. But anyway, you have an amazing story. You talked about it a little at one of our San Diego entrepreneur group meetups, and I just knew that I had to get you on the show, so I'm really excited to dive into that. But before that, tell us a little bit before you got into Teslanomics and the stuff that you do now, kind of what were you doing beforehand?

Ben Sullins: Yeah, so I've been in the kind of data science field for a long time. I was basically an Excel junkie and geek back in the late 90's, working at, at the time, what was a tech company called MCI, the phone company. And you know, people always talk about follow your passion, find something you love, that kind of thing. And I believe a lot in that, and that's what really kept me with it. So I found I loved working with data and numbers, and back then, it was very rudimentary. But throughout all the years of my corporate career, I always focused on that. I never deviated from data and figuring out how to use data to basically make better decisions. Typically, that was for companies to, I don't know, increase profit margins or things like that.

So I spent about 18 years in corporate America in the field of data science in one role or another. I've had a lot of fun, I really did. I loved, I did a lot of consulting in Silicon Valley. I worked at Facebook, I worked at Mozilla, I worked at, did a lot of consulting with Google and all these different companies. Really fun time. But then actually, I think listening to you on SPI was one of the things that got me started thinking about how can I make more time in my life? How can I have more flexibility? And of course, it's all about residual income and passive income and these kind of things.

So fast forward to when I was working at a company called Pluralsight. They were, they are an online training company, so kinda like Lynda.com. I know you've talked about them before, I'm sure you're familiar. And I started making courses for them, online courses on data science type topics. And there, you know, the royalty, the revenue split is really low, but they basically have the audience, right? So they do all the marketing for you, all the sales, all the processing of that, so you just make the content. Started making online courses for them, did a number of them. Finally actually joined them as their chief data officer, was there for two years. Started an office here in San Diego. And then when my son was born, when he was about six months old, decided, "Alright, that was enough of corporate life, almost 18 years kind of shackled to the desk." And it was time to make a change, not because I wanted more money, but because I wanted more time. And I was fortunate. I think I had 13 online courses and I was able to leave my corporate life behind and you know, venture into this world of digital entrepreneurship.

Pat Flynn: And those were courses about data analytics.

Ben Sullins: Yeah, everything from how to do something in Excel, how to present information better, to how to configure a Hadoop cluster. You know, Hadoop is the big data.

Pat Flynn: [crosstalk 00:06:55]

Ben Sullins: Yeah, exactly, right? Something way advanced and crazy that, you know, big data engineers use. So I made a lot of courses on kind of everything in that whole space.

Pat Flynn: Okay. And so these are online courses. How many students overall would you say you had between all those at that time?

Ben Sullins: Oh, man. Even today, 'cause you know, they're still generating income, I think I get about seven to ten thousand student a month.

Pat Flynn: What? That's a lot of students.

Ben Sullins: Yeah.

Pat Flynn: And this is driven by the marketplace you're in?

Ben Sullins: Yeah. So with Pluralsight, and now I have 16 courses with Lynda.com as well. So total, I have 29 online courses. But you know, those platforms have giant audiences, right? I don't know what the public figures are, but upwards of 500 thousand members on Pluralsight, and probably several million on Lynda, because now they're a part of LinkedIn. So you know, when somebody watches it, I'll get five to five thousand people a month or something that go through the course. But it's not like I were selling five thousand copies if it were 100% my own, right? So the royalty model is quite different. But yeah, a lot of people take it, and that helped spur kind of, you know. Listening to you talk about how this stuff works as an independent creator, it really kind of motivated me to then go and say, "Okay, what can I do in addition to this that is 100% my own that I'm not really, you know, dependent upon one of these platforms?" Because who knows what will happen to them?

Pat Flynn: Yeah, I think that's really smart. You want to have full control over kinda what you're doing. And any moment in time, these platforms can, you know, part ways with you or what have you. But it's great, and it's cool that they're still working for you kind of passively as you have this other focus.

Now let's transition a little bit into a little bit more of the Tesla stuff. How did this even enter the picture? 'Cause what you just told me is nothing what I, what I see you doing now.

Ben Sullins: Right, right. So this is all about, I think, listening to the signals, right? Or finding those signals that will, that can really change your direction. And part of what I was doing with YouTube at the time prior to doing the Tesla stuff was I was doing these little teaser videos, like, "Hey, check out this really cool tip in Excel, and then go watch my online course." And nobody cared. Basically nobody on YouTube cared at all. You know, if I got a thousand views on a video, that was a success. But in YouTube terms, that's absolutely nothing.

So what I did was, my wife asked me a question one time, 'cause we had bought a Tesla the year prior. I had kinda sold her on this idea of, "Well hey, we're gonna save a ton in gas money because it's electricity, yada yada." And she said, "Okay, data guy. You know, show me the numbers, prove it to me."

Pat Flynn: Show me the numbers.

Ben Sullins: Right. I even have a mug, you know? "Let's do the numbers."

Pat Flynn: Nice.

Ben Sullins: So I took that and I said, "Oh man, okay. I really gotta figure this out." And I was interested myself. Like, okay. Tesla advertises this, let's figure it out. So I did the math. I looked at gas prices in San Diego. I looked at how much I had driven. I looked at how much we had paid in electricity. And I basically did a really poorly produced video on a 720p webcam with horrible lighting, me talking through a spreadsheet. And it was just, "Here's how I calculated it. And in the end, here's how much money we were saving by having a Tesla." And it was about 40%, which is significant. But if you don't drive 'cause you work from home, it really doesn't add up to a lot of dollars, right? And that video in the first week on YouTube had something like 200 thousand views.

Pat Flynn: What? How did that happen?

Ben Sullins: Well as I've learned, YouTube, it's all about the algorithm and the things it likes. So I think what, in the Tesla space at the time, it still is this way, there was obviously a huge amount of interest, right? People that love Tesla are really, really into it. And there weren't really ... Now Tesla themselves don't do a lot of marketing. They don't do advertising or any of that stuff. So a video about Tesla that, in my case, was personal, right? Because it told you how much money you're going to save by owning a Tesla, which is something like, people love stuff that's all about them. And it was real. I'm showing you data. This isn't just my opinion. I think it really landed well with a lot of people, and then YouTube sees that and then they

recommend it.

So you know, from there, that absolutely went bonkers. And you know, I, being a data guy, I'm freaking out and I'm going, "Wow, okay. What is it?" So then that's when I first got my first hint that maybe I should talk more about Tesla on YouTube.

Pat Flynn: Yeah. And we'll get into kinda what happened next. But let's go back a little bit. 200 thousand views in a week. You had said it's because of the algorithm and it kind of jived with a lot of people, it landed well with them. Can you define what that means in terms of, what does it mean to land well with somebody on YouTube?

Ben Sullins: Yeah. So in YouTube terms, the stuff I've learned now and I'm still learning every day, but the big thing is watch time. Likes, dislikes, comments are all secondary. That stuff helps, but it certainly is not the main factor when YouTube looks at a video, and whether or not it wants to recommend it. And so the title of the video is "What is the monthly cost of a Tesla?" The image is a Tesla and it says "Monthly cost" in text in the actual image, so it all matches, right? All that's very good, and YouTube loves that.

Then when people watched it, the retention rate was really high, meaning people watched, you know, almost to the end. And that is what they love, because the more people spend, the more time people spend on YouTube, the more ads YouTube can show them, and so the more money the creator makes, more money YouTube makes. So that's kind of the main thing. And so looking at the data on that, I mean, the retention rate was much higher on that video than even today, a lot of my other videos. And so that's where, I think, you know, it landing well, that's what I mean by that.

Pat Flynn: Why do you think that video had such a high retention rate?

Ben Sullins: I think it's because the subject of the video is something that, it's an answer to a question that people have. It is directly kind of, to ... You know, people want Teslas, right? But they don't know these details, 'cause Tesla doesn't really share them. Or if they do, they're

sometimes unbelievable, right? Some of these things Elon kind of promises a lot. So here's a real person that is, you know, sharing real data, so it's valid, it's legit. It's not made up. And it's something that they are personally interested in. So I think all those factors combined. Like, if you look at the production quality, it was horrible. It was really bad.

Pat Flynn: That's a big lesson for everybody right there.

Ben Sullins: Yeah. Well YouTube is a thing. You know, you can find a lot of videos out there that have really poor production quality, but they just ring, you know, really well with people. It's either something that personally that makes them feel good, or it's an answer to a question that they've had. I don't know about you, but how many times I've searched for an answer to something on YouTube or on Google, and I end up on a YouTube video that has, it's really bad but it gives me the answer I want, so good.

You know, so I think that's a really interesting lesson about video production is that yes, you know, when you have a certain level of success on YouTube, people expect high quality video. But the YouTube algorithm doesn't necessarily care about that as much.

Pat Flynn: Yeah, I agree. It's all about watch time. As many of you who are listening to this know, I'm going pretty big on YouTube as well, so I'm trying to follow Ben's lead a little bit. I'm asking a lot of these questions for selfish reasons to, but no, I know a lot of you are interested as well. My thought in that video in particular is when you tell people, "Okay, well here's, what's the cost." People want that answer, and the whole video is this gap that you were just closing in on the entire time, right? And the answer finally comes at the end, and people can engage because they drive a certain amount versus how much you drive. They pay a certain amount for gas in their place versus how much you pay. So they're kind of comparing themselves to you along the way.

'Cause I've done videos before that I thought were great, that I thought were gonna be huge, and they weren't. And people leave

before they get to the part in the video where actually I felt that they would want to stick. So I'm learning a lot about retention and keeping people's engaged, keeping people engaged too.

Okay, so this video explodes. You have these courses that are about something, you know, mostly completely different. What's going through your head, and what decisions do you make?

Ben Sullins: Well I still was in the tunnel of, "Wow, people love me talking about data," which was wrong, you know. So I make a couple more videos. And I think at the time, this was November 2016, so we're talking election time, right? And I'm thinking, "Oh, what a great thing. It's super popular in the news. I'll do my data science thing and really break down the numbers." Nobody cares. Nobody wanted to see those videos.

Pat Flynn: And what kind of, what kind of videos were those?

Ben Sullins: Well it was looking at polling results, and I don't know if you follow FiveThirtyEight. They have a great, you know, data science team and there's lot of information about how to actually try to predict things and all that. So I was kind of parsing some of that data and coming up with the visualizations. I mean, this is what I do. And yeah, nobody really cared. But it's funny, 'cause I really tried to step up the production value. I still basically had no clue.

Then I made another Tesla video. I thought, "Okay. Maybe it's not me talking about data. Maybe it's not, you know, these things. Maybe it's Tesla itself." And so I did a video. I forget which one it was. It was like, Model S versus a Mercedes E class or C class or something like that. And what I did is I broke down the cost differences, right? Here's the retail price, here's what you'll pay in maintenance, here's what you'll pay in insurance, all the, and here's what you'll pay in fuel. In the end, here's the total cost of ownership. Surprise, surprise: the Tesla's actually a lot cheaper. That video again, in the first week, had over 100 thousand views. And I'm like, "Man, okay." So uh-

- Pat Flynn: The universe is just trying to tell you something, right?
- Ben Sullins: Yeah, yeah. The universe is banging me over the head with a hammer going, “Hey, dummy.” You know, and so yeah. So then I really started to get the hint. Made another video very similar, Tesla something versus Tesla something else. Did really well the first week or so. And then in the new year, in January of 2017 of this year or last year or whatever, that’s when I decided, “Alright. I’m just gonna rebrand the channel.” I mean, I think I had 800 subscribers. It will still very tiny and really not going anywhere. But I’m like, “Alright, let me just rebrand it so when people come here, they know they’re gonna get stuff related to Tesla.” So you know, if you see the name, you know, “Okay, great.” So hopefully, that’ll encourage people to subscribe because they’ll know that what, you know, the theme is of the channel is something that they’re, you know, interested in.
- And so yeah, in January, I kind of pivoted the focus and said, “Alright, I’m just gonna talk about Tesla, but I’m gonna do it in my way, which is looking at the numbers of things.” You know, not looking at the flashy sex appeal of the stuff, which is hard to ignore obviously. But I wanted to bring my perspective on it, right? Looking at the costs, looking at other factors and things like that.
- Pat Flynn: No, I love it. I mean, this is a perfect example of taking a superpower that you have, which is data, and putting it into something that, you know, obviously a lot of people also enjoy, and coming at it in a completely brand new angle, which allows you to stand out, which is great. So the name of the channel is what?
- Ben Sullins: Teslanomics.
- Pat Flynn: Teslanomics. Like economics, Teslanomics.
- Ben Sullins: It’s a play on Freakanomics, the podcast, if you listen to that one at all.
- Pat Flynn: Okay. Oh, cool.

- Ben Sullins: I'm a huge fan of those guys.
- Pat Flynn: I love those guys too, yeah.
- Ben Sullins: Yeah. And so, so that was, I was talking with a friend. I'm like, "Well I want to do economics and Tesla."
- "Like, why don't you call it Teslanomics?"
- "Ah, bing!" And there was nothing out there. Actually, someone else still has the dot com domain and it's to some forum that's been dead for years. I'm like, "Fine, whatever. I don't care." Google doesn't care about domain names that much. It's more about SEO stuff and all that, so yeah.
- Pat Flynn: I think we have to address the big elephant in the room right now, which is, and I don't know if you know what I'm about to say, but the fact that you say it Tez-la and most people say Tes-la.
- Ben Sullins: Oh, yes.
- Pat Flynn: Why?
- Ben Sullins: Yes, okay. So you know, I don't know why. I don't know if there's actually an answer to why. It's just how I pronounce it. But I'll say this. Elon actually talked about this in an interview in, I think 2012, because he says it the way I do, and so does Franz vol Hanhausen, Halhausen, the chief designer.
- Pat Flynn: What a name.
- Ben Sullins: Who has a very German name, but he's just a dude from Connecticut. His words, not mine. So we all say it the same way, so I kind of argue, "Hey, if Elon says it the same way I do and so does Franz, I can't be too far off, right?"
- Pat Flynn: Yeah.
- Ben Sullins: But yeah, I don't know why. So the difference was cars versus boys.

If you look at these two words, they have a soft s or a pronounced s, or something like that. I was reading, some linguist talked about it and they basically said, you're talking about the name of a company that was founded in America, so you shouldn't really worry about, you know, the Serbian-American inventor's pronunciation and all that. But yeah, I do get a ton of comments on it. I even did a funny video where I went to my wife's hair salon and I interviewed ten of the stylists and said, "Hey, you know, just pronounce it." And yeah, seven out of the ten pronounced it with the soft s, and only three, you know, which I may have coerced a little bit into pronouncing it my way. So yeah, it's definitely-

Pat Flynn: I love that.

Ben Sullins: Yeah. But hey, you know, it's something special, I guess.

Pat Flynn: No, I love it. I mean, I struggle with nitch versus neesh. I get a lot of flack for both, so ... And now I interchange it, which is probably something I shouldn't do.

Ben Sullins: The real question. Is it jif or gif?

Pat Flynn: I say gif.

Ben Sullins: Gif.

Pat Flynn: Animated gif, right? Who says animated jif?

Ben Sullins: I do.

Pat Flynn: Jif is a peanut butter.

Ben Sullins: Well right. And see again, though, the guy that interviewed, or the guy that created it, I don't know if you ever saw that, but they interviewed him and asked him, and he says it's jif like the peanut butter. However, whatever, you know? People, whatever's the most popular way to say it, that's what we'll call it.

Pat Flynn: It's actually gaif. [crosstalk 00:21:10]

- Ben Sullins: Yeah, right?
- Pat Flynn: Okay, well let's keep going here. Okay, so in January, you rebrand. And then what? What is your life like at this point, and your regularity in this brand?
- Ben Sullins: Yeah. So I'm still making online courses at the time, which is taking up a lot of time, as you know. They're a lot of work. And so I'm still kind of, you know, pushing on that fly wheel. And then I'm not producing, I think I was doing one video a week at the time. So I amped that up, and me trying not to do it all myself, I hire an editor very quickly. I realize that that's not my strong suit, and so I could easily just pay somebody. That is much more efficient for me. So I hire, I find a guy in Upwork. He's fantastic. We've been working actually together since then. Ironically, we just met face to face at the semi truck unveil in LA a couple weeks ago.
- Pat Flynn: Oh, you were there?
- Ben Sullins: Or whatever that was a month ago. So yeah.
- Pat Flynn: Semi truck/Roadster reveal?
- Ben Sullins: Yeah, yeah.
- Pat Flynn: Which we'll get into that in a minute.
- Ben Sullins: Yeah, we'll get there. So yeah, so I'm doing one video a week. I have an editor. And then I'm doing online courses still, which my online course schedule was pretty, was pretty intense. Yeah, 'cause I think I did 16 online courses this year, or in a 12 month span. I think it was September to September.
- Pat Flynn: With your Tesla stuff and your videos, how far ahead are you planning?
- Ben Sullins: Oh, man. You know, I have a Trello board that has probably several months worth of videos to make, but the hard part is is that the news cycle with Tesla goes up and down, you know, so quickly that

I'm really about two to three weeks out in reality.

Pat Flynn: Can we talk more about that? What do you mean about that? Why is that important?

Ben Sullins: Well, so for example, right? I had planned on doing a video. So before the semi truck unveil, I had maybe five videos I had done for the semi truck. And 'cause I wanted, as people, as that, the news cycle around the Tesla kind of came onto YouTube, I wanted to be the guy that if you searched anything Tesla semi, I was there. And so I had a lot of, "What I hope to see," you know, "How it could affect the industry, what could it possibly?" All these things, as much as you could possibly do. If you follow any of the big tech reviews like MKBHD, guys like that, they do it all, right? So there's five or six videos before the next phone comes out or whatever. And then when you go search, bam, they have all this content related. So I was really trying to plan in advance.

The most perfect example was I had actually filmed 90% of a video about the Tesla semi, because there were all these leaks, there were all this data, and we basically had this whole video put together about, well how much money could they possibly make? How many could they sell? What's the industry like? All these things. And then when they unveiled it, the details were so wildly beyond any of the leaks or anything that I had to completely scrap the video and redo the whole thing. Yeah.

So I was trying, you know, so I try to plan as much as I can, but Tesla is so kind of tightlipped about these details and things that you can't make a lot of the content until it comes out. And as soon as those details come out, you know, you want to be there. Because especially, my audience expects me to talk about these things now. So you know, it's really hard to plan too far in advance, just because of how quickly things change in the Tesla kind of world.

Pat Flynn: Yeah, that makes sense. And how big is your audience now on this brand?

Ben Sullins: Yeah. On YouTube, we have approaching 54, 55 thousand subscribers. The number of people watching per month is much higher though. We're close to a million views per months. So sort of in YouTube terms, punching out of my weight class, I guess, is the way to put it, right? There's a lot of channels out there. I have a lot of friends with 200 thousand subscribers, but they're only getting, you know, 500 thousand views per month. So I think it's a really weird kind of interesting thing. Still something like 80% of my views come from non-subscribers, which is a really good sign on YouTube terms, because that means that YouTube is suggesting your video to people that are not already subscribed to you. So I think, and that actually holds true for ... I have friends with millions of followers, and they still have that ratio. 85% of their views are from non-subscribers.

So it's a really interesting thing about, when you take a, the version of this in the digital marketing world. You think about how big is your email list, right? And my email list is, I dunno, 13 thousand now, which I feel pretty good about. At the beginning of the year, it was zero, so yeah, there you go. But in terms of YouTube, there's subscribers versus views, and those things aren't always directly correlated.

Pat Flynn: Right. And first of all, to start off with 800 subscribers when you were talking about data to now 55 thousand subscribers. What is in your mind? How do you feel about that?

Ben Sullins: I feel like it's the only thing I've ever done in the social media world that's worked. You know, I've tried to have Facebook pages and Twitter and this stuff, and it's almost, I think you had an interview with Clay from, what, LeadPages, I think?

Pat Flynn: Yes.

Ben Sullins: And he talked about, he said you have to master one thing at a time. One of the fallacies was trying to do all these different things. And so, you know, I guess that, this growth, it makes me feel amazing, but it also is another clear signal. YouTube is my thing,

right? I've tried podcasting, I've tried all these other things, and you know, there's probably a lot of things I'm not doing right that I could do better, but YouTube works for me. So if anything, that's just the clearest signal for me that that's where I belong.

Pat Flynn: I love that. And that's a great reminder for everybody. If you haven't heard that episode yet, go and listen to it. It was a game changer, actually the most downloads in the shortest period of time with over, I think, 400 thousand downloads in just a month of that episode, which is pretty abnormal for the SPI podcast. It's episode 263 with Clay Collins, SmartPassiveIncome.com/session263. We'll link to that in the show notes obviously, and thank you for bringing that up.

Now okay, so you're going gangbusters with the Tesla, Tezla staff and creating videos. You're getting millions of views a month now. How does that translate to business? How does that translate to life and dollars, if you don't mind sharing?

Ben Sullins: Yeah, yeah, totally. So the YouTube money is, the YouTube AdSense is pretty small. You know, I think you get around \$2000, \$2000-3000 for every million views. So still, you know, even at million views a month, \$2000-3000 depending on where the views come from, not enough to really, you know, support living in San Diego, right? There's, it costs a bit more than that. So what I've tried to do is to bring that community from YouTube into a more private space by joining my email list, and then from there, working with other creators to bring opportunities to them that they'll find value in. So you know, hosting online events or promoting other people's online courses. I still have this notion of creating my own online course, but you know, at the end of year and all this other stuff, it'll probably happen early next year. So really trying to basically create opportunities and things for these folks that they will like that makes sense, that are kind of in line with, you know, the Tesla stuff and what they're interested in to kind of monetize and grow, grow it as a business outside of YouTube. Because just on YouTube alone through AdSense is really not sustainable unless you're Jake Paul or somebody like that.

Pat Flynn: This is true. And you know, I've gone to video conferences and such and met a lot of people who have millions of views, millions of subscribers, but they don't have anything outside of that. They're only relying on AdSense income, which is really scary, and also kind of crazy to be, because you have that many people who follow you. You can do things to serve them even more, which will help pay you even more in a way that you have more control. So it's really cool to see that you're doing that. Do you mind going into depth about, you know, some of the things that you're doing to do that beyond the email list?

Ben Sullins: Yeah.

Pat Flynn: You mentioned this online summit thing. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Ben Sullins: Yeah, yeah yeah. So I recently did TeslaCon, and so this was the first online summit.

Pat Flynn: You created this?

Ben Sullins: I created it. Yeah, because I sat down with a friend of mine who's another digital entrepreneur, and we talked about it. He teaches software developers how to be cool, so he has a lot of things about how to, you know, dress or something like that. How to pass an interview, personal development type stuff. So there's an obvious kind of value there, right? And so I came to him and I said, "What can I do here with this audience?" And I think I'd grown the list to almost 10 thousand at the time. And I said, "Alright, well I make online courses, but they're all data stuff, so I don't know how directly related that is to this audience."

So I did a survey and I asked them, and I think I got about 500 or so people that said yeah, they want a free first copy of it, or first chapter, and they're interested. So 500 people. If you know, I don't know, 10% of them signed up or something, you know, that could be an option, right? But it seemed a little adjunct. It seemed a little not directly related. People follow me and join my thing for Tesla, and

this is not Tesla stuff. It's another online course for data something. And so that's still in my mind, because there are enough people that have, you know, could use these skills, but that's not directly related.

So the other idea I had was about creating a summit, an online summit for Tesla fans. And the reason I wanted to do it online is because we did this in person where me and a bunch of other, we call ourselves TeslaTubers, Tesla YouTubers. We all got together at a tour, or actually at the Model 3 handover event and then at the Tesla VIP factory tour that we all went on. And we live streamed it, and people went bananas over it. They were like, "Oh my god! You guys are all friends and you're all together in the same space? I want to come to that." And I started looking into a physical conference, and holy cow. It's insane how complex and how much money it takes, and how much time, and how many people to do a physical conference. And so I thought, "Okay, that's lame. I'm into technology. This, everybody found me through YouTube or through my website, so yeah. Let's do this in a more modern way."

And so I created TeslaCon, the first ever web-based conference for EV and Tesla fans. And essentially, you get to hear from and interact with your favorite creators directly. So unlike, you know, a physical conference where, you know, Pat, you get up there and speak for an hour and then maybe you take five questions and you're done, this is much more intimate and much more direct where the questions that the person answers are voted on, and so only the most popular questions pop up. So that, I think, you know, when I saw that platform and I started to get into that, I was like, "This is really cool." And so that's what, you know, my first digital product, I guess you could say, is for the TeslaCon, or the Teslanomics audience.

Pat Flynn: What platform were you using to host that?

Ben Sullins: Crowdcast.

Pat Flynn: Crowdcast.

- Ben Sullins: Yeah.
- Pat Flynn: And how did it go?
- Ben Sullins: It went great. We're still, still waiting on replays and some other features and things like that to come in, but yeah. I mean, the thing that is a bit tough about it is that people want everything for free, especially online stuff. So they had a hard time with paying, \$200 was the average price for it. So there was a bit of a rub there, but we hit our goal of 100 sales.
- Pat Flynn: That's awesome.
- Ben Sullins: I mean, yeah. You know, at first, 'cause it's a really weird thing because, you know, if I got 100 views on a video on YouTube, I would be devastated. I'd be like, "Oh my God, what did I do wrong?"
- Pat Flynn: Right.
- Ben Sullins: But you know, 100 people paying \$200 to come to an event, awesome. So yeah, so that was the first we'll do that. Probably do it again, but gonna take some lessons there from how it went and everything.
- Pat Flynn: What is one big takeaway, something that you wish you had done differently?
- Ben Sullins: I wish I had hired more people to help with some of the organization and some of the ... There are so many things to do of just updating people on the agenda, creating pages for these things, you know. All those things are just, it's insurmountable, right? It's just too much and things fall through the cracks. So I wish I would have hired more people to help kind of, all the administrative stuff like that.
- Pat Flynn: But despite there being a few hiccups here and there, you glad you did it?
- Ben Sullins: Yeah. Yeah, totally. I just think, you know, for me, I still ... I don't look at the vanity metrics as much about, you know, "Oh, we

made X amount of dollars or this or that.” I look at more at how, how did people really feel? Was it a good thing? ‘Cause if it was a really good thing and people really loved it, then I know we have something special. And whether or not we reached a million people or not, I think, is something that you can work on, right? But if you have something that’s not good in the beginning and it really doesn’t land well with people, then trying to scale that isn’t gonna go anywhere. So you know, I’m happy about the positive response and the community that we’re building and stuff.

Pat Flynn: That’s awesome. I’m stoked to see it grow even bigger. I’m stoked to see other products that you might be coming out with, because I’m obviously a Tesla fan myself too.

Ben Sullins: Yeah.

Pat Flynn: Speaking of Tesla, do you have a relationship with them?

Ben Sullins: Not officially. I do know some people that work there, and I’ve talked to the PR team a few times. I guess through the referral program, I have a contact that I work with through them, but that’s kind of any customer, you know, anybody that has a referral can do that.

Pat Flynn: Yeah.

Ben Sullins: But officially, does Tesla support or work with Teslanomics? No. And I think that’s kind of just their standard policy, right? They don’t really, they’re very Apple-like, I guess, in that way.

Pat Flynn: If though, you wouldn’t be able to create a website called Applenomics because of the trademark.

Ben Sullins: Right.

Pat Flynn: So I’m curious to know related to your trademark, if you don’t mind sharing, how do you deal with that possibility, or with that?

Ben Sullins: Yeah. Well before I officially rebranded the name, or the channel,

to Teslanomics, I looked at kind of what was out there already, and there's websites like Teslarati, and there are other channels called Like Tesla and Everything Tesla, and there's. So there's lots of, their trademark or their name is widely used by many, many properties and stuff. And I looked and I hadn't seen anything about anybody getting sued over it or anything like that. So I felt, "Okay, I'm gonna try it, and we'll see how it goes."

Pat Flynn: Cool.

Ben Sullins: You know, if they tell me I have to change, fine. You know, we're still small and early. It's not like I've been doing this for ten years and it's, you know, it's not Coca-Cola, right? It's a small brand that's growing. And so in talking with their PR team, you know, generally their view that they've shared with me is that they're supportive of people that are doing what we do, spreading information and helping people understand EV's and Tesla and stuff. And I honestly think it's just, this is my opinion, I don't think they're, it's important enough for them to worry about. There are so many giant things that they're trying to do.

Pat Flynn: Yeah, they kind of have a bunch of cars to get out, and yeah.

Ben Sullins: Right. This is like, "Oh, do we even want to have to pay a lawyer to write a letter to a guy who has a YouTube channel with, you know," compared to how big they are, tiny. I'm not even a molecule.

Pat Flynn: You're also actually helping people, and we know this because you've, through the program that Tesla has, which is really cool. When I got a Tesla, I was quite surprised to realize that. They have an affiliate program.

Ben Sullins: Yeah.

Pat Flynn: They call it a referral program where you could go through my link, for example, by Tesla. I get something, you get a little bit of discount too. And so when did you start promoting that through your channels? And tell us kinda what happened next.

- Ben Sullins: Yeah. So the referral program, once you own a Tesla, like you said, you know, you can share your link. People use it to buy a Tesla and you get prizes. I started promoting it. So in January of 2017, they announced the first person to 20 in each region, North America being one of the regions, gets a free P100D Model S or X. And so with that giant carrot in front of you, and me deciding to now just solely focus on Tesla, I thought, “Yeah, let’s go. I’m gonna do it.” And so I started promoting it in January. And honestly, I didn’t really see any traction until about June.
- Pat Flynn: Oh wow, yeah.
- Ben Sullins: So there’s a real big kind of lead there. Yeah, I think I had four or five referrals.
- Pat Flynn: That’s a big investment.
- Ben Sullins: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I’m asking people to buy \$100 thousand on average product, right? So it’s not like \$200 or \$1000 here. This is a major thing, so not something people just, you know, write a check for and don’t worry about it.
- Pat Flynn: Right.
- Ben Sullins: So that was when I started. But then it really picked up when the announced the current version of the program, which the grand prize was a free next gen Roadster. And I was kind of blown away. When I saw it, it was a joke at first, ‘cause it was like, “Oh, every person you refer, we’ll give you a 2% discount.” And you’re like, “Okay, cool.” So I got two or three referrals. I’m like, “Yay, I only have 45 more to go.”
- Pat Flynn: Yeah.
- Ben Sullins: So it just seemed insurmountable. And you know, at the time that the channel really started to grow, I was seeing six to seven thousand new subscribers every month. That’s when I finally hit 500 thousand views a month, 600 thousand views a month, and it really

started to pick up. And I actually used some of your tactics and stuff on how to promote this, and really kind of grow that group within my list and then nurture them to the point where they actually use my code to buy. And so, I mean, the whole workflow was, go to my website, fill out this type form. And at the time, Tesla had a weird thing where they said, “Okay.”

So it was super weird. Somebody was upset on Twitter about YouTubers pushing their code, pushing their referral code. ‘Cause like, “This should only be for Tesla owners, it should be special.” And so Elon responded and said, “We’re gonna put a stop to that.” And me and a lot of the other folks were like, “Oh, that is total buzzkill for us.” And a few YouTubers actually got letters from Tesla, or emails from Tesla and said, “Hey, take your code off your channel. Otherwise, we’re basically gonna invalidate any other referrals you’ve given us. None of the prizes will come out, whatever.” And so that was a big bummer.

Then at one of the events, I forget which one the events, me and a few of the other folks met the guy that runs the referral program. And we talked to him about and he said, you know, “The problem was that people were taking out billboards with their code, and people were doing Google ads for their codes.” And that wasn’t the intent of it, right? They didn’t want to make this a marketing tool for people to make money on. So they had, they saw a giant flood of essentially malicious or you know, whatever, disingenuous usage of the code, and so that’s what they were really trying to clamp down on.

Pat Flynn: Makes sense.

Ben Sullins: Then they updated their program just a few weeks after that conversation and said YouTube is okay, right? They said, “As long as you’re doing something good and you’re being honest. You can be critical, we’re not playing that game. But as long as you’re not basically trying to do this for profit, and you’re doing it kind of with some altruistic intent, we’re all good.” And so from that moment on, it was like, “Alright, let’s go.” And I created the type form which said

you have to be my friend in order to get my code. I had a video, I played flamenco guitar, so there's a video of me playing flamenco guitar. And then I asked, "Hey, tell me something about yourself. Tell me something about you so I know."

So I've had 2000 fill this out. I haven't even went through all the responses. Some of them are pretty funny. But with that, you filled it out. Now you're on my list. Now you get an email, and now you're in an email sequence which is, "Here's the code," and then a week later, "How'd it go? Did your order go through?" Two weeks later if you didn't open that one, you know, "Are you still there? Did it, you know, how's it going?" And so a lot of times what would happen is people would go get the code. Then they would, they wouldn't order but they would get the email, "How'd your order go?" Then they would respond personally and say, "Oh man, you know. I'm waiting on this. I still have questions about this." And then I would go back and forth with them over email, I mean, sometimes dozens of times. And then eventually, they would use my code and buy. And that's when I think I saw a real, you know, spike in kind of the number of referrals I was getting.

Pat Flynn: Yeah, that's great. I'll oftentimes with these larger ticket items, this is obviously a huge one.

Ben Sullins: Yeah.

Pat Flynn: People are gonna have questions. They're gonna, they're gonna question the purchase. And if you are there on the other end helping them through those questions and can provide those answers, well, they're gonna want to go through your link when you convince them.

Ben Sullins: Yep.

Pat Flynn: And not convince them in a slimy way, but just truly answer their questions, because that's what they need to be convinced. So big lesson for all of you out there. And this is why when I promote products, often I'll say, "Hey, by the way, if you have any questions,

please let me know.” Because I know that when people have questions, they are interested. They just need a little bit of help before pushing forward and following through.

Okay, so there’s this carrot in front of you now. It’s not the 100. it’s the Roadster, which you know, the original Tesla was a Roadster built on a Lotus chassis. And then it was discontinued. So you hear news that there’s a new roadster coming out. You don’t know what it looks like. It’s never been revealed. But you won.

Ben Sullins: I won.

Pat Flynn: You won. Like, 100% or the amount of referrals that came in, 50 or however many.

Ben Sullins: 55, yeah. It was a 5 referral ante to get into the secret level, which is where you get the Roadster, and then it was, each one then from there on gave you a 2% discount, so you needed 50. So yeah, 55.

Pat Flynn: Oh, okay.

Ben Sullins: And I actually, two more have slipped in. I’ve got 57. So I don’t know if that gets me 104% discount.

Pat Flynn: Yeah, you get money and a Roadster. And so how are you feeling when you’ve realized through these referrals and through these conversations that you were getting this brand new Roadster that we don’t even know what it looks like yet?

Ben Sullins: [crosstalk 00:44:24] You know, it was very unreal at the time, because yeah, like you said, there were basically no details. There was one person that had done a mock up and that was it. It was a super ... So just a story about how, for YouTube, I wanted to make sure that I got my real honest reaction to this. And so I had to move the app on my phone which shows you your number of referrals to a different folder. I had to hide it from myself so I wouldn’t check it, because I didn’t want to then go try to act in front of the camera, ‘cause I’m not good at that.

Pat Flynn: 'Cause you knew you were getting close.

Ben Sullins: Yeah. I mean, as, in the beginning, it was very ha ha ha, only 40 more to go, you know? And then towards the end, I'm like, "Holy crap, I'm almost there." And so yeah, when I was, I think at 54, and you need 55, that's when I said, "Okay, I need to make sure that I get my reaction on camera." So I would come into my studio each morning, fire up all the cameras and everything, hit record, and then go check. That way, it was a real honest reaction. And remember, I was getting two or three a day, so it could happen at any moment. So that's why I had to be very diligent about recording my reaction and stuff.

Pat Flynn: Uh-huh.

Ben Sullins: When it happened, I was ... I mean, I knew it was coming and I was overjoyed, but it still felt not real, you know? Because I, because there were still no details about it. In the referral program the way it works, I still, they still ... I've won officially two power walls, but it's been over a year and I still haven't got them. So it was very kind, "Yes, amazing! Wait."

Pat Flynn: What does this really mean?

Ben Sullins: Yeah. Like, okay. Maybe I'll get it in five years. Who knows, right? And it wasn't real until I went to the Tesla semi event and they unveiled it.

Pat Flynn: Oh, it's so crazy that you were there. It was so great. So for everybody listening right now, this is what happened. So nobody knows about this Roadster. Nobody knows when it's coming out. Nobody hears any news. And then they have this reveal that Elon leads in a keynote and they reveal the semi truck, which is gonna change the trucking industry. And they go through all the details of that, and then you think the thing is over. And then all of a sudden, there's a second presentation, and out the back of one of the semi trucks comes one of these new Roadsters. And you see it with your own eyes, and you think ...

- Ben Sullins: Yeah.
- Pat Flynn: “That’s mine.”
- Ben Sullins: My first thought was, “Everybody get away from my car.” That was my first thought.
- Pat Flynn: And it has some ridiculous specs. Like, zero to 60 in 1.9. it just, oh man. You’re gonna be flying. And I saw some people-
- Ben Sullins: 620 mile range.
- Pat Flynn: 650 mile range. That’s ...
- Ben Sullins: 620.
- Pat Flynn: 620, yeah. That’s stupid. That’s ridiculous.
- Ben Sullins: You could drive from here in San Diego to San Francisco without having to stop.
- Pat Flynn: And back most of the way without having to stop.
- Ben Sullins: Yeah, that’s right.
- Pat Flynn: Anyway. We’re geeking out a little bit on Tesla. But the whole point of the story is the fact that because of the care that you’ve taken to answer people’s questions and the fact that you kind of positioned yourself as the Tesla data guy and that’s what people want to know, you were able to win your way to this really cool, amazing prize. And whether there’s a prize or not, I mean, there are often JV partnerships where there’s, you know, a small window or whoever gets the most leads or whoever gets the most sales, there are prizes. Those can be very motivating, so if you have your own product to sell, perhaps to move your affiliates, you wanna, you know, dangle a little bit of a carrot for them too. But from the affiliate person, the person doing the selling for those products, you know, being genuine, being honest, being authentic, and truly being helpful will get you a really long way.

Ben Sullins: Yeah. I can't believe it. I think this year today, we have through my code, I have about 67 people that have bought Teslas with it.

Pat Flynn: That's crazy.

Ben Sullins: Which I mean, so that's, you're approaching \$7 million in product sales through one affiliate. I mean, actually, it's funny. They have an API that they opened up and I built a little dashboard on it to show, they've made over a billion dollars through the referral program in Tesla sales overall. And I mean, that's insane. There's no company where I think a billion dollars is a small amount of money, right?

Pat Flynn: Especially through referrals specifically.

Ben Sullins: Yeah, yeah.

Pat Flynn: An attract referral program. 'Cause I know a lot of things are based on just friends telling friends and word of mouth and stuff. So now that you're gonna get this Roadster, imagine all the new videos you're gonna shoot with it.

Ben Sullins: I have a list, yeah, yeah. And I have actually a lot of folks that want to shoot videos with me with it. The question I still have is, when? So I mean, if you were Tesla, and this is the founders series, by the way. So this is the fully spec'ed out one. You know, and the people that bought that, there were only a thousand that they're making. Now they had to pay \$250 thousand. They had to pay \$5000 that night and then wire the extra \$245 thousand within ten days. So if I'm Tesla, I'm probably not gonna make the guys that didn't pay anything for it first. I'm probably gonna give it to the guys that gave me a quarter million dollars.

So there's a big question about how long will me and the other folks that are get them, or get a steep discount on them, when will we actually get them? It'll probably be, if I'm Tesla, I'm making theirs last, right? It's probably not a priority. But yeah. As soon as I get it, I mean, I promised my wife that we're gonna go road trip up the California coast in it, no kids, and just enjoy it. Because she's

been, you know, obviously a huge supporter and really made this all possible, so without her, none of this would have happened. So you know, that's priority one. But along the way, I'll probably be stopping into LA, filming a lot, and then up in San Francisco, I have some friends that I want to meet up with and shoot with.

Pat Flynn: Well hey, man. I'm in San Diego, and I don't have a Tesla channel, but I will have a channel that's hopefully growing pretty big. I'd love to maybe do a collab with you and get you on my show on YouTube.

Ben Sullins: Yeah, let's do it.

Pat Flynn: And we'll figure things out. Anyway, I just want to get in the car once you have it, basically. But dude, no. Thank you for telling us this story. I mean, it's a really incredible journey that you've had here from Excel data nerd building courses to now Tesla nerd and known in the industry, and now winning cars and stuff. So a lot of important lessons along the way from just kind of follow your strengths, listen to the signals, and you know, be helpful and just kinda go with the flow sometimes. I think if I could ask you one last question for somebody who's trying to build a brand who hasn't yet found their signal yet, what would you recommend for them to keep going?

Ben Sullins: You know, I would say keep trying new ideas, and don't, don't be married to one idea, because that can sink in some ways, right? I was very married to, "Hey, I'm gonna teach you data science!" I mean, it was, I still am like, "Ah, people want that." But honestly, they don't. They really don't. And it took me a long time to realize that. So I think actually, I don't know if it was your podcast or maybe it's Freakonomics, or somebody talked about it, but the importance of knowing when to quit and knowing when to say, "Look, that's not working. I need to try something new." And you still have your superpower, right? For me, anything I do will always have this element of looking at the data and making sense of it. But I could probably translate, you know, Tesla stuff into reviewing tech products from a financial standpoint or some other, you know, what I mean? So I think keeping your superpower, but then not being totally married to your first idea, and being open and paying

attention to those signals.

So, 'cause once you find it, I mean, this has been such a fun journey. I mean, I just can't tell you. I was just, you know, I feel like me and Franz, the chief designer from Tesla, are friends now. I see him at every event and we always hang out for at least five minutes.

Pat Flynn: That's cool, man.

Ben Sullins: You know, Elon is always MIA because he's Elon. But I mean, he gives a presentation and then security escorts him off, he's gone.

Pat Flynn: He's out, yeah.

Ben Sullins: Yeah, you know. But hey, you're one of the richest men in the world, blah blah blah, all that stuff. So yeah. I mean, but it's been such a fun journey. And even though I'm not making, you know, crazy money, I'm having so much fun. And if I had been stuck with that first idea about teaching people data science and didn't let go of it, then I wouldn't be here, and you know, we probably wouldn't be talking. And so, you know, I would say that was the biggest thing was just listening and being open to changing directions, because when you find it, when you find your voice, as they say, you know, it's pretty awesome. It's pretty fun.

Pat Flynn: Yeah, man. Well I love what you're doing. Thank you so much for being here. Where can people go and check you out?

Ben Sullins: Yeah, so on my website, I have everything, Teslanomics.co. Also just on YouTube is the best place to find me. Just search for Teslanomics. Probably if you just search for anything Tesla, you'll find me.

Pat Flynn: Love it, man. That's how it should be, right?

Ben Sullins: Yeah, yeah.

Pat Flynn: Alright, well good luck. We'll talk soon and catch up shortly.

Ben Sullins: Cool. Thanks, man.

Pat Flynn: Thanks, man.

Alrighty. Hope you enjoyed that interview with Ben. Again, you can find him at Teslanomics on YouTube, and also Teslanomics.co. I'm doing them interchangeably now. But anyway, hey Ben. Thank you so much for coming on, man. I appreciate it. Super inspirational, especially for me getting into the YouTube space and seeing your success with it in such a quick period of time. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens on my YouTube channel too, so that's SmartPassiveIncome.com/YouTube. And all the links and resources mentioned in this episode are gonna be found in the show notes, which you can find at SmartPassiveIncome.com/session301.

Now really quick, I want to tell you about next week's episode. So if you aren't yet convinced to subscribe, do that now, because with the new versions of [AsPat 00:54:20] and the studying I've been doing, I've been learning a lot about coaching and the art of coaching, and this is gonna be a really helpful episode for all of you who want to learn how to coach better, or do consulting, or perhaps even have your own podcast one day, if you haven't had one already, where you ask questions and you learn how to interview. What I've learned through studying coaching over the past couple of months in preparation for [AsPat 00:54:44] 2.0 and the SPI accelerator program. It's just blowing my mind, and I cannot wait to share my findings with you in episode 302, coming out next week.

So make sure you subscribe to the show so you can get that. Until then, keep crushing it. Again, my name is Pat Flynn here to help you make more money, save more time, and help more people to appreciate you. Thank you, and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye.

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