



Building a Life Science Blog for Professional Development (and 14,000 followers)

This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.

Chris: Joe Whittaker is a Life Science Marketer at Horizon Discovery, but he's also the author of his own personal blog, personalizedgenes.com, for which he's grown an audience of over 13,000 people in the last year. So today I'm going to shamelessly try to extract the secrets of his success and you, dear listener, can sit back and take notes. Joe Whittaker, welcome to Life Science Marketing Radio.

Joe: Thanks, Chris, thanks for having me.

Chris: I'm especially looking forward to this one. I think this one's going to be a lot of fun. So tell us a little bit about your blog and what made you want to start a blog at all.

Joe: Good question. So I think it's easiest to explain this if I give a little background to where I am today. So I am a scientist first and foremost. I studied science at university before I moved into marketing starting at Cambridge. So for having studied all the theoretical marketing mixed in with the science, what better way to actually tune my skills than to actually create a blog myself? I thought to myself, "It's the 21st Century. The online channel is perhaps the number one channel for most companies these days, so why not actually go and do it myself?" I think there's a statistic out there where 1% of internet users produce about 99% of the content. And if you want to actually be out there in the market, marketing to the best of your ability, because I'm a marketer first and foremost, then you actually need to go out there and do it yourself.

Chris: Honestly, that's not the answer I was expecting. And that's a great point because often in this podcast, I'm looking for things to help people with their skill set beyond the tactics. And you bring up what in retrospect, to me, looks obvious but it is not to everyone to say, "I want to get good at this. I'm going to do my own." I love that. So do you want to tell us...go ahead.

Joe: So everything I've learned in the textbooks during the marketing at college, it's been great. Absolutely, I wouldn't change it for the world. But actually going out there and doing it day in, day out, blogging, doing a weekly or monthly blog, you learn so much more. I think there's another statistic out there where there's a new channel that opens up to marketers every week, whether it be Pinterest, Periscope, whatever is this new channel. And so to actually be a good and effective marketer, you probably need to be out there in the industry.

Chris: Nice. So tell us, just so people get a context, what personalizedgenes.com is all about. Kind of what you write about.

Joe: Absolutely. So it's a running commentary on the laboratory advances in precision medicine. So what that actually means is I do a number of different posts around personalized medicine or what's commonly known as precision medicine these days. Whether that's hints and tips articles, review articles, I do guest blogs as well, anything and everything. And some blogs work, some don't. And from that I've learned what I've tuned over the past year, I think I'm just over 14,000 followers and subscribers. So it's grown on exponential rates, and it's just been an incredible journey. It's been very good.

Chris: Beautiful. So what I like about your blog, and there are many things I like about your blog, is that it's not all how-to. So you say it's a running commentary and you get reviews and guests as well as some hints. So for example on the hint side, you answer a question, "What is Poisson?" Which everybody took in math somewhere in university and then most of us probably forget about exactly what it is. So it's nice for you to bring that back. Which types of posts do you find most helpful?

Joe: I guess that's the...yeah, that's the million dollar question, isn't it? Exactly which post can drive the most traffic to your blog? And after all, that's what most marketers want is to drive traffic to their website, and they hope that the conversion of their website will subsequently translate them into a sale. There's been a few blog posts which

I thought were going to be quite bad, which have turned out fantastically and vice versa. I thought I'd written a fantastic post which actually didn't do very well at all.

And it very much depends on that. I fine tune this over the year. The comparison blog posts, they work fantastically. If you're comparing one system to another or one platform to another and your target audience has actually got that platform in their laboratory, of course they'll pop onto your blog to have a look at it and to see what they could have been doing or they could have been using. The grass is always greener. And it's good to have a variety of different blog posts.

I have an automated system which posts them on all the different social media platforms. And what wasn't working about six months ago as a post suddenly gains a lot of traction because a key influencer picks it up and they retweet it or like it and pass it on to their friends. So it's quite hard to say exactly, going back to your original question, what a good post is. There's definitely key ingredients which need to be weaved into your content and into your post. But I think the best thing I'd say to your audience is really go out there and do it and it very much depends on your own specific audience.

Chris: Yes, so you said two things there that I found particularly helpful. First of all, and this has been my experience, you cannot predict which posts are going to be successful. So whether on my own blog or my podcast, sometimes I'm thinking I'm writing a kickass post and this is the one, this is the one. And then it doesn't do nearly as well as you think. And then there are others that take off. So the lesson really is you just have to keep hammering away. I think maybe over time we are going to discover the absolute formula for success or what's more likely or what topics are more likely to hit home, but really it's the discipline of doing it day after day. And then as you say, and we'll come back to this, promoting it over time.

So I think many companies may not continue to promote their content over time. So they create a blog post, they put it out on social media for a little while and then move on to the next thing. And as you say, those topics were good. They're still relevant, and what needs to happen is an influencer to pick it up and make it spread. And so you can never write off a piece of content because it didn't ignite immediately.

Joe: Absolutely. And I think it's an important point that actually just writing good content, being a good copywriter isn't enough these days. The Internet doubles every 72 hours, I believe, in terms of all the YouTube videos out there, you physically can't watch

as much as is being uploaded. So actually, you've got to push out your content to your audience through whatever channels you have available to yourself. So if you do write a good content piece and you know a specific audience that will pick it up or you know it aligns to their specific aspirations or interest, you physically write them an email or send them a tweet, whatever is available to you, because they won't see it without base level of noise of pretty much everyone's got a blog these days or everyone's got a website.

Chris: That's excellent. So now we're kind of moving into...we are talking about your audience. You're talking about specific people, but the audience is a big factor in the success of any blog. And by that I mean, it's important for the authors of a blog to be really clear about exactly who that audience is. So it has to be narrow and focused. So how did you define your audience for this blog?

Joe: Good question. So it all goes to basic marketing. So your value proposition of your blog. In terms of my blog, it was almost the...I flipped the logic. Because I already chose the channel, e.g. the blog, I had to kind of think of the audience. So what specific topic would be of interest to my audience or who they were. So I knew precision medicine was a massively grand trend. There's lots of different tools out there to actually look at what the big trends are, Google Trends being one of them. So I knew precision medicine was up on the increase. Then I decided to build my persona around the idea of precision medicine. That was the blog topic. Looking at the channels available to me, social media having zero pounds investment in the blog, it has to be a free channel.

So you can kind of work through the assumptions of the interest, the hobbies, the equipment people have in the laboratory if they're interested in precision medicine and if they're on social media, so they're going to be under 40. And so slowly developed this persona where actually there's one key piece of equipment which I knew would interest the majority of my audience, and that being next-generation sequencing, which is such a big technology in the industry. For those who are lucky enough to have them in the clinical laboratory, fantastic. And everyone's always wanting to learn more about it. And for those who perhaps haven't adopted this early technology, then they're still aspiring to have one in the laboratory. So you'll notice quite a few of my blog posts focus around next-generation sequencing and exactly what that means in precision medicine. And I think that's perhaps one of the key drivers of the success of the blog.

Chris: So you think your audience selection and I guess maybe...I'm rethinking my question here. So you're very clear about who your audience is. So they're interested in precision medicine. But one thing you said that stuck out for me and that one was the kind of equipment they would have in their lab so, of course, NGS for people interested in precision medicine.

But I'm just thinking out loud here for any scientific marketers to think about even aside from their own products, what other equipment those people might have in their labs would be a really smart thing to think about for their own content marketing because that gives you a wide range of things you could talk about that would be useful to an audience to attract them to you, to tell them about your product without having to continually hammer on your single message about your product. There are lots of problems you could help people solve if you could write about those things.

Joe: Absolutely. So I think the companies out there that are perhaps the reagents or biobanks are perhaps in the best position for this because all of their technology is agnostic to these different platforms. They can talk all day long about all the different next-generation sequencing platforms, the DNA extraction kits, the quantification kits, etc., and those are really the content pieces that would drive traffic to your blog if you're in the clinical laboratory space.

Chris: So you and I had a conversation a little while ago and we talked about, because it's your own blog, which is great, there are things that you can write on there that you certainly wouldn't put on a company blog. So let's talk a little bit about that and...Because there can be some controversy but that's often what gets people engaged. Do you think there are other challenges scientists face that can be a source of stimulating conversation among them that really, really gets them engaged the way you have? Because, honestly, I think your blog is fairly exceptional among life science blogs, period.

Joe: Thanks for the kind comments. Absolutely, regardless of what industry you're in, within the life sciences, we're quite privileged because all of our products that we market are probably quite exciting. I can't really think of any product that isn't exciting in life sciences.

In terms of actually finding a hook or that thought leader positioning, you really...if you're stuck for ideas, go to such tools as Google Trends or BuzzSumo or just go on

social media and do that research. Because the questions people are putting into Google, putting into social media, those are the questions that are really top of your customers' minds, and those are the questions that you want to be answering. And if you can answer those questions, whatever they may be, you will be ranking higher on Google. You'll be getting more traffic, and you'll be answering one of the questions through the buyer's journey. And if you can answer all of the questions that they have and pointing them towards your product, the better because then they'll purchase it.

Chris: Yeah, BuzzSumo is something I think is probably overlooked. I'm sure Google Trends is overlooked, but maybe it's a more familiar name to many people. But BuzzSumo kind of tracks what topics are very popular from a sharing point of view. So if you can find a topic on there that people are sharing other people's content about and you can put a different angle on something, you know it's going to touch a lot of people.

Joe: Yeah, and I think there's a lot of good free tools out there which marketers may not be aware of. Having actually delved into the blog and be there and done it. And there's so much free tools on the Internet. Maybe I'll send you the list and you can put at the bottom of this transcript, Chris, because actually is very useful.

Chris: Yeah. Wow, of course, I would love that. And we will certainly do that. What do you know about how people initially discover your blog, personalizedgenes.com?

Joe: Good question again. To begin with, I remember doing this about a year ago. I was happy if one person came on a day. And that was purely through social media or directly contacting some person. But slowly, it's almost like the flywheel effect. What's great about content and great about the website is a single post you write could get viewed by one person, but it could also get viewed by potentially up to eight billion people in the world compared to actually having a physical conversation with someone. You can't have eight billion conversations because you'd die because you could have them all.

So you get this sort of flywheel effect, go and you develop a bigger audience perhaps through social media and through emails, through offline activities. And as soon as you get more of these backlinks...because after all, SEO is 90% about backlinks. You start developing this organic traffic. And as soon as you can start getting the organic traffic to your blog, then you're really in a very strong position to start tweaking your SEO from a technical point of view and actually reaching out to all the people that reach into your blog. I think this is a prime example of us reading each other's blogs and thinking, let's

get in contact with each other. You'll promote my blog to your audience, and I'll probably...well, I will promote your blog to my audience. And slowly you start getting bigger and bigger. It is a slow uphill battle, but if you're persistent, it definitely pays off.

Chris: And honestly that has been my experience with my blog and my podcast is that these connections that we make through this media...it's how I met you. You reached out to me on social media, asked me something about your blog and now we're having this conversation, which I think even companies probably underestimate the value of. I think it's huge.

But I want to go back to that last question, do you know...and not just in how you grow your blog through personalized medicine, but when people are making that initial contact, I guess you mentioned organic growth. So now you think people are finding you through search?

Joe: Yeah, absolutely. So I think most marketers will know about Google Analytics. So it's fairly straightforward to see where your audience is coming from. They've removed the capability of actually seeing what keywords they put in. But there's a lot of really good, again, free tools out there from an SEO perspective. Open Site Explorer, Ahrefs, just off the top of my head. We can really use those and find what your website's ranking for, and you can tweak it to rank for specific keywords of interest.

So for example, with my blog, it is quite a busy space. Precision medicine, personalized medicine, there's a lot of big players out there which I could never compete with in terms of keywords. So what you've really got to do then is look at what keywords you can compete for at the beginning. When you've got a low domain authority, you've got a low page authority. So really string out what's called a long-tailed keyword. So maybe four or five keywords in a row. It's going to be a fairly low search in Google to begin with, but if you can rank for long-tailed keywords, then you can slowly reduce the tail on the keyword up until...if you rank for personalized medicine as number one, you'd really be getting hundreds of thousands of people each day.

Chris: That's fascinating. So you have a strategy that starts with long-tailed search and I'm guessing in the early stages social promotion and other more active techniques before you get into the...I don't want to say easier search engine optimization, but ranking for more common keywords, which now you're in a position to do and drive huge volumes of traffic. But to get that first bit of traction, so you were doing long-tailed

search. What else would you do in the early stages of your blog when you were hoping to get 5 or 10 people look at it a day?

Joe: So there's lots of easy quick wins and techniques you can use from an SEO perspective to get people to your blog. Infographics being a key example. If you do a nice infographic, A, it goes down well on social media. So it will get shared around which will give you good PR links to your blog as well. But if you actually develop it in conjunction with an influencer, say you contact the influencer, you say, "I liked your publication. I'd like to do an infographic about it." And then if they subsequently go in and show it on their .edu page, which ranks extremely well on Google, and you get backlink from there, then your page would do extremely well because Google really ranks it quite highly.

So there's that technique. There's also a technique, what's known as the skyscraper technique. So if you're looking to get a piece of content ranking quite high on Google, you put in the exact keyword that you want to rank for and you go along and you have a look at what's available on page one of Google. And so maybe you see a post which is The Top Nine Tips for DNA Extraction. And what you do is you take that content and you do the top 11 tips and then you find exactly who has been linking to those top nine tips posts that you've taken and you've improved upon it, and you email them all saying, hey, I've got a slightly better post, maybe not as blunt, and you get them to convert to your blog. And consequently, three months down the line, you'll see your post popping up above theirs. It's a great technique.

Chris: I love it. It's a personal approach that I haven't necessarily seen, which isn't to say that it doesn't happen because I've been out of the corporate world for a while. But it's not something that people would typically think about because...but I do think these are the way we have to think now. We have to think to some regard as if this were your own blog. Even if you're doing a corporate blog, you'd have to say, "If this were the only way I was going to make a living, if this is the only way I'd get paid, who would I reach out to to get my corporate blog to rank higher?" Then you would really get creative about what it took to do that.

Joe: If you look outside of the life science industry, I can't think of any companies that do this off the top of my head. But outside the life science industry, this is what goes on. Perhaps sometimes the life science industry lags behind in some respects because we do

rely on our products to do the marketing for themselves. But the list is what goes on day in, day out with all the big...so the news channels, their kind of websites.

Chris: So any other techniques I'm not thinking about? Something I missed?

Joe: I mean, it's...

Chris: I'm sure you have a long list.

Joe: I think when it comes down to it, it's a combination of good content and also a good strategy behind it. Whenever I write a blog post, I call it the three Ss and three Ps. So that's simple, short and snappy. No one likes a big, long article unless it's a good publication in the likes of Nature, in which case writers write as long as possible. But people like the simple content which is easily understood. There's a good number tools out though, it's called The Flesch Reading Ease. So you've heard of that? So this is a scale of how easy it is to understand your content. And what I normally try to do is aim the content slightly under the average age of my buying persona just so they can actually understand it. I know it appeals to a wider audience.

Then the three Ps, with blogs in particular, I believe the definition of a blog is a regularly updated personal opinion. So three Ps, the first one, personal. I use first person, second person language. It's not a corporate website. People actually like hearing about opinions every now and then. Talk to your audience as if they're right there in front of you.

The second P being points. So here again it's building upon what I've talked earlier about the skyscraper technique. But really link lots of other different good resources into your blog. So suddenly your blog becomes the essential resource. So people come to your blog to actually learn about other people's companies. So you become the sort of thought leader and central resource.

Then the third P being promotion. Some people might cringe on this one, but it's very good to promote yourself, whether it's through social proofing, how many people are reading your blog, how successful you are, and also promoting all your other different blog posts. A, it ranks quite well for Google and from an SEO perspective if you've got you've got a lot of inter-site linking and it's a good customer experience in the website.

But it also shows the wealth and the breadth of all the different content you have available.

Chris: Fantastic. I love that, the three Ss and the three Ps and I won't argue with any of those. What are your plans? I'm going to wrap this up, but I just want to know what your plans are for looking ahead to this year? Are you going to do anything different or you could share your goals with us? Do you want to double the size of your audience? Where do you want to take this thing?

Joe: So when I started a blog, I really wanted to drive minds with personal development. I think, as marketers, it's important to know all the current channels out there and all the current tools. And I think this is definitely reflected in my day-to-day life. I've really translated it into a few really good marketing activities.

In terms of the blog, I definitely want to expand it. As I said before, the sky is the limit. I'm not aiming to get eight billion people to read it, but a hundred percent growth absolutely. Yeah, you're right, I'll be looking for hopefully a lot more than that. But I do also...I've already got quite a good number of people queued up to do some guest blog posts which is fantastic. A year ago, people wouldn't even give me a second chance to ask them to write a blog post. But actually people have been coming to me, which has been absolutely fantastic. So look to sort of develop a community and actually develop my blog to have a purpose, a true purpose in the precision medicine space. I think that'd be fantastic.

Chris: Yeah, I think that will certainly happen the way you're going. Well, I want to thank you, Joe Whittaker, very much for being so generous to share all those brilliant tips with us. And the blog we're talking about is personalizedgenes.com and people can find you on Twitter @DiagnosticsJoe, correct?

Joe: Yes, that's correct.

Chris: Anywhere else they should be looking to connect with you?

Joe: That's the only channels I have available at the moment. Not yet on Pinterest.

Chris: Well, I think it's smart to keep them focused. Makes it easy. Well thank you again very much for this wonderful conversation. I think it's brilliant. And just to recap,

it touched on things that I was not expecting. So there's the aspect of how do you make your blog more successful, and then there's the added bonus that I really loved, and that is, how do you take on a career development project and get better at the thing you'd really like to be doing well on your own? And this could turn out to be yet another opportunity for you. So many, many reasons to try something like what you've done.

Joe: Well, thanks a lot for your time, Chris. And if I may say, if anyone does want to get in contact, my email address is diagnosticsjoe@gmail.com. I'm more than happy to point anyone who's looking to get into the blogosphere or any companies that are wanting to set up something.

Chris: Brilliant. Thank you.

The Next Golden Age of Audio

There is no better way to grow an engaged audience of loyal brand advocates than through a podcast. But getting started might seem a bit daunting. I know how you feel. There's a lot to learn.

The good news is you don't have to do it alone. I've been creating podcasts and [audio stories](#) since 2014 and I'm ready to help you set up for recording and handle all of the editing and post production. It's easy.

1. [Schedule a call.](#)
2. We'll develop a clear strategy.
3. Start growing your audience.