

SUBSCRIPTION ENTREPRENEUR



HOSTED BY ERIC TURNNESSEN, FOUNDER OF [membermouse™](#)

EP108: Everything You Need To Know Before Starting A Membership Site with Ali Jafarian

“There's a lot of people who inquire with us and I spend a lot of time with them. Sometimes I actually influence them not to pursue a membership site and it's because there's this common belief that I can do this on the side. An hour here, an hour there, and then it's going to grow and there's going to be this really magical time where everything's going to fall into place. I'm going to tell my boss, “this has been great but my side gig is booming now and I'm going to go do this!” That never ever happens. It only can happen if you're hustling.”

INTRO: Welcome everyone and thank you everyone for joining me today. We have a really special episode for you. I'm excited to introduce my guest Ali Jafarian. Ali is the founder and CEO of Member(dev), a design and development agency that specializes in building custom membership sites. They help everyone from solo entrepreneurs, start-ups and multi-million dollar businesses build powerful membership sites. Ali and his team are experts in boosting member engagement through UX, leveraging powerful reporting metrics and analytic data to build data-driven businesses and increasing sales for their clients through powerfully designed customer acquisition processes. In this episode Ali shares important things you need to know before starting a membership site. Topics covered are: why you should consider starting a membership site, who should and who shouldn't start a membership site, a detailed outlined outline of what's involved in creating a membership site, and much more. So whether you're just starting to think about building a membership site, or already have one up and running, you'll learn something valuable in this episode. I want to mention right off the bat that we've put together a list of ideas and practice steps that you can take to get some momentum and test your idea before going all in and developing a site. You can download this PDF from our show notes page at subscriptionentrepreneur.com/108. So, let's get to the interview. I'm Eric Turnnessen and this is the Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast.

Eric: Hey Ali. Welcome to the show.

Ali: Eric, thanks for having me. My pleasure.

Eric: Yes, my pleasure. I'm really excited to talk to you today. We're going to be covering a lot of ground - stuff that is going to be really valuable for our audience. Before we can get into that, can you give our audience a brief overview of who you are and what you do?

Ali: Sure, absolutely. I run a business called Member(dev). We help all types of customers launch their own membership platforms. We are considered a hybrid agency. Prior to that, I launched my own membership site. I co-founded a yoga membership site years ago. Prior to that, I did a lot of things in the software engineering world from freelancing to consulting to helping architects build systems for large and small companies. I am a technologist at heart. I'm very entrepreneurial. Now, I spend my time focused on Member(dev) to help some of your customers, and our customers, build their ideal membership platforms.

Eric: You sound like a perfect guest to have on the show today because what I want to talk to you about is membership sites. We probably have a mixed bag of people listening to the show today. The first thing I want to touch on, just to level-set where everybody is at, is what is a membership site?

Ali: Sure. I like to look at these in two lenses. What makes a membership site is really just an online vehicle that allows users to come together in both a free and protected environments. The easiest example is to visualize our club sites for organizations, and memberships. Then there's the more business mode of people trying to gate or protect content and/or grow a business, grow revenue by providing access to that content. In terms of the anatomy, a lot of ways that we help position our customers in the planning phase, and how to disseminate what their membership site is composed of, there's really three aspects. There's the public side of your website, much like any other website or marketing site: homepage, about, the things that both represent the business and help drive new leads. Then there's the sales funnel. This is the middle. This is how we drive people into signing up, whether it's for free memberships, paid membership, standalone products, courses, you name it. Then there's the third, back-end membership experience. This is now - I've signed up, I'm a member and I have access to something that's not exposed on the public site.

Eric: Those are all great examples. The next thing I want to go into is, why would someone want to start a membership site? Why should they start a membership site?

Ali: Sure. We like to look at this in two lanes. We have the beginners who are starting from scratch, going from zero. Then, we have the existing businesses or operators who are growing, extending and enhancing membership sites. Let's start with the first one. The raw beginner what we find, most of the motives or incentives to start a membership site have lots of financial ties. The idea of getting to recurring revenue or online sales, just being able to generate sales from an online or digital property is very attractive to these folks on passive income which, in my eyes is a fallacy - we can talk about that in a

second if you wish. The idea of just having the money come in and not doing anything - that's what I refer to as a passive income fallacy. The other two are very in line with the entrepreneurial mindset of financial freedom and pursuit of passion. So, "I just want life flexibility, I want to do what I want on my time and I want to do something that I care about." The second lane with these people or folks who have some experience in business or have a membership site, or a business that has the potential to extend into the membership space. For these folks there's again the financial incentive, but it's usually more along the lines of they see the opportunity to capture new lines of revenue that they're not doing. Going from an offline business to an online business is very attractive to them - acquiring customers outside of their local reach. So, being able to go online obviously you can now serve anyone in the world virtually given how your content is structured and that it's on the internet. Then, people who are transitioning their product offering online. As we progress with technology more and more the world we live in is becoming more digital by nature. We find a lot of people have a pretty good consulting or service or product focused businesses and now they're convinced that they have to start transitioning to online to keep up.

Eric: That makes a lot of sense. I definitely do want to go into the fallacy of passive income. Also, when you were talking about extending existing businesses, this doesn't necessarily have to be a business. We've seen a lot of people transition from a Facebook group or YouTube channel that becomes popular. What these people have done is something they are passionate about. They may not have even started with a mind towards business, but they found as their audience grew they had opportunities that they could explore and the membership site became the way that they decided to take advantage of those opportunities.

Ali: Totally. I'm glad you pointed that out. Not only is that spot on in terms of comparing a more business focus, but what I found is when that is the avenue, it's actually a lot easier for those types of folks to get traction. They've already proved it right? They have this massive following. We've had some customers that have done some of that stuff with Instagram. They touch base with us with this idea and I'm like "cool, tell me" and they're like - "I have 200,000 Instagram followers." My jaw drops and I'm like, "what, how did you do that?" It's just so interesting in the world that we live in with social dynamics that we're able to build this following that most businesses would kill for. Now, to your point, they just have to do a few things, team up with someone like us or put the hard work in themselves, and now they have this really really nice opportunity to provide for themselves by leveraging what they've already created.

Eric: Exactly. At this point I think we've covered what a lot of people are listening may have already known. They may have already known what a membership site is, they may have known what the value of starting membership site is. I really wanted to get your insights on that because I want to make sure everyone in the audience is on the same page. The thing that I really want to spend a lot of time talking about is, who should start a membership site? There are a number of things in this category that could really help people save time, avoid mistakes. We mentioned earlier with the fallacy of passive income. If you think you're starting a membership site because you're just going to overnight make money and not have to do anything, you may not be the person who should start a membership site. I really want to dive into this and discuss who are the people who should be thinking about starting a membership site and why.

Ali: Yes, absolutely. In our time of serving lots of people, helping them, and observing them, there's a lot of common patterns that I've identified. We'll start with "who should." So, if you've already taken a crack at business, especially if you're a business proprietor/entrepreneur, you own something, you've started something - then you're already a good candidate because you understand what it takes. That's the first check I usually go through when I talk to folks in our early discussions. The same thing goes for the passion for entrepreneurs, I ask "do you have the bug? The passion? Do you have the drive?" Then, one of the huge components that I think a lot of people drastically miss is - the time. There's a lot of time required to start, build and grow a membership site, let alone a membership business. It's not a simple thing. I can tell you that from experience. I can tell you that from helping lots of people do this. So time, carving that out, being what's realistic. Then the challenge, do you have the grit, are you going to dig in? When I look at some of the people who have succeeded with us and we have helped to grow, a very common characteristic is that these people who grow to six and eventually seven figures are relentless. They will figure it out. The mantra: figure it out. That's what they live by. We have goals, we have objectives and we're going to do what it takes to get there. The other thing that is interesting is your technology competency or proficiency. I see that some people come in with a background heavy in a specific type of technology or obviously if they're already in tune with online marketing, web design, development, they have an edge but, if you don't navigate technology well, you're going to have a lot of hurdles. We'll get into that on "why" in a bit later. That's actually another key one that a lot of people tend to forget. In summary, it's entrepreneurial people who are passionate with some time and who understand there's a challenge ahead of them and the bonus is, are they good with tech, because that goes a long way.

Eric: I think sometimes when we start talking about a membership site, we think that it's like a nugget of a thing, but really what we're talking about is you are building a

business. It's not this thing where you go to the store and you pick up off the shelf and you say "oh I'm going to check out this membership site and I'm done and I'll go and wrap it at home and everything is good." You're making a commitment. It's a lot like having a child I often find, and so it's that level of decision. When people search for membership sites and they talk about them it ends up being a lot about the technology and the technology's really a portion of it. So much of the other reasons why people don't end up making it doesn't have to do with the technology, it has to do with other factors. I think that's really what you're getting into when you outline these things about who should build a membership site. You just got to check in with yourself. This is a journey that you're starting, it's not just something that you're going to put up and forget about.

Ali: Totally. I love that analogy as a father. When you say that, a lot of ideas start firing off and it's actually a really good analogy because anyone who has started a business understands that and knows that it is very similar in nature to having a child because you're nurturing this thing and you're raising and watching it grow. You're learning from it and that's one of the things that I love about being a father is also being able to learn from my own children. That is such a good thing to recognize because the amount of work that people I have seen who have succeeded have put in lots and lots of work and now they're at a phase where they're starting to reap the rewards, just like parenting or raising animals, dogs. Those baby years when they're puppies, oh my goodness, it's where you almost lose it. What's interesting is those times in both raising children, raising animals and also building a membership site and a business, those inflection points happen when you're at your breaking point. When it gets the hardest and when you push through, that's when you really learn.

Eric: That's where I have found the ingredient of passion is essential. Those points are going to come and you are going to be tested and if you don't have some innate passion, if you're looking for surface-level feedback like, "I wanted to be making this amount of money by this time, or I wanted to quit my job by this time." If you're only looking for those things to be the reason why you continue, you are going to fail because they don't show up in the beginning. The passion is the thing that will help you push through the times when things look like they're pretty dark.

Ali: I would agree

Eric: So now, what are the other reasons that you've seen in people that you consult with that come and want to work with you. Some indicators that you see that maybe this person isn't quite ready for this step.

Ali: Sure. There's the obvious inverse of lots of the things that we have said for some of the people who haven't started a business. Actually, that's important. Let's start there. There's a lot of people who inquire with us, and I spend a lot of time with them, and sometimes contrary to what it does for the success of our business, I influence them not to pursue a membership site because there is this common belief: "I can do this on the side. I can have my day job and I can crank on this on the side. An hour here, an hour there, and then it's going to grow and there's going to be this really magical time that everything will just fall into place and I'm going to go tell my boss this has been great but my side gig is booming now and I'm going to go do this." That never ever happens. It only can happen if you're hustling and you've got a team around you. Like I said I've had these very candid conversations with some of our potential customers. So, that is definitely a thing if you've never done this and you think it's going to be a side hustle then you should probably step back and reassess.

Eric: But, the never done it isn't never isn't necessarily the biggest issue. When I started MemberMouse I was working full-time and I never started a business before and I made so many mistakes, but I was definitely hustling. I remember during my breaks in a closet in the office having calls with the developer that I hired. Basically I was living at home with my parents because all the money I was making from that job was going to the people that were working for the company - into their pockets to build the business.

Ali: I love it.

Eric: That's the kind of thing that it does take.

Ali: You're totally right. Thank you for clarifying that. The time aspect is pretty key because another question I ask a lot of first-time prospects is, "tell me about your home life." When I start hearing things like "I'm married, I've got kids." I'm just thinking xxx. Realistically, you have only so many hours that you can do something that's not a core responsibility. Like I said, if this is your second thing that you're trying to get off the ground in addition to all of those bigger life responsibilities, you just have a much much taller mountain to climb.

Eric: That doesn't also mean that that's an obstacle. It just means that maybe the membership site and it's a full blossom isn't the next step for you. Maybe what you just want to do is start sharing what your value is. Start doing something small. Do something for free that doesn't have any technical requirements like we were talking about earlier, people who start Facebook groups. We have customers who are single moms with children and they had a passion about something that's very niche. You

would think, “oh there's not that many people who would be engaged in that,” but they get on a Facebook group. They reach out to their local community, they get people interested and more people get interested because there's actually some value in what they're sharing and before you know it that community is then supporting them to push them to the next step. You have the momentum behind you to now take a riskier step, to do something more like on the scale of a membership site. I think it's important for people to be okay with starting small.

Ali: Absolutely, for sure.

Eric: If you're trying to have a membership as a beginner be your first thing, it's probably not the right step because you haven't tested yourself yet. What value are you going to offer? If you're going to do videos, if you're going to do training, have you tried to put a training course out? Have you seen what the feedback was? Have you responded to that feedback? Have you honed your offering? Have you garnered support? If you spend more time offering things for free and getting feedback, then the supporters that you will gather from that process will help propel you to further stages in your business.

Ali: Yeah, I would definitely agree. It is very true with a lot of thought figures like what Gary Vee (Gary Vaynerchuk) preaches: if you do give people value, then it will organically create something. That's such a better starting point than saying, “hey I just kind of did this thing cuz I like it and I'm very interested in it. It's a super passion of mine and these people started emailing me and saying I want more of this.” That is the best avenue, like we talked about a bit ago, to start and think about. Should I start gating some of this content or should I put out a PDF and charge five bucks for it and just prove that I can get dollars? That type of early-stage growth I would strongly advocate, over “hey I want to sit down and talk about this big membership platform with all these features.”

Eric: Right people may think it's a benefit to have a lot of capital up front that you can invest in something, but sometimes it can be a hindrance. For example, somebody may come to you and say, “hey I have this wad of cash that I want to build this amazing thing and I wanted to look like xyz site that's amazing and I really love.” Then you go into three months of development, then it gets launched. It's kind of an empty shell. Ultimately, the sites that do well and are successful, somebody is behind them. Someone has brought themselves to it, somebody is using the mechanism or the vehicle of a membership site to put their value out there into the world. Membership sites are a technology and they facilitate and assist with the things that all membership

sites will need as they're growing, but if you don't have that fundamental value proposition, there's nothing there.

Ali: The last thing I will add to that is one of the big red flags that I see - when people, even when they think they've mapped everything out, I ask them to see their content. You would be surprised how many have already thought about how their courses should be designed and how their libraries are going to be formatted, all the different payment options that they're ready to accept, but when we ask them for content they're like "oh yeah we're going to do that." And, I'm like, "oh you're going to do that when? Right before we go live?" You know what you are identifying - I'm glad we spent time here because you know what people are paying for, they're paying for content. Whatever medium it is that you are providing. That's why they're here. They don't care how cool and that you have all these bells and whistles. Yes, at some point the features that we help our customers with do propel them, but that's usually because the business membership site is asking for those - not because they brought them to the table initially.

Eric: Those are higher-level things that you can do to tweak stuff like retention and lifetime customer value. All of it still stems from value, but as your business grows the way that you offer value and provide value is going to be in different ways and more refined ways. Which, when you start the business you can't possibly know about. That's what you're saying. People know about it secondhand. They see that the sites they are a part of do it, and they liked it. So they think, "I want a copy that," but they don't understand when you see the things that sites do really well and they're successful with, there's a whole part of that iceberg that's below the water that supports that process. There's a team of people that is dedicated to doing that. MemberMouse is a software company right? So content creation was a thing that I struggled with for a long time and pretty much didn't do until later on because the focus was the software. That was my value proposition, was the software, but, I always wanted to do content creation. I saw these sites that were doing such a great job and it seemed like such a great idea. I didn't understand until we started doing it how in-depth content creation actually is. You have a schedule, you do all these things. Every little piece of a business that you see coming out on a website as a little button, there's a process behind that. You can't just think that it's going to happen overnight, and it doesn't have to either. We started getting into content creation and to me this is a good track to continue down in terms of the process. We talked about what a membership site is, and we talked about who should and shouldn't start a membership site and what's some of the mindset around it and the pitfalls. Now let's kind of leave that behind us and assume that people are ready, or that they are going to be ready at some point. Let's help people understand from your

experience what that process of building out the membership site is going to be like. What are the things that are going to be asked to work on? What are some of the things that may work with somebody else on?

Ali: Yeah. And what I'll do is very quickly give you a synopsis of what we guide them through and then I'll go back and focus more on what anyone should expect - because it's a little different. By telling you how we work, and then reverse-engineering about what everyone else should expect, it will make a lot more sense. Our very bird's-eye-view of guiding customers is we have four phases. Planning and discovery, where we map out what it is we're doing. We've designed this very similar to building houses. When you have a house built it goes through a process. We first start planning and discovery, defining what the end products are going to be and then we get into design doing some of the UX stuff, doing some of the aesthetic design, the front-end coding to see what is this going to look and feel like. Then, we get into the development aspects. Now we're coding, building out everything from their platform to customizing WordPress instances and pulling Integrations they need to support them. Then we have the fourth and final phase which is where we test and QA everything and help them launch and prepare them to run with this cool new platform for their business. Again, it's analogous to a house because you have the planning phase and the architects draw up the blueprints. Then the builders come in and start building things and eventually the owners come into view and they start living in the house. That's why we like to use that analogy.

Eric: That's a great analogy. That may be a little bit overwhelming to hear some of the things that you're going through, but I would add to that. Yes, it's analogous to building a house - all of those steps, but what's being built is a business. It's a physical business that building, and then after the doors open it's not going to just be lived in. You have to figure out how you can get people to come to it and exchange money so that you can cover the cost of that house etc, etc.

Ali: True very true. I'm glad you pointed that out. So, stepping back, that's kind of the value of working with a team like us. Going back to if you're going to be doing this to yourself, there's a lot of similarities, but there is more. You have a slightly bigger challenge. The first step is really the content creation and management. Before you start talking about what you're going to do and how you're going to sell it an all that - what are you creating? Which we just discussed at length. You are creating the content, having a plan, being able to manage it. In today's age, having a system for is this video content, is it audio content, is a text content, is it a combination? And if so, how am I going to store these things and present that? Content creation and management is

always the starting point because that's essentially your product. Next, we get into platform development. This is arguably the trickiest part for do-it-yourselfers. "I have this great content so now how do I put it together on a website, an app or whatever the vehicle is to be able to give it and sell it to people?" This is where WordPress comes in, this is where MemberMouse comes in and various tools come in. It can be very tricky. You can tell too and I'm sure you guys have noticed Eric that this part of the process is a lot easier and more native to people in tech. If you've done some online marketing or design and development then they can pick this up.

Eric: The double whammy is not only is this a very tricky stuff to do, but if you make the wrong choice, then you are going to suffer for it later on when you become successful. It reminds me of that scene from Indiana Jones where the guy has to choose which the Holy Grail was, and he chooses the wrong cup and drinks from it. You won't know in the beginning necessarily.

Ali: You can't know.

Eric: The reason, the way that tools help you is when you become successful. How they can assist in reducing costs, automating certain aspects of the business and other things of that nature, which, you're not going to know if you just build a site and you have nothing going through it. That one's a challenge.

Ali: It is. That's where I see the most people get hung up. That's honestly where we get a lot of inquiries is, "I've done some great content and I've sat here for six months with a website that just can't get done." Well, "great let's talk." You're definitely a spot on that is one of the bigger hurdles. It relays into the next aspect which I call tools and integration. While MemberMouse is usually more of a core, at least in our stack, it's a really core part of building these membership platforms/sites. There's a plethora of other tools for email marketing, lead management, site performance, tracking, you name it. We always advise people to stay lean with the basics like Google Analytics, and tie into an email marketing provider, preferably one that interfaces with MemberMouse. There's a lot of these things that add up and you use this word tools and that's what I like to use as well. They are things that some of them you need - they're essential and others that can be used to automate things which frees up your time as a business operator. That is the next step. You've created content, you've got the platform built out, now you're plugging in tools and integrations, now, we get to online marketing and sales. Now, you've got this great thing, how are you going to continue getting people to come into the door, getting people to buy things?

Eric: Now you've got this great, how do you actually use it? This goes back to the point of why it's so important to account for time. Why it's so important to account for persistence and commitment. There are people who specialize in email marketing - how you do it, how do you draft your emails, how you create automated funnels, how you convert people from email into paying customers. But, that's just one of the tools that's on your site. Every single one of those tools there's going to be specialist who can tell you all these different ways you can use use it in your business. It's an understatement to say that these things are overwhelming. They're overwhelming for me and I've been operating my business for ten years. That's why starting small is also a good idea - not trying to pile this all on at once. Unless, you've done a business with these things before. If you have something of value to offer to people there is a market for it. If you are persistent and you commit to getting that out there, you will be able to make a living from that thing. If you try to run before you walk, you could end up in a situation where you trip yourself up for no reason that could have been avoided. If you trip yourself up over technology, it doesn't mean that your idea wasn't good or that you didn't have something of value to offer. You and I both work with businesses from the size of hundreds of members to tens of thousands, to hundreds of thousands of members. There's a big difference with what each of these size businesses should be focusing on.

Ali: Absolutely. This step, I guess this is the fourth step with the online marketing sales, this different differentiates the people that actually grow a business and don't. Believe me we have built some really beautiful and well-functioning platforms that are just like crickets. There's not much going on there and it's because they got to this point and they didn't know how to approach customer acquisition. It's a tricky thing. I agree with what you said Eric - there's a lot of info out there - there's a lot of really good info, and there's a lot of really bad info. Filtering that can be a challenge. The basics, going back to the basics that I always start with are, never neglect your email list. Building an email list, and this is something I learned later as an entrepreneur because I didn't think this was valuable early in my career, I was always focus on building. In reality, if you have this email list, which is such a simple thing and it's such a low barrier in terms of an ask like "hey just jump on my email list." Then, you have this network that you are slowly growing over time. You can always reach out to them. It's not invasive it's like, "here's a newsletter, here's a product offer." Build an email list. The other thing that I always promote and people either neglect this or choose not to do this is, talk to their early users, especially your early customers. I know for introverts it can be challenging, so maybe there's other ways that you set up an email or a one-to-one forum would be a really cool way to do it communicate, but you need to talk to them. The early people, especially for software membership businesses, can help you define the path that your business takes.

Eric: You know I just had a controversial thought. I debated while you were talking whether to bring it up or not. I want to hear your thoughts on it. The thought occurred to me when you said “if you're introverted that could be hard”, the thought that occurred to me is if you are introverted, it's going to be hard for you to run a business.

Ali: No matter what.

Eric: I don't know if I believe this because I'm somewhat introverted. Thinking of public speaking doesn't give me the warm and fuzzies and make me want to jump up and do it. That's something that I think if you want to run the business you have to have that conversation. The benefit I found comes a lot from those conversations from talking to customers. So much of the value that's in MemberMouse today came directly from conversations with customers. This is what we're running into, these are the problems that we're having. Then we go back and solve the problems and everyone's happy. I figured I would throw that out there.

Ali: I'm glad you brought that up. Actually, let's pause and dig on this. I'm not quite an introvert but I'm technical, I'm a technical CEO. Before growing Member(dev) I was very much a developer. To your point, my nature was I don't really want to talk to other people, not because I don't like them, but I have work to do. I want to get in, I want to code, I want to design and build. Where I think this goes, and I kind of learned this as I sort of continued learning and growing as an entrepreneur, is that it's pretty rare, and you're sort of a use case even though I know you have a good team behind you today - it's very rare for technical, especially introverts, to grow businesses. And what I mean by that is when you look at some of the most successful online businesses, software business, even businesses in general, it's usually not some coder. It's usually a coder who either help build the technology or said “hey I have this really cool thing. I need a founder or a partner so I can present it to the world.” There's a lot of truth to what you said. You're a great example because you got MemberMouse to a really far point until you started expanding and said, “okay it's time to build out this team.”

Eric: It took me the technical approach and focus took me so far. Then, I needed to adapt. Basically, it came to a point where it was like you can continue to stay in your comfort zone and continue to be this introverted person, but these are the things that have to be done. Either you change some of the things about yourself and do them, or you get someone else to do them.

Ali: I'm glad you brought that up because that is key. Going back to why we're talking about, what's common here is that on some level, and really whatever you're most

comfortable with - the way you work, you need to listen. You need to be in tune. Everyone will tell you this who has ever built anything meaningful, you can't focus on only on what you think. Yes, your opinion is valuable as a creator, but you need to listen to the market. The market in these sites is your users and members.

Eric: That's a lesson that I had to learn over ten years. In the beginning I spent way too much time getting out a minimum viable product out.

Ali: Yeah, everyone does. Most people do.

Eric: Well, now I know now. Communication is the key to success. This also goes back to who shouldn't start a membership business, well really who shouldn't start a business. If you are just trying to get money out of people's pockets, you're not concerned about what they want. People do make money doing that, but the truly thriving successful businesses that I admire - I should say as a caveat, are the ones where it's a conversation. You're saying, "I'm coming to the table, I can provide something," but somebody else is sitting on the other side of the table who you need to make sure that you are listening to them and can satisfy what they want. That is the profit, to me.

Ali: I would agree. Now, what's interesting is that segues into the next thing I have on our list which is customer support. What I mean by that is when you grow your customer base, guess what? They're going to need things. It's natural. This is one of the things I poke at people in the early stages. I'm like, "are you ready to answer customer support?" And they're like, "what do you mean?" "Well someone may not be able to log in, are you going to help them out?" People kind of step back and say "I have to do that?" I say, "I'm not going to do that for you?" These are the things that you just don't know until you get in there and it's like, they're going to need things from time to time. It's like anything else when you are exchanging goods. That customer support aspect is actually pretty important and I find so many people try to automate it like with the chatbot. Some things are good like knowledge-base. MemberMouse's knowledge-base is phenomenal. Even as one of your more competent MemberMouse developers, I still refer to that thing weekly. I'm checking it out, verifying making sure I'm using the right hook. Having that type of automation is beautiful, but trying to squeeze a chatbot in to help people with routine tasks, that's where I think you can do that at a stage where you've scaled and it becomes binary. When you know there's x amount of things that get asked every month, so let's put that on autopilot.

Eric: In a way that's a response to listening to the conversation. First, you have to do it manually, you first have to understand. You can't just lead with I want to put this here because I don't want anybody to talk to me. That's the thing, it's never about the tool it's about how you use it.

Ali: I've had to do this - I still do this for one of our businesses, the customer support aspect, and I know you've had these experiences, there's really really bad customer support instances and there's really really good ones. The balance of them is what keeps you going. In general, you want to have more positive ones and as you grow your business and you do get to that point, but fighting through those bad ones is always a challenge. I've even been guilty. There's a time in one of my older businesses where I got a little loose on Twitter and I shouldn't have. I ended up with a sincere apology, but going back to the child and being attached to these membership businesses - you're so protective of it that sometimes when a customer rubs you the wrong way or they says something that they may not have meant, you have to taper that. That can be a challenge. I think customer support is not something that people should not overlook.

Eric: Yes, I hundred percent agree. You can't expect to have a business or to start a project and not have the project test you. The whole point, the whole value of doing anything of worth in life whether it's having a child, running a business, having a pet or going to school is you're attempting to grow. You want to change some aspect of yourself or your life in some way. Logic will tell you that there's no way that something different can happen unless something changes. To me, from the benefit of perspective and experience, when I see things that challenge me or test me, I see them as opportunities. This is challenging to me because it is representing an obstacle that I need to push through. It's representing something that's standing in the way between me and another point. Support was definitely one of those things for me. The business will throw at you ten of those things at the same time. The bigger, the more successful you get, the more it will throw at you. That's when I think one of the key things is learning to build a team, which is a whole other podcast episode, but it's something I really had to come to and learn about and put a value on and learn how to do that. You can't do everything yourself.

Ali: That actually is the last point. That's the last thing that I emphasize in terms of the process, is the growth phase. You've done everything prior to this, you've created the content, you've built the platform, you've brought the tools together, you put the marketing and sales strategy in place to get some customers, now you've supported those customers. The last phase is growth. If you've gotten here pat yourself on the back. You're proving something is working. As you know, most people don't get here.

That's where I'll shift and become serious again. Most people do not get here. So, if you do get here you are in the 1% and not even that. I'm kind of here with a couple of my businesses and this is a hard place to be. You have to relearn things, you have to re-humble yourself and say, "okay I did that. I've built this nice thing and I've even built a team - to your point, but now it's time to scale." You had a really good previous podcast with Martin where you talked about the different strategies to scale, so I don't need to hit on that, but it was spot-on. One of the biggest things that I subscribe to is - look at what's been working and just squeeze it like a lemon. Get as much out of that and by doing that you should be profitable and it gives you the opportunity to experiment with other things. Whether it's other channels, other tactics, other growth mechanisms. Like I said, if you get to this stage now you're entering the next level of business, the next level of membership site growth.

Eric: To me, that next area is about how do you take this thing that's a conglomerate of so many things: it's the customers, it's the team, it's all the technology, and all the tools that's a part of it. How do you take all that and you're at scale. How do you still effectively communicate your personality and not fall into the trap thinking that you need to be the same as everyone else? Again, that'd be another great podcast. What this episode definitely shares with people is what happens when you get two people on the call who aren't interested in making hard sells to people and are all about the reality of the situation. People definitely haven't gotten the, "hey membership sites are easy. You should start one today! Sign up here from us!"

Ali: Yeah (Laughing) definitely not (laughing). it's the opposite. I like to push people. This is my approach to entrepreneurship. Probably because I'm biased because like you. I've put a lot in a lot of time into it and it's not easy. I think that people or anyone who thinks it's easy, building a membership site, you're already in the wrong mindset. To build on what you just said Eric, in the early calls, unless I know I'm talking to somebody whose done it, I almost push them to convince themselves not to do it. Not as much as a sales strategy, but more to be like, "look are you sure?" If they can continuously say, "yes, I'm sure. Yes, there's no problem I can do that. Yes, I have a little experience there." Now you're pretty qualifying yourself and there is no convincing. It's a lot. It's a big undertaking.

Eric: It's a friendly test. It reminds me of Indian weddings. The bride doesn't see the groom beforehand. The priest, or whoever is doing the ceremony will do to the groom before he goes into the ceremony, is he will go up to them and say, "are you sure this is what you want to do?" Then the guy will say "yes this is what I want to do." Then the priest can do whatever he wants, maybe he will flick his nose or step on his foot.

Basically create some kind of discomfort and say, “this is what marriage is like, it’s going to test you, are you sure you want to do this?” Not because he's being unfriendly, but he's saying “look you're going to run into these things and if you can't handle just the idea of it, then I'm saving you the trouble right now.” You're just getting a little glimpse of - these are the things that are to come if you choose to do this. Knowing that, you can then come up with a sound plan for how you approach it and be realistic about it, which gives you the best chance of success.

Ali: I like that. I actually didn't even know know that. What I did know about Indian weddings, and maybe this is the reward for getting through that nose flicking and the double-checking is that there are actually three to five day events and the whole community. Which, doesn't quite translate into this, but if you do some push-through then maybe you do get that nice member base in your future.

Eric: Right, you ride in on an elephant (laughing). That's what everybody should take away from this: build a membership site, get successful and you will ride an elephant.

Ali: There you go.

Eric: Well I know I certainly enjoyed talking to you about this Ali. This is been a ton of great information. I'm really glad we got to sit down and record this. I really appreciate you coming on and having this talk with me.

Ali: Likewise, this was a pleasure. I'm glad I could spend that time with you as well and hopefully we can dive in to some other topics in the future.

Eric: That would be great. Ali, before we sign off, do you mind sharing with our audience if there’s some way they would like to get in touch with you - if there is some way they would like to learn more about you, is there somewhere they can go to do that?

Ali: Absolutely. We’re easily found at memberdev.com. It pitches what we are about, and what we have done. Check out some of our customers - we are all about them as well. Most of them are MemberMouse customers. That's the easiest way or you can also hit me up directly at ali@memberdev.com, with an email. That's my best mode. Yeah, I'd love to hear from people, so please reach out.

Eric: Awesome, and actually I do have one more question. Is there a resource that you could think of if someone is considering doing a membership site, building a business -

since we've identified this is about building a business, is there something that comes to mind for you that has been helpful for you?

Ali: We have a very basic 'How to Build a Membership Site' blog post. Anyone who is new should definitely check that out memberdev.com. We have aspirations to do something a lot more robust with you, MemberMouse, which hopefully we will get that done in the next couple of months. Books, I have a whole list and instead of spewing them out, I'll gather what I think will be useful books for both entrepreneurs and first-time membership operators. We can throw them in the show notes.

Eric: Yes, that would be amazing. I appreciate you offering that. Great, again thanks Ali.

Ali: All right, take care.

OUTRO: Many thanks to Ali for coming on the show today. I hope you found value on this episode. If you would like to learn more about Ali and Member(dev), be sure to check them out at memberdev.com or on Twitter at MemberDev. I imagine some of you may be thinking at this point, there is more I need to do to prepare for jumping into the deep end with a full membership site. To that end, we have put together a list of ideas and practice steps you can take to get some momentum and test your idea before going all in and developing a membership site. You can download this PDF from our show notes at subscriptionentrepreneur.com/108. There you will also find a full transcript of this episode and if you've enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to the Subscription Entrepreneur podcast on iTunes or Stitcher for future interviews with successful entrepreneurs. In our next interview we will be speaking with Dan Caron. Dan has over 20 years of experience in internet marketing and is an expert in designing landing pages that convert visitors into customers. He shares from his wealth of knowledge about the power of copy, design and psychology when it comes to designing your landing pages.