



SPI 357

How a Beautiful Mess Became a Beautifully Diverse Business Empire – with Emma and Trey

February 6, 2019

Emma Chapman: You should tell him. We just hit a milestone early today.

Trey George: Oh yeah. Literally.

Pat Flynn: What's the milestone?

Trey: We just hit 10 million installs on [A Color Story](#).

Pat: Are you serious, 10 million?

Trey: Yeah, today.

Pat: 10 million installs.

Emma: Today. So we're going to go get lunch after this.

Pat: Oh my gosh, congratulations. I have so many questions about this.

Trey: Thank you very much.

Pat: First of all, that's wonderful . . .

This is part of a conversation that I just had with Emma and Trey, a wife and husband team who had built an app that is one of their many, many, many different things that they have in their portfolio of income streams in their business. This app in particular is called [A Color Story](#), just hit 10 million installs. As you can tell, I'm a little bit blown away by those numbers and I do ask a lot of follow up questions to kind of unpack exactly how that all happened.

But that's not where everything started. Everything started with a blog called [A Beautiful Mess](#) that Emma and her partner Elsie, who unfortunately couldn't join us today, had started. Then everything kind of just took off from there. Today we're gonna dive into, with Trey and Emma, the story behind [A Beautiful Mess](#), and there's several different pieces of their very diverse portfolio for income streams, which include the blog. We definitely spend a lot of time in the beginning talking about the income strategies there, especially with sponsored posts.



I actually try to uncover exactly how might you be able to do this as well, so make sure you stick around for that. We also dive into the app store business, books, and they also have a physical product line, an Airbnb sort of business that they have, and they also own a bar together, and we don't even uncover those things today. But as you can tell, they've got a lot going on. We also talk about how to organize those things, how to build a team behind it and all those great things. So stick around. This is a great one, very inspirational, but also very tactical. Before we get to that, the intro music.

Announcer: *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—his dad jokes are a favorite pastime—Pat Flynn!*

Pat: You're listening to Session 357 of The Smart Passive Income Podcast. Thank you for joining me today. My Name is Pat Flynn and I'm here to help you make more money, save more time, and help more people too. Today we got an amazing husband and wife team, Trey and Emma from A Beautiful Mess. From all the things that we're gonna mention—there's so many things here that they have going on, and it was really inspirational because they're able to organize it and still have a life outside of all the amazing things that they've built.

We dive into, from the start, how A Beautiful Mess was built. Again, Elsie—who is unable to join us today unfortunately, it's a tough time to do interviews around the holiday season, but we definitely get into how they built the blog, which then supported all these other business ventures as well. Like I said, they even own a bar and have physical products and other things too. It's just amazing what they've been able to create. Let's just dive right in, and as you can tell and as you'll be able to hear in the questions, I get very curious about how they all are able to manage this and how everything was built, how they got it successful.

I try to be you and I try to poke holes to figure out, "Well, how can

we do this too?” Let’s dive right in. Here’s Emma and Trey with all the goods. Here we go.

Emma and Trey, welcome to The Smart Passive Income Podcast. Thank you both for being here today.

Emma: Yeah, thank you.

Trey: Yeah, thanks for having us.

Pat: Emma, I want to talk to you, and obviously we’ll talk to both of you and there’s a third person who wasn’t able to join us today because of the holidays, Elsie. Elsie, if you’re listening to this, you’re awesome. I’m sorry you couldn’t be here. Hopefully we can chat in the future. But Emma, tell us a little bit about what ABeautifulMess.com is all about, and then we’ll kind of dive into the story and kind of see how it all happened.

Emma: Yes. My sister and I started a blog a little over eleven years ago. I feel like we really hit blogging in the early stages and in some ways at the right time. Although I still think it’s a great time to start a blog now, but our site is all about crafts and recipes and home decor, basically all the things that we really enjoy doing in our free time and were already doing, we were blogging about, and over time that has become our job and not just the things we do in our free time.

Pat: That’s so cool. So you started eleven years ago; how soon after that did it become like, your job?

Emma: Well, at the time we also owned a vintage store in Springfield, Missouri where we are from and where I still live, and so we would use our blog as a way to promote the store and our online offerings from our vintage store. We just found, over the course of probably the first two or three years, that our content was growing and our audience was growing and they were really interested in what we were doing and our story. But they also just wanted to know how to do their own thing and learn how to kind of get the look that

we were showcasing for themselves, but not necessarily buy our vintage products.

We sort of transitioned over time and leaned into what was working. It's hard to answer when it became a full time thing 'cause in a way we were doing something else in tandem, but probably after the first like, three or four years, it became the main thing that we did.

Trey: I feel like it would have been close to like, 2012 because that was when I remember you decided to invest more into sponsorships and try to lean a little bit harder into monetizing that blog. I feel like that's right around 2012. That's also around the time that like you've kind of closed down the store as well. Wasn't it right around there?

Emma: Yeah, I think so, and our first book was coming out.

Pat: Wow, okay. So just so everybody's listening, I looked into sort of the portfolio that Emma and Elsie and Trey have together and there's a lot of things. We're going to get into all of them. You have the blog, ABeautifulMess.com. You have a product line, you have apps and software, you have courses, you also have books. You also have and own a bar and also do some like AirBnb-type things. Just wow, this is crazy and so I definitely want to unpack how this all happened and how you've been able to add more, how you've been able to organize.

Trey I want to speak to you. Going back to those early days, what was it like to like, take something that was offline and then start to go online, and how were you able to even just technically do that? I know a lot of people want to do that, but they don't even know where to start. Where did you guys start with that?

Trey: Well, I guess around the time that I started working with the company—I was working for ad agencies prior to that. I was looking at the crazy sponsorship dollars that would get thrown around for much smaller offerings than A Beautiful Mess could offer, like smaller reach and all this. Then I saw what they were charging like, and I just kept kind of butting in. I was just like, "Hey, you know you

could do this, you can do that, you could try that. Have you tried this?”

Eventually they were like, “Do you want to just come work for us?” I’m just like, “Yeah, I kind of do,” so they brought me on. Like I said, that’s why I said 2012 sticks out ‘cause that’s around the time they hired me is like, that was kind of the break. Because they didn’t quite have the money at the time. They didn’t know that they could make it the full year to pay my salary, but they’re like, “Well, if this works, if this takes, then everything else works.” From there it was just kind of . . . they saw that sponsorship worked. Then they invested more into it by hiring me.

Then that just kind of, or that gave me the opportunity to kind of scale that out and grow it ‘cause it was right around the time sponsored content was starting. We went from depending on like, direct-sold banner ads—we weren’t using ad networks or anything like that—to almost exclusively sponsored content and then more dynamic banner ads so that way that didn’t need to be managed. Then we could do sponsored content which could pay higher and then ultimately grow it and give us more opportunity to invest elsewhere.

Pat: Trey, is sponsored content still kind of a big part of the revenue that’s being generated in the business?

Trey: Huge. It’s the number one for A Beautiful Mess. We’ve incorporated the apps as their own company now and that’s where all of my focus is now. But for A Beautiful Mess, it’s the number one revenue stream.

Pat: Finally, can you tell us and kind of educate us on what exactly is a sponsored post and what do those deals look like, so those of us who aren’t quite familiar with how that works, we can get kind of the rundown?

Trey: Sure. It’s a basically whether it’s a craft project, whether it’s home decor or it’s a recipe, they are already blogging about all these

topics now. Then there are certain products that they use as they're doing it. Whether it's a certain brand of pasta or whether it's like a certain type of kitchen tool or something like that, that you're using, that brand will then pay us to give them a better feature within the post.

If Emma is doing something like, she wants to make pasta, KitchenAid could theoretically pay us to feature KitchenAid a lot more prominently, giving them some links and all that kind of stuff. Basically we try to build in brands as naturally as we can into the content that we're already writing and then just give them a little bit more focus than we otherwise would.

Pat: That's great because oftentimes I talk to brands, and a lot of times their sponsored posts are for things that have nothing to do with the brand. I see this a lot on YouTube. Like I'll see a video and at the end it will be like, "By the way, you could also get this really cool mattress that sponsored this scientific thing that you just watched," and it is like, has nothing to do with it, so I love that it's kind of on-brand.

Trey: Yeah, it's a nice—

Pat: Oh, go ahead.

Trey: Sorry.

Pat: No, no, go ahead.

Trey: I was just saying it's the nice thing about the blog in general and kind of all of the categories that they cover. It's a lot of brands that may not be as like cool as something like Apple or whatever.

Emma: I think all are pretty cool, for the record.

Trey: But the point is, is like, because of all the spaces we cover, it gives a lot of different brands that opportunity to sit into the content really naturally.

Emma: Well, I think of it that it has to be, and I talk about this with everyone on our team a lot, but it has to be a win-win-win. It has to be a win for the sponsor. You're getting in front of an audience that's truly going to be interested in what they're selling 'cause I wouldn't want to sponsor someone or advertise if people aren't wanting what I'm offering. That makes no sense. It has to be a win for our team. We like to create content around certain categories and it needs to be real for us.

It has to be a win there, and then it has to be a win for our readers. They don't want to see random stuff. They want to see what we're really doing and the type of content that they're used to seeing, which is crafts and cooking and home decor mostly for us. If we can find the intersection where everyone's winning, those three wins, then we have a winner. Okay, I need another word here but you get it.

Pat: I like that and that's the same approach I take with things like affiliate marketing. If it doesn't make sense for one of the parties, then it doesn't really make sense at all. I would imagine that as your business continues to grow, you have more and more opportunities that are coming your way. Emma, how do you stay true to your brand despite A, the opportunity to promote kind of whatever products you want and the opportunities and the potential revenue gain that can come from likely, companies that are reaching out to you to want to get in front of your audience? How do you stay true?

Emma: Well, I do think that's part of why diversifying our revenue has been so important to me over the years and always something that's on my mind every single year. Because when you're working with sponsors for example, I mean this could apply to a number of different revenue streams. But it can be kind of hard as a business owner who has bills. We have a small team and they count on me for their income. You think, "Well, what if we don't have any sponsors two months from now or four months from now; I better do this one that doesn't quite fit."

‘Cause you can have a little bit of that fear, and I think that makes sense and I would never fault another business owner for that. But I think if you kind of diversify, so you’re creating a little bit of a safety net for yourself with your revenue, then that gives you that freedom to say, “You know what, this isn’t quite the right fit. This isn’t a win-win-win, so we’re going to pass on this one,” and I don’t feel scared that I’m not going to be able to make payroll or whatever other bills your business may have. ‘Cause I can rely on these other revenue streams that I’ve built up.

Trey:

Well, it also gives you that opportunity to kind of lean into what your interests are. Like as you evolve as a person, as you change over time, like you kind of get that chance to try these other things and more or less stay true to yourself because you spread it out so you’ve been able to kind of change as it goes, and that way you don’t have to just always stick with this one thing that may have worked really, really well in 2013, but in 2018 maybe there’s not as much space for it anymore, and if you haven’t diversified, then like you end up kind of stuck beating that same drum and you weren’t able to change with the times.

Emma:

Sure.

Pat:

Thank you for that. I definitely want to go into that diversification, which you’ve obviously mastered. You have this giant empire now, it seems, but I do want to talk a little bit more about sponsored posts ‘cause this is a topic that I feel like a lot of people may be interested in and there’s a lot of opportunity out there. Trey, you said you came on when you discovered these opportunities for sponsored posts. Where might a person who has a brand, who has yet to do this, where might they start? How do they even begin that conversation with a company?

It’s very intimidating to just go, “Hey,” and a lot of people don’t want to like boast about themselves either, which I know is an important part of it, to show all the things and the assets that you have to offer. How would you recommend a person start down the line of sponsored posts?

- Trey: The very first thing to think about is what is it that you have to offer? You have to kind of define your product that you're selling. Like, what is this sponsorship? That's putting together a media kit of some kind and even if you're just doing it from a rough draft standpoint for your own, like even if you're not sending out a full media kit every time, but just so you have those numbers baked in and you can very quickly say like, "This is what we have to offer."
- Because at the end of the day, sponsors, they're trying to move a needle. They're trying to be able to present to their overall marketing team, like all these great metrics that they've come back and been able to generate through their marketing efforts. They want to know, how does sponsoring you fit into those metrics? Like I said, just knowing your numbers, knowing your audience, knowing what it is you actually can offer at a very core level, and then specifically, what does that sponsorship product look like? Is it going to be something where you want to bake this sponsorship and naturally, into what you're saying, or do you want to have a hard cut and say, "This is an advertisement," and then hard cut again back to the content or whatever they could be?
- Emma: Like a threshold.
- Trey: Exactly.
- Pat: How do you kind of approach it? Do you approach it one way or the other or both?
- Trey: Well, like I said, we always try to back into our value a little bit so we take a look, like I said, we look at what our numbers are and then we back into it. As far as to answer that question a little bit more directly, we like to weave in a little bit more naturally. I find that to be a better—just we find it to be a better sponsorship product and also as a better experience for readers 'cause at the end of the day, if our readers go away, then the sponsors go away. We always put them as like, the highest priority, and so we're just continuing to make content that we really like to make and then finding sponsors that fit that.

Emma: I think it depends on your platform too. Like, I think for bloggers and influencers on Instagram, things of that nature, I think it makes more sense to kind of bake it in as Trey is saying. I like that term. Then I think for podcasts though, and also YouTube channels, which we do have a YouTube channel, but it's not an emphasis for us as much. But I listen to a ton of podcasts and watch lots of YouTube and I'm very used to as a consumer of that content, there being kind of a hard cut and, "Oh now I'm seeing an ad, now I'm listening to an ad."

I think that works well for those particular platforms, but I think it depends where you're at, what kind of platform you're on and what that audience is used to and what they'll respond to well.

Pat: I think that's really smart. For example, and Emma I'm just curious 'cause I know traffic is important, right? Like, sponsors want to know how many people are going to see whatever it is that you're going to be mentioning. But what in addition to the traffic would be a part of that, that package that we're talking about here? 'Cause there's a lot of beginner bloggers who don't have much traffic and they automatically assume this is not possible for them. How might you combat that?

Emma: I actually think sometimes more important than traffic is engagement. What I mean by that is how much someone's audience will interact with them and want to participate. Whether that's buying something or commenting or whatever it is. A great place to start is actually affiliates and finding those affiliate programs that fit what you're doing. Because if you can be successful with affiliate, that means you can move product. Now it has to be products that you like and that your audience likes. But you've already done the work of figuring out how that works for you and your audience.

Once you have some successful affiliate programs under your belt, I would share some of those numbers with potential sponsors and maybe even include them in your media kit so that you can showcase, "Hey look, I can move product. My audience is interested in these types of things, so if we align in that way, we

could potentially work together and find some value together.”

Pat: I love that. How do you know how much you’re worth? I’m curious to know how you might answer that question.

Emma: One, I think getting a sense of generally the market. We are friends with lots of different bloggers and different influencers. I think it’s really smart to be friends with lots of people in your network and whatever you’re doing. If you’re a YouTuber, be friends with other YouTubers. I think it’s important for cross promotion. I think it’s important to kind of build each other up and to help each other. I’m a big, big fan of sharing sometimes fairly private information.

Like if someone emails me and they’re a fellow blogger and I know them and I know they’re a legit person who’s just asking me a question, I will totally share lots of information like that because I think it’s going to help them grow. In the same way, I’ve been given a lot of information and advice over the years from people in my industry. I think that’s important and I think that’s a good way to kind of start thinking about that. ‘Cause it’s not really what you are worth, ‘cause we’re all worth an infinite amount of money.

We’re important people and individuals. We have loved ones and the number that I charge for sponsorships for A Beautiful Mess has nothing to do with me and the Chapman’s worth. It has everything to do with the value that I can bring to the table for a potential sponsor and the going rate within my particular industry.

Pat: Thank you for that. That was a beautiful answer for A Beautiful Mess. Sorry, I had to go there. Trey, I’d love to ask you the same questions since you’re likely you’re coming in with a lot of like, the numbers experienced before even A Beautiful Mess got into that. What is your thought on valuation?

Trey: Well, we always try to start with—I mean the thing about sponsorship is it is a little bit of a moving price. It might be a little bit more expensive to work with one sponsor versus another based on how difficult it will be to make it work with the content or whatever.

- Pat: Does that mean that like, you don't share what the price is right away; you'd want to have a conversation first?
- Trey: We basically, we have a backup. We have like a core number that we have in the back of our mind. It's like, this at least has to be this, and then we kind of work up. Yes it does. Basically we don't come out of the gate with a clean number.
- Pat: Cool.
- Trey: We kind of want to have a conversation. A lot of times we ask them what their budget is and then we try to build something that fits that budget. Then however, like I said, I always like to lean back on that, on those metrics and have a good sense of like, "All right, generally speaking, we know this will provide this CPM for you out of very engaged users." If we know that we're providing that, we know that can be a much higher CPM than it would be for say, a banner ad, which you might get a few dollars for every thousand impressions. But for something that's in content, you can charge upwards of \$50 to \$100 CPMs.
- Pat: Thank you for that. Final question on that is, is there a trick to reaching out to a company, to getting ahold of them or having that discussion?
- Trey: I would say shamelessness, but I think a lot of times it especially . . . maybe it's our generation. We're really polite. We don't want to be too forceful or anything like that, but it's just, there's no such thing as like, a bad route to finding that contact. LinkedIn is a fantastic resource. You can look up companies and just start looking for titles that would be relevant to what you're trying to do. Like things like, whatever, whoever's marketing, whether it's a brand manager or assistant brand manager, social media managers, and so like, start to just try to piece together as many connections as you can.
- Emma: Honestly too like, I'm a pretty shy person, but I am definitely "shameless" when it comes to promoting. 'Cause here's the thing, this is the advice I try to give my friends. It's like, be as proud of

your work and talk about it as much as you think your mom would. My mom is so proud of me and like, it's an embarrassing amount. My mom is awesome. She's an amazing mother and she would talk about my stuff endlessly to someone. Not because she's like, being sleazy and trying to sell them. She's legitimately proud.

In the same way, think of your company that way. Are you proud of what you've built? You probably are 'cause you've worked really hard on it, so don't be afraid to get out there and say, "Hey, I have this great thing. I have this great platform. I have this engaged audience and I want you to get involved with that 'cause I think your company's awesome." If someone says no or doesn't respond, that's the worst that can happen and that's not that bad. You just keep going and find other places where you can add that value.

Pat: Amazing. Thank you for that. Emma, can you continue speaking a little bit about, what were the next steps after A Beautiful Mess became the main thing and on the lines of diversification, kind of what was the next step for you or the next sort of phase of diversification?

Emma: Our next big project was we got a two book deal, and for us books was a natural next step because we were content creators and books is just basically a collection of content. We got a two book deal and we took the money, the advance from that, and we made our first app. For us, we were thinking like, we don't just want to like, take the money that we make and spend it on fun stuff. We want to grow our business, we're in this to win it, so let's continue to diversify. We had a great idea for an app so that's the next thing we did. The same year we were writing our first book, we were beginning to work on our first app.

Pat: Wow, okay. Let's go back to the books really quick. How did that start? I'm curious, I know a lot of people have a book in them and they know that, but they don't even know where to begin and it sounds like that you just naturally went into it. But the traditional book requires a lot of planning and an agent and all those things.

What were the pieces that had to come together in order for this to be executed?

Emma: I'll tell you our real story and I don't know how helpful it will be to listeners, but for us—

Pat: Tell us.

Emma: We were blogging. We were putting out content that we were proud of and a book, not an agent, a publisher contacted us and was like, "I have an idea for a book that I think you guys would be great to write, would you be interested?" We loved the book idea so we were like, "We love it." We were also like, "Oh, we should get an agent because we have no idea like what kind of advance you should get from a book." We don't know. We have no idea. We looked up a few agents and reached out and we found an amazing one and we've worked with her now for like ten years. She's amazing. We love her.

Pat: That's awesome.

Emma: She turned that into a two book deal and we were really happy with the advance and it definitely allowed us to create the content we wanted to make for the books and they were really fun to write. That's really our story. But a lot of times people approach me and say, "Oh, I have a book idea. How does it work?" If you're wanting to write a book that's like non-fiction, so it might be a teaching style book or something of that nature, that's what my books are. Those, you typically kind of have a book proposal so you don't have to have the entire book written.

The thing I say for people and the type of industry that I'm in—so it could be crafts or cooking or decor or fashion or something of that nature—I think if you have a channel that could be a blog, that could be a YouTube channel, it could be anything where you're putting out great content, it's going to be so much easier for you to sell a book. Because you already have an audience that's interested in

the type of thing you do and you already know how to write great content. That's exactly what publishers want to see and they want to see your audience and they want to see that you can write great content.

You have all the hard work done if you're already doing that. I also think currently, in 2018, 2019, it's a great time to be self publishing even better than it's ever been. Sometimes I think people have an idea that if they don't get a book deal with a major publisher, that it's not legit. I completely disagree. I love reading self published books. Some of my favorite ones have been self published. I've had lots of friends self publish and I think it's just as legit if not more, money wise sometimes. Don't be afraid to explore both avenues and see what's the right fit for your project.

Pat: Thank you for that, and I can vouch for self published books as an author of self published books as well. I appreciate that. How long did the book writing process take for that first book, Emma, and how hard or easy was it?

Emma: Our first book, I think we wrote it in about nine months, I want to say maybe ten months. It was really fun to write. It was typical to write a blog and a book at the same time. I also think we just had never written a book before. We didn't understand, like, I think they had to send me a document, how to track changes in Word. I just didn't even know how to do that. There are a few hurdles then we had to get it through. But I love the process of it. It's just like writing a blog, but it's a much more kind of pointed thing.

Because instead of a bunch of random content, you're kind of creating this one long narrative, not like a novel, but just one thesis I guess, or whatever. I love writing books. I think we still have a few more books in us. I hope someone publishes some, but whatever.

Pat: That's awesome. A couple more questions about the book and then Trey, I want to pivot to you on the app thing and the software, which is really exciting to me as well. On the book, how did you get your audience involved so that you had a really good launch? What are some tactics and things that you've done now to move that

audience?

Emma: We definitely talked a lot about writing the book as we were doing it. We weren't necessarily showing the content because I think that kind of, you can show a little bit, but I think if you show too much, then why should they purchase it? You want to keep a little bit back so it's more exciting to see the finished product when you get to the end there. But bringing in your audience to what you're doing is just so natural for bloggers and other influencers.

I think it's so fun and it can also, in a weird way, kind of be a little bit of an accountability thing because you can't be slacking on your book deadline if you've told your whole audience about it. I think that that kind of works well too. But yes, we bring them in on the project, we let them see that we're doing it, we tell them what it means to us. If we're truly excited about the project our audience knows, and they tend to be more excited with us. That helps a lot for launches.

Pat: Looking back at that launch, what was one really smart thing that you realize that you did that worked really well for you?

Emma: There a lot of the things I wish we'd done on that first launch.

Pat: That was going to be my follow up question.

Emma: I think sharing the process as we went was really smart. I don't think we knew it at the time . . . like, we didn't realize that we were marketing. We just kind of thought like, "Oh yeah, we can just talk about what we do." But I do wish we had started a newsletter. We didn't even have an email list when we launched the first book and that would have been very valuable. Definitely have that newsletter. But I feel like that's kind of online business 101 right there. Definitely have a newsletter. Definitely have a wait list so that you can let people know when the pre-order's out and then when it's finally out and they can buy it.

If you have any sales, depending on where it's being sold, you can

inform them on that and hopefully even get people to give you reviews if they're interested. You don't want to be too pushy about it, but you do want to be upfront about it because it can help you sell your book, and hopefully you're really proud of your book when you're done. It's amazing to see like, a good review from someone you don't know. It feels like a million dollars.

Pat: Where can we go grab the book? Where can we see it?

Emma: All our books are sold really wherever books are sold, but you can find them at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and lots of small Indie publishers too, which I think is for Indie bookstores.

Pat: Share with us the name of the book so we can know what to look up.

Emma: Our first one was [*A Beautiful Mess Photo Idea Book*](#). Our second one was [*Happy Handmade Home*](#), and our third one is a cookbook called [*Weekday Weekend*](#) which, it kind of has a healthy slant to it so it might be a good one for the new year.

Pat: We could find them through ABeautifulMess.com as well, right?

Emma: Yes. We have the books tab you can click on.

Pat: Nice. Now I'm looking at the covers right now. They look gorgeous.

Emma: Thank you.

Pat: Well done. Trey, I want to pivot to the app and software sort of realm of what you guys have built. Tell us about even like, why apps, why software? I remember Emma was saying, "Well, it just kind of made sense to do that." But I want to know like really where this came from.

Trey: This would have been I think 2013; we started it in I think 2012 I believe. Basically Elsie has a pretty iconic like, drawing style and handwriting style. She was just uploading photos to Instagram that she would draw on her tablet with and on like, just something

in Photoshop and she would just do a cute little doodle or some sort of cursive phrase or whatever. Over and over again in her comments she was getting asked, “What app did you use to do this? What app did you use to do this?” She just like, “Well, I just used Photoshop and I think about it.”

That’s kind of where the idea of the A Beautiful Mess app came. Our first app was a photo app where you could kind of bring in doodles and you could recolor and then add them to your photo or whatever. Just, it kind of came out of that just as natural as it could be. Honestly, a lot of times we’ll get ideas that come from readers and followers just kind of asking, “Hey, how did we do that?” We realized we took a lot of steps to do it and maybe we could shorten the amount of steps to get them to that same result.

Pat: It makes me think that you need some information on how to build an app now, because now everybody’s going to be asking, “Well, how did you do this?” That’s what I want to ask you. Like, were you a developer, did you know how to create that? How did you get it done?

Trey: Oh no. I think we’d had, it was just like a friend of a friend who connected us to this app agency based out of Austin and they were like, a startup and it kind of, it worked pretty well because they were really young and kind of figuring out what they were doing. We were a relatively young business and don’t totally know what we’re doing, so we just kind of worked together and made all sorts of mistakes along the way. But yeah, it’s funny. It’s one of those things that like, Elsie and Emma kind of kickstarted that and I was trying to soften expectations a little bit.

‘Cause again, coming from the advertising world, it was just like, every client that we had wanted to do an app because it was like the trendy thing to do and it was just like—and they always would fall flat on their face when they would try it and so they always failed. So I’m just like, “Let’s be happy if we get 10,000, 20,000 installs. Let’s be thrilled with that. That would be awesome.”

- Emma: You said we were throwing our money away.
- Trey: I don't know if I said throwing it away. I was skeptical to say the least, but by the end of it I'm like testing and all in and we're kind of overseeing the process. Then yeah, I couldn't have been more wrong about my predictions. It went number one in the app store before we could even promote it. We'd said that it was coming out, we'd teased it a little bit, but we're still going through the approval process with Apple. We've gotten kicked back for like, not having a certain button just right.
- Emma: Yeah, 'cause we didn't know how that worked to be fair, since we've never made an app before.
- Trey: At the time they didn't know, or at the time Apple didn't really have any way to schedule a release date. It just, as soon as it was approved, it was in the store and we also just didn't know when it would be up. Then all of a sudden it just kind of popped up at like 10:00 PM one night and by the time we're online in the morning to kind of promote it and start talking about it, it's already number one in the App Store. That was quite the fun story for us.
- Pat: How many installs?
- Trey: A Beautiful Mess topped out at about 1.2 million installs. That one, or that app has kind of, it's had a nice life. Then we've kind of moved on to a free model through a couple of other apps. Basically A Beautiful Mess had a big, big spike at the beginning and it did really, really well. But then whenever we tried to continue investing in it, we weren't able to see that same kind of return that we saw in the initial investment, all that, so we were struggling with it to make it work exactly right. Then we started to move on to new apps.
- We started doing this app called [Party Party](#), which was kind of like a photo booth app that also turned—this was before Boomerang and it would kind of turn your photos into a gif so you could just do like, back to back photos and would stack them on top of each other and create a little animated gif. It was right around the time

Instagram introduced video so it all kind of work together. Then Party Party was like, we were exploring another business model. With A Beautiful Mess, we did a paid app with in-app purchases, but we got so much pushback for having in-app purchases in a paid app. It's like, "Okay, let's try doing a paid app with no in-app purchases."

People really liked it. We didn't get much pushback, but it ultimately hurt from a business standpoint. It ended up being a profitable app, but Party Party ended up capping out at about 75,000 installs, which is drastically different than how A Beautiful Mess was doing. Then we wanted to find something that was a little bit cleaner because A Beautiful Mess has a very, very specific style and it kind of fit in its time. But times change, trends change.

We wanted to find something that was like a little bit more dynamic, a little bit more subtle, and something that could have a long shelf life. That's where A Color Story came into play. Elsie again, it was kind of—Elsie and Emma both have this very bright, popping editing style that wasn't really happening, like bright popping, colorful editing style that wasn't really happening in any of the photo editing apps out there. They were all very moody and very—

Emma: Dramatic shadows.

Trey: Very dramatic. Which is like a look, but it's just like, there was a lot of filter apps out there for very serious photos, but for the more fun, colorful photos that we like to post and take and do, we didn't see a lot of apps out there. We were like, "Let's try to throw our hat into the filter app game. That's where A Color Story came to be. We worked this out. We kind of built together a pretty substantial filter library and effects library.

Emma: You should tell him. We just hit a milestone earlier today.

Trey: Oh yeah. Literally.

- Pat: Oh, what's the milestone?
- Trey: We just hit 10 million installs.
- Pat: Are you serious, 10 million?
- Trey: Yeah, today.
- Pat: 10 million installs.
- Emma: Today. So we're going to get lunch after this.
- Pat: Oh my gosh, congratulations.
- Emma: Thank you very much.
- Pat: I have so many questions about this. First of all, that's wonderful and I'm looking at the app in the App Store right now and obviously we'll link to all the things that we're talking about in the show notes, for all of you listening right now. But on this app in particular, like I've had my hand in the App Store for a while since 2008 or 2009 when it was really just beginning. And that business that I had in the app space no longer exists. I know exactly how hard it can be to create an app, but more so to continually update it. I have questions about . . . you're not a developer. How are you supporting these apps and continually updating them for all the updates that iTunes and Apple has and all the things?
- Trey: We parted ways with kind of agencies in general after A Beautiful Mess. We just kind of ran into the hurdles and it was like, we've kind of felt like our business model and their business model were at odds a little bit. Not to say that we had any ill will or anything. It just ultimately, in order for them to make a profit they needed to be able to get the work out as quickly as possible, and in order for us to make a profit, we needed a really stable application.
- For A Color Story, we transitioned away from agencies once I

started to understand the process a whole lot more and I just started trying to find developers from the space and contracting them freelance. I just kind of pulled all the resources, like just would find the individuals that I needed and specifically somebody who had had experience creating these apps before. The first developer for A Color Story, for example, I found him through the app store.

Like I was just going through the photos and videos app, or photos and video app category, and I found an app that was a really well built but wasn't getting a whole lot of attention, and so I kind of looked up, who are the developers behind it. It was just a guy, wonderful guy named Matt out of Manchester and—

Emma: Matt from Manchester.

Trey: We just kind of put together a plan and got the whole thing built, so that's how we got A Color Story built initially. Then once it became clear—like we kind of set some goals in place, and so once it became clear that A Color Story was going to be its own thing, I moved full-time over to A Color Story and then I was the sole employee working with freelancers for the first year and then we hired. Now we are actually just about to hire our third full time mobile developer, so we now have a staff of developers and managers and designers and things like that to keep the whole business going.

Pat: That's amazing. Congrats. These are structurally separate companies owned by like an umbrella company that you have, or how is that sort of all figured out for this? When you diversify this is a big thing, it's like, "How do I even manage all this stuff separately?"

Trey: Yeah, it's structurally its own LLC and then Elsie and Emma are fifty-fifty owners on both the LLC over A Beautiful Mess then A Color Story LLC, which is its own, like I said, its own entity entirely. There's no umbrella company that it connects it together, the umbrella company is Elsie and Emma as individuals. That's how it's structured.

Pat: Nice. I just downloaded it, and already it's like super gorgeous. I'm going to play around with this after the call, so I'm going to not distract myself and I'm going to put my phone away. Final question on the app stuff, 'cause we have more to talk about. How were you able to get people to find—and I know that A Beautiful Mess was a big part of this, but I mean 10 million on this one and even the first one, A Beautiful Mess over one million, and then even 75,000? I mean that's not something to breeze over. These are significant numbers. What has been the marketing strategy behind these apps? How are you able to get them in front of people?

Trey: It's a couple of things. A Beautiful Mess obviously is a fantastic launch pad. It will always get us started and it will get us the attention of the right people. With A Beautiful Mess there wouldn't be A Beautiful Mess app. We were able to, with us shooting up the charts to number one, it got Apple to pay attention to it so it got us an Apple feature right away. Then with Party Party it was a similar situation. We were able to get out . . . like, us getting that big boom, like that big burst of installs at the beginning—which again, it doesn't have to be something insane, like you don't need like a million installs on the first day or anything like that.

If you're able to get a few thousand installs in a day, like some way able to draw that up, you'll get the attention of Apple and then that will give you those prime feature spots there within the App Store app and you'll be able to get substantial success there in the first week. Then ongoing—so with A Color Story, the way that we kind of were able to keep the rhythm going as opposed to just having that big spike in the beginning and then a big drop-off was through one, we do a lot of influencer networking and influencer outreach and that's kind of 100 percent of our PR strategy. We have a lot of friends in the space and so we work with them directly to kind of get feedback on the app. There's an element of social marketing there. But beyond that it's, we've really, really hit a good stride with Instagram ads. That's like, that is our bread and butter as far as generating installs right now and we had it set up where our costs per install is substantially less than our value per user.

- Emma: And your reviews matter too.
- Trey: Oh yeah.
- Emma: So anyone aspiring, I do think that's something to really keep an eye on and work on is making sure your reviews are good. Because if someone who doesn't know you clicks over and they're interested, but then they see you have one star, two star app, they're going to be more hesitant to download. You just want to keep an eye on that.
- Pat: You have an average of 4.8 out of 5 right now with over, closing in on 9,000 ratings. That's a very significant number and that is fantastic. Obviously a part of this is just making apps. If you are going to do it, make it great and worthwhile, right?
- Trey: Yeah. Well, and to be fair there's a whole strategy to your reviews too, 'cause you get a whole lot more reviews if you just ask for them. That's the big thing for us is that like, we try to find our users who do like the app who would never think to review it, and we just ask them like, "Hey, would you mind?" Then they're almost—and they're very willing.
- Emma: I think that's a life tip too. You get a whole lot more in life if you ask for it.
- Pat: Thinking of asking for help, Emma, I want to go back to you now. Related to influencer marketing with this, and even other things that you have going on, how do you ask for things without feeling like you're just taking so much? I think this is a big struggle that a lot of people who do have a lot of value to offer struggle with. It's the ask. Can you share with us your approach for working with colleagues and friends when you have something to launch? How do you help them help you?
- Emma: Yup. I completely understand the feeling there. I feel it myself often. I don't think that's foreign at all. If anyone's listening to this and they're like, "I could never ask for help like that," trust me, I've been there and I still am there sometimes, I feel it. But the thing is, do you ever give help? 'Cause one, you should, but two, if someone

asks you for help, it's kind of an awesome feeling to know like, "Oh, I can actually give you some advice or go leave you a review and it's going to make a big difference to you in your business and this thing you're working on."

In the same way, truly you are giving your friends and colleagues an opportunity to help you. Here's the thing, when I asked for help, I know very much that—and I'd say this too, "You don't have to do it if you don't have time to do it. If you're not interested in this thing I've worked on, that is totally fine and I truly mean it, and it's not going to hurt my feelings. You don't owe me anything." But I'm still going to ask for what I need and what I want in life and I'm going to give. In that way I'm going to like contribute to the universe's karma and give what I believe that we should all be giving.

I will expect that back, but I will not be angry or upset if I don't get it from someone in particular. But I also will probably come back and ask them again, unless they tell me not to because I'm a little bit shameless. But I think sometimes people forget other people are just busy. There are so many times I feel like I missed a friend's launch, and it wasn't because I didn't like them and I couldn't believe they even wrote me asking for help, it's 'cause I was busy that week or I was sick that week and I just missed it and I actually feel kind of bad so I'm glad if they come back to me and they say, "Hey, I got something else. Could you help me with it?" I'm like, "Oh yes, good, because I missed your last thing and I'm sorry and really do want to help."

Like, that's also something that might be going on. Don't get discouraged and unless someone directly says, "Hey, don't email me," don't feel that way. That's not how most people operate. That's probably not how you operate so don't assume that, just like, put it out there, what you need, and give.

Trey:

Just to build on that a little bit, a really good strategy in general is just to get them involved somehow. 'Cause to come back to Emma's point, people do love to help and especially if it's on kind of a cool project. With A Color Story, our big thing is that we'll bring in

influencers to help us test. They'll tell us like, "Oh, this is good, this is bad." We also really take their feedback like, "Oh, it'd be really awesome if I could have this feature or that feature." Then they're kind of, they are part of the process and all of a sudden it keeps it more top of mind. They're less likely to forget about it, they're just a little bit more excited for you 'cause they understand it a little more.

Pat: I love that. Thank you. When it comes to business one thing that I've learned over time, it's really important to know what your strengths are and what your weaknesses are. I'd love to hear from each of you, and Emma I'll start with you. Like, what is the unfair advantage, the big strength that you bring to your team that you feel you've been able to sort of take advantage of and use for the success that you've been able to gain? Like, what is your superpower?

Emma: I think I am like a very optimistic person. I wouldn't say like unrealistically so, but also, I don't know if that's always a bad thing. But I definitely will just keep going. Like, you've listed at the top of this a number of things that we've had that have done well for us; what you didn't list, which I'm glad, but it's all the things that haven't done well for us and that we had to abandon in business. But I'm still standing, I'm still here and I still have more in me. I have more to give. I have more to build in my lifetime.

I think I just bring a level of optimism and I'm not afraid to put myself out there and fail or put myself out there and succeed and then talk about it. In the same way, I'm willing to help others come alongside me or go do their own thing and give them some advice or some encouragement that you can do big thing, so can I, and we all deserve that kind of success and happiness.

Pat: Thank you, and I do want to ask you about perhaps an example of one of those failed projects if you don't mind. If you could think on that while I ask Trey the same question. What is one of your, or what is your strength that you bring to the team?

Trey: Before I answer, I do want to add one to Emma, that one of her best superpowers is her decisiveness. What makes her able to continue moving forward is that she'll very quickly realize, "Oh, this is a problem. Stop doing. Oh, this is great. Keep doing that." Like she's my rock. Whenever I get kind of stuck in something or another I'll call her and just be like—and I'll just explain it to her. Then she always has the plainest, simplest, most obvious answer for me 'cause she can just be so decisive. That's another thing. It kind of builds on what she does, but that's like, she's so good at that.

I'd say probably my big thing is, a level of healthy obsessiveness when it comes to getting things done. Like I get really, really thorough and I make sure everything works. We've built some really robust testing processes and like I said, since managing reviews in the App Store is such a big thing, if you should have something with a bug that—especially a bug that's particularly detrimental to the overall experience of the app, your reviews just start to tank. Through a lot of process design and just a little bit of obsessiveness, I think I've been able to create some really, really clean products on the other side of it.

Pat: That's great. Thank you. Emma, can you speak to a superpower that Elsie brings to the table?

Emma: Yeah. Elsie is a dreamer. She has that thing where you could start a meeting and everyone's feeling kind of down, and by the end of it they all are thinking about these like, five ideas that Elsie has, and they're really excited about it with her. She's just like, a very enthusiastic—has way too many ideas and thinks they're all going to be amazing and she can bring you on board where you're like, "Oh, I want to help you build that," because you get really excited with her.

I love having her in meetings. I love having her just in everything. She makes me excited to reach farther than I think I ever would without her, and I think she inspires other people to do that too. It's my favorite thing about her. I want to be more like that, in fact.

- Pat: That's awesome. Thank you. The final question is, Trey and Emma, husband and wife, you guys have been working together and then, Emma, you and Elsie have been partners for a long time now as well. I would love to hear from each of you, what is your best tip for building a business with others? I think that working with other people is really important, especially as you begin to grow out of solopreneurship and get into really becoming the CEO of your company and developing partnerships and all those kinds of things. But I also know that that's not always easy, and oftentimes people can either butt heads or they have different ideas. What would be your best tip for making sure that the relationships support the business and the business supports the relationships?
- Emma: I would say recognizing what your strength is and also recognizing what other strengths are is really, really important. One, don't necessarily partner with someone who has the exact same strength and weakness that you have. That's probably not going to be ideal. Elsie and I have opposite strengths and weaknesses in many ways and that makes us great. I also think if you are starting to grow your team and manage people, if you have someone talented on your team, part of your job is to just get out of their way, let them do what they're really good at. That's why they're there and you go do the thing that you're really good at.
- Trey: For me, I would say my number one is communication. We meet frequently and we always spell it out and that way it kind of eliminates all those questions of like, "What do you do all day?" You never have that if you're kind of always on the same page and you're always able to talk as much as you're able to kind of keep everybody up to speed. And continue those conversations, I think that's huge. I also would say believing in the good in others, and it's a little bit of kind of like what you're saying. It's like, don't come from the perspective—like if you come at somebody assuming that they're being lazy or that they don't want . . . like, assume that they're doing their best and start from there. You're able to get a lot more, I guess a lot more value out of each other in that way.

- Pat: Thank you. When you say we meet frequently, how often are you meeting and for how long?
- Trey: We do a weekly meeting with the whole team for about thirty minutes to an hour and then I do daily standups with our developers and then our business team. We'll just kind of do a quick recap. Like if I need five, ten minutes of like, "Hey, what do you have going on today?" Then that way we can see like, if they're working in the wrong direction on something, we can catch it right then and there. Or if somebody needs help, we can catch that within there as well.
- Emma: We definitely use [Skype](#) and [Slack](#) a lot. There's lots of great tools, but I always like to throw out tools 'cause I feel like sometimes people get overwhelmed by just making that decision. [Full Disclosure: As an affiliate, I receive compensation if you purchase through this link.]
- Pat: Well thank you. We hadn't even really touched on the physical products, the bar that you guys own, the Airbnbs, and all those kinds of things. But I would love to hear from each of you because I just want to continue talking 'cause you guys are amazing.
- What would be your best tip for diversification and managing all of this? 'Cause I have a lot of things going on as well and sometimes I feel like it could potentially spiral out of control and I could lose control of a lot of the stuff you . . . you have even more than I do going on. How are you managing all of this and able to stay sane and still find time to do personal development and spend time with loved ones and all those sorts of things?
- Trey: When something's winning, you should staff it. Like if something is starting to become like a clear winner, it's like as much as you can ask for help, bring people in. Whether it's a full time person or it's somebody contract or whatever. When you're first starting out it makes sense, you want to do as much yourself as you can 'cause that's the most efficient way to go. But once something starts working, bring in people to help you and so with that help, it can keep things from completely overwhelming them.

Emma: Yeah, and I think too, like one, think about diversifying among different categories and additionally think about diversifying as far as things that will take your attention. Some things will take a lot of your attention and need a lot of handholding and some things won't. When I'm thinking about diversifying my business, it's very similar to diversifying your own personal income. You want to have a savings account, a retirement account. If you have additional money beyond that, then maybe you're thinking about stocks or mutual funds or maybe you're also going to think about investing in real estate.

All of those kind of have different levels of potential involvement and like, time associated and also costs. In a similar way, think about that with your business. You don't want to start three businesses one year that all require \$100,000 in all of your time. That's not gonna work. That's definitely going to be difficult and you'll never see your family that year. That's not good. You want to think like, "Well, I have the space to use something that could take up ten hours of my week" and that, I think it's a lot. So it's like, "Okay, well dream up an idea and try something and try to pick something that's not exactly the same category of what you already have going on."

That way if it does well, you could potentially staff it, you could grow it and it's its own thing now and it creates this financial safety net for you. But you don't want to create products or services that are just going to compete with what you already have in your portfolio. That's not necessarily going to help you build that wealth, whether within your business or in your personal life.

Pat: Thank you Emma. Thank you Trey. This has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you for the inspiration and all the advice and the ability to now better organize the life that we have. I appreciate that. Emma, where should we go to find out more information? Where can we get more from you?

Emma: Well, my blog is at ABeautifulMess.com and if you're interested in photo editing at all on your mobile device, you should definitely download [A Color Story](#). It's free. We have lots of stuff in there too

for you to enjoy.

Pat: Awesome. Thank you both. Appreciate you so much and have an amazing 2019. We can't wait to see what else you guys come up with.

Emma: Thanks Pat. We appreciate you.

Trey: Thanks so much.

Pat: All right. I hope you enjoyed that interview with Emma and Trey and again, ABeautifulMess.com is where you can go. A Color Story is the app that we talked about that just crossed 10 million installs. They have all these other amazing things and the bar and the product line and all those things, which we didn't mention. We'll have links to those in the show notes as well, so all the things that they're doing you can find at SmartPassiveIncome.com/session357.

The final thing, just to kind of wrap this up: It all started with the blog, A Beautiful Mess, and the audience that they built there, the engagement that they had there and the opportunities that then came their way as a result of building that brand. Just to remind you, this all didn't happen overnight. This is eleven years in the making and it wasn't until 2012 and '13 that they really started to devote full time energy into this and see those opportunities. For those of you who are just starting out, who may not even have that one thing under your belt yet, I hope this encourages you to know that you got to keep working at it. You got to keep persisting.

And really it's about that audience engagement in that targeted niche audience that you're building that will open up those opportunities for you. If you've already gotten started, well you're already headed in the right direction, 'cause how many people do you know who have always said they wanted to do things but yet haven't even taken those first steps? Sometimes those first steps may not be the best first steps, but at least you're taking steps and that's exactly where it all starts.



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As we begin our 2019 together, I just want to say I appreciate you for being here. Thank you so much. All the reviews that have been coming in this year on iTunes and Apple, just appreciate you so much. It really motivates me to continue moving forward. Speaking of moving forward, we have a lot of great episodes coming your way so if you haven't yet [subscribed to the show](#), please do that and that way you can automatically get the new episodes that come your way too. I just want to say one more time, appreciate you. Thank you so much, Team Flynn for the win.

Announcer: *Thanks for listening to The Smart Passive Income Podcast at www.SmartPassiveIncome.com!*



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RESOURCES: [A Color Story app](#)

[A Beautiful Mess Photo Idea Book](#)

[Happy Handmade Home book](#)

[Weekday Weekend book](#)

[A Beautiful Mess app](#)

[Party Party app](#)

[Skype](#)

[Slack](#)

[The Golden Girl Rum Club \(Trey & Emma's bar\)](#)

[Oui Fresh \(Elsie & Emma's physical product line\)](#)

