# From Microsites to Quality Websites and Services - With Spencer Haws

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Microsites used to be all the rage. Everybody had one. It was easy to rank on search engines and website owners made lots of money from advertising. But times change, and microsites are all but dead, or are they? Today's guest has made a career out of long-tail websites and traffic in more ways than one, and continues to innovate today. Stay tuned.

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Here's your program.

Michael Cyger: Hey everyone. My name is Michael Cyger, and I'm the Publisher of DomainSherpa.com - the website where you come to learn how to become a successful domain name investor and entrepreneur directly from the experts.

We are all aware that Google updates, called Panda, Penguin, and EMD tried to suppress low-quality websites and content. Today's guest started out building hundreds of niche websites, but has changed his strategy over time. We are going to find out what he has learned over the years and how we, as investors and entrepreneurs, can make use of his learnings.

Joining us today is Spencer Haws, Owner of Long Tail Media, Publisher of NichePursuits.com, and Owner of the Long Tail Pro Keyword Research Tool.

Spencer, welcome to the show.

Spencer Haws: Hey Michael, it is great to be here. I appreciate that introduction.

Michael: And I love flubbing it right from the beginning, because then it takes all the pressure off of you. I have been the first to flub anything.

Spencer: Hey, I appreciate that. It makes me look good, right?

Michael: And it is lovely to have another Washingtonian on the show. Of course I am on the west coast and you are across the mountains, over in which area?

Spencer: In the Tri-Cities area, so definitely eastern side of the State, but yeah, always great to have somebody from Washington doing business.

Michael: Great. So, you started developing niche websites for additional revenue back in 2011. At the peak, how many niche websites did you have up and running?

Spencer: Yeah, so definitely. I had really started dabbling around niche websites a little bit before that, but 2011 was kind of the peak, where things

were going great. Actually, when I quit my job was early 2011, because I was making so much money from these niche websites. Right around 200 sites is about what I had peaked out at. I do not know the exact number. Once you get over that amount, you kind of lose count, but it was right around 200.

Michael: Yeah. And how much revenue did you generate in your peak month with all of the website hitting at full cylinders?

Spencer: So, the largest month that I did was just over 16 thousand dollars during the one month, and most of that was from Google AdSense as a monetization strategy.

Michael: Great, and so, just to contrast it, today, post-Google Penguin, Panda, and EMD updates, how many websites do you have up and running?

Spencer: So, I still have maybe a hundred of those or so. And they are all in varying degrees of either development, or amount they make or amount that I pay attention to. Some are just making enough to make it worth it. Maybe only a couple of dollars a month, but hey, all it costs me is ten dollars a year to renew that domain.

Michael: Right. And so, are you willing to say roughly, from those hundred websites, how much you generate? Let's take out your big website, NichePursuits.com, of course your Long Tail Pro, which is a software website, but your other niche websites.

Spencer: Yeah, so I will say that I am making maybe about one-third of what I was making before. So, at my peak, 16 thousand, so it is probably just under one-third of that or something.

Michael: Yeah, so in the thousands, but still pretty good.

Spencer: Yeah, still a few thousand dollars a month for sure.

Michael: Yeah. All right, so let's start the story with a definition, Spencer. What is a niche website?

Spencer: So, a nice website is really a site that target a very specific market. That is how I view the definition. And typically, when we are thinking of websites, we are thinking about a specific keyword, if you will. So, it is just not about knives. It is more specific. It might be survival knives and, even more specific, a really niche would be best survival knife.

Michael: Right.

Spencer: That is kind of the thing we are talking about, and I mention that because that is sort of a case study I have done. So, something that is a very narrow topic and very laser focused is what I consider a niche website.

Michael: Okay, that makes sense. And are there any descriptive statistics around the definition of that specific market or keyword, like do you define it by competition, search volume, cost-per-click, or any other factors besides just picking a really specific keyword like not knives, not survival knives, but best survival knives?

Spencer: Right. So I do look at metrics as well. In particular, search volume is where I start. I like to see keywords that have at least one thousand exact match searches per month. And that can go up from there. The most important thing to look at is level of competition within Google. I want something very easy to rank on the first page, but typically those types of keywords are anywhere from one thousand. I would say eight or nine thousand searches per month are typically the search volume that those types of keywords are going to fall into.

Michael: Okay. So, I know most domain investors will do research about domain names that they are buying, and they might buy an exact match domain, because it is a specific market, exactly like you are saying, and they will definitely look at the exact match search volume and they will look at the cost-per-click, because nobody wants to build out a website if there aren't any advertisers and the cost-per-click is zero or ten cents, or something like that. But you also mention competition. So, you want to make sure that you are targeting a keyword or keyword phrase that has low competition, because something like automobile insurance would be high competition. Is there no way for you to use your resources to rank a website well for auto insurance?

Spencer: Yeah, so the entire strategy is indeed to find things that are easy to rank for SEO-wise. So, there are obviously different levels of competition for amount of advertisers or something like that. That would be different, but easy to rank in Google. Automobile insurance - I can tell you: yeah, it is off the table. Just off the top of my head, I know that is going too hard to rank for. It was kind of the mistake I made early on through learning that I did try to go after some of these big markets and, no matter what I did, I could not get my site to rank. And so, it was a mental shift for me when I said, "You know what? If I just pick off these super easy to rank for; it takes very little promotional or link-building efforts to get to the top of Google, why bother with the difficult keywords?" So that is what I have always done. Yeah, maybe there are some opportunities, if I put lots of work and effort into, I could rank, but that is kind of missing the whole point for me. I want something that I find and rank easy without a lot of effort.

Michael: Yeah, that makes sense. So, low competition, over one thousand search volume. Exact match search volume. Well, we cannot even search for exact match anymore using the Google Planner Tool, which I will ask you about. And then, what about cost-per-click? Does there need to be sort of a minimum there that you like for your niche websites?

Spencer: Yeah, I usually do look for about one dollar cost-per-click, which would be ideal, and that can vary. If it is a very high search volume - it gets searched seven or eight thousand times per month - I might be willing to accept a keyword that only has 50 cents or 25 cents cost-per-click, because the earnings will level out based on search volume and cost-per-click, but usually one dollar is kind of what I would ideally like.

Michael: So, that sort of sounds like your strategy. You began building websites prior to 2011, hitting your peak in 2011. When and why did you strategy change?

Spencer: Yeah, so a lot has changed since 2011 and since before I started that. Obviously we know about Penguin, Panda updates, and most certainly my sites were affected by those. And a lot of that had to do with, well, a couple of things. The quality of the content. When I first started doing this, it

was almost like for fun. It was a game. What can I put up there and rank in Google, and how quickly can I do this? And so, I was not writing every article. They were not great. So I was affected by Panda on some of my sites. When Penguin came out, that affected how link building was done. Obviously, back in the day, using exact match anchor text for all your links was the way to go, but Penguin hit that very hard. And so, the Google updates have forced me to change not only how I build the sites, but also how I am promoting them and doing things like that.

Michael: Okay, so let me dig into that a little bit. You had two hundred sites. Penguin, Panda, and EMD updates. EMD, I think, was earlier this year, so let's talk about Panda and Penguin. How did you determine which of the hundred sites you were going to drop; which ones you were not going to maintain going forward?

Spencer: Oh, well, honestly, that decision is pretty easy. I just look at the earnings and, if they are worth renewing, I keep them. That sort of thing, because these were passive sites for the most part. They are something that if they did well enough on their own without me touching them, I kept them.

Michael: So sort of the winners would rise to the top, like stocks, and if they were just dogs, you would just drop them. You close down the hosting account, you let the domain drop, and you are done.

Spencer: Exactly.

Michael: Okay. And there weren't like a few of them where you said, "Oh, I am not making anything on it, but it is a great keyword phrase. Low competition. It is a five-dollar click"?

Spencer: Okay, yes. No, there certainly were some cases like that. So, some of my sites did well enough to keep, but there were other sites definitely that got hit that, before they were hit, were making great money. And so, I looked at some of those definitely and I recreated those. I bought new domains, built sites on the exact same keywords, and within a few months, I was back up and running lots of those.

Michael: Oh, interesting, so you determined that it was not worth trying to repair the sites that you had. You needed to start over.

Spencer: Yeah, definitely. It is so much harder to clean up links and just write new content. Might as well just do it from the start.

Michael: So you realized it was good enough to go back for a second shot, but the content was not very good, it is already in Google's index with bad content, so you cannot take that and put it on a new, good domain name and expect it to do anything, and you had done link building in a way that Google has now said is not acceptable.

Spencer: Exactly. So, I just did it right the second time I guess.

Michael: All right, so let's talk about that for a few minutes. There are two key factors there, I think. One is good content and one is link building. So, let's talk about the content first. Let's talk definition of terms. What is good content, Spencer? How do you go from a site that just has bad content to something today that has good content, and how do you define that when you are writing it or when you are asking others to write it?

Spencer: Yeah, so good content really is content that answers the questions of the person making the search. So, if it something that really addresses their problem and really answers their question - their query - then it is good content. Now, I mean that is a very fuzzy answer, but most of us know good content when we see it. I mean there are varying levels. I am not going to say mine is Pulitzer Prize-winning content, but it is sufficient content. When they type in whatever the phrase is, yes, they are getting the appropriate answer, and it is good English, good grammar, and all those basic things. Also, a little bit longer content. Instead of maybe three or four hundred words they could rank before, my articles tend to be seven hundred, one thousand, and 1500-word type articles. So, a little bit more in-depth as well.

Michael: So, they are articles that go deep enough on a specific subject to fully answer somebody's question on that exact query.

Spencer: Yeah, definitely. Definitely, and there are other levels. Again, I go back to my case study site - my best survival knife site. If people want to check that out, I find that that is good quality content. I created an original shopping comparison chart of all the different knives that is sortable by price and features, so that sort of thing is good content that is useful.

Michael: Yeah, and if anybody is listening to this and they want to bring it up, go to NichePursuits.com, and in the upper right-hand corner are the case studies. Click that link and then it is a grouping of two case studies, and the top one is the one that you want to flip through, and you can read it while you are listening to this. It is a great - I don't know - ten or fifteen individual articles, as you are going through the case study, to target the keyword phrase 'Best Survival Knife'. And you built a website on BestSurvivalKnifeGuide.com.

Spencer: Exactly. Yes.

Michael: And I want to ask you a little bit more about that, but if anybody is wondering what you are talking about, that is that case study. So, good content. Did you find that you actually need to write the content yourself to make it good, or are you able to outsource it?

Spencer: So, I still do outsource most of it. For that particular site, I did write at least the initial content myself, but you can find great authors. I am not best writer in the world, certainly, and you can hire people to do great content. You need to give them good instructions and you maybe need to think about what type of content you ask them to provide a little bit, but with the right instructions there is great authors out there you can hire.

Michael: Yeah, so you need to do some editorial work. You cannot just hand off the editorial discretion to somebody else and expect them to pull together a phenomenal website.

Spencer: Yeah.

Michael: Okay, got it. And where do you go find your writers?

Spencer: So, I use, usually, either TextBroker.com or Elance.com. Those are the couple of places I usually go.

Michael: What do you find you have to pay to have a quality article written at 750 to 1,000 words?

Spencer: So, on TextBroker, for a Level 4 author, I think it is around twenty dollars. Maybe 18 dollars. Something like that. And it is pretty similar on Elance. So, I will pay anywhere from probably 15 to 25 dollars for a 1,000-word article, just depending.

Michael: Yeah, and do you find that you need to specify the title and the main points you would like to make in the article, or do you just hand off the title to an author and expect them to do the research and come up with the main points and write it?

Spencer: So, I definitely give them the title, and I usually give them a description of the type of website it is going on or what it is going to be used for. It really depends, but yes, a lot of times I do need to give them additional instructions, such as: "I want you to review three to five products in this category and write a paragraphs on each product." Other times, the title itself is quite obvious what the article will be about. So, it depends.

Michael: Okay. So, in sort of phase one, when you first launched the websites, you were putting out lesser-quality content. Probably paying people not very much. Five to ten dollars maybe to write an article. Now you are really choosing the editorial direction. You are hiring quality writers. You are paying twenty dollars or so for a more lengthy written article. You are setting the topics, which I think a lot of people who want to build niche websites have trouble doing. It seems like a lot of work involved to build a quality website with good content.

Spencer: Sure, yeah. No, it is. I mean it is some work. I mean it used to be you throw up a one-page or a three-page or a five-page website, and you are done. And if you want to automate more of it, I mean you can hire somebody to do all of it. Setup the WordPress and put the content on. And I have done that; hire virtual assistants to help me out. So, there is a lot involved.

Michael: Yeah. So, how often do you find that you need to publish on these new websites in order to keep the index fresh and make Google realize that it is not just a microsite that you threw up with one fell swoop and now you are done?

Spencer: I do not know if there is a magic formula.

Michael: Is it even a factor? Do you not need to update it when it is published?

Spencer: So, what I usually do is I will build up my sites to a certain level. Maybe 15 to 20 pages of content over the first couple of months. And then I focus on promotion or link building, and see how it does. If I see it ranking in Google and making money, at that point, I would decide: "Okay, I want to invest in doing one article a week, or more," just depending on what it is. So, if it is not performing and it has been a few months and I have done everything that I can, it might be one of those things that I decide it is a loss. So, I focus on the winners. I grow those and maybe add an article a week, or a few articles a week, just depending on the site and how well it is doing.

Michael: So, clearly, if you loved survival knives and you went out in the wilderness every week, you might want to write on this blog once a week. How you used it, what you gutted or chopped - I don't know what you use a survival knife for.

Spencer: Yeah, sure, absolutely. In fact, for that particular site, I have actually found somebody on Elance that is like a camping, survival guy. That is what he does for a living, and he is writing most of the content.

Michael: Very cool.

Spencer: There is about sixty articles, I think, on that, and he is doing about two a week for me. And so, yeah, I mean if you are not the expert, you can find an expert.

Michael: Yeah. And so, let's talk about promotion. When you want to promote BestSurvivalGuide.com, what is your process today to go do that?

Spencer: So, I am always looking to get the free traffic from Google, and that has been kind of the whole point of me building these sites. So, I focus on link building to get the rankings up, and so the process is always changing I guess, if you will. I am always doing different things, but essentially I start out just getting a base layer of links, if you will, that might be very simple blog commenting. I research the links of my competitors and see if I can get some of the same links. I might do some basic directories. Kind of get just a very base layer of links, and then the second step. Usually what I do is I hire some sort of either link builder or buy some sort of link building package, if you will. A service that is already out there to build links for me. And I am always changing, I guess, what service I buy, so I do not have one that I can say always buy this; it works.

Michael: Yeah. Well, sort of looking back at your phase one, Spencer, I think a lot of people would have put up those simple microsites and then gone onto Fiverr and said, "Get me a thousand links coming into my website using this anchor text," or whatever, and they would do that and Google has now identified all of those routes and said that those are spam, and we are going to assess a penalty or we are not going to give you any benefit. So, it was either wasted money or detrimental money spent against your website.

Spencer: Yeah.

Michael: And I think we have all experienced that phase, but in this part of the story, as you have moved to phase two and you are building more quality niche websites, you have said that you go out and get targeted links. So, you look at where your competitors are getting their links and you will try and get similar links, or you will go onto discussion forums about outdoors or survival knives, or things like that.

Spencer: Yeah, related.

Michael: You will comment and put your URL. And maybe they are no value to those links because they are putting the Google HREF tag that says that

they should not transfer any value, but that does not matter because they are still there and you are going to get some people clicking through, and so it gets you that base level. But then you said that you are buying packages; and I am thinking to myself: "Well, are you going back to phase one where you are just buying these links, but you are not sure where the links are going?" How is it different?

Spencer: No, so I try to be very careful where I am buying these, because there are tons of link building packages out there that are still building like it was 2009.

Michael: Right.

Spencer: They are just spamming. Whatever. So, recently - and take this for whatever value. Some people will like this and some will not, but some of the best links that I have found are actually essentially expired domain networks or link networks that people have built up either privately or that you can purchase from them privately. I am not sure if you are familiar with that. Probably.

Michael: Yeah.

Spencer: But you can get some great links from either high page authority or page rank - whatever you want to look at - domains targeted to your niche. So, those tend to work well for me, so I look for packages that kind of are doing that.

Michael: And do those packages work in such a way that they spread out your links over time so you are not getting a hundred links all in one month? You look for longevity.

Spencer: Yeah, and that is one thing that I look for. I mean if it is a service that says I will get you 250 links next week, I will usually avoid it. But if it says I will get your three links or five links, I am like: "Okay, this might be interesting." This is somebody that is probably building high-quality links. So, I am looking for lower volume, higher quality links.

Michael: And I do not want to make this a promotional for those because I am not sure if they are good or not. Clearly you think they are good enough and you are using them, but if somebody else were looking to do something like that, how do you verify that they are actually good links? Do you expect that network or whomever you are buying them from to show you the exact links on the pages that are coming into your website so you can verify that they high relevancy, high authority websites?

Spencer: Yeah, that would be great. That is why this takes a lot of research. You kind of just have to learn and test and experiment, and I have tried out lots of different services and you kind of learn from experience. "Hey, they are not very good. This one is good." Also, just doing a lot of research as far as what they about their network on their sales page or whatever, you can learn a lot and get a decent idea of what they are trying to do, but a lot of it just trial and error.

Michael: Okay. So, how many of your hundred sites would you say today you are actively pursuing link packages on?

Spencer: So, again, most of these sites that I have built, once I get them ranking up on the first page of Google, I do not do much to them.

Michael: Okay.

Spencer: So, for most of my sites, no. Maybe ten are now maybe in the works where I might buy a link package or something for.

Michael: Yeah. And how much would you expect to pay for a link package like you have described? Is it a hundred dollars a month or a couple hundred dollars per months, or like twenty bucks per month? What is the order of magnitude?

Spencer: Yeah, it can vary. I mean there are some that you can do one-off. You can spend 75 dollars and get a few links here. There are others that are monthly that range anywhere from 47 dollars a month to 400 dollars a month. So I try to find a happy medium probably in there, and I have not found, like

I said, one service that I am doing every month at this point, but that is kind of the range.

Michael: And is that because you cannot find one service that is big enough that covers every single niche or is that because you just keep spreading it around to try and find reputable link providers, or why do you think that is?

Spencer: Yeah. No, I think it is still just more trial and error. I am trying to find the best service out there. I mean there are still a couple that I will go back that I like. I guess I am just not sure that they are the best, so I am trying to find the best.

Michael: Got you. All right, so your strategy years ago - pre-Penguin, pre-Panda, pre-EMD - worked. You were putting up the websites. You were easily building a lot of links because there is a ton of providers out there that would do it and you ranked them well. Then you lost a bunch of those websites and you focused on higher quality content. You get them up and running, you build some initial links into them, and hopefully they rank well. People are coming to the site. Hopefully they are sharing it and linking to it because you are providing good content now. But you did not just stop there, Spencer. You are actually going beyond keeping those hundred websites up. Let me ask you this. Why didn't you just stay at a hundred websites and then add a new website every couple of weeks so that you can build up this empire of high-quality smaller sites?

Spencer: Well, I kind of am looking to the future of Google, I guess, because I have seen that they change a lot, and so I am trying to think about the future. What types of sites are going to be around in two years or three years, or whatever? And so, as I think about that, really, if everybody takes a hard look at what does Google want to rank, they want to rank the higher quality sites and probably the larger sites that people are naturally coming to. Real visitors, where you can build a real community and that sort of thing. And so, that is kind of my focus going forward; is to just narrow it down to a couple of sites and build those into really large destinations for people. So, that, going forward, is my primary focus. Now, knowing me, I say that now and then, in a month, I will probably go: "Oh, but micro niche sites are so much

fun," so I will probably dabble in that, but really my focus really is on the bigger, larger sites.

Michael: Okay, and so you see potential risk still with the microsites that you have, even though you know the content on BestSurvivalKnifeGuide.com is valid and it is useful. If I type in 'Best Survival Guide' into Google, I see BestSurvivalKnifeReview.com in number one. I see BestSurvivalKnifeHub.com in number two. I see yours in number 17. And if I look at the three different sites in three different tabs on my browser, I like the fact that, on your homepage, you have a sortable spreadsheet where I can easily see: "Well, here is what I want to pay or here is the weight of the knife."

Spencer: And we could talk about that, I mean if you want. That is a whole other discussion, but let's just say that none of those sites existed until I publicly shared my case study. Okay, so they were all copied and, in fact, my site was not number one for a very long time for a number of month, but some readers of my blog decided to build links to my site without my permission. There was a lot of negative SEO and if people want to look, I promise you I did not build 10,000 links to my site, but that is what is pointing to my site. So, I have had a sort of negative impact due to my public case study.

Michael: Yeah, so you did something good. You did a case study. You chronicled it over a number of weeks in multiple posts on how you ranked your website for Best Survival Knife and got it up there, and how much you were making. And the fact that I think, just three months in, you made enough money to pretty cover all the costs that you had developing the website, minus your time.

Spencer: Yeah.

Michael: And it is a great series. So, if anybody is thinking about developing a niche website on a specific keyword phrase or an exact match domain, this is definitely one that you need to go watch. And I think actually on one of the posts I read - this might have been a recent post: "Since inception, this site has revenues of just over 3500 dollars. My initial investment of about 700,

and now I spend approximately a hundred to two hundred dollars per month for new content. So, my net profit is close to 2500 for this project."

Spencer: Yeah.

Michael: And if I look at your update from September, Spencer, you actually made money last month, even though you have had some negative SEO from some unscrupulous people out there. And karma is a bitch. It is going to come back to those people.

Spencer: That is right.

Michael: But even as you lost traffic because Google assigned a penalty, you are still getting a good amount of traffic and you are still converting people through Amazon affiliate links to sell products.

Spencer: Yes, I am still making some money. That update you saw actually was before the update, so I think I made eight hundred dollars or something in September, and then, early October, the penalty is assessed. But I can tell you I am still making. I will make close to three hundred dollars this month, which is still pretty good with that penalty for sure.

Michael: So this is why affiliate marketers and people who have niches where they are making money - this is why they never want to talk about it.

Spencer: For sure. This is probably the last public case study I will do, and I knew going in. It is not like this caught me by surprise really. I knew going in there was a lot of risk that people would copy it certainly. I did not realize how much effort somebody would put into building negative SEO links, but yeah, there is some negative impact from sharing your things publicly. I will just say this case study is not over. I do intend to get that site back to number one. So, I think it will be interesting to go through the disavow links tool with Google and that entire process, so I will do that, but I think your original question was why don't I just keep doing this.

Michael: Yeah.

Spencer: Why don't I just keep building those sites? I can. One reason is it is a lot of effort to continually research new niches, so that is part of it, but the other part of it is that, really, the original strategy was to rank for easy or low-competition keywords within Google. Okay, I mean that really was it. Find low-competition keywords, get free traffic, and make money. I can still do that with one or two larger sites. Okay, so instead of building a hundred sites, build one site with one thousand pages, and each of these articles targets a different low-competition keyword. You can still do the same thing and, as a result, you then have this huge site, hopefully, with real people that is much more valuable than all your hundred sites combined. You have some place that people share them. Facebook and tell their friends about it, or whatever. So, that is why I am going that direction.

Michael: So, instead of individual sites focused on a niche keyword phrase, you pick a broader topic and each article is a niche keyword phrase. So, you might have an entire site focused on knives, and one is the best survival knife.

Spencer: Exactly.

Michael: And then another one is the best cooking knives. And so, anyways, you go across the entire vertical, or industry, or whatever you want to call it, but you need to pick a bigger concept. Is that fair to say?

Spencer: Yeah, that is basically what I am doing here with a couple of my sites, and so that is what I am focusing on now. It is not like these other, smaller niche sites will not work. They still work. They are just fine. Just varying levels of risk, interest, and sort of thinking about the future. That is what I am doing.

Michael: Great. And similarly, that is what I do on DomainSherpa. I pick the domain name industry, which many people would have said, like: "How can you write more than a few articles on domain names?" And I pick very specific topics, so today we are talking about building niche website and how your strategy has changed over time using specific keyword phrases, and we are going to talk about some tools to do that in the future. But I have been

doing this for over two years now and it is amazing. There is no lack of topics related to domain names for investment and entrepreneurship.

Spencer: Definitely. Exactly.

Michael: Great. All right, so I definitely recommend people go and read the entire review on your Best Survival Knife. I look forward to reading how that case study continues to evolve. Do you have a newsletter on your website? I need to sign up for that.

Spencer: Yeah, just on the right-hand sidebar. People go there; they can indeed sign up for the newsletter along with a free eBook that I have.

Michael: Great. Let's talk about what Google knows. Google does a lot of great things for a lot of people. It is able to expose great content to an enormous audience. If people are searching for it, they have got a majority of the search volume that happens. But it makes me a little afraid to use Google so much and rely on Google so much. You have got Google Analytics measuring the people that are coming to your website. You have got Google AdSense, which is displaying potentially on some of your websites to generate revenue. You sign up for the Google Webmaster Tool so you can see what they are indexing and what they are not, and what issues they have and if they have assigned a penalty from all these unnatural links. You go on the Google Keyword Planner and you need to sign in with your ID in order to lookup keyword phrases. Is using all these tools telling Google too much about how you are making money and is it potentially harmful to us, as entrepreneurs and publishers?

Spencer: That is a great question. I think it is one of those things we will never know for sure, I guess, how much they are using that information to figure out what we are doing and deciding, based on our Google Analytics and our Google AdSense, is this person doing something shady, or whatever may go through our mind that kind of scares a little bit. I really wish that Google did not have such a monopoly on all these different areas. So, I am all about if we can find some other service to do analytics or other things, I hope some competitors come into the market. I think it is needed desperately, but it is a scary thought, but it is almost a risk you have to take, at least in some

aspects. Certainly you do not have to use Google Analytics. You do not have to use Webmaster Tools.

Michael: There are other options.

Spencer: Yeah.

Michael: It just costs money for other analytical services or what have you. So, let me ask you. On your hundred websites, do you use Google Analytics across all of them?

Spencer: No, I do not, and the ones that I do, I have multiple analytics accounts, so they are separate by ID and login, and everything like that.

Michael: Got you. And then, do you monetize any of your websites with Google AdSense?

Spencer: Yeah, I sure do. That is pretty much how I made most of my money starting out.

Michael: And I am noticing some background noise. Are you touching your computer, Spencer?

Spencer: Yes, I am.

Michael: All right. So, across Google AdSense, do you use the same AdSense code then across all those websites?

Spencer: Yes, unfortunately there is not a whole lot you can do there. I do have like a business account that has a Google AdSense and then a personal, so there is a couple there.

Michael: Yeah, because Google pretty much requires a business in order to deposit the money or your social security number in order to deposit.

Spencer: Exactly. You cannot open up multiple accounts under the same social security number.

Michael: Right, so there they know if they are assessing a penalty under one of your websites, well, maybe we should investigate these other websites too. They could or maybe they do not. I do not know.

Spencer: Yeah. So, you are. You are kind of at the mercy there of Google.

Michael: Yeah, but you definitely use different analytics logins so that they are separated at least from that perspective.

Spencer: Yeah, I do have different groups as far as Google Analytics.

Michael: Yeah. And so, keyword research is one of the other areas. I have signed onto the Google Keyword Planner Tool, which I have done a tutorial about a couple of weeks ago, since they have upgraded their tool, but it has some limitations. I remember, less than a year ago, I downloaded and tried out another keyword tool. One that is called Long Tail Pro, and before I realized it was your tool, I have used it and it was very useful, because it does a lot of things that the Google AdWords Keyword Planner does not do. So let's talk about that tool for a few minutes. How do you describe Long Tail Pro to people who have never heard of this software before?

Spencer: So, I tell them that it is a keyword research tool that helps webmasters discover niches or markets that they should go into. So that is the very broad picture, and then, of course, depending on how much people know or are interested in, I dive in from there.

Michael: And so, Long Tail Pro is definitely promoted through your NichePursuits.com website. I do not consider myself a webmaster. I consider myself more of a publisher, but I like to do keyword research because I want to find out what people are searching for so that I can either write an article about it or find an interview guest about it, or things like that. Do you find that a lot of your customers are downloading it for that same reason?

Spencer: Definitely. That is a big portion of the market of people downloading the software. Individual publishers and bloggers looking for post ideas and things like that.

Michael: So, when did you start creating Long Tail Pro?

Spencer: So, the initial idea for Long Tail Pro was right around the same time I was quitting my job back in early 2011. So, January/February 2011 is when I hired a programmer to help me build the software. It was, I think, in June or July of that year that we released a Beta version to some people to test out and started selling a Beta version I guess I should say, and official launch a couple months later after that.

Michael: So why did you develop the tool at all, Spencer? I am sure you were using the Google AdWords Keyword Tool and you could look up and see what people were searching for from a long tail perspective. Long tail being people might search for domain names, and that is the big head, but the tail under the curve of searches that are done is much bigger for people search for domain name leasing and domain name escrow and domain name - you name it. That long tail.

Spencer: Exactly.

Michael: Why wouldn't you just use the Google AdWords Keyword Tool at the time?

Spencer: So, I did use that. I was also using competing keyword tools out there, like Market Samurai was one of the biggest competitors, but I just was not happy with the way they functioned and the usability of them. I was maybe a little bit different than other people in that I was searching for lots of different markets. I was not afraid to search on things like survival knives and vehicles, and worm farms, and coin collecting all at once. I just wanted to throw in a bunch of different seed keyword ideas, and it did not matter the market. I just wanted the least competition type keywords.

Michael: Right.

Spencer: So, the tools that existed did not meet my specific needs, and so I created Long Tail Pro to help you search lots of markets very quickly, and also there was some other shortcoming. Some functionality of competitors.

Easier to sort and filter, and search for exact match domains automatically, and some things like that. I just saw a way to make the existing software that was out there better and to do it faster to meet my own needs, and of course I knew there was a market out there going to buy the software as well.

Michael: How did you know there was a market?

Spencer: I had been involved on the forums and other places. I had been building websites for a couple of years. So, when you are the ideal purchaser of keyword tools, you know what is out there and you hear the grumblings and people complaining. I was the market and I could hear it grumbling, if you will, and so I knew that people would buy this.

Michael: Yeah. So, one of the things you mentioned is a competitor. Market Samurai is one of them and clearly the Google Keywords Planner Tool is one of them. And I hate it when I go to the Market Samurai website and I cannot find the pricing for the life of me, and I go to LongTailPro.com and I can see the pricing smack-dab in front of me. How much does your software sell for?

Spencer: So, standard price is $97 that we sell. And now there is two different options that you have. There is a one-time purchase of $97. That gives you the lifetime access to the Pro Version. We also do have a Platinum Subscription Version that is $17 a month for some additional competition analysis features, and a few other features that people really like.

Michael: Cool. How many customers have downloaded your product since the beginning?

Spencer: So, actual paying subscribers or paying downloads is close to 14 thousands probably.

Michael: Wow, nice. And you also have a free version. So, if people are hearing about this for the first time and they are listening to you describe the tool, but they are not sure how they want to use it, they can download it and use it for a number of days. Correct?

Spencer: Yeah, there is a free trial. It is a ten-day free trial, and it does give them actually full access for the ten days. So they can try out the entire tool for the ten days and see if they like it.

Michael: Excellent. So, I know that there is tens of thousands of domains dropping per day. Often times, people run them through like EstiBot.com and they will evaluate the value of the domain name, which is a function of a lot of different factors, including the search volume of the keyword that is slices up and the cost-per-click. But they can actually take all those domain names with the words that are split and copy out all those split words and paste them into Long Tail Pro. And what might they find out from Long Tail Pro that they would not have found out just by using Domain Name Tools?

Spencer: So, I am not 100% sure what these other tools provide, but if you were to paste in a list of two thousand words, it would give you the search volume per month. It would give you the CPC per month. It would give you advertiser competition for that particular keyword. And if you want it, it tells you whether or not the exact match domains are available in lots of different extensions. So, it certainly does that, and then, if you want to go a step further and see how hard or easy it is to rank in Google, you put that in the competitor analysis and it gives you all the stats for the top ten sites within Google. So, that is basically what it provides.

Michael: Great. So it might give people a little bit more information. And I believe that they can filter and say: "Only show me low-competition with over this CPC," and then it will narrow down all the names that are dropping, and then they can maybe look through them and figure out what makes sense to them.

Spencer: Yeah, exactly, so there is a lot of filtering options. Very easy to use, based on all those things and a few more. By like including number of words, if they only want a domain that has two words or three words, they can filter out anything that has four or five words. Things like that.

Michael: Cool. So, how much time do you spend between NichePursuits.com, your software option, LongTailPro.com, and all of the

other hundred niche websites that you have built and are operating in the past?

Spencer: So, I still try to put in a traditional workday, if you will. Sort of eight to five, or whatever. I spend probably half my day with NichePursuits and LongTailPro, either writing blog posts or updating the software, and then the other half of the day working on other projects. And depending on how ambitious I am for the day, I may put in a full day or I may go to the gym a little early and work out, so it all depends.

Michael: Nice. Do you look at NichePursuits.com - the publishing website where you share your secrets about building niche websites - sort of as a loss leader for your Long Tail Pro? Is it your marketing channel? You spend your time, which is valuable, probably one of the most valuable assets you have writing content that you can promote your Long Tail Pro software and sell that.

Spencer: Yeah, in a way it is. I mean I hate to sort of say that; that that is what it is for. I really built it to just document my journey of building niche websites, and there really is a great community there, and so it is a genuine project. It is a genuine blog.

Michael: Yeah, I am sorry; I did not mean to phrase it that it was the only reason, but it is one of the reasons. And clearly you started NichePursuits before the software.

Spencer: Yeah. No, great question, but it certainly works very well as a marketing channel, because people do get to know me personally. And if there is anything that I have learned with marketing, even online, is that people love to buy from people they know and trust. And it just makes sense. It is obvious, but people join my newsletter. They read my blog posts. Nothing related to Long Tail Pro. They just get to know me. They know what I do, what I am doing in my business, and of course I have got ads for Long Tail Pro in the sidebar. And when I do my case studied, like my Survival Knife site, I am creating videos using Long Tail Pro because that is what I really use, and so yes, I get a lot of referrals going from NichePursuits over to Long Tail Pro. It works very, very well, and so that does keep me motivated

in a good way to keep writing on the blog and to keep producing great content. It is like okay, the more I promote my blog, I see that on the backend with more sales of Long Tail Pro.

Michael: Great. And so, you have tried different niche pursuits over the years. I read, at one point, that you were building an iPhone app.

Spencer: Yeah.

Michael: Did that actually get out the door, into the App Store?

Spencer: It did. I have since closed it down.

Michael: Oh, what was that app?

Spencer: A raving success. So, it was called Ad Alerts, and essentially what it was - it was a Google AdSense sort of stat checker, if you will. You could check your earnings, but the unique feature of it was, without touching your phone, you could have alerts go off. It could make a sound every time you hit five dollars or ten dollars in additional earnings. So, kind of a fun idea that your phone would jingle or whatever every time you made some money.

Michael: Sure.

Spencer: It ran into some problems technically and never quite got worked out, but yeah, NichePursuits.com was and really is still created for the purpose of me trying out different small business ideas, because I wanted to kind of move away from niche websites to diversify. Not that niche websites are bad, but when all your eggs are in the niche website basket, things can happen. But if I have got iPhone apps, different businesses, software, and niche websites, then I have a more diverse portfolio, and so that is what I try to talk about on NichePursuits; is other small business ideas. So, yeah, I have done iPhone apps. I am working on sort of another software idea in a different market right now, and probably will do some other things down the road as well.

Michael: Cool. So, would you say that your new phase of entry, although you are maintaining a lot of the things that you have done in the past and they continue to be areas of focus for you, clearly, throughout every single day, moving towards larger websites with a software platform attached to them? Is that fair, like you have done with NichePursuits.com with Long Tail Pro?

Spencer: Yeah. I love the success that I have had there, and I want to replicate that. It works really well, and so I am going into another market where I am trying to build a community, and I shared this with your privately before, but where I am building a site, blogging with content, ranking for these long tail keywords to get traffic. But eventually I am going to have a software product that I sell to this community. It works. It is a good business model.

Michael: Yeah. So, how do you envision having enough time to start another large community like NichePursuits.com and spend the time to architect and oversee the development of a software problem? If you are spending half your day on NichePursuits and Long Tail Pro and have your day maintaining a lot of the websites that you have done in the past, are you going to cut working out out of the daily schedule?

Spencer: I cannot do that.

Michael: Your kids are not going to get anymore time.

Spencer: That is right.

Michael: How do you envision it going forward?

Spencer: Yeah, so it is a lot of time and it is a problem I have always suffered from; is spreading myself too thin, getting excited about different ideas. So, we will see how it goes, but on this other particular project, I do have partner that will be helping out. We will be hiring a software developer. So, hopefully, my time will be limited to more consulting and directing of the projects. More just management, but hopefully I can squeeze in. So, the time that I was spending maybe building lots of small niche websites, I will be focusing on these other projects; hopefully I will still be able to fit it all in.

Michael: Yeah. One of the other questions that I had about hosting a hundred websites - niche websites or microsites, whatever you want to call them - that I have had is that I do not want to host them all on the same server so that Google can easily pinpoint those are all the same and they are AdSense and maybe they do not have value. How do you wrestle with that? With a hundred websites, how do you host them, update them if they are using WordPress, and make sure that they are all functional? How do you manage just the logistics of that many websites?

Spencer: Yeah, so I had a virtual assistant helping me with that for a long time. I do have maybe a dozen different hosting plans, if you will, so they are sort of spread out, but there are decent chunks of them still on the same hosting account. Up until recently, I was using a product to help me autoupdate the WordPress installations and plugins. Things like that. So, it is not easy. It is a big management project that I guess the way that I do it, honestly, is my moneymaking websites - the ones that are really my top 20% or whatever - I make sure those are up to date. The other 80% may or may not be up to date sort of thing. My attention goes to the moneymakers.

Michael: Yeah. Do you use WordPress Multisite and have multiple websites on one hosting account, or do you keep them all on separate hosting account?

Spencer: Yeah, so they are not WordPress Multisites, but many of them are on one shared hosting account though.

Michael: Got it. Recently I have been using ManageWP.com to have all of my websites listed in one control panel so I can see the updates and click update, and things like that, but you still have to go and check them, and I definitely do not have as many domain websites developed as you. Have you tried ManageWP.com?

Spencer: Yeah, I have, and that is actually a service that I referred to there. Yeah, I use ManageWP, and it is great. It makes it a lot easier to update the sites.

Michael: Yeah. All right, so we have talked about diversifying your income, how you have entered your new phase, and where you are heading with that. The one question that I asked you in the pre-interview, Spencer, that you said was good, so I am going to ask you again. Google has identified the fact that small websites that maybe are not updated very often in a particular niche might be trying to game the system. How do you think Google differentiates between a microsite built for AdSense and a small business website that is built for a real business, but just has a business owner that does not understand the web and is not adding new content and maybe it does not look beautiful, but should rank well for a keyword phrase maybe in a certain geography or something like that? How do you differentiate those two that might actually look very similar to an enduser?

Spencer: Yeah, so Google uses all kinds of different ranking factors that we know, and we know they do everything algorithmically. So, what maybe looks good to you or I may look different to Google. I mean all I can say is they do have at least a basic understanding of what quality content is. I do not know how advanced that formula is that Google has, but then I would say the links pointing to the site are going to be a big factor there. The smaller niche site that maybe has a lot of spammy links maybe is easier to detect. The small business guy that does not update anything probably has one or two links total or something pointing to a site. So, I would say the off-page factors play a big role in detecting that, but there is no reason that a one-page site cannot rank. It still happens. So, it is not really the quantity of content that is on a site. It is sort of the quality of it and the off-page factors combined.

Michael: Yeah. So, that small dry cleaner on Bainbridge Island, Washington might have a link coming from the Chamber of Commerce and link coming from the Dry Cleaners Association of America, and maybe a Yellow Pages one or a Google Places link, and like that is all they have and they might rank at the top for Bainbridge Island Dry Cleaner.

Spencer: Exactly. Yeah, and that would make sense. I think Google sort of looks at that and at least they say they understand those sorts of things.

Michael: Yeah. All right, so here is the final question for you, Spencer. It comes from a reader, Steven Davis. I was going back and forth with him over

email and I said, "Steven, you are in luck. I am bringing on Spencer Haws on the show. I am going to ask your specific question, which he is an expert on." So, the question is from the email: "I started to develop DogTether.com, and I have done nothing with another domain name I own, BuyContraceptives.com. I am not far into the process. I have close to 40 domains now and I am looking to create quick sites that might make a few dollars a month, until I can spend more time on them. I would love to hear his opinion and tell him not to spare my feelings. I am curious to hear which direction I should take these [two domains - DogTether.com and BuyContraceptives.com]."

So, those are both keyword phrases that people probably search for. It sounds very similar to your phase one, Spencer, where you identify a domain name around a specific market and you build up maybe a ten-page website on that, and you try and rank it. Would you recommend he go that route or does he need to turn his attention more on phase two and say you need to focus on websites that are near and dear to your heart that you want to write content on or that maybe you are going to find somebody that is interested to write about it, like your Best Survival Knife; you found somebody that is an expert on that, that you pay on a regular basis to write content. What would you recommend?

Spencer: So, it really all depends on the individual and what they are looking for. Steven there sounds like he wants something that he can put up quick and make a few bucks from. He is not looking for something long-term. And so, what people have to realize is that yeah, you can probably make a quick buck. You probably can make a few dollars by putting up some basic content and getting it to rank. I have not looked at those specific keywords to see how difficult they are. They might be a little more difficult than quick, but it is risky. So, it depends on how risky this individual is.

Michael: So tell me what is risky about it, Spencer. What is risky?

Spencer: Well, if you are putting up a site that you hope to just throw up and never update again, and you are trying to rank it quickly, probably using methods of link-building that are borderline, according to Google quality

guidelines, it is risky. Google, tomorrow, can change how they rank sites and yours could be gone tomorrow.

Michael: So it is risky that whatever you invest on that, whatever few hundred dollars to write the content, buy the hosting, put up a website, and your time invested in it might all vanish tomorrow.

Spencer: Exactly. And you should probably think about that. If you are okay with a site that only earns a couple hundred dollars a month for a few months or something, go for it, but see it as a quick return. A quick investment that may be gone after a couple of months. On the other hand, if you are somebody that says, "You know what? I am willing to wait six months or a year before I see any earnings," then I would say, "You know what? Build a quality site." Do the best things the best that you can, according to Google quality guidelines. Build this. And if you are willing to put in that time investment, long-term, down the road, you are probably going to see a higher return. So, it is really up to this individual. Either is fine. How risky do they want to be? Do they want a quick churn-and-burn type site or do they want something they can pour their heart and soul into?

Michael: Yeah. And I am not sure how competitive 'Dog Tether' keyword phrase is. Assuming it is low-competition, we know there are products out there that you can buy. And if he has a dog that maybe he wants to develop that site out for a few hundred dollars like you have done, he can have the website up and running with a decent amount of content. And then, if he wants to generate links, what would you recommend if he did not want to go the route of buying links? That he wanted to build quality links. How could he build some quality links to a brand new website about dog tethers?

Spencer: Yeah, so I mean he can start by just getting to know the other bloggers or websites in the industry. Certainly leaving some blog comments, but those comments are not really the links he wants. Ideally you can build some relationships with these bloggers and ask them for guest-posting opportunities, so you can do a lot out there. Finding sites that have not updated their content in a long time and say, "Hey, I will give you a free article." Those sorts of things. A lot of outreach. And then, you can think big and do like a content marketing campaign. Some sort of link bait campaign,

either writing huge articles of the best dog training blogs on the Internet, and send that out to everybody and hope they link back to you. Things like that.

Michael: Yeah, a lot of easy ways like that. If he gave away a dog tether a month for people that shared it on social media or linked to it from their blog, then there is a ton of great links coming in, and that would be easy. It would cost him twenty bucks a month, plus shipping and handling maybe.

Spencer: Yeah, or do some contests or something. There are a lot of different ways that you can do it. It just takes a little bit of time and creativity. And usually, when you do that, you are in a market you want to be in for in.

Michael: Now, if you owned both of those domains, Spencer, DogTether.com and BuyContraceptives.com, what would be your process to figure out which one you would want to develop first?

Spencer: So, I would definitely look at the keyword itself. All the metrics we talked about - search volume and CPC - but most importantly, how difficult the sites would be to rank within Google. And I mean just off the top of my head, dog collar sounds like a much easier one than buy contraceptives.

Michael: DogTether.com

Spencer: Or dog tether. Yeah. It sounds like that would be a lower competition, but I would look at the SEO difficulty.

Michael: Okay, sounds good. All right, if you have additional questions for Spencer, please post them in the comments below the video and we will ask him to come back and answer as many as he can.

Spencer Haws, Owner of Long Tail Media and Publisher of NichePursuits.com as well as the Long Tail Pro Keyword Research Tool at LongTailPro.com. Thank you for coming on the show, sharing your knowledge about building niche websites, and thanks for being a Domain Sherpa.

Spencer: Absolutely, Michael. I appreciate it.

Michael: Thank you all for watching. We'll see you next time.

**Watch the full video at:**

http://www.domainsherpa.com/spencer-haws-nichepursuits-interview/