



Episode 564: How to Get Rush Limbaugh Fans Asking the Right Questions

Guest: Joshua Bennett

WOODS: I've been wanting to get out to — I was going to say Australia. I've also wanted to get to Australia. Alaska may as well be Australia for me, given that I've tried repeatedly to get there, and it's always fallen through. I had an invitation at the University of Alaska. I had an invitation to be a speaker on an Alaskan cruise that fell through. I don't know; it's just not meant to be or something, but I'm glad at least to be able to talk to you about what you've been up to, and you have an interesting story, and I think people can draw from it some inspiration to do likewise in their own area. Alaska's a unique place in a lot of ways, and politically it's very interesting, the types of candidates that come out of Alaska, the types of ideas that can get traction in Alaska that's hard to get traction for elsewhere in the country.

I want to start off, before we get into your particular achievement, which is the success of this radio show that you started and how you got started with it, I'm curious to know what you can tell me about Sarah Palin. I know what everybody knows about Sarah Palin, but nothing more. What I also know is how she was packaged. She's a tremendous maverick — well, look, they portrayed John McCain of all people, the most establishment guy in the world, as a maverick. You know, what does that mean? He's a maverick, because occasionally he cooperated with Ted Kennedy. Oh wow, that must have taken a lot of courage to do exactly what the media wants you to do anyway. So as somebody who's lived in Alaska for, I don't know how many years, but I guess a long time, what is your real sense of being on the ground there what her record was, what her real intelligence level is? What can you tell us about her?

BENNETT: I think she was — one thing I did like about her was she ran to get rid of corruption. There's a lot of corruption in Alaska politics, especially because of our oil industry, things like that. So I don't know if you know the story of Ted Stevens, who was a U.S. senator who was found guilty of taking gifts from an oil company or something like that. So she was going to come in and end all of this corruption and the buddy-buddy system between politics and oil and crony capitalism and all of this stuff. And at first I think she made a few things, ruffled some feathers, but, meh, not so much. I mean, when it came down to budgetary things, she spent like a wild woman. It wasn't like this was Miss Conservative by any stretch of the imagination. (laughing) And when she decided to go with John McCain, like, wow, okay. You're going to say nice things about that guy? How can you even do that? I mean, I don't even know how much I'd have to be paid, and I still couldn't say nice things about John McCain.

WOODS: Yeah, but I mean, don't they say — my general understanding is that even though she has all the demerits that some people associate with her, that she was basically successful against corruption. She at least has that to show for herself.

BENNETT: I think she was, yes, but I was glad to see her go. Not that we got anybody better by any stretch of the imagination at all. I don't really like politicians, so it's hard to find good things about them. But you're right, she did do that as far as corruption. She nailed some people to the wall, and that was good. But overall government-wise, I didn't really see her doing anything over the top beyond that at all.

WOODS: All right, let's move into what you have done in Alaska that's gotten a lot of attention, that's gotten a lot of listeners, and that is in a way similar to what I do, but the medium is different in a significant way, because you're on radio. And as you say, as we were saying before we went on, people can just stumble across your show much more easily than they can stumble upon mine. You have to know what a podcast is first of all; then you have to be looking for a particular kind of podcast, whereas you're on the radio, somebody's just flipping through the dial and hears you, well, you can get a lot of organic traffic that way. So let's start from the very beginning. You have this very successful radio show, and you're getting crazy radical ideas out there, but it all started with your decision to run for office on a platform that apparently shocked even the so-called conservatives.

BENNETT: Yeah, so I'm really not political at all. I do not like politics. And I was ranting and raving — several years ago, five or six years ago I guess now — and ranting and raving to my brother about property taxes, because I'd just had my property taxes raised again, and property taxes are my pet peeve; I hate them. I mean, above and beyond all taxes. So he said, I've got an idea; let's run for borough assembly. We don't have counties here; we have borough assemblies. And I thought, what the heck, let's do it. So we talked to some local conservatives here, a group that we had met, and they were all for it, and so our platform was going to be let's get rid of property taxes. Well, good grief, we might as well have just come out and said let's kill all grandmas, because the Left, the Right, everyone was just, what are you — you can't get rid of property taxes; how are we going to fund this wonderful government we have? So we backtracked —

WOODS: And did they particularly say how are we going to fund our wonderful schools?

BENNETT: Oh, absolutely.

WOODS: Yeah, and even the conservatives?

BENNETT: Yes.

WOODS: Because the public school system is the American religion.

BENNETT: Yes.

WOODS: Much, much, much more so than actual religion. The one thing they will not give up is that public school system. They cannot imagine life without it.

BENNETT: No, even when we had the debates — well, they're not really debates; you just get to give these one-liners — the local conservatives we were running against — and my brother and I were running — this was an open election, so you can have 50 people running for one seat. And the conservatives we were running against were no different from the liberals we were running against, especially when it came to spending and the schools. I mean, like, I'm going to triple the budget, and blah, blah, blah. So there was no — really, there's no difference, except for my brother and I.

And well, we got chastised. You can't get rid of taxation. So we decided to back it up. Well, let's just do a — what if we put the tax cap, instead of at 13 mil, we'll drop it to 10. Let's lower the tax cap. Oh no, it was the same thing. Now you want to kill our grandmas and kill their husbands too. So we lost that election.

Next year we decided to run again, but this time we just decided let's take the gloves off. Forget this taxes and everything. So our campaign ran on let's end the borough. Just get rid of it. The whole thing. And of course people thought we were silly and somewhat didn't take us very seriously, but we still got to go to all these debates, and we got to speak our message, and man, once we were actually able to tell people where we were coming from, well, now people were starting to listen to us.

WOODS: Well, what's the benefit of that? Getting rid of the borough, what does that mean? Getting rid of some local —

BENNETT: The borough government. It'd be like getting rid of the county government.

WOODS: Okay, but then that just means that there'd be more control over you from a more distant authority, wouldn't it?

BENNETT: Actually, we have an area just south of us here that does not have a borough government, and they have way more freedoms than we do. Way more freedoms. They don't have property taxes, for one, and they don't have all these ordinances. I mean, we have to pay for libraries and doggie parks for doggies to go poo and all these kinds of things. Our brothers in the south here, just 100 miles from us, they don't have any of that. They only have to deal with the state government, where we have to deal with our city government, our borough government, and the state government, so it's compounded tyranny if you want to put it that way.

WOODS: All right, so this didn't go over well either, apparently.

BENNETT: No, strangely enough it did not go over well, but I got to go in front of the NEA, the local chapter here, which had I think there were 25, 30 people that I got to speak in front of, and they basically said, you know, tell us all the great things you're going to do for us and how much money you're going to demand that we get. And I said, well, I homeschooled all my life, and I actually am going to, if I'm elected, I will

do everything I can to completely get rid of your budget and end public schools in the borough. So that didn't go over well at all either. But no one threw knives at me or anything, and the most interesting thing out of that was two of the ladies there came up to me afterwards and said you're the first person that's told us what you actually think about this instead of just telling us what we want to hear, and both of these ladies pledged their support, even though I was saying I was going to get rid of their job if I got in. So I thought that was kind of a —

WOODS: Yeah, that's interesting.

BENNETT: — strange takeaway from that. And so election day came around, and I'm listening to the local talk shows, and people are just trashing us. One gal that was, she was the host for one of these local talk shows, was saying, you know, these Bennett boys, they know the Constitution better than anyone I've ever heard, but we just can't have them in there. This is ridiculous. We can't have these crazy radicals in government. And the callers after that, why can't we? What do you mean? You're saying that you're a constitutional conservative. These guys know about it more than even you do. Wait a minute, that doesn't make sense.

So I learned that day and previous other days that this local radio is powerful. Very powerful. People listen to talk radio. So I decided never to run for anything ever again, even though I kind of did later with Ron Paul, being a delegate for him. But my brother asked me, let's start our own radio show. And I will say, by the way, I did vote twice in my life finally. Once for myself and once for my brother. But otherwise than that, never again (laughing).

But we decided to try to do this radio show, so we looked up and saw the one station that we have our show on now, on Saturdays it's just reruns. So we went to them and said, hey, we'd like to start a radio show, what do you think. And they said sure. But we didn't want to have commercials. That was kind of the difference. We wanted to have a full hour of just us, so we offered to pay for that hour so we wouldn't have, you know, the paid commercials. Because if you look at it, in an hour's time, you really only get about 38 minutes because of all the commercial and news interruptions. So we got to start our own radio show.

WOODS: You're putting up your own money?

BENNETT: Yes, sir.

WOODS: Did you eventually solicit the listeners to kick in a bit?

BENNETT: We haven't. They have offered money, and some people have just dropped off money at our office here and what not, and we've been asked, you know, put up a funding site and this and that. But we can afford it right now, so we just want to keep it the way it is. That way we don't have any — and I'm not against anyone taking funds or anything, but we didn't take any funds when we ran for office, so we just kind of kept it that way with this radio show. But that's just us.

So we started this radio show, and people hated us. It was amazing, the callers that we got. And my brother would always ask me, how can people hate us so much for just wanting them to be free. It didn't make any sense —

WOODS: And what kind of topics were they? Were they really, you know, hot button things that are not going to go over well with — I mean, I assume it's a conservative audience tuning in?

BENNETT: Oh yeah. Well, we have a large conservative audience, but also a large liberal audience, because we have University of Fairbanks here, so a lot of college kids and their professors and what not. But we would talk about — well first I have to say that you can't go too overboard too soon. We started talking Austrian economics and this and that, and our friends would talk to us afterwards and say yeah, that was a great show. Don't have a clue what you were saying, but that sure was fun. So let's step back a little bit.

So what we did is we started off talking to conservatives mostly about constitutionalism and things about the Founding Fathers and the Constitution and things that were wrong with our government, local and national, that were unconstitutional. So we kind of got a following that way, by talking about things that people understand. And you know, there's not too many people outside of libertarians that say too many bad things about the Founding Fathers and the Constitution, and so we got people kind of in the mood that way. So people not so much hated us anymore, even though we always let everyone know, we're upfront that we're against government or against the state.

So eventually we ramped it up a little bit from just talking about the Constitution. Once people started agreeing with us, yes, we need a constitutional government, now we kind of changed it to, now let's talk about some of the problems with the Constitution. And that turned it back around, and everyone hated us again.

But eventually — I mean, now we're going on our fourth year, and we've had tremendous success. People are — we hardly get — it's kind of upsetting to me, because we hardly get anyone to call in to argue with us anymore. They just call in to ask questions, or can you talk about this topic, or what's your understanding of this topic or that topic. Occasionally we'll have a spot that we call "Ask an Anarchist," so people get to call in and say, "In your anarchist utopian world, what would you do if blah, blah, blah..." (laughing) So that's always kind of fun to do, because it stretches our minds a little bit; we get to think, hmm, well, what would we do in such a case. So that's basically it.

WOODS: All right, well I want to ask you things of — I want to know how somebody gets started and if you had any background in broadcasting and whether you were learning on the job, so to speak, but let's just pause for a quick message.

[Sponsored message]

All right, so you walk into this radio station; you know they're running reruns on Saturday, so you feel like you've got a reasonable chance of getting them to be interested in original programming. I'm sure there are similar cases on stations around the United States. But did you guys have any experience in broadcasting? You had some experience in local politics. Was that sufficient?

BENNETT: Um, we had no experience in broadcasting at all. I guess we did kind of make friends with one of the guys at the radio station who was kind of really liked — he wasn't a libertarian at all, but he liked maybe just the scent that we caused (laughing). So we went to him and we talked to him about it, and he actually agreed — we paid him to run the board for us for a while until we learned how to do the whole thing ourselves, without having to have someone in there, which is actually really an interesting thing there, because he has since become a libertarian, and he hosts a two-hour show, five days a week locally.

And his libertarianism comes out now, and we bounce off of each other. I listen to his show as much as I can during the week, because he has the local politicians on Tuesdays and this person on this day, and so on the weekends we hammer 'em. We kind of use his radio show to get ideas and hammer on those same politicians on things that they said the previous few days before.

But that's how we got in there, and he helped us get through the whole thing. And I think it's quite easy, if you just go to a — I don't know if it's easy, but if you can go to a station and say, hey, you have this dead time, let me do something interesting with it. And I would encourage people to do it. Because like you mentioned, I listen to Tom Woods and Lew Rockwell and other libertarian podcasts, but I have to go find them. That's what I'm looking for. But talk radio is huge. I mean, we're getting Rush Limbaugh listeners. We're getting the Sean Hannity listeners, unfortunately. Glenn Beck and all these folks. So those people that are listening to Glenn Beck, who calls himself a libertarian, well, heh, they get to tune into our show, and we tell them what real libertarianism is, not the Glenn Beck libertarianism.

WOODS: How do you know who's listening? How do you know that you have a listener base, other than the angry or supportive letters and emails and telephone calls that you get? How can you know?

BENNETT: Well, a few years ago I was told by the station that they did — I don't know what they call it when they do their, they pay to see what their ratings are. And I think it was two years ago that that happened, and they told us that our ratings were above Rush Limbaugh's, and Rush Limbaugh was the most listened to person in town. So that was pretty encouraging, to say the least. And at that time, I wouldn't say it was people that liked us, but they don't have to like you. The whole point isn't to have everyone like your show or whatever. The point is to get them to listen, because people will listen even if they hate your show, even if they hate what you're saying. We've had communists call up, and I've met some that, man, I hate your show, but I can't not listen. I listen every Saturday, and it just, ugh, you make me so mad. And I've met with them. We've had the — shoot, what do you call them? The 1%er people?

WOODS: What, the Occupy Wall Street people?

BENNETT: Occupy, yeah.

WOODS: You have Occupy in Fairbanks?

BENNETT: Oh yeah. Yeah, we've had Occupy people here in Fairbanks, and we actually had the leaders on our radio program. Ah, the conservatives went nuts, because they were wanting to haul them off and throw them in a dumpster, because they set up camp in our local veterans' park, of all places. But here we get these guys to come in here and talk to us, and the next time we see him, the guy, the head cheese of this local Occupy, is reading Bastiat, *The Law*. Like, whoa. So you can't — just because they don't like or you they're not coming from your side of the woods or whatever doesn't mean that — when they hear you talking about freedom and libertarianism and liberty itself, it does set seeds, you know? It puts seeds in people's hearts, and maybe it might come out later.

And shoot, I think it would be great if there were more and more and more local radio shows, because who are we — I'm not worried about changing D.C. I want to change the people that live right here in Fairbanks. I want people's hearts and minds to be changed right here in Fairbanks, because this is where I live, this is where my children live. So I used to think very seriously about moving out of the country, and more so now, seeing the change that's happened here in Fairbanks, I think maybe I just want to stay here. I mean, when we ran for office, the local electoral was — participation was about 33%, and now it's down to 9% since we started our show four years ago. And I don't know if we can take all the credit for that, but the opposite side blames us for it. So if they want to blame us for it, then we'll take the credit.

WOODS: Yeah, sure. Very interesting, very interesting. So I'm always telling people about if they're interested in podcasting, I've got some resources for them to show them how to get started, but podcasting is not the only game in town if you want to get your message out through the spoken word. And radio is still very much a force, even though there are — you know, I think the technology is changing, and there's likely going to be — the broadcasting world is going to be different 20 years from now, but right now there's a big audience of people who are in their cars, and they're going to turn it on, and they're going to listen to you. And that's a way, again, to get what we call organic traffic. In other words, traffic that's coming from people who aren't deliberately looking for you but they find you anyway. And you have a much better chance of getting that type of traffic through traditional radio than you do through podcasting, where it's a little bit more of an initial slog to draw people there. Once you do, well, I've got a really loyal audience that's, you know, been very stable over the years that I appreciate, but it's tricky to attract that audience, and you've done both. You've gotten that organic traffic from people tuning into radio, and then you've consistently delivered a good product. I've been a guest on your show —

BENNETT: Yep.

WOODS: — I've had a great time; we've covered some really, really good substantive stuff that people are not going to hear on the radio. That gets people talking, and it gets them listening and tuning in, even if, as some of them admit, it's just because they need their daily dose of insanity, they need to be driven crazy by you guys. Well, at least they're listening.

BENNETT: Yeah, and I would recommend to people, if you do go this route and you don't feel like you're up to it, write the folks at the Mises Institute; write the folks at the Ron Paul Institute. I've had — a lot of the guests that Tom has had on his show have also come on on our show. I mean, we've had dozens and dozens. Our very first guest years ago was Michael Boldin, and what a hit that was, because here we are in Alaska, and this guy's talking about nullification. Well, that's big in Alaska. But all of these folks that we've asked to come on have been so generous and gracious with their time, and I'm sure — I mean, I don't want to speak for everyone, but I'm sure they would be more than happy to help out as being a guest. You don't have to know everything; just have them come on and let them talk.

WOODS: Yeah, and I enjoy doing that on my own show, because first of all it gives my audience a chance to hear from a whole lot of people and people they may not be familiar with, and then they walk away and say, wow, there's another great person I didn't know about, there's another person who he's either out there really working hard on something important or who's a real expert on something. And I want them to feel like the liberty movement, so to speak, has a really deep bench. It's not just the starting five. There's a really deep bench to the whole thing. But also, it's a great opportunity for me to learn things. I learn right along with the audience, and I get to ask people questions that I have always wanted to ask or that I haven't — now, a lot of the time I'm playing devil's advocate or I'm asking questions because I think the answer will help the audience, but I do get to ask questions that have stumped me or that I'd like to know more about, so it's a great experience for everybody listening.

And I even do get people writing to me who say I started off completely on the opposite side from you guys or from you, and yet for some reason something has drawn me to your show, and now I find myself more and more agreeing. And the thing is even if I were just preaching to the choir — which, I so hate that criticism, such a dumb criticism — the fact is I don't know any choir in any church that leaves during the sermon. You always preach to the choir. The choir stays in the church during the sermon. But secondly, you preach to the choir, because the choir needs to be preached to. What, the choir is all experts in theology? They need the preaching. Well, the same thing goes here. The people in the liberty movement, they need the knowledge. They don't all know everything; they're not experts on everything any more than I am. So they need that so that they can go out and be more effective.

And also, it becomes a product that they can then bring to their non-libertarian friends and say, well, here's a good discussion of this subject we were talking about today. So it serves a whole lot of purposes. Even if your express aim is to preach to the choir, still you're building up a cadre of people who could spread that message further, and secondly you're creating a product that could be listened to by anybody.

BENNETT: And I think your choir's going to grow.

WOODS: That's right. And look, if I had a gigantic choir, that would be great, because that would mean we're going to reach a whole lot more people. And so I've been glad that I've been able to do that. And sometimes my style appeals specifically to libertarians, but sometimes I put my well-behaved hat on and I try to do something that will have a more general appeal. But anyway, I know you've had that kind of success, and at the very least people are talking about what you're talking about, and you're not just giving them the same old stuff that they can get on any station and the same old stuff they're going to get from Sean Hannity. You are challenging them. You're taking them by the collar and saying, now, wait a minute, Sean Hannity is not giving you the right perspective, and you've got to stop and listen. Well, you know, that gets their attention. No one else is putting it to them that way.

BENNETT: Yeah, and even if folks do try this route, I do encourage people to do it, just try it out. And you think, well, no one's listening or whatever. I like to think back with Albert J. Nock with "Isaiah's Job," just spread the message. It doesn't matter if you think someone's listening. There's going to be people out there that need to hear. I don't know how many times I've had someone come up to me and say, man, I thought I was alone in the world; I thought I was the only freak out here, but now I know that there's other freaks out here too because of what you're talking about.

WOODS: Yeah, exactly, exactly. And that is important, because that's another reason that Ron Paul was so important, because there were a lot of people obviously who agreed with him, and some people who were persuaded by him, yes, but some people who already agreed with him before they knew there was a Ron Paul, and they feel like they're weirdos and cranks because the political spectrum is stacked against them. There's nobody who holds their views in politics, Democrat or Republican, but then they look out and they see 2 million people voting for Ron Paul, and they say, all right, now I'm going to be bolder about expressing myself and spreading these ideas, because I know I'm not alone. I know it's not just me and seven other people. I know there are millions of people who agree with me, at least on the fundamentals, and you're helping to do that also in Alaska. How can people listen to your show if they don't happen to live in Fairbanks?

BENNETT: They can go to 660 KFAR, and they click on the "Listen Live" tab. We're on Alaska time 9 to 11 in the morning, which we're four — to make it easier, that's 10 to 12 Pacific Time, Saturday morning's. You just click "Listen Live," and you're there. And we enjoy having people call in. We usually have — sometimes we don't always take callers because we've got a message to get out there, but we love callers. It's so much fun.

WOODS: All right, I'm going to make sure on today's show notes page, TomWoods.com/564, I'll have that link, so if that's not an easy URL for people to write down, we'll have that link for people who can listen to — is it *Patriot's Lament*?

BENNETT: Yes, sir.

WOODS: All right, so then there it is. They'll find it right on the show notes page. Well, Joshua Bennett, you're doing important work, and it was a great pleasure talking to you today. Thanks for your time.

BENNETT: Thank you very much, Tom.