



Episode 995: This Mom's Website Pays the Bills for Her Family – and Five Others

Guest: Katie Wells

WOODS: I used my appearance on your show as an episode of mine, and when I did that, I told everybody I've got to get this person on. And by the way, if you're hearing background noise, I already told everybody that I'm in a hotel because of the hurricane conditions. And even though people can clearly see I'm sitting here with a microphone here in the lobby, they're congregating all around. But that's okay. It adds authenticity to the broadcast. I'm just trying to protect the family from getting overwhelmed by the hurricane.

Anyway, I told people as soon as I saw your site, which I looked at because I like to know about people who are interviewing me, I thought, *This is somebody I've got to get on the show*, because you know what you're doing. You've built up something really amazing online that has a lot of moving parts to it and that seem to be pretty successful. So let's start with: how long ago did you get started?

WELLS: So unofficially, about a decade ago, and the short version of the story is that I had my own health problems I was trying to figure out, but once I had my first son, I was sitting in the doctor's office actually for my follow-up appointment, my six-week appointment, and I was reading – I think it was *Time* magazine, and it said that for the first time in two centuries, the current generation of children being born starting that year were going to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. And that just really hit me like a lightning bolt to realize this perfect, tiny baby I had and what his generation was going to face. And so that coupled with trying to find my own health answers, I started really delving into the research.

And I have a research background. My original degree was in journalism and then I went back for nutrition, so I really just tried to look into the research. And I realized there's so much information out there, and it's conflicting, it's overwhelming, and if I feel that way with a research background, surely there's a lot of other moms who are trying to find answers who feel the same way. So my goal became to start writing very simple, very actionable posts that took the research on these bigger topics and made it simple and easy to understand and kind of like what do you do with it, where do you go from here with the long-term goal of really trying to improve the health for the next generation, because it is pretty terrifying what those kids are going to face if we don't make some changes.

WOODS: So you started off then with a blog and then you built from there?

WELLS: Absolutely, yeah. So we started actually way back about ten years ago on Blogspot and then eventually moved to Wordpress.com, and then now we have a self-hosted site obviously on just Wordpress.org, and it's WellnessMama.com. And from there, the goal from me has always been trying to serve the audience in the best way possible. The making a living with the blog has come kind of naturally. And I tell my kids that all the time. When we talk about business and entrepreneurship, if your focus is helping people and changing the world, the rest will take care of itself, and so that's what we've always been laser-focused on, is changing the world. But we started with the blog, and luckily for me, I joke that it helps when you're married to someone who knows what they're doing technology wise. My husband is really good at website building and SEO, so he was actually using my blog when it was still very much a hobby as his testing ground. He was testing all these SEO theories for his bigger clients, his more important clients. And it turns out they worked pretty well and Wellness Mama took off. So now we get about 10 million visitors a month, and it's an amazing community that's grown around this, like I said, because I think a lot of people are looking for these answers, and our goal was to just help them find it.

WOODS: Could you tell people what SEO is, search engine optimization? What is that all about?

WELLS: Yeah, for sure. So basically the theory is you can write content all day long, but unless Google or another search engine – usually Google, though – can find it, no one's going to read it. So SEO stands for search engine optimization, and it's really kind of a complex topic, but it goes everything from how your site is built and the framework it's on and how SEO-friendly even that is and your robots file, which is kind of like a – and your sitemap kind of tells Google what's going on with your site – down to the posts themselves and the keywords they use and how the title is written and the metadescription, which, if you see a Google result, you'll see the title, and then you'll see about two sentences right underneath it. That's the metadescription. And just getting all of those factors accurate and SEO-friendly really helps people to be able to find the information that you're putting out there.

WOODS: Now, I'm looking at the site right now, and I want to tell people WellnessMama.com, you should look at it for – this is what you should be striving for ultimately, because your layout is just right. As soon as somebody gets there, it's very attractively laid out. You're making them implicitly an offer as soon as they get there. But then I scroll down just a little bit and I see how I can join your community, and I see you have it exactly the way I have it on my site, where you have to click a "Join Here" button and then you enter your information. And some people say, "Why shouldn't you just have the cells right there for them to enter their name and email address or whatever?" But for some reason, it seems to work better if you have them click – if you're not immediately asking them for something. You give them an option to click something and it makes your site look like a giving site rather than a "take, take, taking" kind of site. Anyway, I've been told that's the psychology behind it. But as I scroll down, you've got beautiful graphics for each of the blog posts that you do.

So in other words, you started with a blog, and now you have a members area, an email newsletter, a podcast, products, and you're doing affiliate marketing for some of the products that you talk about on your show. How did you go from a blog to that?

WELLS: So it really actually started — when I was blogging, it was always purely in the beginning a hobby and a mission for me. And at that time of our lives, money was pretty tight actually. And so one month I was balancing our checkbook, and I was like, *Why do we have money from Amazon? Did we get a refund or something? What is this?* And I kind of followed the rabbit hole and realized it was an affiliate commission from Amazon. And I'm like, *What?* And my husband had told me to put affiliate links from Amazon in case anyone ever buys anything. I never thought they would. And so this was probably seven, eight years ago now, but I was like, *Oh wow, you can actually make money doing this blogging thing and help people. That's pretty cool.* So from there, that's when actually we started to think of it as a business in that sense.

But the focus for us, we're probably a little different than a lot of people who have Internet businesses, just in that we always keep the content as the focus. And I know a lot of people with smaller communities that make a lot more money. That's just never been our first goal, and I'm much more happy to serve the audience and make less if it's authentic. But basically, what we did is growing from the blog, I realized that basically people had questions they were asking or they wanted deeper information on topics that I was covering on the blog. And the first one was actually a meal planning service, which was a subscription service, which, ironically, I didn't know at the time, they say you should always do a subscription service. That's like the gold standard because it's recurring income.

WOODS: Right.

WELLS: I just knew that's what my audience wanted. So our first product was a meal planning service that we developed and wrote the software for, and we launched that. And then there were a lot of requests for a podcast, so we've launched that. And the free membership actually is something we've been trying from a business perspective. It's worked really well, because I kind of got the feeling people were tired of just signing up for an email newsletter, that that wave was kind of dying down. And so I wanted to find a way that would be more valuable to them and that would also build the community aspect. So the membership library is free, and there's I think like 23 free eBooks on there and courses and all kinds of stuff, and I just really wanted the goal to be serving the audience. And of course from a business side, I do still get their email and they're a member of the community, so I have the ability to make content with them and to stay in touch. But we've just found that's been a really valuable tool for the readers, and also it converts a lot better than just a straight email opt in.

WOODS: It's funny to hear you — any time I have somebody on talking about email opt ins and so on, I'm sure you and I started off not even knowing what the heck any of this is, and now it's just like the language we speak because that really is the lifeblood of what you have, is that audience, particularly an audience you can keep in contact with. I want to ask you just an off-the-wall kind of question. I'm looking just at the cover of the Wellness Mama cookbook. It's so beautifully laid out. How did you do this?

WELLS: Thank you. So actually, the blog had grown so much that I was able to get a really substantial publishing deal. And so it was published through an imprint of Random House, and they came to our house and they had photographers photographing the food as I was making it, and it was incredible. They definitely are amazing at what they do.

WOODS: Wow, so it's your food in — so they didn't just take generic stock photos or something. How about that?

WELLS: No, that's actually our food, yeah, made on set, and they photographed everything in the book as we were testing recipes. They did an awesome job, and I'm really proud of the effort that went into that cookbook. It's over 200 recipes, so it was an epic tome to write, for sure.

WOODS: All right, I guess what I need to ask is there are a lot of people who have blogs about health and food and wellness, so how did yours just explode?

WELLS: I think it's kind of twofold. I think there is an aspect — and I do say this now with the online world the way it is. I think there is an aspect of being in the right place at the right time. Eight to ten years ago, people were just learning what is coconut oil, why would anyone want to eat it, and looking for these topics, and I think I was in the right place to provide those answers.

But I also think that, just in blogging as in every aspect of life, that doing the right thing long enough consistently, showing up every day, working hard even when no one's commenting — and also I think the core of it too is your big why has to be authentic. And that sounds sappy and that's not a great business tip that people — It's not sexy to put on the cover of a business book, but I think if you don't have your heart in the right place and you don't have a big why that keeps you up at night that you want to change the world — just like you do with the work that you do, you have things that you are super passionate and knowledgeable about that you want to share with the world. I think if you don't have that at the core, that it really is hard to keep showing up every day and to feel authentic and to keep writing when there's crickets.

Because there will be crickets in the beginning, and it's pushing through that and writing consistently, making sure that you are doing the SEO stuff and using the right keywords, but also that your site is easy to find from Google and that the page loads quickly, all the many facets of SEO-friendly work that goes into a site. So I think it's very much multifaceted that way, but I think a lot of it is just being consistent for a long enough time. I think a lot of people probably give up on the verge of making something really amazing.

WOODS: You mentioned your husband as being somebody who's very knowledgeable. There's so much in this site. I mean, for example, podcasting. A lot of tech people wouldn't necessarily know what to do there. Are there resources that you look to or courses that you took or people you can recommend as reliable folks to help you get up and running to learn a lot of this stuff?

WELLS: Yeah, so over the years, we've used a lot of stuff from Copyblogger and StudioPress. So our themes in the beginning — right now we have custom themes, but those always came from StudioPress and Copyblogger, and they have a ton of free resources and blog posts on their site that kind of talk through it. They also now have a platform I believe on Rainmaker that actually will host a podcast and makes it really simple. You kind of just upload and go. Because you're right, it is, starting a podcast is kind of a tech nightmare when you're trying to figure out how to get the feed to iTunes and Stitcher and where to host it.

WOODS: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, once you get all that done, then it's just rote. It's just a procedure every day. But that initial thing you have to do is awful.

WELLS: Yeah, absolutely. So Rainmaker was really helpful in that when we were starting, and they have a platform that anybody can use for that. There's also one called StudioPress Sites, which is really inexpensive — I think it's like \$20-something a month — that can host podcasts as well. So for someone just starting out, that may be a great way to not have to figure out the tech hassle of it. And if it ever gets huge and you want to self-host or do something different, you can always do that, but that's just an easier way to break into it.

WOODS: Incidentally, I've been telling people to go to WellnessMama.com partly for your content, no doubt, but also to show what a successful not just blog, but frankly like a mini-empire, what it looks like. And one small thing that I like at the very top, the "Start Here" button, because that's a way people can deal with overwhelm. You've got so much material here, it can make people think, *I don't even know what I'm supposed to do*. So you start here. Perfect. It's a small thing, but it's important, and that's what I would be clicking as a first-time visitor.

All right, now having said all that, I remember early on in the history of my own website and my own online stuff, I was extremely interactive with people, and that I think helped to build, if I may say, a community or the audience, because they felt like, *Okay, he's a real person and these are real responses. This is not a bot*. And I wonder — like for example, Thomas Jefferson apparently responded to every letter people wrote to him when he was in the White House. He answered all of these letters in his own hand. Did you do the same sort of thing?

WELLS: Absolutely. I've actually heard on that note that Gary Vaynerchuk does that still. I don't know how he does, but he responds to every tweet and email. But for us, certainly the first few years I did. I responded to every blog comment and every email and every interaction on social media, because I was not just trying to build an audience, I was trying to build the community. And like you said, I think people do have a fear in the online world that they're not really talking to a real person or it's just some big company that's just doing marketing to try to sell them something and there's not really anybody there. And I think that the human element is something that really helps people to connect with you and to trust you, because that is a big element of any online community, especially if you're trying to teach people things or get them to change their lives in some way. They have to trust you a little bit. Excuse me if you can hear — apparently there's a lawnmower in our neighborhood.

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, it's authentic on both sides of this conversation. All right, go ahead.

WELLS: Yeah, it's a crazy week. SO that was a big part for us, and now we still try to — like, I try to respond as much as possible. It's not physically possible at this point to respond to 2,000 emails a day. I also found for myself just personally that at some point, I was getting all these emails from people who were having health challenges or their kids were or whatever it may be, and I had gotten to a point where I was taking on the emotional stress of all of this. And I felt so bad for them, it was keeping me up at night. So I've had to learn to answer emails at certain times so that I can actually

sleep at night, because really, my heart does go out to these people, and I think that in some way, that has helped build the community, because I really do care and I hope that even in the online world, people can sense that.

WOODS: Let's talk about social media and the role that played in building up your audience, because I think people again would feel overwhelmed. *I've got to do blog posts, but then maybe I should be on Facebook and Twitter and YouTube, maybe be on that. I should be on some of the lesser social media platforms.* And then they get so overwhelmed they don't do anything at all. So how would you rate it in terms of the effectiveness of social media as an ingredient in your success?

WELLS: That's a great question. I think it's definitely been instrumental in the community-building aspect, and we're working now even on just diversifying into Facebook groups to make it a little more personal. But I think social media has never been a primary traffic source for us. So our traffic always primarily comes from Google. I think about 90% of the traffic comes from Google.

WOODS: Oh, that's amazing. That's not been true for me at all. So you really are good with SEO.

WELLS: Yeah, so I think we're probably unique in that. I don't think that's going to be probably the case for most people. But just in our case, we haven't ever been primarily – but I do think that there's a place for social. What I tell people is: figure out who your audience is. You probably have talked about this with your audience before, but find your avatar. Know how old your audience is. Male or female, do they have kids, where do they shop. Basically, you want to know them so well that it's like you can envision them. It's like they're a friend. And then figure out where those people hang out, because for us in our audience, it's women 25 to 44 with 2+ kids. They're on Facebook, and they're now on Instagram largely as well. For a long time, Pinterest was a bigger traffic source than it is now. But that's where they are. They're not on Snapchat and they're not on Twitter and they're occasionally on YouTube, but only if they search to find something. So I think that helps, is figure out where your audience is and then just focus on those kinds of social media. Because like you said, there's new ones coming out every day and you could spend your entire day just posting things on social media if you wanted to.

WOODS: Right, right, yeah, that's smart because as you say, some audiences aren't even going to be on an entire platform, so you're just speaking into the wind for no reason. You're able to support your family on the basis of this website. Am I right about that?

WELLS: We are, yeah.

WOODS: That's amazing. Do you know how many people listening to this would kill to be able to do that? But not only that, you have full-time employees who in turn are able to support their families on the basis of this website.

WELLS: Yeah, and actually, an interesting note. So our core mission, we did the whole mission statement and our core values, and for me, it's always been helping moms to

have healthier lives, helping moms to improve their families. And so to that end, we have a policy that we hire other moms who are then working from home. So I feel like that's a way we can even extend the mission even further, and we're empowering those moms to work from home, and they understand the mission because they are the reader and they are Wellness Mama themselves. So I love that, that even our full-time employees and them being able to support their families, that they're moms as well and they really are in line with everything that we do.

WOODS: All right, so now let's wrap up with this: there are a lot of people listening who are maybe interested in seeing if they can try their hand at something like what you're doing. And by the way, I even noticed that on your show notes pages for your podcast episodes, you've signed up for the affiliate programs of anything you've mentioned. You've left no stone unturned. You know exactly what you're doing. A lot of people are very curious about how they could get started. So your key thing is: make sure you're doing something that you love that you feel is a mission that you're not just doing for the money, and that those other things will follow, will be added unto you, if I may put it that way. So that is a great first step, but what would you say like a few other first steps for somebody getting started might be?

WELLS: So I think a big key for me in the beginning, I think in today's Internet environment — because Wellness Mama is a very general site, which totally worked when we were starting. I think if you're starting in today's world, really you'll get traction a lot more quickly if you have a very specific niche or focus. I know people who have gone from a general blog and then they focused on pregnancy or they focused on allergies or whatever and that became their thing, and then they grew quickly because they were able to kind of own the terms around that. And I think in today's Internet environment, specificity really has an advantage. So I would say if you're just starting out, figure out your specific thing. Don't just blog about health; blog about one aspect of it. Or don't just blog about history, but blog about one aspect of it that you can really own and be the expert on, because that's going to make it easier to grow.

And from there, one thing I did inadvertently just because of my journalism background that was really instrumental in our growth, I started writing my first few posts, and I kept going, *Oh, I wish I had a post about this I could link to and I wish I had a post about this I could link to*. And I created this huge posterboard that was a content map of the first 400 posts I was going to write, and I had lines of how they were all going to interlink and interact, which it turns out is great for SEO. I was just trying to make it a good reader experience at the time. But that has really helped our content to gain traction, so if you're just starting out, figure out your really specific niche that you're trying to help people in and then figure out all the core content that you're going to need related to that in the future and make a note of how they're all going to interact with each other, so as you write them, you remember to go put the links back to the old post and to link to your new post, and that'll help everything kind of grow as it does.

From there, just technologically, I will say that for us being on the Genesis platform and HTML5 and just staying up to date with the current, most SEO-friendly platforms and frameworks has really helped. We've always done really well in Google, and I think the technical framework is also a large part of that. But from the content side, I would

say get as specific as possible, because then the people that are looking for that exact thing when they find you, you're going to be their person and they're going to find the answers they need and they're really going to connect with you, and that's how you build a long-term community.

WOODS: Right, right, right. I've been hearing that as well, that a lot of times it's tempting to go into something like weight loss or whatever, but good luck with that in this day and age. But maybe going into weight loss with a particular emphasis on some approach to weight loss would be the better way to go.

WELLS: Exactly, or weight loss for moms who've had more than three kids, because most of the weight loss guys out there, they're guys who have never had a kid and you're like, "That's cute." So find your area that is very specific to you so that your audience, the people you want to connect with, when they find you, they're really going to make that connection as well.

WOODS: Right, right. All right, all very good advice. So the site once again is WellnessMama.com. It'll be linked at TomWoods.com/995, and I'm glad I got you on. I know you could talk to me about food and a lot of other topics, but I thought to myself, *I bet she's never talked about this*. Am I right about that? No one's ever asked you this kind of question?

WELLS: Yeah, I don't think in a public way. I've had people ask me personally, but it's been fun to delve into it with you, and hopefully it'll inspire or help people to launch their own platforms. Because I really do think, to circle back to the health side especially, but in any aspect of life, we need voices, a lot of voices talking about these things if we're going to change any aspect of life. And if you have a mission to change something, to get out there and be consistent and do it, because we certainly need all these voices in the world right now.

WOODS: Absolutely, and I personally think, just again, what you're doing is just so exciting because of how wonderful it is on so many levels. You get to provide something truly great to a lot of people, and in turn, you're able to support yourself and employees and do something you love and be flexible in your lifestyle and everything. I mean, it's what a lot of people would love to be able to do, so your insight and advice is I'm sure greatly appreciated by everybody listening. Thanks so much, Katie, and continued good luck to you.

WELLS: Thanks, Tom. Thanks so much for having me, and thanks for all that you do in the world too. I use all of your resources very often.

WOODS: I sure appreciate that. Thanks so much.