SPI Podcast Session #178–
The Ask Formula - How to Discover Exactly What Your
Audience Will Buy (Even If You Don't Have a Following)
With Ryan Levesque

Show notes: http://www.smartpassiveincome.com/episode178

This is the Smart Passive Income podcast with Pat Flynn, Session #178. If you don't ask, you don't get!

Intro: Welcome to the Smart Passive Income podcast, where it's all about working hard now so you can sit back and reap the benefits later. And now your host – he's more cheesy than a shopping cart full of brie – Pat Flynn.

Pat: What's up? Oh man, I cannot wait to share this episode with you because we're talking with the author of a best-selling book that has changed the course of what SPI will become and how I will better serve you.

Some background information. A lot of you know that I ran a survey to you in July. Actually while I was out in Australia the survey was being run and it was collecting information. Over 5,000 listeners, blog readers, and people who watch SPI TV have responded, and just responded in such a great way because you've helped me realize that I was not serving you in the best way possible. I structured that survey in a specific way based off of this formula that has really, really opened up my eyes to what I can do to better serve you.

This book is called *Ask: The Counterintuitive Online Formula to Discover Exactly What Your Customers Want to Buy, Creative a Mass of Raving Fans, and Take any Business to the Next Level*. This was written by Ryan Levesque, who's our guest today. I totally butchered Ryan's last name on a Periscope when I talked about this book and how great it was.

Ryan Levesque comes on this episode and we talk a lot about surveys, and we talk a lot even about my survey and the particular questions I asked, and what I did right and what I did wrong, and a little about the results as well.

Oh my gosh, I feel like this is going to change a lot of people's lives because it's definitely changed mine. I know that so many amazing things are going to happen here on SPI, and I'm putting the team to work. My team is doing a lot of things now –

changing the look of the website and delivering more value to you – based off of those survey results as well.

We're going to get into exactly what these surveys are all about. There are different kinds and they have different purposes, and there are specific ways to ask these questions. I'm pretty sure you're going to be blown away by this, so here is Ryan Levesque from AskFormula.com, and the author of *Ask.*

Make sure you stick around till the end too, because there's a way to get his book for free with just shipping and handling, and we'll talk to you more about that. Here he is, Ryan Levesque.

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Pat: What's up, everybody? I'm so happy to welcome Ryan Levesque here on the SPI podcast. A lot of you have heard me talk about him recently and here he is. What's up, Ryan? Welcome to the show. Thanks for being here.

Ryan: Pat, thanks so much for having me. I'm absolutely thrilled to be here.

Pat: This is probably going to be one of the most important episodes that I've recorded in a while. I'm so happy that you're here because you've already helped me so much with your best-selling book *Ask.* We're going to talk more about the book and why it was written and all that stuff, but why don't you introduce yourself to the audience really quick. Tell us your story on how you got to where you're at now.

Ryan: Sure. People know me today as the Survey Funnel guy or the Ask guy, and the reason for that is in addition to the book, my claim to fame is today and every single day I generate 52,000 email subscribers using surveys and quizzes. That's across 23 different markets that range from golf instruction to tennis instruction to weight loss to business funding to dentistry to dog training, and the list goes on. That's what I do, but like most people I started online in a very humble way.

My story goes back about 10 years. My wife and I were living in China, of all places. I was working for the insurance company AIG. I was opening up sales offices across the country, and one day I stepped into my office and opened up my door to see the cover of the Wall Street Journal Asia edition read, "AIG files for bankruptcy." This was in 2008 in the middle of the world financial crisis.

I picked up the phone and called my wife and said, "Honey, I think I'm going to get out." I'd been contemplating leaving the corporate world and starting my own business. We had a little fledgling of a business in the most obscure niche, just like your first niche. It was very obscure. We were in the 'how to make scrabble tile jewelry' market.

Pat: No way, seriously? Scrabble tile jewelry? That's awesome.

Ryan: So that was our first little market and we were making a few thousand dollars at the time. I said, "Honey, I think we can make a go at it." I was based in Shanghai and she was based in Hong Kong getting her Ph.D. at Hong Kong University, so we were living this crazy bi-country marriage.

That very day I drafted up a resignation letter, dropped it off on my boss's desk and said, "Peter, I think I have to do this." The excuse I gave him was I wanted to be with Ivy. I wanted to be with my wife. I didn't want to live this crazy bi-country marriage thing, but in the back of my mind I had reached this boiling point where I had to give it a go. I had to give the whole entrepreneurial thing a shot.

I packed up everything and sold everything that I owned except for two suitcases, and I moved into student housing with my wife. I went from living this great expat lifestyle with a car and driver and housekeeper and penthouse apartment, making all this money, to living on a Ph.D. graduate student stipend of like $500 a month. I had a $450 Gateway laptop and I got to work and we grew that little Scrabble tile jewelry business. It started at a few thousand dollars and eventually we took it, Pat, to just under $10,000 per month.

We were like, "Man, we're good. We're awesome!" and then I learned what it meant to be in a fad market. It's just like Beanie Babies and all these other fads. The Scrabble tile jewelry craze was just that, it was a craze. Later that year in 2008 after the world financial crisis, I joke that when the financial markets crashed, the Scrabble tile jewelry market crashed as well. We were back to ground zero, except at this point we had no safety net.

My wife and I had that "Oh crap" moment where we looked at each other, there's like no money coming in, and we said, "What are we going to do?" My wife said, "I'll go get a job. We'll move back to the States." So she got a job as a museum curator making $32,000 a year, we moved to Brownsville TX and I got to work.

I said, "I'm not going to make the same mistake and go into a fad market, but I am going to go into a new market." We went into the gardening market this time and took

that next business from nothing to $25,000/month. My wife was at that point confident enough to quit her job. We moved to Austin TX and launched a third market, the memory market, and that's a business that we have today called Rocket Memory. At that point we were off to the races and we haven't looked back since.

In each of those businesses and each of those markets we applied what was the precursor or foundation to what's now become this Ask formula, using questions and surveys to figure out what your market really wants – not what they say they want, not what they think they want, but what they really want to buy from you, then using that data to drive your marketing, to drive what products you create, to drive what language you use, and go from there.

Pat: Ryan, I think that's the big deal here. It's not, "I think this is what they want." This is what you know they want, based off of data. That's why the Ask Formula is so powerful.

Even after conducting this recent survey here on Smart Passive Income I've just seen everything in terms of what everybody's saying and what everybody's answers are, and that is really helping me understand what else I can do to better serve my audience down the road. Now I don't have to guess anymore. It's right there and I'm so excited for what's coming, so I love this.

Going into the Ask formula and your book, when was the book created and how long had you been running the Ask formula at that point?

Ryan: That's a great question. I've been doing this for the better part of the last 10 years, but up until three years ago I was a complete unknown. After I launched those 3 businesses that I mentioned, I started getting attention from other businesses who wanted to work with me to apply – it wasn't known as the Ask formula then, but they wanted to apply the methodology.

I was eventually approached by a very large company who said, "Hey, I know this isn't what you do, but what if we pay you a huge sum of money and pay you a percent of the profits. Would you be open to doing this for our business?" and I thought, "Sure, we'll do it as an experiment."

It was wildly successful and then company after company began recruiting me to be their secret weapon to do this, to break into new markets. I mentioned some of the markets at the beginning of the call. I was a secret weapon. Nobody knew who I was.

In fact, these companies wanted me to be secret because they didn't want their competition to know what they were doing and how they were having such success.

Then about three years ago my first son was born. Henry was born, and a few months after he was born something weird started happening to me. I started getting sick. I started being tired all the time. I started losing weight.

I ended up losing about 35 pounds, and I'm not a big guy to begin with. I just chalked it up to over-working and being a new dad. You know how it is. You're not getting a lot of sleep and you're running a business and you've got all these things. I thought, "I'm just not taking good care of myself, but it's fine. This will pass. My son will eventually sleep through the night and I'll be fine."

My wife insisted I apply for life insurance and I had a medical exam. The examiner came to the house, did the life insurance exam, and I thought nothing of it. I went to a marketing conference in New York City and came back, and the life insurance results and letter was on my desk when I arrived home, and the letter said Denied.

I thought, "This must be a mistake," so I called the life insurance agent and tell him the situation. He says, "Ryan, it's not a mistake. In fact, in addition to the letter I also have your lab results from the exam in front of me. You're going to want to sit down to hear this."

He said, "I'm not a doctor." I remember his words exactly. "I'm not a doctor but I really think you need to go see one. Your results are off the charts," and he proceeds to read a whole bunch of numbers off to me, and I'm writing them down seriously and I'm about to make the biggest mistake of my life. I looked up what they meant on Google. It said everything from pancreatic cancer to liver failure, renal system shutdown, and the list went on.

Later that night when my son went to bed I told my wife and she broke down. She insisted that I go see the doctor the next day. I go see him and get lab results, and he comes out after the lab results and grabs me by the shoulders and says, "Ryan, you should be in a coma right now. I do not know how you're standing in front of me. We need to get you to the emergency room stat."

I'm rushed to the emergency room, spend 10 days in the ICU, and I emerge and came out of it finding out it was a state known as DKA, diabetic ketoacidosis, which is potentially fatal. Most people find out because they do slip into a coma. I was on life

support, I had blood in my urine, my pancreas had shut down, and a lot of bad things were happening.

Out of that experience I kind of had my "come to Jesus" moment or whatever you want to describe it as. I said, "What am I going to do with my life? Am I just going to have this little marketing technique that I've used and made a lot of money with, or am I going to have an impact on the world?"

To answer your question of when did the book start, the book started that day in the hospital when I said, "I want to give this to the world. I want to make an impact. I want to teach the world how to use this, because this has had a profound impact on me, my family, our financial situation, the businesses that I've helped, and the consumers that benefit from getting better matched solutions," and I made a commitment that I was going to share this with the world.

The book didn't come out until April this year, so it's been a bit of a long road to get it out there and make it to what it is, but now that it is out there and there are 30,000 or 40,000 people that have gotten their hands on the book, it's changing people's lives every single day.

I love your story, Pat, not only because I'm so happy for you, but I'm just so happy because you have a voice and you can share this with your audience and they can also benefit from applying the formula in their business. So that's a long answer to a short question.

Pat: First of all, what an incredible story. I'm obviously not happy that you had to go through all that, but obviously a very positive outcome in terms of your book and helping so many people as a result, so thank you for doing that.

I've read the book and it's amazing, so let's dive into this because I think a lot of people need to hear this. I'm obviously going to recommend this book and everybody should read it. It is going to be a part of my book club. If you aren't part of the book club yet, go to smartpassiveincome.com/bookclub and you can join that. We have some more information for people who are in the book club already, if you haven't heard already on the email list.

We're going to share this with as many people as we can because it's obviously helped me already and it's going to help a lot of people, so let's dive into exactly what is this Ask formula? We've been talking a little bit on the surface about it, but what is this exactly?

Ryan: The Ask formula at its core is made up of 4 specific surveys that serve 4 different purposes. The overall purpose of the Ask formula is to find out what people really want to buy, and giving it to them and using language that resonates with them.

The first survey we're going to talk about and that you executed is called the Deep Dive survey. The Deep Dive survey is a survey you run once when you're kicking off a new project or launching a new product or entering a new market. It's designed to get open-ended data or open-ended feedback from people in your market that helps you identify two things. It identifies what they secretly want, what their unspoken desires and needs and challenges are, and it identifies what buckets exist in the market.

In other words, no market is homogenous. No market is made up of everybody who is the same. Markets are made up of sub-segments and the Deep Dive survey is designed to uncover which segments you want to focus on and which you want to ignore, because you can't serve everybody. You have to be selective. So that's the Deep Dive survey.

The Deep Dive survey then sets you up to run something that I call the Micro Commitment Bucket survey. The Micro Commitment Bucket survey is a survey that becomes a permanent part of your prospect or lead or customer acquisition strategy. So the Deep Dive survey you want to run once. It's a research-based process. Then once you've identified the buckets, on your website itself when someone opts into your list – to make this as concrete and simple as possible – you want to ask them a series of questions that are designed to steer them in one of several possible directions.

For example, maybe if you're in the weight loss market you've identified – a very elementary example – that there are three buckets of people: people who want to lose belly fat, people who want to shave weight off their thighs and hips, and people who want to tone up their arms. You might have uncovered that from your Deep Dive research, that those are three segments worth focusing on, but you want to ask people when they opt into your list, "Which of the following best describes your single biggest challenge right now? A, B, or C?"

Then with that information you can customize the products you sell, the way you speak to these people, the emails that you send out, the sales messages, etc. So the second one is the Micro Commitment Bucket survey.

Pat: This is so perfect because we always hear about these advanced marketing strategies and using all these high-end tools that do a lot of this tagging and giving

people personalized experiences through your email lists and sales funnels and all that stuff, but then it's like, "That's all cool but how do we know who to send what?" Your book fills in those gaps, and I've already started to see that.

I'm getting excited because we're at the point now where we're starting to put the systems in place to serve some of these buckets that were found and the different types of people in the audience. You're right, a lot of surprises came out that I didn't realize, the unspoken things that my audience said through the survey that they had never told me before.

So the Deep Dive survey, then the Micro Commitment Bucket where people who are constantly coming in are almost tagging themselves essentially as being in different categories, and what are the other two surveys from there?

Ryan: The next survey is probably the one that's most controversial. It is one that's come to be known as the "Do you hate me?" survey. It gets its name because of an email subject line that's very effective that goes to say, "Do you hate me?" This survey is really a survey to find out why people aren't buying.

The reason why I like to use language like "Do you hate me?" or "Is it something I said?" or "Did I say something wrong?" – and by the way, in all these cases if you use that language I recommend tagging it with a smiley face or parenthetically saying something like, "Well, naturally I'm joking but I needed to get your attention with something extreme," and you want to get people's attention.

Pat: So not all caps.

Ryan: Not all caps, no angry faces, and you can't directly ask people, "Why didn't you buy?" That's too direct. That's awkward and you want to avoid it. It's too direct. You need to almost soften the situation by saying something that's sort of humorous like "Do you hate me? Actually I know you don't hate me, but all joking aside I'd love to know what was the reason why you decided not to invest in my XYZ program?"

What this allows you to do is it helps you identify what you are missing. We've done all this Deep Dive research. We've put people into different buckets. We're speaking to those buckets differently, and yet we're not going to get it perfect. We want to find out, "What are we missing? What did we not do a good job of explaining? What questions did we not do a good job of answering?"

The "Do you hate me?" survey uncovers what those things are. And then it allows our marketing – and I'm going to use a buzzword here – to become iterative. All that means is we can go back and make tweaks. Maybe we should change the headline. Maybe we should add a FAQ section to our sales letter. Maybe we should send a specific email that addresses this particular challenge. That's all uncovered from that "Do you hate me?" survey.

And then last but not least, the 4th survey is something I call the Pivot survey. The Pivot survey is simply after you've gone through this whole process you're still going to have a bunch of people in your world who don't buy from you for whatever reason. It's just not the right time. Maybe it's too much money. Maybe they want to spend more money with you but they want a done-for-you solution instead of something that they have to do themselves.

The Pivot survey is what caps off the entire process. You say, "Okay, I understand that this wasn't a fit for you, so where should we go now? Should we talk about A, B, or C?" It's really like those "choose your own adventure" books that we might have read as kids, where you're giving them the option of where they want to go next.

Then it's just a matter of lather, rinse, repeat. Maybe you move someone from toning their belly to toning their arms, so you run a Deep Dive survey specifically about toning their arms and you figure out what the sub-buckets are related to toning their arms. Then you funnel people through the "Do you hate me?" survey and then the Pivot again. These things can be chained together like train cars in a train.

Pat: I love that. So the "Do you hate me?" survey would, for example, be at the end of a sales funnel when people haven't purchased yet, and people who have purchased don't get this email but it's just a natural conclusion to the sales process if somebody didn't buy, so it's in an email sequence you're saying?

Ryan: Typically it's in an email sequence, you're absolutely right. One of the things that I didn't mention but I often like to do before running the "Do you hate me?" survey is, to use a baseball analogy, I like to take one last swing at the bat, one last swing where I'm offering the absolute best possible deal that I can put together before I ask them why they don't buy.

Oftentimes that might be something like, "How about just try it for $1, and if you like it you pay the difference," or "How about I'll ship you a copy or a box for free, just cover the postage," some low-threshold offer where it's the best possible deal that you can offer, short of asking them why they don't buy.

Then you run, exactly like you said, Pat, that "Do you hate me?" survey oftentimes in an email only to the folks who don't purchase from you.

Pat: Got it, perfect, thank you. I think this is getting everybody excited. I feel excited, even though I'm already going through this process right now. I think most of the people who are listening – and you've probably seen this based off my survey results, because I've shared my survey results with Ryan and he's gone in there and looked at them a little bit and wanted to give me some constructive criticism and hopefully some advice that all of us can use – and I found out that a lot of people are probably in the beginning stages of building their online businesses.

I believe it's about 80% of my audience is either just getting started, have started their business within the last year, or have not started yet, so I would assume that most people would benefit from crunching into the Deep Dive survey. So if you don't mind, can we get a little bit more detailed with what all is included in the Deep Dive survey? Like you said, this is the one that I just did and it's provided a ton of information.

I think even before that I want to have you answer the question of do you have to have an audience already in order to go down this survey route, because how do we run this survey if we don't have anybody to take it?

Ryan: That's a great question. It's one of the biggest questions I get. "What happens if I don't have a list? This makes a lot of sense if I've got a huge following like Pat and I can just send an email to my following and I'm going to get a ton of people responding and telling me what's on their mind, but what about me? I only have a tiny little list or no list. What do I do?"

You have a couple options if you don't have an existing audience. The first option is you can run cold traffic to a page that's designed to collect survey responses. In fact, this is something I talk about in the book. Every time that I've entered a new market I've followed this process.

It involves creating a simple little website where you're sending Facebook ads or Google AdWords ads to a page that is designed to gather feedback about the market. Without getting into the details behind that, that's option #1.

Option #2 is you can reach out to someone who does have a following and offer some sort of compensation. You could go to someone like Pat and say, "Hey Pat, I'm thinking about creating a product on X and I know your audience is probably interested in this.

If I were to pay you a little bit of money or if we were to split the profits on the product that I create, would you be open to letting me run this survey to your list, and of course I'd actually share the data with you?" There will be people out there that will be open to doing that sort of thing.

There are also other people out there that this is their business model. They do what's called "rent" their email list, which means that you can run a solo email and you can pay $500 or a few hundred dollars to send an email to their list, and instead of selling something you will actually collect survey data.

One of the intermediate level techniques that I do when we take this approach is after someone takes the survey and they get to the thank you page, you can send them to a product offer with a discount or some kind of coupon code after they take the survey as a way of saying thanks, sort of like an unintended bonus for them, a surprise to someone for taking the survey, and you can do what's called "sell to liquidate" the cost. If you pay someone $500, maybe you make 10 sales at $50 apiece and it covers the cost of that $500, you recoup your original cost, and you can run these surveys over and over and over.

Pat: Super smart, I love that. Now, let's get into exactly what is included in the Deep Dive survey. I think this is the one we're going to go into right now. I know after reading the book and through experience with the survey I ran myself, that very first question is the most important question so why don't we go into what is that question exactly and what's the point of it?

Ryan: Absolutely. The Deep Dive survey again is that first survey you run that's designed to get open-ended feedback from your market. The first question we're talking about is what I call the single most important question you're going to ask. If your survey responders only answer one question, this is the one that you want them to answer, so what is it?

One of the biggest mistakes that people make when they're getting open-ended feedback is they say, "Well Ryan, I've done surveys like this before but I don't get useful information," and oftentimes it's because they're asking the wrong question. A common mistake people make is trying to ask people directly what they want. You cannot directly say, "Hey, what do you want?" and the reason for that is people don't know what they want. What people want is not inside their awareness, it's outside their awareness.

There are so many famous quotes in history that attest to this. There's one that's attributed to Henry Ford and he said, "If I would have asked people what they wanted, they would have told me faster horses," because people didn't envision what a car might be. Steve Jobs more recently is famous for saying, "People don't know what they want until they see it," and both of these things are true.

So the question is what are people good at answering? What kind of question can they give you an accurate response to? One of the best ones is answering not what people want but what they don't want.

If I were to ask you, "Pat, what's the perfect day look like for you?" you have to go to a place in your mind where you're trying to envision that. You've never experienced, by definition, a perfect day yet and it's always going to change so you're always going to be speculating on what that might be. It's not based on reality.

But if I said, "Pat, think back to the past week. I want you to think about what happened in the past week. If there's one thing that you just never want to have to deal with for the rest of your life, that you'd never have to do ever again, what comes to mind?"

For me it was the fact that the garbage for whatever reason was super dirty and smelly and then we had to clean out the garbage can. I never want to have to deal with that ever again for the rest of my life. That thing comes to mind because my wife and I were saying, "Who's going to clean the garbage can? Is it going to be you? Is it going to be me?" I never want to have to deal with that again. That's top of mind, it happened recently, and it's very easy for me to answer very concretely.

Pat: I've got one. My wife and I every single night really when we're trying to figure out what to eat we spend like a half hour and we just waste so much time.

Ryan: That's a perfect illustration. How many times does it happen where you're with a friend or your spouse or loved one and you're saying, "What do you feel like?" It's like you go around the circle. "I don't know, what do you feel like? Do you want to do Mexican? Do you want to do sushi, Vietnamese?" "Oh, I don't know. What do you want?"

Pat: You pick whatever and then they pick something like, "No, I don't want that."

Ryan: Right, and this is great that you brought that up. If you said, "Okay honey, let's narrow it down. What's one thing that you want to cross of the list, that you absolutely do not feel like? You do yours, I'll do mine."

Let her go first and she says, "Oh, I don't want pizza because we had pizza a couple nights ago," and you say, "Alright, I'm totally not in the mood for sushi because it gave me an upset stomach last time we had sushi," so you can start narrowing things down based on what you don't want.

So in the Deep Dive survey, what type of question are you asking? Focus it around what do people not want. The way we do this online or in a survey is by asking people, "What's your single biggest challenge or frustration or stumbling block related to XYZ?" – XYZ being the topic that you want to gather information around.

In your world it might be hypothetically – I don't think this is what you asked specifically – but it might be something like, "When it comes to generating passive income, what's the single biggest challenge that you have right now in your business?" Even better might be, "When it comes to generating passive income and trying to juggle achieving that with your day-to-day commitments, what's the biggest challenge that you have related to that?"

Pat: That's good.

Ryan: We're getting a little bit more specific now. What we're doing is giving just enough information to put a ring fence around the possibilities of what people might say.

So let's move into case study time now. Before we dive in can you say exactly how you worded your open-ended question?

Pat: I'm looking at it right now and this was question 1. "What's your #1 single biggest online business challenge right now? Please be descriptive."

Ryan: Cool. What's great about that is we focus on what people don't want, we focus on challenge, and we kept it broad enough that we're not planting any answers in people's minds. If we're too specific we might unintentionally put an idea in someone's mind that doesn't exist.

Pat: Right, like if I said, "What's your #1 single biggest marketing challenge right now?" then I get rid of all those people who are struggling with technology and all those sorts of things.

Ryan: Right, and I might need to invent a marketing challenge if I don't have one because you've asked me about a problem that doesn't exist, so I invent one to satisfy the demands of the survey taker. This happens.

My background is in neuroscience. I didn't mention this earlier, but I studied and taught neuroscience at the Ivy League level at Brown University. That's what I did before going into finance, so a lot of what I do is very psychologically-driven and there's a lot of nuance to it. I bring that up because when it comes to designing psychological experiments you need to be really careful not to skew the data by doing something like that unintentionally.

The challenge – and I noticed this immediately when I looked at your data, and you probably noticed this as well – is that the responses are what?

Pat: They're pretty all over the place.

Ryan: All over the map.

Pat: My team has done a great job of going in there and trying to find those buckets, but like you said in the book there are dozens, based off of that. We've been narrowing down and kind of being creative with how we've been able to kind of put those all together, but yeah, you're right.

Ryan: That's great. So what you've done – and we'll call it an intermediate strategy – is a great initial deep dive. What you might consider, if you're considering perhaps going down one of several paths – and I'd love to know what maybe one of the paths might be, if you're open to sharing – if you're considering going down one of several paths you might consider doing a follow-up deep dive that is more specific.

You might consider doing something like, "A few weeks ago we ran an open-ended survey asking you what was the single biggest online business challenge that you had to date, and interestingly enough one of the most common responses had to do with ___. And that led us to the idea that maybe we should offer some training that helps on that topic specifically.

"So we compiled all the answers and we have a pretty good idea of what I think you want to know, but before we put the finishing touches on this training I want to make sure that I cover absolutely every single last question. So my question to you today is this. As it relates to XYZ, what's your single biggest challenge or unanswered question related to that specific thing?"

Now all your responses, instead of being spread across the dozen or so buckets that you and your team identified, are all going to be focused on that one bucket and you're going to be able to get that much more nuanced on that specific thing.

Pat: I see that for sure. There's definitely a load of respondents who are in the beginning phases who haven't even quite pulled the trigger yet on their businesses. If we could reach out to those people specifically and ask – and we sort of did this in follow-up questions and I'll talk more about that in a sec – but "In terms of getting started, what is it really that's holding you back?" If I could get open-ended questions on that, which we didn't get, that would be that much more beneficial.

We did ask follow-up questions later on common struggles that people who have yet to start a business have, and we got some great data out of that as well, but one of the benefits of having these open-ended questions, as I read in your book, is to understand the language that they're using, which could be used on blog posts, on sales copy, in emails, and things like that.

Ryan: Oh, it's brilliant, and I'll touch on two examples of that in one of our businesses. Then I want to talk about the second mistake that people tend to make at this stage, because I want to make sure that your audience doesn't make this second mistake.

Pat: Did I make it?

Ryan: I don't think so.

Pat: I'm freaking out now.

Ryan: No, no, but the first mistake is asking the wrong question, and you've got that covered. You did a good job asking the right questions, so that's great. The second mistake is related to analyzing the data. I'm going to talk about that in a second.

But first, you brought up a great point about the consumer language. People oftentimes come to me and they say, "Ryan, how do I write copy that is going to resonate with my audience?" Well, when you use the natural consumer language that your audience is

echoing to you in a survey you can create this response where people actually will come out and say to you, "Pat, it's almost like you can articulate my thinking better than I can myself. It's like you can get inside my head or you're spying at my dinner conversation with my husband and you know exactly what's going on in my mind." And it's no more complicated than paying attention to what people are saying and echoing it back to them.

In one of our businesses, the memory business, there are a couple phrases that I use in email subject lines and sales letter headlines that I wish I could take credit for. I wish I could say I invented them, but it's just language that came from the market. One of them is "I'm a poster child for poor memory." That came straight out of a survey. That became an email subject line, "Poster child for poor memory? Do this."

Another one is, "I'm a chronic name forgetter." I just remember these because they came out and I'm like, "That's an email subject line. That's a headline. Beautiful." These little bits come out of the survey and you just need to echo them back to your market. So it's great that you're using the consumer language for your blog posts and ideas on what you're going to be writing about.

Pat: I'm looking at some of my open-ended answers right now. Somebody said, "My biggest challenge are the nuts and bolts of starting my business," so there's something there. I like this one, "It's like floating in the Indian Ocean and hoping to be spied by a rescue plane. I cannot be found."

Ryan: "Does it feel like your website's floating in the middle of the ocean and you can't be found?"

Pat: Oh my gosh, so good.

Ryan: We're writing copy right now, and you and I aren't doing any of the heavy lifting. It's all in the survey, so that's great.

That gets us to an important point, though. You want to focus on the right data within the survey. This is the second mistake that people tend to mistake. All survey responses are not created equally. The sound byte that I'm going to leave you with is that depth of response is more important than frequency of response, and I'll give you an example.

Another market that we're in, as I mentioned, is the gardening space. This one we took from nothing to $25,000 a month and about $500,000 a year. One of the first products

that we tried to create and launched very unsuccessfully was a guide on watering. Now, the reason I launched this as our first product was I ran a survey and I paid attention to the survey data like a good student would, and the most frequently answered question in the survey around the biggest challenge was around watering.

So naturally I said, "Okay, this is what people want. Everybody in the survey is saying watering, so we'll create this guide on how to water your plants and it's going to sell like gangbusters," and we literally sold 0 copies.

I went back and said, "What's up? What did we do wrong? Where did we miss the mark?" What happened, Pat, was all the water responses were super, super short. People would say things like, "Watering, water, how much water, when to water, how do you water," super short. There was no indication of passion.

So I went back to the survey and said, "What are the people leaving long answers saying?" and it was completely different. These people said things like, "You know, I've had 3 plants in the last 3 months, and every single time that I try to repot, the plant dies, and I follow everything step-by-step. I sterilize my tools, I wash my hands, I wear gloves, I'm making sure that I'm not using ceramic pots, I'm using plastic so that it's not leaching the harmful glazes into the soil. I'm doing everything by the book and yet I still can't keep my plant alive after I repot it. Help me. What am I doing wrong?"

Who do you think is more likely to buy – that person or the person who says, "Watering."

Pat: Definitely the more passionate one, and you can get a sense for how passionate they are from the length of the response.

Ryan: Yes, exactly. And even though that represented a tiny fraction of the survey takers, those are the people who are willing to spend money to pay for a solution to their problem. This is where you want to focus on the right data.

The simple most basic way, without getting into any formulas or anything, is generally speaking you want to focus on the top 20% of the longest open-ended responses that you get. You can do this very simply in Excel by using a function called len (length) that will calculate the number of characters in any open-ended response, and you want to focus on the top 20%.

If you're familiar with the 80/20 rule, this is the top 20% that are going to represent 80% of the people who are most likely to become customers of whatever topic you're surveying them on.

Pat: It's interesting because we actually did that too. We took the results from the survey and found out who had the longest answers. We called them the thoughtful group, the ones with the long responses, not to say that the other ones were not thoughtful, because everybody who took the survey was thoughtful, so thank you guys for doing that.

We found out some good information about that. It's real interesting to see how the answers change as the result of who you're looking at within that group. This group, for example, we found is less likely to have started a business so a lot of their responses were based off of a lot of struggles that they're having even just trying to get started. They're less likely to read the blog actually, but much more likely to listen to the podcast by even 12-15%. And in terms of what they want to learn more about, it too is different than the general pool of the responses.

Ryan: I am not surprised. Not that I'm not surprised by those specific results, but I'm not surprised that there's a difference between those two audiences. One of the things that comes to my mind is that the way in which the question was asked, it's phrased in a way sort of geared towards beginners.

If someone asked me, "What's your single biggest challenge when it comes to online business?" it's a pretty broad thing, so if I were a beginner I might be more inclined to answer that type of question in a deep way. For someone like me, because I'm an advanced online marketer, the question would be something like, "When it comes to tracking email conversion rate, what's the single biggest challenge that you have?" That speaks to me because it's at my level.

It's sort of like if you talk to a child and you say, "What's your favorite color?" they might say red or blue, but when you talk to an artist, someone who's gone through art school, are they going to tell you red or blue? No, they're going to tell you cerulean blue or they're going to tell you crimson. They're not going to tell you something basic.

The language we use is going to attract a certain type of audience, and what I'm telling you is neither good nor bad. It's just something to consider.

The other thing that I think is really interesting – and I think you have some data around this if I'm not mistaken – is when you couple this single most important

question, this open-ended question, whatever it might be, with demographic questions, this can be really powerful.

You'll identify things like, "Oh, the top 20% of survey responses tend to skew much more female," for example, or much older, or more towards this geography, or more towards businesses of this size, or any other sort of demographic questions that you can ask. That helps you identify who is your bull's eye avatar? Who are you speaking to?

Your audience as a whole might average out to be women who are 55, but your hyper-responsives, the thoughtful responses as you described it, maybe they're 62-year-old women. So when you're creating ads, when you're telling stories, when you're writing blog posts you're going to speak more to a 62-year-old woman who's in a different situation than a 55-year-old woman, in that fictitious example.

Pat: I see. Awesome. In addition to the open-ended question, Ryan, I know I have a great relationship with those in my audience so I felt like I could probably ask more questions and get more answers than somebody who's just starting out, for example, who might just want to ask a couple.

I'm just curious your thoughts on that. Did I make a mistake by asking too many questions and trying to get deeper, knowing that I have this relationship with my audience and they probably would go further? And for somebody just starting out, how many questions would they want to have?

Ryan: It's a fantastic question. First of all, I have the data in front of me and I'm not going to say the exact number, but I am blown away, just absolutely blown away by just the sheer number of responses that you have. Just on an absolute level it's among the highest that I've ever seen, and I work with companies that are doing north of $100 million a year. They have multimillion-person lists and they can't get a fraction of this. I think that just speaks volumes about you, your audience, and the relationship that you have with each other, so kudos to all of you. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is the way you combat that is I suggest separating your questions on one screen at a time. You can use a software like Survey Gizmo or I have a software called Survey Funnel software, and there are many on the market that allow you to ask one question on a screen and then click Next.

What happens is you can capture that data, so when someone answers that single most important question they click Next. The data is captured. You have not lost it. They get

to the next question and some people will answer it and some people will say, "You know what, I'm just going to drop off here."

That gives you the best of both worlds. It ensures that you're getting the most number of people to answer your most important question, and then you might consider going in descending order of importance. So by the end, if you're asking 6, 7, 8 questions, people who answer question 8 generally speaking are only going to represent a fraction of the people who answered question 1, but you can still get that data from as many people as possible.

If you conversely ask 8 or 9 or 10 questions all on one screen, all on one page, unless you're Pat Flynn, in most markets people are going to say, "Gosh, I don't have time for that. That looks complicated. That looks hard."

Pat: Thank you for sharing that. We used Survey Monkey and most of the questions were one per page, except for a couple that were related to each other.

Ryan: So you guys hit the nail on the head there. You hit it out of the park.

Pat: That was thanks to you, obviously. I made my team read the book too.

Ryan: That's good! I'm glad. I know we didn't get a chance to chat before you guys kicked off the survey. I know you were traveling and you wanted to get it off the ground, and I was saying, "If I can help you I'll make sure you do everything right," but honestly you guys did a great job. There's maybe a few things here or there, maybe the wording of the question in a few places, but for the most part you guys knocked it out of the park.

Pat: Thanks man. I appreciate that. The interesting thing that I remember reading in your book that kind of blew me away when you talked about the strategy behind it – we kind of tweaked it a little bit as you can see after I talk about this – but in your survey that you have for the Deep Dive, one of the final questions is something to do with, "If you would ever consider talking to me more about this or helping me out even further, include your phone number."

Just collecting that there at the end of the survey gives you a good understanding of who is it really that would actually take the time to talk to you, kind of dividing the group into, "Yeah, I would totally talk about this," similar to kind of how we looked at the thoughtful/long responses. You're getting an idea of who would actually want to engage with you and things like that.

We just decided not to collect phone numbers. We talked internally and we said if we start collecting phone numbers it's always scary to collect data like that, especially when we say it was an anonymous survey, but additionally I felt like if we asked for people's phone numbers they would be expecting a call and would kind of be disappointed if they didn't get one.

We kind of turned that question around and said, "Here's a random final question. If you could come to San Diego" – and I think I could have worded it better, but "If you could come to San Diego and hang out with Pat for a day, would you spend $1,000 to do it? Yes or no?"

It was kind of cool because about 40% of the people said yes, they would, and it's real interesting to see the different answers from those people who said yes versus those who said no.

Ryan: I think that's a great twist to that question. The whole reason behind the phone number is to get another data point around hyper-responsiveness. For example, there are some people who are going to leave long responses because they have nothing to do. They're unemployed, they have a lot of time on their hands, and they just love to write. There are some people that just naturally tend to write more. Maybe they're more a writer than an auditory type person.

I've got people on my team that are like this. I've got people on my team that when we're on a team call they will never speak up, but oftentimes they have the best suggestions. They just send them to the team in an email afterwards. That's just the way they communicate.

I have other people who are paranoid over the idea of having to type up an email. They'd rather just hop on a quick phone call for 3 minutes, so phone is another indicator of if someone is willing to get on the phone with you to chat about the situation, all things being equal if they have a response that's 100 characters long, you might want to double the size of the length of that response when you're scoring the top 20% of your responses because they left their phone number.

Generally speaking, the number that I like to use is 1.5. If someone leaves a 100-character response and they leave their phone number, I apply a force multiplier of 1.5 so their effective score is 150. In other words, it's just as valuable or they're just as responsive as someone who leaves a 150-character response and who does not leave their phone number. It's just a great way to measure that additional data point.

What you did in some ways is even more ingenious because you're really asking the $64,000 question, which is "Would you pay money for a solution to the problem you said you're running into?"

Pat: Right. Now I know there are thousands of people who would come to San Diego, so maybe I could put on my own event or something. Man, this is super cool, and obviously there's a lot more detail in the book. Go to smartpassiveincome.com/askbook for Ryan's book on Amazon. Make sure you leave a great review as well. I still have to do that. I apologize, I didn't leave that yet for you, Ryan, but I will go ahead and do that for sure.

Any final thoughts for people out there who are about to get into this Deep Dive survey, any final pointers, because we could talk about this for days I feel like. But maybe what's one big thing to make sure people pay attention to when they're conducting these surveys and analyzing their audience?

Ryan: We've talked about a lot, and I think when people hear that there are four surveys or you have to get the questions right it can sometimes be like most things, it kind of feels a little intimidating and you run into that analysis paralysis.

My best advice – I'm going to say two things – first, you don't have to get it perfect, you just have to get it going. Getting 10 survey responses is infinitely more valuable than 0.

Then the second thing is this. I tell people the 5 most profitable words of my career are very simple. Every time I've run into a situation where I've said, "Am I going to move forward or am I not?" I psych myself into it and I say, "Screw it, just do it." And every time that I've done that it's led to good things in my life.

So if you're hearing Pat and I talk about this and you're saying, "Yeah, this makes total sense," my advice to you is, "Screw it, just do it." Ask a few questions, get a little bit of feedback, get the ball rolling. Once you see that feedback come in it's going to be some of the most encouraging pieces of information or data that you get. It's going to get you excited to deliver to your audience and it's just a great way to run your business and to serve your audience, by finding out what they want and giving it to them.

Pat: Absolutely. I won't go over the details here but a lot of you will see the results of the survey come out in future courses and products and things like that, and books that I'm writing right now actually. It is very, very encouraging to see, and also very

inspiring to see that people are out there and they're looking to help you, and here you are collecting this information so you can help them further. It's one of the best things I've done in a while and I'm just kicking myself because I haven't started sooner, so screw it, just do it, absolutely.

Ryan, where can people get more information about you and what it is that you have to offer online? Where can people find more info about you?

Ryan: As you mentioned, I think the best place to get started is the book *Ask.* It's available around the world, translated into different languages. It's available in Barnes & Noble and Wal-Mart and Target and Amazon, so you'll find the book in most bookstores around the world.

That said, we have a special opportunity and Pat will provide the details around this. We're going to be offering a few totally free copies of the book. If you go to AskFormula.com and follow the instructions that Pat provides, we're going to make a few copies of the book available totally free. If you miss out on that totally free opportunity, worry not because I have a special deal where you can get a copy of the book. Just pay shipping and handling and I'll send it over to you.

My mission in life at this point in my life and my career is impact. That's a lot more important than money for me, and I really want to get this book into as many people's hands as possible. You'll hear my story. You'll hear how we started from nothing, how we failed, and how this formula was transformative in our lives and I hope it has the same impact on your life as well.

Pat: Thank you, Ryan. What was that URL once again?

Ryan: AskFormula.com and go to the home page. If you follow the instructions on the home page there will be a link there. As far as the special introductions for the free copy, we'll make that available as well.

Pat: Awesome. Ryan, thank you so much. This has been such a pleasure and I can't wait to get this into the hands and ears of everybody out there in the SPI audience. I know this is going to help a lot of people. You've already helped me a ton, and thank you once again, Ryan. We appreciate you.

Ryan: Thank you, Pat.

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I hope you enjoyed that interview with Ryan Levesque, the author of *Ask.* I highly recommend you check out his book. You can actually get it for free if you go to smartpassiveincome.com/askbook. You'll get it delivered to wherever you want it to be delivered. All you have to do is pay for shipping and handling, but the book is free.

If you want to go to Amazon you can go to the show notes at smartpassiveincome.com/session178 and there will be a link to the Kindle book there and also the Audible book as well. But if you want to get the physical book delivered to your doorstep, all you have to do is go to smartpassiveincome.com/askbook, and again all you have to do is pay for shipping and handling.

Ryan also offered to give away 100 books completely for free without the shipping and handling, but I actually offered those coupon codes to people who were on my book club email list. I have a book club and every month I talk about a new book that I've been reading, and I give away as much as I can on that, like these special deals or notices about new books that are coming out that nobody's ever heard about before.

If you go to patsbookclub.com you can sign up to that email list and get additional exclusive offers like this in the future, but I've already shared that coupon code to the people who are on that list right now, and the first 100 people to put in the coupon code got the book completely free without even having to pay for shipping and handling. Thank you to Ryan's team for making that happen and setting that up. Again you can check out my book club at patsbookclub.com.

Ryan, thank you again for all that information. Actually, Ryan called me back after we stopped recording and said, "Pat, I forgot to tell you something about email list building that I want you to make sure everybody knows," and I said, "Let's just record this. We'll add it to the end of the show," so stick around through the sponsors because you're going to hear something else that Ryan has to offer you at the end in terms of value and a tip you can use for email marketing.

Speaking of sponsors, I want to talk really quick about my buddy Chris Ducker, who you heard on the last episode, Episode 177. We talked about Periscope but we also talked about his up and coming brand new membership area called Youpreneur.com. I love this tagline…"a place where nobody gets left behind."

That's really important because I feel like there's a lot of membership sites that do a good job of getting you excited about getting in there, and then once you're in there

you're kind of on your own. But here Chris and the community in Youpreneur.com is going to help take care of you as well.

It doesn't matter what level you're at with your business. This is a resource that can be very, very helpful for you, so I recommend you check it out. Again that's Youpreneur.com. I know behind the scenes Chris has been working his butt off to make this the best experience possible, so again that's Youpreneur.com. Chris, I know you're listening to this. I couldn't be more proud of the work that you put into this and I'm very stoked to be a part of it with you. That's Youpreneur.com.

I also want to thank today's other sponsor, 99Designs.com, making it super easy for all of you out there who are looking to add images and designs to your website and brand. It just makes it so easy for you to do that, because whatever you need done – from a logo to letterhead to a book cover to a truck wrap, t-shirt or mug design, whatever you need done – you put in the description of what you need and then designers from around the world will come and share their best attempt at your favorite design. Then you get to pick your favorite one at the end. If you're not happy with the results after 7 days from the hundreds of different entries that come in, you get your money back so you have nothing to lose.

If you go to 99Designs.com/spi you'll get a Power Pack of services for free that's worth $99 that will help you get even more exposure and get more designers coming in, which increases the likelihood that you're going to find a design that you love. Again that's at 99Designs.com/spi.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I appreciate it and I'm truly excited about next week's episode as well, where we're talking with Mr. Tim Paige from LeadPages.com, who's giving us a lot of great information about what's working today when building your email list, especially for those of you who have a podcast or YouTube channel, something where you're using your voice and people are on the go.

Tim's got some amazing data to back up some things that are working very well today in terms of building your email list off of a podcast or YouTube channel and things like that, so make sure to check that out next week.

Until then, thank you so much for listening. Again you can get Ryan's book at smartpassiveincome.com/askbook. Today's show notes are available at smartpassiveincome.com/session178.

Thanks so much! I appreciate you and I'll see you in the next episode of the Smart Passive Income podcast. Cheers.

Outro: Thanks for listening to the Smart Passive Income podcast at www.SmartPassiveIncome.com.

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Ryan: Hey, Ryan Levesque here. Pat, you mentioned that your audience is really interested in email marketing. We were talking about using feedback in your marketing to really guide your decision-making and asking the right questions and using surveys.

What's interesting is that one of the most powerful easiest ways to get feedback is to do it in email. This is what I call my secret email technique, and it works like this. When someone signs up for your email list, the first email that you want to send out is something that delivers whatever ethical bribe or promise that you made. Maybe it's a free report. Maybe it's a free video. Maybe it's a free checklist or whatever that might be.

Then what you do is this. About two hours after that first email goes out – you can set this up with your email service provider – you send an email that says, "Hey Pat, it's Ryan here. I shot you an email a few hours ago with your checklist [or free report or whatever] and I just want to make sure that I sent it to the right place. Would you do me a favor and hit Reply to this email to let me know that you got it? It would mean the absolute world to me."

Here's why this is so powerful. First, people are going to be blown away that you checked up on them. That's the first thing. The second thing is it gives you an opportunity to start a conversation. You're inviting them to hit Reply, which is the easiest call to action that you could make in an email. You're not asking them to click on a link. All you're asking them to do, whether they're on their iPhone, whether they're on their computer, is just to hit Reply. And third, this is the single best way to be whitelisted on someone's email.

Why is that? Because when you send an email to them, they send an email back to you, and you do what I'm about to say, it becomes a conversation. It's just like an email thread that you might have with your spouse or your mother or something like that.

Now here's where you blow people away. They write to you and they say, "Yup, got it. Thanks so much." You write back to them – either you do this or you have a customer

service person, but I advise that when you're first kicking this off do this yourself because it will really put you in touch with your audience – you reply back to them and you say, "Great, so glad to hear that. Hey, quick question. I'm thinking about covering XYZ topic in the next couple days. What's the single biggest challenge that you have related to this topic? I'll try to cover it in one of my upcoming emails."

People will be blown away that you took the time to personally respond back to them, and at the same time you're constantly collecting feedback from your market on exactly what you should talk about. Oftentimes this can lead to direct sales right then and there because they realize you're a real person. You're not this monolithic organization.

Now, it sounds so counterintuitive. It's like, "Why would you do this? The answer to email is automation, not manual." But when was the last time that someone ever did this to you? You would talk about it. You would remember it, so it's one of the most powerful things that you can do. You get feedback that guides your decision making with email. I know email is such a hot topic so it's one of my favorite things to do with email and I'm happy to share it with your audience.

Pat: That's awesome, Ryan. Thank you for sharing that tip with everybody. Everybody's going to love that for sure.

Links and Resources Mentioned in This Episode:

AskFormula.com
Ask: The Counterintuitive Online Formula to Discover Exactly What Your Customers Want to Buy, Creative a Mass of Raving Fans, and Take any Business to the Next Level
Pat's Book Club

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Youpreneur.com
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