How My Creator Startup Made 4-Figures in 5 Months While Working a 9 to 5

Five months after launching was the first time my creator startup hit four-figures in earnings. This was all achieved while also running the operations for my family's traditional business as my nine-to-five.

Deciding to launch this endeavor was a multi-year process of procrastination, fear, and doubt. The odds were stacked against me as I lacked time or funds. What I did have was years of startup experience, especially in marketing.

Knowing I wanted to be profitable quickly, I knew I couldn't think like a traditional creator and focus primarily on creativity – I had to think like a business owner.

The question was, what activities would yield the best results in the shortest amount of time, given my limited resources?

In reflecting on the answer to that question, I applied the Pareto Principle or the 80/20 rule, where 80 percent of outcomes should come from 20 percent of causes.

I want to share more about my journey of building a creator business while working full-time. Here are what I did to achieve growth and monetization in the first five months.

Focus on evergreen and owned platforms

Most creators default to publishing content on social media platforms first. While there's nothing inherently wrong with this approach, it's way too time-consuming and offers little

return when you’re just starting out. Not to mention, you’ll always be at the mercy of these centralized platforms.

As Tobias Lütke, Founder and CEO of Shopify, once captured in a tweet, “There are only two things on the internet that you can own: your website and your email list. Everything else is just temporarily rented.”

So if you’re serious about building a creator business, you’ll need a website eventually. This is why I launched a blog as my content headquarters. A website is where content should be hosted, and social media channels are where they’re distributed. YouTube is a hybrid of both, but creating a YouTube channel and videos was out of the question for me due to time constraints.

Many creators who saw success strictly on social media platforms may disagree, but I didn’t have the time or patience to hope for virality. I also didn’t have the funds to maintain an omnipresent strategy. I come from a marketing, accounting and finance background, focusing on making data-backed decisions. And I knew how to leverage the power of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) to target keywords with proven search volume and intent.

In five months, my blog has generated over 25,000 clicks and 1.62 Million impressions. It now also averages 16,000 new monthly visitors.

This was achieved with only 70 articles.

But that wasn’t it.

Each page on my website was a customer touchpoint, and I had Calls to Action (CTAs) to sign up for my email newsletter on most of them. This allowed me to build up my email list at the same time.

Leverage the power of AI

In a perfect world, 70 articles in five months is an average

of three and a half articles per week. The only problem was I had a full-time job.

While running a family business, work doesn't end at five, and I don't get all weekends off. I'd be lucky to get one quality piece every other week.

So how did I do it? I had to leverage AI writing tools.

There's nothing wrong with using AI to write. In fact, according to a recent study, 85.1% of marketers use AI for article writing. But the key is not to publish raw AI content because these tools work by producing content similar to its training data.

If I used ChatGPT to write an article (not counting access to the web plugin from a Plus subscription), it would only be referencing facts up to September 2021.

Even if it were to scan the SERPs (Search Engine Results Pages) to analyze existing articles, it would only produce an article that matches the top few at best. This means I won't be creating any additional value for readers.

I use them to reduce the time and resources needed to get a foundational piece. That means achieving the bare minimum on-page SEO elements (keywords, word count, headers, etc.) to compete on the first page of Google. But the goal is to craft better content.

To maintain a distinctively human touch while also providing more value, I included the following:

- Personal anecdotes
- Professional expertise
- Humor
- Sentence imperfections
- Rich media
- Unique case studies

While I used AI to speed up my writing, instead of using the time saved to write another article, I spent more time refining the same one.

I also used AI image generators like MidJourney to generate unique anime-style graphics for my blog posts, thumbnails, and social media posts to add personality to my brand.

Don’t be afraid to outsource

Content aside, I wouldn’t have been able to achieve those figures even with AI. I increased my publishing frequency to once a week while maintaining quality, but that wasn’t enough. Being a solo founder, I had to be every executive at the company from CEO to any other C-suite role. There were many other activities aside from content creation that needed my attention. To scale and focus on more strategic activities, I needed to outsource.

Having a stable income from my job meant I had some disposable cash after tending to my commitments to invest in my creator business. This was when I decided to hire freelance writers.

However, after working with my first few hires, I soon encountered a few problems: I wasn’t getting high-quality articles, the hiring process was extremely manual, and I had no systemized way of tracking writing progress and status.

There were three things on my priority list to solve this:

- SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures)
- Writing tests
- Automated hiring system

Creating SOPs allowed me to maintain consistency and streamline my writer onboarding process. Google Drive’s folder system was too clunky and didn’t have the features I wanted to build my Wiki-like knowledge base, so I chose Notion. I started with just some general notes for writers, but it

eventually grew into a comprehensive Editorial Guide. In fact, it’s still growing, and there will always be more things to add over time.

Next was coming up with writing tests that were short enough so candidates would take them but also extensive so I could give a proper evaluation.

I decided that 300 to 400 words was the sweet spot and gave writers instructions and references to follow. In general, I wanted to test their:

- Writing style
- Research capabilities
- Attention to detail
- Reliance on AI tools
- Topic expertise
- Basic SEO knowledge
- Contextual linking understanding

This was the only efficient way to filter through poor applicants before issuing a paid test.

Now it was time to put everything together with an automated hiring system. After trialing a few paid products, I built my own on Airtable as a more cost-friendly option.

It wasn’t difficult to create the system: I started by creating two tables, one for applicant records and another for test submissions. Then, it was just a matter of gluing them together with automation. Here’s how the system works:

1. Insert the Airtable application form link into job ads.
2. Publish job ads on onlinejobs.ph and Facebook groups.
3. Candidate enters their details after clicking the application form link.
4. Applicant form will populate with their details (including their resume and portfolio), and the status will default to “Applied.”
5. If the status changes from “Applied” to “Test Sent,” an email will automatically be sent to the applicant with the test form link.
6. If the status changes from “Applied” to “Rejected,” an email will automatically be sent to the applicant informing them they didn’t make the cut.

7. Once the applicant submits the test via the form, both the test and applicant record form will populate with the submission. The status will automatically change from “Test Sent” to “Test Done.”
8. If the status changes from “Test Done” to “Accepted,” an email will automatically be sent to the applicant informing them they passed, requesting for their preferred messaging app.
9. If the status changes from “Test Done” to “Rejected,” the same email from Step 6 will be sent.

Those accepted will be invited to take a paid test to see how they would perform in an official setting. A content brief will also be issued.

Network, monetization and relationships

Once the hiring system was in place, I was finally able to scale up to two to three articles per week while having time for more impactful activities. I was keen to focus on the tasks that opened up the doors for more growth – networking and building relationships.

Before scaling my outreach efforts, I was fortunate to have some of my roundup articles already ranking on the first page of Google and generating traffic. That was also when I decided to start affiliate marketing and monetize.

Representatives from SaaS companies who saw my articles and found out their product wasn't included reached out to me, asking for an insertion. I didn't have enough leverage to ask for compensation at that time. So, rather than asking for payment, I requested backlinks to build up my website's DR (Domain Rating).

I continued to perform outreach, asking for collaborations, guest posts, and built relationships with company founders and marketing leads. I also start digital PR on platforms like HARO (Help a Reporter Out), Help a B2B Writer and Terkel to build more brand authority. This landed me quite a few high-authority backlinks from big publications, which boosted my Domain Rating and increased traffic to my pages.

This started in March 2023. At the time, affiliate commissions for March and April barely scratched $100. But in May, a few of my articles took off due to the snowball effect of all the abovementioned activities. That was also the month I received a few sponsorship requests, and I finally had the leverage to ask for payment – resulting in my first four-figure month!

Collecting testimonials

Social proof is one of the most powerful psychological marketing concepts that can influence decision-making. I needed that, but I didn’t have any. Or did I?

Around this time, I was analyzing various SaaS websites and noticed they had a wall of testimonials from customers. But I wasn’t selling anything. I had nothing for anyone to review. What I did have was relationships, and that was why I decided to get reviews about their experience working with me.

I started gathering testimonials from founders, former colleagues, other creators, and even freelancers to show social proof on my website and build more credibility using Senja.

My plans moving forward

This has been my journey for the past five months. These were all achieved while working a nine-to-five. Spending just a few hours before and after work on this startup. In the future, I’m planning on building out my offerings by creating digital products, doing consultations, getting started on YouTube, doing more collaborations, and launching my creator community.

Sometimes on social media, it can look like other creators are having meteoric success. In my experience, that tends to be the exception, not the rule.

I hope sharing my early journey gives you some inspiration and realistic expectations about building a creator business while having a full-time job.

https://buffer.com/resources/startup-founder-full-time-job/