

How to Learn Online Marketing Technology for Free

You're listening to the Tiny Course Empire podcast with Cindy Bidar. This is episode number 11, and it's part two of a two-part series where I'm teaching you how you can get an education in online marketing... for free.

Hey guys, and welcome back to the Tiny Course Empire Podcast.

This is part two of a two-part series all about getting creative and learning all about online business for free. If you missed last week's episode, you'll find it at TinyCourseEmpire.com/10, and the show notes and resources mentioned in this episode will be at TinyCourseEmpire.com/11.

Over this past weekend, I rewatched a favorite movie from a few years ago called *The Martian*.

If you haven't seen it, it's about an astronaut who gets stranded alone on Mars. He's facing a minimum of four years alone before NASA will be able to get a rescue ship to him, and he's got about a year's worth of food, so he has to figure out how to grow food on a planet where nothing grows.

It's a great movie, and—from what I understand—the science holds up, too. So should you ever find yourself stranded on Mars, you can take what you learn in that movie and maybe feed yourself.

But why am I telling you about this here? I doubt any of us are going to Mars any time soon, but something this character says near the end of the movie reminded me of being in business.

Enter the obligatory spoiler alert here. Skip ahead a few seconds if you don't want to know how the movie ends.

Still here? Good. Here's what Mark Watney says to a group of astronauts in training:

"At some point, everything's gonna go south on you... everything's going to go south and you're going to say, this is it. This is how I end. Now you can either accept that, or you can get to work. That's all it is. You just begin. You do the math. You solve one problem... and you solve the next one... and then the next. And if you solve enough problems, you get to come home."

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And you know what? That same thing works in business, too.

You solve one problem, and then you solve the next, and the next. Sometimes they're big problems that mean the difference between having your website up and running or not, and sometimes they're so insignificant that they don't matter to anyone but you, but the way to keep moving forward is to just keep solving problems.

That's what today's episode is all about. It's about how to solve problems, even when you think you don't know what you're doing, or haven't had the right training or taken the right course.

Because the truth is, you really can figure it out, if you just know what to look for, and where to find it.

Last week we talked about reverse engineering the big picture strategies to improve your own business.

So this covers things like deconstructing a webinar funnel, or segmenting your email list by using a simple one question survey after opt-in, or even what not to do in your business.

Today, we're going to dig deeper and go beyond the overall strategy and actually uncover the tools your competitors and others are using in their business.

Or, as Mark Watney might say, we're going to solve some problems.

And I want you to understand why this is an important skill to have, so I've got some examples for you of tactics I've reverse engineered in this way just in the past few weeks.

So like I said, last week was all about big picture strategy, and on this episode we're going to focus on tactics.

Basically, last week we looked at how you can decide WHAT you want to do to improve your business systems in some way, and this week we're going to figure out HOW to do it.

That's the real difference between strategies and tactics. Strategy is the what, and tactics are the how, and in the online world, tactics—or how to accomplish something—is largely about knowing what tools to use.

When you see a strategy you'd like to emulate, if you know what tool they're using in the process, then you know it's something you can do as well.

And before we go any further, I probably should put a disclaimer here.

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I used the word emulate, which means to imitate or replicate. In other words, to copy.

But listen, I'm not telling you to copy anything. That would not be ethical, but as you'll see later in this episode, it's entirely possible to do. You can literally take someone's website code and recreate an entire sales funnel with just some copy and paste.

Don't do that.

What we're after here is inspiration, and to dramatically cut the technical learning curve. We're not out to copy their success, but we do want to learn from it.

Ok, with that out of the way, here's the thing. Like I said earlier, this reverse engineering process is something I do constantly in my business. If you listened to last week's episode, then you may remember that I advise you to slow down in your daily trips around the internet so you could pay more attention to what others are doing.

That kind of reverse engineering is great for finding new ideas, but more often than not, I'm looking for something specific. Maybe you are as well. In fact, I know you are if you're trying to improve your business processes. You probably have a pretty good idea of things you'd like to change.

Here are some examples that have come up for me over the past few weeks. You may have similar examples.

One big one was when our hosting provider lost a server and all of my sites were down for several days. We knew it was time to make a change, so I went in search of a new web host.

If you've ever done a search online for something like "best web hosting" then you know that what you're going to find is page after page of affiliate links.

Now, I'm an affiliate marketer. I've got no beef with affiliate links and reviews, but in this case, I wanted to look beyond the obvious ones that seem to be everywhere. I wanted to know who my competitors were actually using to host their sites.

So I dug in, did a bit of reverse engineering magic, and I figured it out.

Then there's my website theme. Right now as I'm writing this, we're in the process of rebranding the website.

Don't tell anyone though. That will be just our secret.

Anyway, for a lot of reasons, I'm on the hunt for a new theme, so as I'm browsing around the internet, I'm checking out lots of themes that I like the look of, and I'm keeping a list so I can go back to look at them in more detail later.

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Closely related to that is the page builders. You know I use and love Thrive Architect, but that doesn't mean there isn't something better out there, so when I come across nice looking pages, I always check to see how it's built.

Another thing I researched this way was podcasting.

When I started this podcast, I wanted to make sure I got the technical bits right, right from the start.

It's important to me that I maintain consistency, and that means starting as I intend to continue. In this case, since I know that Apple Podcasts is so important to the growth of a show, I wanted to make sure I got the file format right.

I remembered hearing one of my favorite podcasters, Brooke Castillo from The Life Coach School Podcast, talking about hiring a podcast producer when she just was starting her show.

She specifically hired someone who was trained by John Lee Dumas, and if you don't know him, he's the guy behind the daily interview show, Entrepreneur on Fire. He's also a multi-millionaire, and he teaches a highly recommended podcasting course.

Naturally, I figured anything that works for Brooke Castillo will work for me, but I didn't want to have to hire a producer to make it happen. So I did a little digging and reverse engineered her set up.

Then just a few weeks ago, the husband—who's my business partner—and I sat down and started thinking how we can really uplevel the business in the coming years.

One thing we seriously considered is changing our shopping cart. Right now we're using aMember, and while it's a great platform and I still highly recommend it, we thought we might be better served on a bigger, more widely used cart, so I did what I do, and I went snooping around in other people's shopping carts to see what they're using.

Again, I could have just Googled something like "best shopping carts for course creators," and I did do that, but what you get is a lot of "reviews" (and I'm saying that with air quotes right now) but you get a lot of reviews that may or may not be useful.

I wanted to know what my competitors and others in my niche are actually using, not what pays the best affiliate commissions, so to find out, I had to do a little digging.

One thing I'm always looking at—sometimes just out of curiosity and because it's so easy to see—is email providers.

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I'm not in the market for a new provider. I use and still love Active Campaign, but I am endlessly curious, so any time I see something unusual in an email—say a button or an image, or I see something I don't like—maybe spacing that's off or text that's too small to read—I'll take a peek and see what email provider it is.

I do this not because I'm looking to move, as I said, but because people ask me all the time what I think about this provider or that, so it's helpful to have this kind of insight, plus it's just so easy to find out what email platform someone is using.

Something else I'm looking at upgrading is our Six-Figure Systems Q & A call platform. Right now I'm using Zoom, but as the membership continues to grow, we're going to outgrow that platform, so I need to find a different option.

I'd also love to give subscribers who aren't yet members a chance to log into a live call so they can see how the calls work, but I don't want them logging in as a participant, because that would be distracting. I want them in viewer only mode.

I know there must be a way to livestream the calls while still giving members participant access, and that's got me looking at how other people manage similar calls, and I've found several options to try out.

Now that I've given you some ideas of things that I'm actively researching—and hopefully you've got some ideas of your own in mind as well—let's talk about how you can actually find out what tools people are using.

We'll start with the easiest methods, and work our way up to the most technical. I'll tell you what I used in each of the examples I just gave you, and also how you can make them work for you.

To start with, one of the most basic and useful methods for reverse engineering the tactics another business owner uses is to simply keep a swipe file.

If you've never heard of swipe files, it's a tool that comes from the copywriting world. The idea is simple. Keep copies of headlines, calls to action, or other tidbits of text that are proven to convert—in other words, the advertisements that make sales—then use them as inspiration when you sit down to write your own sales copy.

I frequently save emails, sales pages, Facebook ads, graphics I like, or even color schemes.

Then, when I want to write a compelling email or need an attention-grabbing subject line, I can look through my swipe files for inspiration.

Of course, you never want to copy anyone outright. Like we talked about earlier,

that's not ethical or—in some cases—even legal. But inspiration? Heck yeah. Grab all the inspiration you can get.

Or, as Austin Kleon says, learn to Steal Like an Artist.

The next place to look—and I'll be honest, I'm often guilty of forgetting this one—but the next place to look is to see if the website owner has a start here page, or a recommended resources page.

A lot of times, what they recommend using is what they actually use.

For example, if you go to my resources page, you'll find links to Active Campaign, Thrive Suite, Liquid Web, PostGopher, Studio Press themes, and a bunch of other tools I use in my business.

Amy Porterfield has a different version of this on her website. She breaks her recommended tools down into categories, so you can see what she recommends if you're brand new, or if you're more advanced, which is a really clever strategy I might like to consider, don't you think?

Something else people do—and I do have this on my site—is to write a blog post or page that details all the tools in use. I got so many questions about the platform I use for the member site that I sat down and wrote the whole thing up as a blog post a few months ago, and now whenever anyone asks, I can simply send them the link.

So if you're curious about the tools someone is using in their business, try doing a search of their site for pages with words like "start here" or "recommended resources."

And a little backdoor tip is to watch for income reports. In some niches—and this is probably more common in the business advice world than anywhere else—but in some niches bloggers and others share income reports.

But not only do they share income reports, but many of them also share their expenses, and that's where the gold is.

For example, one blogger I follow is Jon Dykstra of FatStacksBlog.com. Jon builds and then often sells niche websites, and he publishes an income report at the end of every month.

On that income report, I can see who he hosts his sites with, what email platform he uses, what tool he uses for keyword research, what he's using for social scheduling, and even where he buys his stock photos.

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I told you a few minutes ago that one thing I researched a lot was hosting providers. It turns out that's pretty easy to reverse engineer. Well, within some limits anyway.

You can go to Who Hosts This.com, SiteChecker.pro, or any number of other sites which will do a DNS lookup to try to determine who the hosting provider is for any website you enter.

This is a pretty good start, but be aware that it's not 100% accurate.

If you see, for example, that a site is hosted by Cloudflare, that's not actually what's happening. The site is most likely hosted elsewhere and it's using Cloudflare's DNS to improve site speed and protect against DDoS attacks.

The same may be true if you see a site is hosted by Google. It might be hosted on Google's servers—they do offer website hosting—but it's just as likely that the site is hosted elsewhere and it's just using Google's DNS for better speed.

You can also look at the who is information for a website by visiting Whols.com/whois and entering the domain name. You'll get a bunch of information, including the name servers for that domain, which will sometimes tell you who the hosting company is.

For example, if you enter cindybidar.com, which is my domain, in the search at Whols.com, you'll see my name servers are ns.liquidweb.com and ns1.liquidweb.com.

It's pretty easy from there to see who my host is.

As an aside, there's another reason you may need to do a Who Is search, and that's if you suspect the site is in violation of your copyright. In other words, if the site has stolen your content and you can't reach them through the usual contact form or email.

A Who Is lookup is a good way to find contact info you might not find on the website itself, and you can also contact their hosting company to request removal of your content from the site.

Another thing you might want to know about a website is what theme is it using.

I know a lot of times I've been out surfing the web and I come across a really nice looking site, and I'm curious how it's built. Knowing the WordPress theme—or even if it's WordPress at all—is a good place to start.

There are a couple of ways you can find the theme of any WordPress site. The easiest way is to use a site that checks for you, such as What WP Theme Is That.com, or WPThemeDetector.com.

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Either of these sites will tell you what the theme is, and if it's a custom theme, they'll often tell you who designed it. They'll also tell you what plugins are used on the site, which can also be useful to know.

The other way to find out what theme is being used is to just look at the source code yourself. You can view the page source code from any browser, and if you find a file called something like style.css and open that up, it will often have the name of the theme right at the top.

That said, it's a whole lot easier just to plug the URL into WPTThemeDetector.com than it is to wade through a bunch of source code to find the css file.

Another way to find out all kinds of information about a website is to use Built-With.com.

Plug any URL into that site, and you'll find out what CMS or Content Management System it's using—in other words, is it WordPress, Shopify, SquareSpace, or something else.

You'll also see what analytics tracker it uses, what ad networks are on the site, which plugins are running and whether or not they're free or paid, and where the site is hosted.

This is the site I used when I was researching shopping carts. If you plug in the link to a checkout page and scroll down to the eCommerce section, you'll see what cart is being used.

The detailed technology profile tab gives you more information, like whether an app or a plugin is paid or free, but there's a daily limit on the number of sites you can view that information about unless you upgrade to a paid account.

Honestly though, you'll get everything you need to know just from the basic search.

Another easy way to check which apps or software a site uses is to pay attention to the link structure as you're clicking.

For example, if you want to know which email provider someone is using, hovering over the "unsubscribe" link will almost always tell you.

If the link has us13.list-manage in it somewhere, it's MailChimp. If it has dripemail in the link, it's drip. An ActiveHosted link is ActiveCampaign, and ConvertKit will show a convertkit-mail link.

You can also look in the address bar of your browser and sometimes find information

there.

When I was looking at shopping carts, I could tell just from the URL if the page I was looking at was built with Infusionsoft or Ontraport or ThriveCart, and there are others that leave obvious clues in the address bar as well, so make sure to check there if you're researching solutions you might want to try.

Ok, here's where we're going to get a little techy, but stick with me, because I have a couple of tricks up my sleeve that will make this easier for you.

If you've ever been to a website and seen a clever pop-up or maybe an opt-in box, and you want to find out how it was created, what do you do?

Well, if you're lucky, you might find a "powered by" link near the bottom of the form. That's the easy way, but you won't always find them.

But if you don't see that link, there's something else you can do to find out what tool or app the site is using, and that's by powering up your browser's "inspect" tool.

In my theme browsing that I mentioned earlier, I sometimes come across interesting page layouts I'd like to emulate, but I know it's not always the theme that controls those. Sometimes it's a third party page builder.

I can use BuiltWith.com to know what plugins are in use on the site as a whole, but if I want to know exactly how a single page is constructed, I have to dig a little deeper, and that's where the inspect tool comes in really handy.

Here's an example.

I really like the look of David Risley's website at BlogMarketingAcademy.com. It's very clean and has a minimalist feel that appeals to me, plus he's a smart blogger who's been around for years, so he knows a thing or two about building websites.

I know he tests just about everything, so if he's using a page builder, it's because it passed his usability testing.

using WPThemeDetector.com I can see he's using the BuddyBoss theme, which makes sense. He runs a membership, and that theme is built for that purpose.

But taking a look at their demo blog, it doesn't look like what I see at BlogMarketingAcademy.com, which makes me think David is using a page builder.

I can use the inspect tool to find out for sure.

In chrome, I right click anywhere on the page, and at the bottom of the popup menu,

I see Inspect.

If I click on that, a panel opens at the bottom of my browser with the page source on one side, and the site CSS on the right. Across the top of this panel are some tabs that will show me other information, but what I'm looking for is way off to the left. It's a little icon that looks like a square with an arrow pointing to its center.

If I click on that icon, it enables the element inspector. You'll see it turn blue, which tells you it's been selected.

Then as you move your mouse over the page, different elements will be highlighted as you pass over them, and you'll see popups that give you more information about each element.

You'll see—for example—what font is used in that space, and what color it is. You'll also see at the top of the popup what's called the CSS selector. That's just the name for the element, and it tells the site what that section of the page should look like.

If you're hovering over a headline, that section might show h1 or h2 for the headline level. If you're looking at an image, it will say `img.something`. And if you're hovering over a section of the page, it will start with `div`, which is just HTML shorthand for content division. In other words, it's a container that holds content on your page.

But here's the interesting thing. Those `div` tags use names that are specific to the page builder, so it takes about five seconds to see that this blog page I'm looking at over on David Risley's site is built with Elementor.

Now, it's not always that easy. Sometimes the element names are pretty obscure, in which case you might have to do some Googling to figure it out.

But if you really want to know how that pop-up was created, or what's powering that countdown timer, or even how a sales page is laid out, don't ignore the inspect tool in your browser. It can give you all kinds of interesting information when you know where to look.

Ok, I know that was a little techy, but I do want to encourage you to at least try it out. The more you know about how websites work, the better you'll be able to make your own business.

But let's back it down a notch or two and look at some special use cases you might want to investigate.

I mentioned earlier that one thing I researched recently was podcasting, and that one

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of my favorite podcasters hired a well-trained producer to get her show up and running.

I decided to poke around and see how her show is put together so I could use similar tactics.

The first thing I did was download an episode of her show to my computer. So I grabbed the actual MP3 file right from the download link on her page and saved it to my desktop.

Then I opened that file in my audio editor. I use Audacity, which is a free app that has both Mac and PC versions.

What I was specifically looking for in this case was the metadata on the file. MP3 files use ID3 tags to hold information about the creator, the title, and other details, and I wanted to make sure I got that right.

By opening some other podcast episodes and looking at the metadata that was included, I could then pretty easily figure out what my ID3 tags should be.

Now of course I could have just Googled this. You'll find article after article with tips for adding ID3 tags to podcasts, but what I was specifically looking for was actual use cases. I wanted to see how hugely popular shows manage their ID3 tags, not just what some random blogger recommends.

And in about five minutes, I had my answer, and I was able to set up my own episodes in a way that makes sense to me, and that will help it get found in the podcast directories.

The next thing I wanted to know about podcasting is where to host the media files. I can't just upload them to my server, because my hosting account is not optimized for streaming media. I know there are a lot of podcast hosting platforms out there, but again, I was looking for what was actually in use.

In this case, all I had to do was look at the player on the Life Coach School's website, and when I hovered over the link to download the episode, I can see the file source is Libsyn.

I checked a few other favorite shows and found that most of them use Libsyn as well, so that was an easy decision. I didn't have to read a bunch of reviews or compare plans or sign up for trials. I just trusted what I see other people using who I respect and who are successful.

Finally, there's one more thing I always want to know, and that's where do bloggers

and others find their images.

The more content I create, the more images I find I need, and I can spend hours and hours browsing through Canva or Deposit Photo and not really find just the right photo. Honestly, sometimes it feels like I spend as much time looking for just the right image as I spend writing a podcast episode, which is crazy.

Maybe you can relate?

Anyway, sometimes I find a similar image to what I'm looking for on someone else's site, and if I just knew where that one came from, maybe I could find what I'm looking for.

There's a couple of different ways to do this.

First, right click on the image in your browser and choose "open image in a new tab."

Then take a look in the address bar and see what the image is named. That's the part just before the dot jpeg or dot png at the end of the URL. If the blogger or site owner is using good SEO, the name will have been changed to a keyword, but in a lot of cases they won't bother, and you'll see something like depositphotos-somelongidnumber.jpeg. So now you know the image came from Deposit Photos and you can do a search on that site for something similar.

But if the image has been retitled, you can still find out where it came from by doing a reverse image search in Google.

In Chrome, you can do this from the right-click menu. Just choose "Search Google for image" and in the search results you see if it came from a stock photo site and which one.

If you're not looking for that exact image, but something similar, then on the search results page, click on "visually similar images" and look at the domains listed below each image you like. You'll see the usual stock photo sites, along with some free photo sites, as well as blog and other websites that use similar images.

Make sure if you're going to use an image that you're getting it from an actual stock photo or free photo site. I know I probably don't have to tell you that, but just in case it's not clear, you should never use images from any source that doesn't explicitly grant you the license to use the image.

Today we've looked at nine different ways you can play detective with just a few simple tools and some creative ingenuity to discover exactly how successful business

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owners are doing everything from writing email subject lines to building entire websites.

But there's one last thing you might be wondering. Maybe you're saying to yourself right now, "That's all fine and good Cindy, but just knowing the tools to use isn't enough if I don't know HOW to use them.

You'd be right of course, and here's how you can easily get past that hurdle.

First, start with the software developer. Most of them--if they're any good anyway--have plenty of training resources available to help even brand new business owners get up and running fast.

The developers of tools like Elementor and Thrive Suite, and the teams that create beautiful themes, and all those handy apps you might see know that if you can't figure out how to use them, you won't stick around.

So start with the resource library or FAQ pages for the tools you're considering.

YouTube is another fantastic resource for learning how to configure and use online software--or just about anything else for that matter.

And finally, check for Facebook groups or forums. Some software and apps also have user communities where you'll find answers to just about any question you might have.

But above all else, remember this: There is nothing about online marketing that you can't master. I have 100% faith in you to figure it out. So go do a little detective work, and dig in. You got this.

Now I want to hear from you...

Leave me a comment on the show notes and tell me what strategies and tactics from other business owners are inspiring you today, and which ones you'll be implementing first. I'd love to hear about your ideas.

Have a terrific day everyone. I'll talk to you again next week.