

Tiny Course Empire Podcast Episode 36: How Did You Build That?

PLEASE NOTE: This is a machine transcription. Some punctuation and spelling weirdness are to be expected.

You're listening to the Tiny Course Empire Podcast with Cindy Bidar. This is Episode Number 36, and today I'm answering one of my most frequently asked questions, which is, how did you build that?

Welcome to the Tiny Course Empire Podcast, a weekly show dedicated to helping you launch and grow your digital course business. Even if you don't have a big team or a six-figure ads budget, we'll help you design smart systems, take consistent action and achieve massive success on your own terms. Now, here's your host, Cindy Bidar.

Welcome back to the Tiny Course Empire Podcast. I am your host, Cindy Bidar. You'll find show notes and recommended resources for this episode at [Tiny Course Empire.com/36](https://TinyCourseEmpire.com/36). If you're new to the show, welcome, I am so glad to have you join me. Be sure to tap that subscribe button so you don't miss any future episodes. Next week, I'm going to be walking you through how I use time blocking to plan my week. It's what keeps me organized and consistent, and it's what allows me to get everything done and more or less on time, but that's next week, this week, we're taking a peek behind the curtain to see what tools and software power my online business.

Now, I am pretty fortunate in that before I launched my Tiny Course Empire, I had spent eight or so years working for other empire builders, that gave me a lot of experience with a wide variety of tools. I'm pretty intimately acquainted with software like ClickFunnels and LeadPages Infusion Soft, which is now KEAP, ONTRAPORT, AWeber, ConvertKit, AMember Samcart member, IAM, Acacia, and those are just the ones I can think of right off the top of my head. My point is, this gave me a really well-rounded education in online business systems, and it made it easier for me to understand the pros and cons of each, so I can make good choices when it comes to my own business. You probably don't have that kind of insider knowledge, which is why I have a podcast episode called How to Choose Your Tech Stack, that's Episode 3. And I'll put the link in the show notes for you. But I also know that sometimes we just want to know what other people are using and how it all fits together. And that's what this episode is all about. I'm going to give you the low down about what software I use, why I chose it, what it cost me to use it, and whether or not I would choose it again if I were starting all over. It's a long list, so grab a cup of your favorite beverage and let's dive in.

First, let's talk websites. I have four, even though you might think it's only one. That's because of the blog, the support site, the membership site, and the sales

pages are all on different website installations. For reasons that I'm going to explain in just a minute. But what you need to know is that they are all running on WordPress, that is my platform of choice, and it has been since the early days. So my WordPress websites are all hosted on Liquid Web. So the way that it works, if you're not familiar with website hosting and website building is with WordPress, and here we're talking about WordPress.org, not WordPress.com. These are two different things.

So WordPress.org, you download the software from them and then you install it on a server that you own, so the server that I use is hosted on Liquid Web. And I use Wordpress, like I said, because that's what I've always used. I find it to be the most flexible option, it is the most stable option I have found, and way back when I got started, things like Squarespace and Weebly and Wix didn't exist, so we didn't have a whole lot of choice back in those days. But I think even today, I would probably still choose WordPress just because it is the most flexible option out there. In fact, I have a blog post about why I would not choose something else, and I'll link to that in the show notes if you are interested in that.

So WordPress, the way it works is you install a theme and the theme controls how your website looks. So the theme that I'm using on the blog on the main site, as we call it, at CindyBidar.com, that theme is Astra, and on the access site, it's a different theme. So on the access site, we use a theme called Memory, which is something that is available from the Membership Academy. The guys on the team over at Membership Geeks runs AMembership site called the Membership Academy, and as AMember, you have access to this theme called Member One. So that is what you see if you've ever purchased a course from me, or if you're inside Six Figure Systems, that's what you see in the membership site, is that theme, that's what controls how that site looks and how it acts. So I told you I have different WordPress installations, and that is why you cannot run two different themes on the same WordPress installation. So CindyBidar.com is one WordPress installation. CindyBidar.com/access is a completely separate installation, as is the support site and the sales page site, which is IT courses, so all four different websites, all use different themes and different plug-in configurations to manage how they operate.

Now, I have to say, my husband does an absolutely fantastic job of making them all look alike, so you will be forgiven if you didn't notice that those were actually four different websites. So I'm using Stroheim on the main site. I am using Memory on the access site, on the course site, we don't actually use, there's a theme installed, but we don't actually use it, we use Thrive Architect to build out all of those pages. That is my page builder of choice, and what a page builder does in WordPress is it allows you to completely customize the way a single page looks. So

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with a theme, you've got your blog theme and all of the content fits within that theme and all of the pages look alike, but with a page builder, you can customize a single page to look completely different from the rest of the site. You can keep the same branding, obviously, you don't want to change your colors and change your fonts and all of that, but the layout of the page can look completely different. So you'll see what I mean, if you go to CindyBidar.com, just the home page, that is built with Thrive architect.

Whereas, if you go to the show notes for this episode at TinyCourseEmpire.com/36, you'll see it's on the same website, but those show notes are just using the theme itself, they're just using the blog post layout of that theme. So that's the difference between your theme and a page builder, the Page Builder kind of sits on top and allows you to make extra customizations. So we use thrive architect for that. So those are the websites.

Let's talk about cost. WordPress is free to use, it is a free software, like I said, you download it from Wordpress.org, you install it on your server. Now you are paying for your server, I mentioned we're hosting with Liquid Web, we paid two years in advance and it worked out to about 35 a month, I believe, is what we pay for hosting, and that is for a VPS and VPs. If you're not familiar with the term, stands for Virtual Private Server, which just means that we have rented essentially a dedicated section of a computer that is sitting somewhere in an office building somewhere in the middle of the state here, and we pay to have access to that chunk of server space. That's what a VPS is, as opposed to what you might have or what a lot of people have, which is called shared hosting. With shared hosting, you are paying for not a dedicated section of a server, you're just kind of in there with a bunch of other websites, so you don't have that dedicated space that is completely yours within your control, you are just allowed to rent some space in this server where it's available.

So that's the difference between shared hosting and VPs. I highly recommend if you are running an online business, and this is a bit of an aside, but if you're running an online business, go with a VPS if at all possible, if not a dedicated server. It's well, well worth the investment, much more stable for your business than going with shared hosting.

Astra theme, we are using a paid version, and unfortunately, I can't tell you what we paid for it, they have lots of different options on their website. I think we bought the lifetime option, but I'm not 100% sure, and the husband is not here to ask, he took care of that for me, so I don't know for sure. But I know they do have a lot of different options on their website. I'll put a link in the show notes so you can check that out. And the reason we chose Astra theme is because I have heard

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from a lot of people who know about these things, who know more about these things that I do, that Astra is one of the fastest, lightest themes you can use. And speed is important, as we get more into beefing up the SEO on the site, speed is going to become more and more important, so that's why we chose that theme.

Then Thrive Suite. We pay for that as well. That is, at the time we purchased it, it was \$228 per year, so we are grandfathered into that rate. They've recently raised their rates, it's now \$299 per year, or you can purchase access to the individual plugins. So like I said, I am using Thrive Architect to build-out the sales pages and the landing pages on the site, and I also use Thrive Leads to build the opt-in forms on the site. So those are the two primary uses I have for Thrive Suite or Thrive Themes, as they call it. So those are the website, that's what we're using to, that's what you see. If you go to the website or you log in to the member site or you visit a sales page, you are seeing one of those tools in action on my sites behind the scenes. We've got something else going on.

So we also have a shopping cart, I mentioned we have a membership site, we need to control access to that, we run an affiliate program, and all of that is handled with a tool called AMember, and AMember is a stand-alone piece of software similar to Wordpress. You download it from AMember.com and you install it on your server and it runs on your server. So that's opposed to software as a service, which would be something like Teachable or SAM Card or something like that, which is running on someone else's server and you're just connecting to it, you're paying for access to their server. AMember is installed on our server, and like I said, AMember handles our shopping cart. If you've ever purchased anything from me, you have purchased it through AMember. If you are an affiliate, your affiliate links are in AMember.

If you are a member, if you've purchased a course from me in the past, you had to log in, it is AMember that controls access to those courses and to the membership. I chose AMember because I like the fact that it is mine, it is downloaded to my server, I have complete control over it. It was a one-time payment. I do pay for ongoing support, which is really inexpensive, so the one-time payment for AMember was \$180, that allowed me to purchase the software, and then I pay \$80 a year for ongoing support from the team at AMember.com.

Now, I also chose AMember because I have worked with it for years, I have been working with AMember since the very beginning. Since I very first came online, since I first started doing virtual assistant work, AMember was one of the first shopping carts I ever used, it's been around forever. It is rock solid, 100% reliable, and the team behind it is really, really supportive, we've had really good luck with them and really just fantastic service from the guys at AMember, so we continue

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to support them, it is incredibly flexible as well. Basically anything that you want a shopping cart to do, AMember will do it.

Now, with that being said, it is a complex piece of software, and I know that a lot of people that I know really don't like it, they find it too complex and too confusing to deal with, and they're looking for other alternatives which are certainly out there. But for me, AMember continues to be my top choice, I really, I get how it works, I like how it works. It has never let me down. And the guys behind it are just incredibly supportive and their service is impeccable, so I just really like how it works. And it does integrate well with the other tools that I use, which is WordPress for one. So AMember has a direct integration with WordPress, which is what controls access to my courses and to my membership. When somebody buys that, they get access and when somebody cancels their membership, they lose access, and that's how it's supposed to work, and it just works and it's seamless and easy for us to manage, so that's why we choose AMember.

Another thing going on behind the scenes is Active Campaign, we've been using Active Campaign as our email platform of choice for several years. I love it because it is so unbelievably powerful, all of the email marketing power that you see in a big expensive system like Infusion Soft or KEAP as it's called now, or ONTRAPORT, you get all of that inside AMember, it has incredibly flexible automations that you can set up, I have not even begun to tap the power of Active Campaign and those incredibly flexible automations.

I also love it because it makes sense to me, and you guys may have heard me talk about this before, when talking about what tech to choose to run your business, a lot of times it comes down to what makes sense for you. I mentioned a minute ago that I have friends who don't like AMember because it doesn't make sense to them, and I completely understand that, because there are other really popular email marketing platforms that don't make sense to me. ConvertKit is one. I don't like the way it looks on the inside. It confuses me. So Active Campaign just makes sense to me. It works the way that I think it should work. And when I log in, I can find the things that I am looking for. So Active Campaign just ticked all the boxes for me many years ago, and I have stuck with it ever since, and it continues to serve me really well.

Now, I will say if you are considering checking out Active Campaign, first of all, I have a complete course about it that you can access for free, and I will put the link in the show notes. That's going to walk you through how to set up a new account, how to use it, how to use those automations, how to get started with all of that power that is available to you. But the other thing that I want to say is, if you are considering changing email platforms, try a few of them out, they all have free

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trials, so sign up for some free trials and put them through their paces and see which ones make sense to you. That's the only way you're going to find a software that really works the way your brain works and the way you think it should work. And it makes it easy for you to run your business. So that's what I would recommend.

Also, if you are signing up for Active Campaign, I am using the Light plan. A lot of people seem to think they need that next tier, and I've not found that to be useful at all. There's some extra little bells and whistles that come along with the next tier up, the Pro Plan or the Business Plan, or whatever it's called, but I am using the Light Tier and it has served me well, and I can't see any reason why I would want to upgrade from that. It's significantly more expensive to go up to the next level, so if you are considering Active Campaign, start with the Light Tier, I think it will serve all of your needs quite well.

So those are the big three. Those are the big three systems I use WordPress with Thrive Themes for page building and AMember one for the member site, I use AMember as my checkout and to control access to my courses and my membership and to manage my affiliate program. And I use Active Campaign for email marketing. Those are the big three, but there are lots of other little things going on in my world as well, so let's run down some of those.

Canva Pro is something that I have used for a couple of years now, and it just continues to get better and better. I use the pro version, like I said, they have a free version as well. I use the pro version, which is \$139 a year. And what I do with Canva is all of the slide decks that I have in the membership site and if you've taken a course for me, and there were slides involved, those were probably created on Canva. I use Canva for all of the course graphics, for all of my blog post graphics for all of my podcast graphics. Basically, if it's a graphic on the site, it was probably created in Canva. There's a small chance that my husband did it in Photoshop, but even he's getting into Canva these days, although he resisted it at first. I've also recently found out that Canva has a video editor, which I haven't tried, but I'm going to be checking that out because that might be an alternative as well.

Right now, what I'm using for video editing is Camtasia and this, a new installation of Camtasia runs about 300 from the website at TechSmith.com. And again, I'll put the link in the show notes to all of this stuff you guys. But I use cantata to record slides to record my screen, if I'm talking about a particular platform, if I'm demonstrating something, I'm using Camtasia to record that demonstration. I use Camtasia to record my picture, if you've ever seen a video where you'll see me in a little circle down in the lower left or the lower right corner, and you're seeing my screen behind that, that was recorded in Camtasia. I find Camtasia to be easy and

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intuitive to use for very simple video editing, I have tested out some other tools, I've looked at Screen Flow, I have looked at iMovie, and I am of course looking at Canva as well, but I find Camtasia to be really easy for doing what I need it to do. So that's probably the tool that I am going to stick with.

I use Adobe Acrobat Pro to create fallible pdfs, so what affable PDF is, is if you download a worksheet or a workbook from one of my courses and you can actually type into the PDF, that's Adobe Acrobat Pro that allows me to do that. And that costs me \$15 a month.

Another tool that I cannot live without is SendGrid. SendGrid is an SMTP server, and what this does is it connects to AMember and allows me to send email out of AMember that gets better deliverability rates, so because AMember is installed on my server, if I were sending email directly from that platform, and when I send emails to affiliates or I send emails to Six-Figure Systems members, those emails are going out of AMember, so what would happen is AMember would send it from my server. So I don't know a ton about email deliverability and all of the rules that go into this, but I do know that trying to send email from my own server really results in a very, very low deliverability rate because that server IP is used by other business owners who may or may not be as diligent about keeping their list clean as somebody else and all of that has an impact on the deliverability when Gmail, for example, or Yahoo or Hotmail or whoever the email server is on the other end of that email, when they see email coming in from that particular server, they make a snap decision and say, This is good email or This is bad email, and when it comes from your own server or if it's coming from my server, it's more likely to get marked as spam. So what I do instead is I pay for SendGrid, which is, like I said, it's called an SMTP server and those emails go from SendGrid servers, and it is SendGrid job to keep their server clean and to keep my deliverability rates high. So that's why I use that platform.

And there are other tools that do this. There's Send in Blue, and there's Kirim email, there's a lot of different SMTP servers you can connect to... If you need that type of service, SendGrid is the one that I choose, I find it easy to use. Again, it's all about how easy is it for me to use and how quickly can I figure out how to get it connected and get it running? So SendGrid is \$15 per month.

Another tool that I use is Deadline Funnel. If you have ever seen a sales page of mine that has a common down timer on it, that is Deadline Funnel, I like Deadline Funnel because it really is a deadline when their countdown timer is gone, if the site redirects or if the page redirects, you cannot get back to it, it is pretty solid in that way, I also like that it creates automatically an email timer, so you've probably seen emails from me, they have a countdown timer in the top of them, that's a

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Deadline Funnel as well, I pay annually for that, I can't tell you off the top of my head how much it is, but I know I'm grandfathered in at a lower rate than they are advertising right now, but even at the rate they sell for now, I find it well, worth it.

This podcast is hosted on Libsyn. Libsyn is a media host specializing in audio files, so I pay \$12 a month, I think or maybe \$15 to Libsyn to host these audio files which are then plugged into my website, which then sends it out to all of the podcast services out there, so that's how I end up in your podcast player.

Another tool I use is for calendar scheduling, and that is Acuity. Acuity connects to my Google calendar and allows people to make appointments with me for coaching calls and for podcast episodes and things like that, so they can make those appointments without the back and forth of Well, are you free at 3 o'clock? No, I'm free at 2:30. Can you do 4 instead? You know, that sort of back and forth. It just takes forever. This is one click, they go to my calendar, they choose a time. All is done.

Another tool that I think just about everybody uses is Zoom, I have been a Zoom user for years. I pay \$15 a month for their lowest tier meeting plan, which is what we run all of our Six-Figure Systems, Q and A calls on, and I recently chose a live webinar to run webinars instead of Zoom. So Zoom has the option to run webinars. So the difference just real quickly, is with a meeting, when people log on to our Q and A calls, everybody has a camera, everybody has a microphone. With a webinar, only the host has a camera and a microphone, and everybody else is just listening, just watching. So recently, Zoom doubled their webinar pricing, and I wasn't down with that, so I went looking for an alternative, and I found Live Webinar, which I've been using for the past four or five months to run that webinar style meeting. I've run some workshops with it in Six Figure Systems and overall, I like the platform. I think it works really well. I'm definitely going to keep it. We're definitely going to keep using it, but if you are seeing me on video, you are either seeing me on Zoom or on Live Webinar, one or the other.

And finally, I use Vimeo for hosting video replays. So all of the courses, all of the workshops, any video you see anywhere on my site is most likely hosted in Vimeo. There may be a few stragglers that are YouTube, and you may see more YouTube coming up relatively soon, but for right now, every video is hosted in Vimeo. I like Vimeo because it's the most cost-effective platform out there for hosting video, we pay \$240 a year for their Pro Plan, and that gives us the right to use Vimeo commercially and also plenty of upload space, so I don't have to worry about running out of space with video. So Vimeo is my tool of choice for that.

There are also loads of other little things that we pay for and use on the site, you'll

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see different pop-ups, you'll see different plug-ins maybe on the site that are doing different things, but these are kind of the big ones, those are the ones that I use day-to-day and that you are most likely to encounter. If you're listening to this podcast, if you're a student, if you're a member, these are the ones that you are most likely to have seen and to have questions about.

So now the big question is, would I choose these same tools again. And I got into thinking about that when I was putting together the outline for this episode, I thought if I had it to do all over again, would I do it the same way? And honestly, I think I would. Now, everything came together this way, kind of because it was piecemeal, I didn't need all of this stuff all at one time, I didn't go from zero to a Membership site in a week, it built up over time over several years. As a matter of fact, so I had a lot of opportunity to kind of bolt things on where I needed them, I didn't have to just drop into a complete system in a very short period of time.

If that had been the case, I might have gone a different way, but as it was, I could build on when I needed something. When I was ready for a shopping cart, I could add that to my existing site. When I was ready for a Membership, I could add that to my existing platforms. When I was ready for more video content, I could add that in without making a huge change. So it's kind of evolved over time, but overall, I'm really, really happy with what we've built, and I think I would probably do it again.

There are some pros and cons. Obviously, the cons are it can be really difficult to manage. We've got a lot going on, there are a lot of different software pieces that all have to talk to one another, and my husband, and I will fully admit that my husband, his full-time job is to make sure that this stuff keeps running, and without him doing that, this would be a lot for me to handle all on my own. I cannot imagine making this all work together all by myself. If you decide to go this way with all of these different pieces all talking to one another, you're probably going to need some help with that because it is a lot to manage and it's all on us.

So recently, we ran into an issue with a caching problem where people couldn't see the product that they had purchased, they were getting logged out weirdly, and we couldn't figure out what was going on with that, and that was all on us. There was nobody to call to say, fix this stuff, because we didn't know where the problem was. Was it our website was at our host. Was it AMember? Was it something else? We didn't know we couldn't pinpoint it, so we didn't know who to call to get it fixed. We ultimately did get it fixed, but if we were in a different platform, if we were in, say, Kajabi or Teachable or something like that, it would have been much easier to troubleshoot because there's only one place to look. But when you've got a lot of different softwares all talking together, there's a lot of

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options where a problem could be. And it can be hard to find. So that's another downside to having a system like this.

But the upsides, I think outweigh the downside. The upside is it's super flexible. I can make the website anything I want it to be, I can make it do anything I need it to do, I have no constraints. Worst case scenario, I hire a developer to create custom stuff for me and I can't do that if I'm in, say, for example, an all-in-one platform like Teachable or Kajabi, I wouldn't have that option. You are stuck with what they give you, and that's it.

The other thing is it's really cost-effective, like I said, it's costing us right now, I added it all up, I think it's around \$250 a month to run everything that runs all of our websites, so that's pretty good, I think. But the more important thing is I only add to it as I need something, so I'm not paying for software that I'm not using, I'm not paying for features that I'm not using. Which is a bonus for me.

So would I choose this style of platform again, would I choose to piece it together this way to integrate all of these different softwares? Again, yes, I think I would. I'm very happy with what we have created here. I'm super happy with how it looks and how it works, and how the customer experience is, and I think it's totally worth it to run these multiple systems. Again, if you are just starting out or you're looking at changing your systems, I want to encourage you to go and listen to that podcast episode about how to choose your tech stack, because I think that you might find some insight there. And also I'll have the list of everything that we use in the show notes for this episode, so you can check those out as well.

So that's the rundown on all of the software and all of the systems we use to run our Tiny Course Empire over here at CindyBidar.com.

I would love to hear from you, head over to the show notes and tell me what tools or software are you using that you can't live without in your business or if there's anything that I mentioned in this episode that you'd like to know more about, that you'd like further explanation on how I use it or how I've configured it, or why I chose it. I'd love to answer that question for you as well, so drop me a note over at TinyCourseEmpire.com/36, and I will get right back to you. And finally, if you're enjoying the show, would you do me a favor and leave a rating and review over at Apple podcast? That helps other people find the show. And of course, if you have a friend or a colleague who would love to hear this episode, go ahead and send them the link, that's TinyCourseEmpire.com/36, and with that, have a terrific day everyone, and I will talk to you all again next week.

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If you like what you hear on the Tiny Course Empire Podcast, you're going to love all of the courses and workshops and support you'll find inside Six-Figure Systems, that's my monthly program where we dig into online marketing for regular people like you and me. We don't do big launches, we don't have the big headaches and we don't have the big expenses that come with them. Instead we focus on creating repeatable, sustainable systems that continue to grow over time, and that don't suck up all of our energy or require a 10-person team to manage. You can come see what we're all about at SixFigureSystems.com, and I'll see you on the inside.