



**GE 236: How John Hall Grew Influence &
Co. into the Largest Creator and
Distributor of Expert Content
[podcast]**

Growth Everywhere Podcast Transcript

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John Hall: When you trust someone, that's when you want to work with them. You want to deal with them, and so we've created this service for ourselves.

Announcer: Do you want to impact the world and still turn a profit? Then you're in the right place. Welcome to Growth Everywhere. This is the show where you'll find real conversations with real entrepreneurs. They'll share everything from their biggest struggle to the exact strategies they use on a daily basis, so if you're ready for a value-packed interview, listen on. Here's your host, Eric Siu.

Eric Siu : Before we jump into today's interview, if you guys could leave a review and a rating and also subscribe as well, that would be a huge help to the podcast. If you actually enjoy the content and you'd like to hear more of it, please support us by leaving us a review and subscribe to the podcast as well. Thanks so much.

Okay, everyone, today we have John Hall, who is the CEO and co-founder of Influence & Co, and also the author of *Top of Mind: Use Content to Unleash Your Influence*.

John, how's it going?

John Hall: Going well. Going well. Thanks for having me.

Eric Siu : Yeah. Thanks for being here, first and foremost.

John and I actually met in person at Collision Conference a couple months ago. We're both in the same entrepreneurs' group online, which is the Young Entrepreneurs Council.

John, why don't you tell everyone a little bit more about who you are and what you do?

John Hall: Sure. Yeah. My co-founder and I, Kelsey Meyer, started Influence & Co about five years ago. The purpose was to help, it was actually initially started to help entrepreneurs build trust with audiences they were wanting to influence. We thought that entrepreneurs were always busy and they never had time to focus on their own brand, but at the same time is that one of the big things that we believed in is that when you trust someone, that's when you want to work with them, you want to deal with them. And so we created this service for ourselves, which was helping us extract knowledge, and we would have a team develop it and then distribute it, find out all the places online, whether it's like an entrepreneur mag or a Forbes or Atlantic, wherever the place is where their audience is. We started with that idea.

What ended up coming from it was pretty crazy. It did really, really well with entrepreneurs, small businesses, and then even brands started, Office Depot, American Airlines, Dell, a lot of bigger companies, came to us and said, "Hey, we like this kind of angle on PR and thought leadership." It's more focused on trust, education and getting really consistent placements rather than this old traditional PR model. That's how we started, and now we're the largest creator and distributor of expert content, and things are going really well. The book just came out. It's doing well, so I'm doing a lot more speaking. That's the last five years' story.

Eric Siu : Awesome. Let's talk about the book for a second. I've had authors on the podcast before, and almost always they say, "Eric, you got to do the book. The book changes everything." Is that something you agree with? What has it done for you?

John Hall: Yeah, I think it does. I think different things change. To say a book changes everything, I think that if you're crappy at branding and doing things, investing in your own brand, then, yeah, if you do a book, of course it's going to make a big difference. For me, it's like there's different forms of brand-building and credibility and how people perceive credibility and influence.

For example, one area could be bylines, op eds. Another area could be people talking about you, whether it's influencers or contributors. Another one could be doing video. There's all these different ... or social, for example. I think a book's a key column in that area. I think that it's one of the important ones similar to how the other ones I've described are.

I think that when you do a book, especially for you, yeah, I absolutely think it's important, because you're good at creating content, and you're good at networking and helping others. I think that when people are like that and then they do a book, it's extremely beneficial just because it's a really big part of branding. I think that it can amplify what you're doing.

Eric Siu : Love it. I want to talk a little more about, let's go to Influence & Co now. If I'm an entrepreneur, I want to be on Forbes, I want to be on Entrepreneur Magazine, for example, that's part of what you guys do, right? Is that the gist of it?

John Hall: The idea isn't just like, "Okay, I want to be in that publication," and that's what ... We have to get people to take a step back. It's like, "What is your goal? What are you really trying to accomplish," because if people just say, "Oh, I just want to get in this publication," and they do, it's like sometimes they don't actually hit their goal, because it was just an ego play. For me, it's take a step back. Let's talk about the goals.

A lot of times when somebody says, "Oh, I want to be in whatever ... Fast Company, Forbes, Inc.," I say, "Why? What do you expect to happen? What does success look like?" A lot of people are like, "Well, let's just say I have this product or service that I want to build credibility around." I'm like, "Okay. How are you doing that right now?" They're like, "Okay, well, we're partnering with this company." I'm like, "Great. That's a ..." "We're partnering with Google." "Great. That's awesome. That's good credibility. What do you want this to do? Are you trying to reach thousands and thousands of people?" "No, actually, we're going to use it on our site." It's like, "Okay, cool. You're just wanting a marketing asset."

"In that case, then we need to find out what's the best type of content to come from you or to be about you. It might say, 'Okay, in this case it makes sense for a contributor and influencer to talk about you, because they need to highlight certain things about the product and the service, which it would come off very cocky and egotistical and promotional if you're talking about it from yourself.'" That's why it's so important to

take a step back and talk through goals and truly think, "Why am I doing this?"

If, for example, a client says, "Hey, I want to, in the next two to three years, I want to be the leader and the expert in the space of AI technology," I would say, "Great. You absolutely need to hit those sites at some point. Let's look at all the sites that reach this AI audience. Let's look at angles. Let's actually do everything we can to build up to the point where those are the sites that want you really bad, and you're looking at distribution like a portfolio. You're not just saying, 'Oh, I only want to get in this site.' You're testing it out in that first six to 12 months. Then you find out what works, and then you can dive in quite a bit more into the ones that work."

Eric Siu : Makes sense. For what you guys do ... First of all, how do you guys make money, and how do you charge?

John Hall: For us, it's a service fee model. It's not retainer based, similar to how old, traditional PR was, "Okay, we'll, it's going to cost this much." We're going to be pitching. Whatever we get, we could get zero, we're still getting that money. We're trying to go away from that and be more a deliverable space and say, "Okay, well, what's important is that you want the placements and you want them in these types of sites, and you need help in content creation, and we have technology that can manage the process. For this, there's a service fee. If we deliver based on amount of articles, we are service fee."

As long as the client is cooperative, we can hit those at the time. Occasionally, a client, like we did have a client want to really focus on one article one month, so they were doing typically two or three articles a month. They said, "We really want ..." This is Bob Glazer. Bob Glazer wanted to hit HBR really bad, because it's a fantastic site, and he had a really good angle that fit there. In that case, then it would make sense to really make sure that that article was there. We made an exception there with the deliverables. When you look at the different ways we want to, at least pricings, we want to price it as that you're getting this for this price, and you can feel confident. If we agree on that and you feel like these are the deliverables that are going to help you accomplish your goal, then expectations should be in line, and we should have a very good relationship.

Eric Siu : Let's use that example, because I think a lot of people listening to this are probably thinking maybe they can't afford your services yet and maybe down the road they probably will use your services. Let's say they want to get into an HBR. Their goal is more branding, but they're really targeting HBR. What would you recommend to people looking to figure it out on their own? What's the process?

John Hall: For example, HBR, that's one of the harder ones, and to just focus on that, especially when you don't ... I would say that that's something that's in a plan that's down the road. Right out the gate, I would say, what are the sites that make sense to initially target, because not only are you going to start learning what engages people in your writing style, is that you're going to start getting out there a little more and getting people to pay attention. It's activating your audience.

For example, there's a lot of people that as you're meeting people, yourself, you're a nice guy, you run into people, you want to consistently stay top of mind. That's what the

book will talk about if you read it. You'll see that as long as you stay consistently top of mind, content is a great way to do that. Then you come up with these big moments where it's like an HBR moment or one that you're really, really proud of, and you really get behind it.

I would say that don't just go out the gate and go for that big moment. What I would do is I would start consistently getting content developed, get in and distribute it in different places that reach the audience, and as you find out what really, really, really is an amazing post, then you aim for those sites a little more. Glazer's a perfect example, is that he's been a client for a couple years. This was a piece that was just really good. It took time for him to ride between a lot of the content that we put out for him. He was like, "Wow, this is a really great piece." Once that did happen, then you amplify that.

That's where some people are like, "Oh, should I sponsor things? Should I pay to play at sites and have the sponsor's logo on it?" For me, doing everything you can to earn and amplify things is the way to start off. As you consistently get those placements and you see different ones work well, amplify those, so when you do get that chance in the big site, if you ever want to publish there again, I would do everything you possibly can to distribute it.

That means getting your friends to share it out. That means reaching out to influencers to share it out. Some sites allow amplification. There are certain sites that actually tell contributors that they can't pay to amplify. I think it's dumb. I think you should allow contributors to amplify content, because it just helps get more good eyes on the content. I would really focus on that, because if you're ever going to contribute there again or if you pitch again, they remember those articles that did really well.

You will get one of those opportunities in a bigger site sooner or later, and when you do that, nail it. Do a phenomenal job. Trust me, if it does that well, editors will want you to come back.

Eric Siu : What you're saying is, part of what I caught was, if you do get a placement on HBR or something like that, you're saying to also run paid ads at it and then just to continue to reap the benefits. Is that what you're saying?

John Hall: Yeah. I mean, you do amplify. Once again, make sure in your contributor agreement you can do it. There are certain sites that don't allow it. You know that when you contribute, you get a contributor agreement. I know there's two in particular ones that are really well-known for their agreements, that they don't allow it, but if they allow it, or what you should be thinking is, that I need to be doing everything to distribute, so anything I can, and distribute to the right people.

I'm not saying necessarily go to the cheapest possible way to get eyes on it, because also sites know when it's international traffic and different things like that. For us, if there's a piece that we're really getting behind, we'll do Facebook or LinkedIn targeted ads towards exactly who we want to see that content.

We look at it as, one, helping with potentially converting from that article, but, two,

also, just a great branding play. Then, three, it helps on the publication side if they know that we actually make an effort to get the right people to view that content. Yeah, the short answer to that is yes. In certain cases you look for ways to amplify. Sometimes they're paid, but I would definitely start off with doing everything you can earned first. If that works, then you start seeing it work well, then, yeah, obviously amplification on the paid site would make sense.

Eric Siu : Then I can hear people asking also, how much should they be spending if they get a nice, one of those coveted slots on like an HBR. Is it \$150? Is there no formula at all? Does it go by gut?

John Hall: I would say you track and you see how it does well or how it does. For example, if people go, are going to your site, obviously that's a no-brainer, but let's say that you start seeing actually traction on social, different people talking about it. I would go with, okay, this seems to be doing really well, so I'll put more money behind this.

There's an example I was just pointing out the other day, where there was a placement on Forbes. This was years ago. This was in 2014, where it was one of the email softwares was named in an article, and they looked at it and they saw that it just converted really well, because they were mentioned in this really positive way. What they did was they ended up doing paid amplification, towards it to a very targeted audience, and the article ended up getting four million views, and it was the right views.

You look at it. You're like, "Okay, is that bad?" My feeling on it is that if you are targeting the right people to get the most value, I think everything should always be about the audience. If you're truly getting the right people to view that content and it's helping them out, then I think it's a great way to get more of the right eyes on the content. That was a very successful article for the brand. I know the publication was happy, because they were getting the right eyes on that content that did well.

Eric Siu : Great. I do want to jump back to talking about the book for a little bit. You spoke about being top of mind. We've had a guest on this podcast before. His name was Scott Oldford, and then basically I see his content on Facebook all the time. He's always writing good stuff. He's just constantly staying top of mind. He's staying consistent with it. I think a lot of people tend to miss out on that. Do you want to jump into the book a little bit on what the impetus was behind it and then maybe some other tips around the book itself?

John Hall: Yeah. You're talking about Scott, he's from Toronto, isn't he?

Eric Siu : Yeah.

John Hall: Yeah. That's funny. I just spoke a keynoted event at Summit ... or Powder Mountain. He was there, and he was a really awesome guy, so I got to meet him. Yeah, I would agree, he's pretty smart at what he does.

Yeah, for me, the idea behind Top of Mind is not just an important part of business. It's an important part of life, is that you want to engage people in different ways, where you

come to their mind at the right time. It not only creates opportunity for you on the business side, but it helps you build relationships in the right way.

Your example of Scott is a perfect example, is that he does something, some sort of what I call a trust touch-point, where he engages you in a way, whether it's through content. It sounds like it was from Facebook in this example, where he comes top of mind. Then he starts moving from your short-term to long-term memory as either a friend, resource or just business acquaintance.

Once they get in that long-term, it's an extremely, extremely valuable thing to have, because then if something comes up where you see an opportunity for Scott, he comes to mind, and you go, "Oh, hey, you should talk to Scott." It's where you get more referrals. It's where more advocacy can happen and ultimately just helps relationships become stronger so that you are more connected to people in a meaningful way.

For me, Top of Mind initially out the gate was just that I changed my life on how I looked at business and relationships, is that I wanted to make sure that I engaged people very consistently in the right way and I was consistently helping, I was educating others. I truly tried to make a difference in people's lives, whether it be through writing better content that they can learn from, or even in one-on-one conversations. When we started writing the book, we started looking at all the things people do to engage people at different times so that they'd connect better with people and then they come to their memory at the right time and the right moment, and it can bring opportunity to you.

It's done extremely, extremely well. It got on some bestseller lists out the gate, and it's created quite a few opportunities, which has led me to speaking a lot more. As I was telling you before the podcast, is that the last three weeks I've spoken. I'm speaking next week. They're coming from not just the book but also just how people are reacting to the content within the book and the content that we're publishing around it as well.

Eric Siu : Love it. We talk about amplification a lot on this podcast. How did you go about amplifying the book itself?

John Hall: Right out the gate, we're doing something very different. Behind the idea of top of mind you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket at the beginning. A lot of people do book launches, and they try and sell just thousands of thousands that first week. I think that is good, but at the same time, what we did is we wanted to put resources this whole year consistently, because you could guess it. We want to stay top of mind.

That's the point, is that we're actually doing it spaced out, where it's a blend between, we're getting the press and PR for it, so getting people and influencers and contributors to recommend it in addition to getting on the book lists of, "Oh, hey, you should read this book." That's been extremely valuable for us. Doing a certain number of podcasts consistently over the next year, doing ... We did some paid amplification.

For the book, to get people to read the book, like doing advertising, it wasn't successful, as successful for us, to actually get people to buy the book. I would say after I speak at an event, you can see an uptick in sales, so when you combine it with that, that's a great

way to amplify it. Then partnerships, like getting people, like my buddy John Ruhlin wrote *Giftology*, and he advocates for my book, I advocate for his, because we both believe in the content. That was a great way to amplify, where you have those types of partnerships advocating for you. Those are the ways that I've sold the book.

Then after a while, if it's good content, it gets in enough people's hands where then they start referring in, saying, "Oh, you should read that book." As crazy as it is, sales, I see sales going up or remaining consistent, and it's because a lot of the people who bought the book when it first came out in May or June aren't reading it until now, and we're seeing a lot more of the benefit in month three or four.

Eric Siu : Great. Awesome. There's people out there, and I don't think there's any wrong or right way, but there's people out there that write their own book, and then they have others who ghostwrite for them. Which way did you approach the book with?

John Hall: I used my company. Partially, we used it because we were looking into the service of offering, developing books, or developing content for our clients that were books. We really like services, like, I like Book in a Box, for example, over there. I think they're great people, but for us, we wanted to, if we're not referring business to them for that, a lot of times people want a content marketing and PR strategy with it. If that's a really strong core element, then we want to also do the book as well. That's how I looked at it. I was our first guinea pig.

I think the best that I've seen is this blend, is that you want, in the same way we create content even when we're publishing things in the publications for our clients, is that you extract the knowledge in a way that's effective for their time. We have a set time where we either send them questions, or we get them on the phone. We extract the knowledge. We can obviously use supplemental information. That could make sense. We'd have to do our best to get the core, the golden nuggets, the anecdotes, the personal experiences, from the client. Then once you get a really core part of that down, then you get it to a very talented storyteller.

We had been, if you look at my book, it's dedicated ... A lot of people do it to their parents, do it to their wife. To be honest, I love those people, but they had nothing to do with the actual book, and I dedicated it to the writer. I was transparent as that this person was the storyteller of the book, and I listed the four or five people that helped with editing, design and things like that.

For me, it was a process where the core elements of it should come from the author, and then you have a great supporting structure of a storyteller and editor and then good design. If you put those together, you can do a really good book.

Eric Siu : Great. Just a couple more questions from my side before we wrap up. What's one big struggle you faced while growing this business?

John Hall: This business? There's been a lot of struggles. I'm trying to think. For me, there is the, as we grew, when we were ten, 20, 30 people, it was easy to feel super valuable, because you were involved in so much. It's like you're involved in the sales. You're involved in

operations. As we've gotten bigger, three times the size of that, and you hover, I would say 100, and as you go up, it's a different type of role.

For me, a struggle has been the pride of, "Okay, what do I do now as the CEO? What is this?" I think a lot of CEOs act like they know exactly what they're doing as they're starting a company from scratch, but in reality, for me, it's that trying to make sure that you're offering the most value for the company. It's challenging at every level, because your role changes at every phase. I think that's been a challenge for me.

I think that, yeah, I would say personnel, we have an amazing team here, so it's made it easier, but when you grow past a certain number of people, it's so important to get middle management trained. Now we have good middle managers. We have an executive team that's in a better place. I think that we should have done that earlier. A lot of times companies are too reliant on their co-founders. I think that we did that early, but I think we've done a lot better of a job recently, but that was a struggle, obviously, transferring that.

Eric Siu : Got it. Okay. What's one new tool that you've added in the last year that's added a lot of value, like Evernote?

John Hall: Oh, Mixmax. I love Mixmax to death. I want to go give, I think Olof, their founder, I want to go give him a big kiss. It's saved me so much time. For some reason, and I know there's tools that ... I was using Boomerang. I was using Calendly. I was using, I forgot, three other tools. Then Olof, I got in touch with him, and I started using Mixmax. It all was in one tool. I also love the shortcuts. It's made me probably at least double, I would say at least 50 percent more effective at email these days. My time's pretty important for me right now, so that helps quite a bit.

Eric Siu : Yeah, I think time's important for anyone, right?

John Hall: Yep.

Eric Siu : Yeah, Mixmax is great. If you're interested in that one, you can listen to the interview with Olof, Mixmax, research Growth Everywhere. Mixmax, for those of you in the audience.

Finally, John, besides your book, what's one must-read book you'd recommend to everyone?

John Hall: Ooh, that's a tough one. I have different ones for each one. If you're looking in to be an entrepreneur, I like the John Rampton and Joel Comm's book on entrepreneurship. It's like, *50 Signs You Know You're an Entrepreneur*. I love that. *Giftology* is my one that I think is great, just because it helps people become more thoughtful about gifts and then about life and effectiveness. I love *Essentialism*, so those are my three. It's hard to narrow it down, but it just depends on the people who are asking me.

Eric Siu : Great, John, this has been fantastic. What's the best way for people to find you online?

John Hall: It just depends. I would say that if it's something that my company or you're looking for this service or you have questions specifically about building your brand and you're looking to invest in this, just email me directly, and I'll try and advise you. It's John@InfluenceandCo.com, and I'll try and be helpful, at least point you in the right direction.

Then if you want to follow, I would say I'm pretty active on Twitter. Connect on LinkedIn and just say, "Hey, I heard you on Eric's podcast," and I'll connect you as long as I know you're from this podcast. Yeah, from there on, follow my content. I write for Forbes, Inc., Fast Company, Mashable, HBR, and so follow the content. Hopefully, it helps you out.

Eric Siu : Awesome. John, thanks so much for doing this.

Everyone, make sure that you go check out *Top of Mind* and check out his company.

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