

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Ray Blakney. He is a location independent serial entrepreneur, world traveler and the founder of [LiveLingua](#), one of the top online language schools. And he's the founder of [Podcast Hawk](#), a SaaS product that helps you get booked on podcasts on Autopilot. Born in the Philippines, Ray grew up mostly in Turkey before moving to the United States. He started his first business in Mexico in 2008 with his wife as his business partner and has subsequently bootstrapped multiple six and seven figure businesses, mostly from home in his Superman pajamas. He has been featured in Forbes Entrepreneur magazine and many other publications. He is also the podcast host of Learn Spanish with [LiveLingua](#), one of the top language learning daily podcasts on iTunes.

Ray, welcome to the show.

Ray Blakney: Matt, thanks for having me on.

Matt Bowles: So good to have you here, my man. We should just start off by talking about where we are today and the fact that we have agreed to make this an alcohol induced interview. I am actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina today. I have just opened a bottle of wine. This one is a red blend from Stellenbosch in South Africa. So, I'm going to be drinking through that during the episode. But where are you today, Ray, and what are you drinking?

Ray Blakney: So, I am in the mountains of Mexico in a city called Querétaro, where my wife is originally from. So, my wife's Mexican. I am actually drinking Sake, but Mexican sake, it's called Nami and it's actually really, really good. It's. It holds up to the sake I had when I was in Japan. So, I'm enjoying it.

Matt Bowles: I love it. Brother. That is amazing. I had no idea that they make sake in Mexico. But let's take that as an opening mind that we should start with chatting about Japan. I know you've spent a bunch of time there. Definitely. It's one of my favorite countries. And let me ask you this, man. I heard a rumor that while you were in Japan, you had a run in with a deer.

Ray Blakney: You got it. It was not just one deer; it was a herd of deer. So, I was in a town called Nara in Japan. It's just outside of Osaka. There's actually a sake tie into this as well. So, we got there really knowing almost nothing about the town. But we went on Airbnb and we found some guy was doing a bike tour around the town. Sounds wonderful. So, we go on this bike tour. We're the only two people there, nobody else on the tour. So, we're kind of biking around town. One of the stops is a sake brewery. So, we've had a few things to drink, right? So, we kind of go to the main part of Nara, which is this big temple, this huge park that's out there. And the cool part that Nara's known for is it has tame deer. These deer are about the size of a big dog, like a German shepherd. But they are part of the religion there. And they're allowed to walk around town wherever they want. They will literally, they can walk into a Starbucks, right? Like the automatic door opens, a deer will walk in and the staff will not like chase the deer out because it's religious. You're not supposed to touch them.

So, we went to this temple where they were doing. It has this wonderful, this huge wooden Buddha inside, deer all over the place. You can pet them. They're like, I thought, totally docile. We go there, we take all those photos. I have the picture with the deer. Then we kind of continue on our bike tour and we kind of go to a more rural part of the park where there're dozens of deer, I'm going to say, you know, hundreds. But that was probably my fear induced state at the end of this. But, you know, dozens of deer. And our tour guide gives us these little wafers that we're supposed to give. The deer gives me like four or five, right? So, I kind of pull them out and they're on those crinkly wrappers so you make the noise. All the deer in the, like, in this

whole park, their head shoots up. They start running towards me like a deer. How cute. So, I pass out those, you know, the five wafers that I had. So those five deer are really happy. But the other hundred that are standing there, maybe 10, I don't remember.

Again, fear changes numbers for you. They kind of look at me like, so where's our wafer? And I'm like, I don't have any more. I look over to the kind of tour guide. Do you have any more? It's like, no, that was it. So, they actually got upset with me. And I had one of these, like, it was drizzling a little that day. So, I had one of those, you know, trash bag raincoats on. They start eating my trash can raincoat. So, I'm running away from all these deers, trying to get on my bike. My wife, instead of helping me, is sitting there laughing as I'm being mauled by a herd of deer in Japan. I'm happy to have escaped my life.

Matt Bowles: Well, I understand that that is not the only run in with an animal that you have had on your world travels, Ray. I heard that you had a little bit of a personality issue with the camel in Morocco. What happened with that?

Ray Blakney: Yeah, so ironically, I love animals. I grew up with dogs. I like cats, though I'm allergic to them. You know, in general, I like all animals. They don't like me so much, especially when I travel. This was in Morocco. So, my wife and I did a wonderful trip from flew into Madrid, kind of did. Went to southern Spain and then took a boat across Gibraltar and spent, I'm going to say, three or four weeks in Morocco at the end of that. Part of that was this amazing trip we did in the Sahara. It was three days to night that we did in the Sahara Desert. And part of it is you kind of get on a camel and they take you to these different "Bedouin camps" that are there. So just to set the scene, we're driving down this highway in southern Morocco. And it's surreal, right, because you look to the left and the right and it's essentially just there's nothing there. It doesn't look like a Sahara Desert yet because it's not sand, but it's just like mud flats.

Everything is like totally flat with, like nothing to tell you. Not even like a cactus to tell you that there's anything different. There's in a random part of the road. Our driver just takes like, swerves off the road, goes to the left. And we've been with a guy for a few days now, so I kind of trusted him, but it was still kind of like, wait a minute, if somebody's going to kidnap us, this is the spot, right? Because I have no idea where we're at. So, you know, he just turned off on a random part of the road. So, we're driving there for, like, 10 minutes. Suddenly, in the distance, kind of like a mirage, we see this random, like, adobe house. I'm not even going to say hut, because it was actually huge, kind of coming out of this, like, mud flat. And as we pull up, we see there's, you know, dozens of camels out front and a few other tour vans, so to speak. The way it works in Morocco is you take private vans all over the place, but you kind of tend to see the same people along the stop. So, you know, we were in this pirate SUV, and it kind of pulled up there, and we saw about six or seven other private SUVs.

They take us out, you know, sign some paperwork, and they say, okay, here are all the camels. Let me introduce you to yours. So, they bring me over and they show me this camel. And the camel guy, Bedouin nomad, said, you know, who spoke like, 15 languages, was incredible. Said, this is Jimmy. He's going to be your camel. Don't worry. Jimmy's a super tame camel. You just go on and enjoy your ride. My wife gets on her camel. I don't even remember that camel's name because, you know, nothing interesting happened over there. So, we start walking along and, yeah, for the first, maybe 10, 15 minutes, Jimmy was the perfect camel, right? You know, I'm kind of there, holding on, then suddenly, out of nowhere, he dips the camel equivalent of bucking right where he. His front legs go all the way down. I'm almost thrown off the front of him onto a sand dune. He did that because there was a patch of grass down there, and apparently, he was hungry, right? But they don't just put their heads down.

The whole front of their body goes down. Little did I know that that was what was to come for the rest of the trip, right? Because literally, he did that for every 15 minutes for the next two days while my wife was sitting there on her camera on her camel, taking all these beautiful photos of everything in the Sahara Desert. I'm holding on to the camel saddle for dear life, hoping that I don't come out of this with a broken neck. And every time it happened, like, everybody laughed like, it was the biggest thing. Okay. In retrospect, it was actually kind of funny. But at the time, I was like, this is really exhausting. I mean, I was dripping sweat when we got to the camps at night, I spent the whole day hanging on to Jimmy. So that was Jimmy trying to kill me.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know that you have spent a bunch of time in Morocco. I have as well. I've spent over a month there. I've been a couple times. But you've actually been to some places in Morocco that I have not been that are really high on my list, including the town of Chefchaouen. And I'm wondering if you can just share a little bit about that place for folks that have never heard of it and what that was like.

Ray Blakney: That is an amazing place. Most people have never heard of it, myself included. Right. So, I've traveled a lot, but I had never heard of foregone Morocco, but I had seen it, right? So, if, you know, you guys have probably seen photos of Chefchaouen either on National Geographic, even some travel ads on Facebook, right? Because it's so picturesque that people just, like, use stock photos of it to show travel. Right. I'm like, these, like, one of the places you should see. So, Chefchaouen is up in the mountains in Morocco, right? So, we came into Tangiers from there. We got on a van, and we kind of started driving. We hit up the Chefchaouen. It's famous for two things; one, it's a UNESCO World Heritage site, right? So, it's been there for hundreds of years. But really what makes it famous is every single building in that town is painted sky blue, this beautiful sky blue. And there's two reasons why they explain that is the first is that apparently the sky blue keeps the town a lot cooler. You're in the mountains, but it still can get kind of hot up there. We're not like, super high up in the mountains. It's kind of built on the side of a mountain, so it's kind of. You kind of see it just kind of coloring in blue.

The second thing is, apparently that color of blue is supposed to scare away mosquitoes, so that's why they've kept it there. Now, I didn't see any mosquitoes while we were there, so maybe it's working. But I don't really associate mountains with mosquitoes anyway, so maybe there wouldn't have been mosquitoes if everything was painted white as well. But it's a beautiful town. You can spend all day walking around in it. They're beautiful Airbnbs that people have set up. Definitely, definitely worth a visit. It's a little out of the way from the normal tourist sites though, so you kind of have to make an effort to get there.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome, man. Definitely super high on my list. Well, Ray, I want to go all the way back now and learn a little bit about your background and your upbringing. I feel like you were almost born as a world traveler. Can you tell us a little bit about your background and where you grew up?

Ray Blakney: Yeah, so you're absolutely right. I mean, I was got on my first plane when I was nine months old. You know, I've talked to other people since then and they remember their first plane ride. By the time I was five, I'd been to 20 or 30 countries. I mean, I have no memory of the first time I ever got on a plane. I have no memory of a time where I wasn't flying around the world. I can't take any credit for that. Of course, it was my parents who did it. As a five-year-old, I didn't decide, hey, I want to be a digital nomad and let's go travel around the world, right? They just took me along and I had to go for the ride. So, I was born in the Philippines. My dad was a U.S. peace Corps volunteer. So, kind of to picture it, he's a, you know, six foot three, blonde, blue eyed, Boston Irish guy and he goes to the Philippines, he meets my mom who's a five-foot one Filipino lady. They get married after six weeks. I did not find that out until I was like 30 years old.

But they literally met and got married within a six-week period. And my dad finished up his Peace Corps in the Philippines. So, I was actually born during his last few months in the Peace Corps. So, I actually joke that I was a Peace Corps volunteer for the first three months of my life.

They lived there for a little while longer and about nine months old, with a stopover in the United States, my parents got a job in Istanbul, Turkey. So around one and a half, give or take a few months, I moved to Istanbul, Turkey. And that's where I spent the next 15 years. We would travel a lot, but that was kind of the home base where I lived. Technically speaking, my first language is Turkish, my second language is Filipino and my third language is English, which looks great on your college SATs. When you score really well on the verbal section and you're like, no, it's technically not, but let's be honest, I've spoken English my whole life. So, it's, you know, I am a native English speaker. Add a little bit into that, that my dad actually grew up in Rhodesia, Zimbabwe, in Africa. So, you know, he might be American, but he didn't grow up in the United States. My grandfather was born and grew up in China, in Peking, back then Beijing, right now, back in the, that would have been like in the 40s or something like that, right.

So, he kind of. Right before the, the Maoist revolution came in, my grandfather was there. My great grandfather was a teacher, a professor at Harvard who was doing a year sabbatical at the Peking University when all of that happened. My grandfather was born in China. Keep in mind they're all Boston Irish, blonde, blue eyed, you know, so kind of weird, strange background in there. I moved to the U.S. finished up high school, 15 years old, went to college, worked in Silicon Valley for a bit, Fortune 500 companies. And then when I was about 26, I was like, yeah, just doesn't feel right being in the U.S. I'm used to being an expat. So, I quit my job. I also joined the Peace Corps, sent me to Mexico, where I've been for the last 14 years. And that's where I'm at now.

Matt Bowles: Wow. Well, first of all, we should note that you and I both went to college in Cleveland, Ohio. So big up to the land. I'm curious, with your experience coming to the United States, right. Having grown up your whole life in Turkey, having traveled so much around the world, what was that immigration experience like for you, coming and living in the United States and then eventually going to college in Cleveland?

Ray Blakney: Yeah, so great question. So, when I moved back to the United States, I was junior and senior year in high school and I went to a boarding school. My parents were still in Turkey. It was probably the biggest culture shock to date that I've had in my life was actually moving back to the United States. And the reason being I sound American, right. If you heard me on the phone, you would never think anything other than this guys from the U.S. Right? But culturally, I'm actually not very good at being American. Right. Because I'm 40 years old and I've lived 27 of those years outside of the United States. So, I have a lot more culture. I've lived more in Mexico and Turkey than I've ever lived in the United States. So, when I moved back when I was 15, having grown up in Turkey, I went to the American school. So, you know, English wasn't an issue, the education wasn't an issue. But again, dating myself, this was pre-Internet, pre-Netflix, pre all that kind of stuff.

So, I didn't really know U.S. Culture, right. I had never been to date. I've never been to an American football game. I'd only been to one baseball game in my life. And that was when I was, like, 10. And I didn't get the cultural references right. People would make jokes from friends, right. Just talking about it. This was in the 90s, and I wouldn't even know what friends was. I'm like, you know, so they would make, like, cute things. So, I really felt like an outsider when I went to a U.S. High school. Not that they were, you know, picking on me or anything like that. It was just that I did not fit into this culture at all. I'm more comfortable, I'm finding now, as an adult. And looking back, I feel more comfortable in cultures where I'm not supposed to fit in.

So, being in Mexico, I speak Spanish, but I'm not a native Spanish speaker. So, if somebody says a Mexican joke and I don't understand, they don't look at me weird like they did in the United States. Because he's a foreigner, he's not supposed to get the jokes if I do. Bonus. But nobody looks down on me when I don't kind of get the humor, the cultural references. In the U.S. I felt like they did. It was like, wait, you're American, but you don't get it. So now I feel much more comfortable being an expat. I'm kind of a professional expat. I plan on probably remaining this way for the rest of my life, is I feel much more comfortable in places where I'm not supposed to know what's going on, as opposed to the United States.

Matt Bowles: Now, by the time you got to the U.S. you had done more international world travel than most people do in an entire lifetime. What impact do you think all of that travel had on you up to that point in your life?

Ray Blakney: Yeah. So, another great question. So, I've been to about 50 countries in my life. I never counted, like, which one was before I went to the U.S. and which ones were after I went to the U.S. but I've been to about 50 different countries in my life. And one of the things that's always struck me, because I would. Wherever I would go, I'm introverted, but I'm very outgoing. So, I have, you know, I no trouble going out, meeting people, and I would make friends. And it struck me how similar all of these people were. If we spent three months in a country and I made friends with the neighbor's kids, I'd go and play with them. Even if we didn't even speak each other's language, you know, we'd go out and play and it was fine. So, what I realized through all of that is, like, we're not that different. I mean, you know, a kid who's in Africa is not that different from a kid who's in the U.S. Who's a kid who's in Chile and a kid who's in Thailand. We all kind of same general things that extends to when we're adults. If you get away from politics, if you get away from, like, the rhetoric on the high level. If you talk to a person on the street in Afghanistan, another one in India, another one in Germany, they want a house, they want food, they want safety for them and their families.

Growing up that way made me realize that, you know, we are so much more similar than we are different. Despite what a lot of other people think or a lot of people kind of tell us to think, most human beings are almost exactly the same desires. So, a lot of these conflicts and discrimination, like, you know, racism to me is utterly incomprehensible. Just because when you meet people from all around the world and see how similar they are, I'm like, where you nitpick at a certain thing and distinguish people, you know, I don't know, you're blond, I black hair or whatever. I mean, it's just totally arbitrary. The world is a small place. We're all the same. It's a little cheesy, but, like, why can't we all get along? We're really not that different from each other is what I learned growing up in that way.

Matt Bowles: And then when you got to the U.S. and then you went to college, and then you went into sort of the corporate career track. Can you talk about that experience and what it was that made you decide to take a different path and go into the Peace Corps?

Ray Blakney: Yeah. So, I love my parents. They're very well meaning. I come from a family of academics, right. So going to college. I remember this event in high school, right, where they brought everybody in for to talk about drugs, right? So, they had people who would recover from drugs to come and give us a talk. And at one point in that, they split us all into these smaller groups of about 20 people. And this, keep in mind, this was a New England prep school, right? I mean, this. I was going to school with kids of senators and all the rest of it. And the guy who takes our group of 20 says, how many of you guys are thinking of going to college? And I remember all of us looking around the room confused, thinking like, well, everybody raised their hand is like, of course, what else do you do after high school, right? You go to college.

It wasn't until many years later that I realized how strange that was, right? Because that's the environment I was brought up in. I bet you that guy gives the same speech in other schools where only 1 out of 10 people raise their hand. But in this particular environment, going to college for us was just the logical continuation of going to high school. You're not done with school until you go to college. The reason I bring that up is that's not the end for a lot of us who are in that, because what do you do after college is you go and get a good job and you work at that company for the next 30 years. That's the logical continuation to go into college. That was the path I was on, right? Nothing wrong with it. So, I graduated from college. I was a computer engineer, technically, I guess I still am, but I learned coding. So, I went and worked in Silicon Valley for a little bit. Then I worked for some fortune 500 companies writing code. Why? Because that's what you're supposed to do after college, right? You get a secure, well-paid job.

It wasn't until about five or six years into it that I realized something was missing though, right? I mean, I had a good job, I had a nice car, I had a condo. What do you get? I get a raise next year. I buy a nicer car, nicer condo, and, you know, bigger plasma screen TV for my wall. Or living quote, the quote unquote American dream. But I kind of felt that something was missing. So, there were a few events that happened in the course of a few days that kind of got me on the path that I am right now. The first one was, and we talked about this before. I was at a Halloween party in the Blind pig on East 9th in Cleveland, Ohio, drunk, standing on the stage. I was not performing, just nobody was on the stage and the floor was full. So, a bunch of us were standing on the stage, right? And I remember looking out over the crowd in kind of a drunken haze and, and having this weird thought where kind of a lot of my friends, I was 25, some of my friends were 5, 10 years older than me. And I was kind of seeing them out there in the crowd.

And I remember thinking, I know that they've been in this bar for the last five, 10 years doing exactly the same thing with the same people. And while there's nothing wrong with that, I was just sitting there. I'm like, do I really want to do that for the next 10 years? And I was like, no, I don't. So, I went into work the next day and hungover. But at 25, you can go into work hungover and still function at 40. Trust me, for your young ones out there, that does not happen anymore. If I go to work drunk, I'm out for, like, three days right now. So, I go to work the next day. And I was a team lead, but my boss came over and kind of invited me, like, hey, another team lead we're going to give. He's celebrating, you know, an anniversary at the company. So come on over. We have, you know, like, food and stuff like that. So I go into this room, and they put out the typical, you know, cheese and fruit platter, this big platter with, like, grapes and cheese and stuff on it.

The other team lead comes over. He's in his 50s, and I think the CTO, somebody really high up in the company, comes in, gives them a plaque and a watch, and says, thank you for 30 years of dedicated service to our company. And I remember staring at him like, look, I know he makes six figures. He's probably comfortable. He's, you know, he has a nice house. He's supporting his family. I don't want to get that plaque 30 years down the road. I do not want to be here doing exactly the same thing I'm doing right now. Get that plaque. And the third kind of strike, or the final thing. There was around that time, there was a commercial on TV for the U.S. Navy. And while all my respects to those in the armed services, if somebody starts shooting at me, I'm running the other way as fast as physically possible. So it wasn't that they necessarily. I was thought about, hey, I'm going to apply for the Navy.

But in the commercial, they had this one scene where these Navy SEALs in the night pull up on their little dinghy on the beach, right? So, like, the top is all black, and the bottom, all you see is these Navy SEALs on a beach. And a quote comes up the top of the screen, and it says, if they were to write a book about your life, would anybody want to read it? And I remember sitting there staring at it and thinking, wait, no. If I

continue on this path, absolutely not. I might live a decent life. I might live the American dream, but it's not the life anybody would want to read. About it's not the life I want to live. Literally, the next day, I went online and applied for the Peace Corps. Within three months, I had touched down in Mexico. I quit my job, sold all my stuff, and arrived in Mexico.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. Well, I want to talk to you about that initial Mexico experience, because I know that your Peace Corps experience was in Chiapas, and I have also been to Chiapas. I actually went down a few years before you went there, but I just went down for a short period of time. It was on a solidarity delegation. It was actually with. Through an organization called Schools for Chapas. And we stayed in the autonomous Zapatista communities in the Aguascalientes. And we were there basically to just do manual labor and help them to build schools so that they could teach their Zapatista curriculum and education in their own communities. So, it was an absolutely extraordinary experience and incredible to spend time in those communities. But I was just there for a very short period of time. You were in Chiapas for quite some time, and I would love to hear about how that experience was for you.

Ray Blakney: Yeah. So let me start by saying I was totally ignorant of Mexico, even though, you know, though we live in the U.S. and we're the country just in the north. Before moving to Mexico, my one exception was I was a frat boy in college and I went to Cancun spring break. And I can tell you, I probably did not see a single Mexican in the entire time I was there. Everybody speaks English. Everything was in dollars. That's not going to Mexico. So, when I first touched on a Mexico City, there was quite a few shocks. So, the first thing that happened is we fly into Mexico City and then they brought us to a city called Queretaro. So, the Peace Corps headquarters are in the city I actually live in right now.

My first observation when I came to Queretaro is like, wow, Mexico is not a third world country, despite what, you know, a lot of other people in, especially in the United States, might actually think it's part of the G20. It's one of the 20 richest countries in the world. There are more Teslas, Ferraris, and BMWs in the city than I see anywhere outside of, like, San Francisco, New York. So, it's definitely a wealthy country. That was my first impression of Mexico. Then they sent me to San Cristobal de las Casas. Now, keep in mind, Chiapas is the poorest state in all of Mexico. It competes with Oaxaca, like, every year. One of them beats the other one in being poor. But, you know, in general, it is one of the poorest states with a very, very high indigenous community. But that also makes it one of the most interesting places. Like most people in the U.S. have never heard of Chiapas, let alone San Cristobal de las Casas.

So, San Cristobal de las Casas, which is where I was stationed for two years in the Peace Corps, I was working at a science center out there, and the science center worked with the indigenous communities. I was working as computer engineers, so I didn't go out all the time, but I did have an opportunity to go out a few times over there, and we loved it. Like, my wife and I are still talking about retiring there because it's just this beautiful mountain village. It's in Mexico. They have some things called Pueblos Mágicos, like magical towns. And San Cristobal is one of the 30 towns in the country that have had that designation because it's just so beautiful to live out there. And it's almost not Mexico. Like, a third of the people there don't even speak Spanish right. They speak whatever their indigenous language is. And my level of Spanish now is probably higher than their level of Spanish is there, even though they're technically quote, unquote Mexican.

So that was the privilege of being stationed for two years. Made some amazing friends, got out to the Lacandon, you know, went out to Palenque, all the rest of it. Proposed to my wife, but she followed me out there. She was my girlfriend at the time, followed me out there. I proposed in Tikal, but technically,

according, you know, for the indigenous people, that's all still one country. So, I was technically still in Mexico for that. And that was what I spent my time doing for two years out there. Loved it. Probably two of the best years of my life.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit more about meeting your wife and how the two of you ended up founding a business together in Mexico?

Ray Blakney: Yeah, so my wife was my Spanish teacher in the Peace Corps. So, the Peace Corps hires a bunch of people to teach you the language and the culture, and she was one of the people that they hired. We actually started dating while I was, you know, training in Peace Corps. Even though it's technically against the rules for teachers to date their students, keep in mind, I think a third of the teachers ended up marrying Peace Corps volunteers. So, I was the first, but not the only one who's done it since then. It's more of like a don't ask, don't tell kind of thing. Like, don't get into trouble and no, you know, they're not really looking for you, but just don't get into trouble kind of thing.

So, we started dating there. I got stationed in Chiapas, so she followed me down. She's a Spanish teacher by training. So, there are a lot of Spanish schools positioned a very popular place to go to learn Spanish. So, she had no trouble finding a job. Right. She ended up working at three of the local schools and, you know, had more demand than she knew what to do with. And that's where we spent two years. So, we, you know, we would travel out every weekend, see what was out there at the end of the time. You know, I proposed to her, as I mentioned, in Tikal while we were on a trip over there and we were sort of talking about what do we want to do next. So, the easy option for us was, I'm a computer engineer, she's a bilingual teacher, we go back to the US we both probably get close to six figure jobs and we're fine.

But that put me back on the path I was before, right? Where I was comfortable, but nobody would want to read about it. She's actually the one who brought up the idea of, look, I've always dreamed of running my own school. She's one of those people that played being a teacher when she was five with her dolls. She knew she wanted to be a teacher since she was a kid. I was that, that kid in high school who everybody thought they would start his own business, but I always thought they were crazy, right? Because what are you talking about? I like computers. I'm going to do that. So, it didn't even occur to me, but I thought we met, we're like, okay, we're lucky to have great parents who, if, you know, things go bad, they'll take us in, we'll start again, we'll get jobs, we'll be fine. So why don't we try to launch a Spanish school? You know, the Spanish part. I can make a website. I thought that was enough. I mean, you know, we know nothing about business, but we'll figure that part out.

So, we launched our, our first school. We did market, you know, basic market research with unlimited knowledge. And we decided to come back to Canada where we were trained, and we launched our first school here. I learned something called SEO (*Search Engine Optimization*) on my last year. Peace Corps. You had a lot of free time with Peace Corps. And I was actually able to get our website to rank number one in the country. So, if you kind of want to come to Mexico to learn Spanish or Spanish schools in Mexico. Some we would show up number one in Google. But we weren't even open yet. Like, literally, we weren't even open yet. As a result of that, we were fully booked pretty much within two weeks of us opening the school. I only had \$2,000 in my bank account, so we used that to, like, rent and buy the basic furniture.

People would pay deposits and we would run out and buy more furniture. So, by the time they showed up the following week, we actually had furniture in some of the classrooms. That's how we built the school. We slept on the floor of the school because we couldn't afford to rent our own place. That was the first

three to six months of our school. But, yeah, we got fully booked pretty quickly. And, yeah, we're finally able to at least afford our own apartment, one studio apartment, within about six months.

Matt Bowles: That is amazing. And can you talk about the journey of building that business and then eventually, how did that evolve into [Live Lingua](#)?

Ray Blakney: Yeah. So, it's always interesting when I read those books about successful entrepreneurs, and it feels like they had this huge grand plan and everything just fell into place. Yeah, that's not me. So, if you guys are waiting for that story, you might want to switch to another podcast. When we launched the school, we never had a business plan. I've never written a business plan in my life. So, I wouldn't even know. I'd have to Google, like, business plan template and fill it out. If you asked me to fill one out today, I have no idea how to fill out a business plan. And it was the same thing there. So, we launched the school. I stumbled across SEO, got good at it, and, you know, we were fully booked.

A year into that, something called swine flu hit Mexico. For those of you who don't remember, it is what Covid is. We're recording this during COVID today. They thought that was going to be the next global pandemic. So, what did they, the international community, do they close down Mexico's borders, right? Nobody flying in or out. Our school was our brick-and-mortar school was built on the premise of people, you know, foreigners from other countries coming to Mexico and doing immersion with us. So, they would come here and we would put them with Mexican families, and we'd really immerse them in the Spanish language. And of course, if you cut out planes, our business pretty much died up, ironically, except for, like, four doctors who had already reserved and they thought the whole thing was crazy. So, they came down anyway. So, we only had like four doctors for that week. But that wasn't enough for us to pay our rent and let alone pay our teachers who are contractors who got paid every week they needed the salary to pay their food and their rent.

So, it was actually my wife who had the first, the first idea, which is why don't we contact our former students who studied us for the last year and see if they want to take classes with us over Skype. We always got fantastic reviews at our school as far as the quality of the education. So, I sent out an email expecting one or two students and out of like 150, we had like 30 of them. 40 Of them said yes. I was surprised, like, wow, maybe there's something going on here. So, I threw up a dinky little website. I mean, it was like five pages. I am a programmer, not a graphic designer, so it looked awful. And I'm like, let me throw it up. Throw up some SEO and see if anybody signs up for this thing. And I was shocked that within like three months, well, within like 30 days, the first person signed up.

Within three months we were getting like a sign up every single day. You know, not a huge amount. That's 30 students a month. But you know, we were running a small business where we had like 20 or 30 students a month anyway. I mean, you know, it's coming to our brick and mortar. Maybe 50 in the high season. So, I'm like 30. That's pretty good. Within six months, we were making more money on that online like side hustle than we were on our brick-and-mortar business. It wasn't called [Live Lingua](#) back then, but that's how we started the business. From there I, you know, I threw up a website that offer English lessons, then French lessons, German lessons, and you know, grew up to 11 languages on 11 different websites. And that's what became [Live Lingua](#) today.

Matt Bowles: Wow. Can you talk a little bit about the process of that scaling that you did with [Live Lingua](#)? And I'm curious about sort of the journey. And as you started to build and hire a distributed team, how did that whole process evolve for you?

Ray Blakney: You'll see the theme that I don't really plan these things out. So again, I'm not going to say that I knew what was going to happen. So basically, my philosophy is what right now is in, I think, Eric Reese, Lean Startup. That's kind of what I've been doing for the last few years for all of my businesses. And that's the philosophy I've kind of had since the beginning for [Live Lingua](#), it was the same thing. When we started off, it was me doing the website. My wife was the first teacher, right? And then we had a few teachers from the school. But that really became impractical really, really quickly because the school swine flu did not become a big thing. So, within a month, our school was full again.

And suddenly all these teachers that were teaching online didn't have any availability. So, what did we do? First thing we did was we needed to find more teachers. First step was we used my wife's network. She taught at Spanish schools all around Mexico. She contacted her friends. We got like three or four teachers that way. I'm like, but that wasn't scalable. So, we put ads on Craigslist all over, like Mexico, and started trying to get teachers that way. So, we got a few more teachers that way. Then we expanded to all of Latin America, got a few more teachers that way. We had no CRM system back then, so we were using Skype. We would use Google Docs Excel spreadsheet, where you would have to go in there and report your logs, your classes on an Excel spreadsheet. Then I would have to manually go into every single one and count for every student. So, it wasn't one teacher, one spreadsheet. Every student had a spreadsheet. And one teacher could have 20 students.

So, like 100 teachers. I would manually count how many hours they taught every single month so that I could send them the salary via PayPal. People would pay us via PayPal, but it wasn't integrated on the website. I would manually send them an invoice when they said they wanted 10 hours. I mean, it was the most ghetto setup you've ever seen in your life. And that's how we started. We actually scaled to low mid six figures that way. I mean, we got up to about half a million doing that. At that point, I'm like, wait, Ray, you're a programmer. What are you doing? So, I started, right? I finally wrote my own CRM system and payment system integrated into the website and all the rest of it. But that was like five years into our building. I mean, we did everything manually for the first five years to scale.

Matt Bowles: All right, so let me ask you another really foundational question about what you're describing. How did you run this business with your spouse and have your wife as your business partner, but also balance your family life and date nights and all of that kind of stuff? I'm really curious. Any tips also from your experience that you have for folks about running a business with a spouse.

Ray Blakney: Okay, tip number one, don't do it. Let's move on to tip number two. We got lucky, I think, right? So, if you're going to run a business with your spouse, be ready for two possible outcomes, and one is much more probable than the other one. First one is divorce, and I think that's 80% of the cases. Otherwise, you come up with a super strong relationship at the other end, which is 20% of the cases. If I was a betting person, you do not want to be betting on the 20%. We got lucky that I think that's where we ended up. But in hindsight, that was not part of the plan. One of the keys that I think to our success was pure luck. We had very, very different skill sets. And just from the beginning. Now, don't get me wrong, the first year, we actually argued a lot because we started the business in the same place. We got married. I mean, you know, we got married and had to deal with that and starting a business within like the same week.

When you get married, you're dealing with those issues and then you starting a business as well. We separated the division of work very clearly. I'm marketing and business. She's education. She doesn't know anything about marketing and business. I don't know anything about education. So luckily, that helped us

out a lot. There was very little stepping on each other's feet because if somebody came for an education thing, I was not going to say one thing and then have to be contradicted by my wife. Because I don't know to this day, I mean, through osmosis of 15 years of running education companies, I might know some stuff now, but I'm still not a teacher. I'm an awful teacher. So, I would never kind of, if she has an idea about teaching, I would never contradict her. She'd do the same for business and marketing. For me, she just, you know, she's like, ray, you take care of that. I don't have to worry about it. That was key number one.

Key number two is, so I was lucky to marry a Latina. And there's one thing that Latinos know how to do, and that is argue. And I actually say that as a good thing. So, I'm going to stereotype here. But in the U.S., we're generally taught to avoid conflict, right? You don't want to start arguments and all the rest of it. Part of the problem with that in a relationship, though, is it's not uncommon that, you know, there are these little things that Bother you for years. And then it's kind of, you know, like as one of those steam pots, you get to a point and explodes and you start saying, for the last five years I've put up with you putting the socks on the floor when you should have been or something like that, right? And I think that's what really hurts relationships because you can't go back and change what you've been doing for five years at that point.

Even though those individual things are, you know, are not that big a deal, once you start adding them all together, they become a big deal in Latin America. With Latinas, they're actually much better blowing off steam. She would yell at me when I put the socks in the wrong place the first time. Now that's not going to be a relationship ending big argument. You know, as an American, the first time I was like, wait, what are you making such a big deal? It's just a sock, right? But over the years I've learned the benefit of that. Every time a little thing, she taught me how to do this and a little thing bothers me, I tell her. And we might argue about it in the moment, but that way nothing becomes this huge overarching argument that becomes relationship killing in the long term. So those are the two things, separating it as best you can and voicing any issues you have in the moment and not letting them build up in a long term.

Matt Bowles: So, I also want to ask you about another massive piece of this whole thing, which is the HR part of building a company, hiring the right people and managing a distributed team over the years and the businesses that you've done this with. Ray, what tips do you have for hiring remotely and managing a fully distributed team?

Ray Blakney: Okay, so for hiring I go through a general three step process that's worked really well with us for hiring over the years. But I also want to put the kind of counterbalance to that, that we don't overthink the process because some people are trying to create this perfect hiring process. Trust me, if you do that, you have a nine-figure business there. Because everybody in the world is trying to figure this hiring thing out, right? I mean, there's like nobody out there who's like, I got it. Every single hire I do is a rock star and I've never failed, right? They tell you that they're totally lying, right? So, our basic process for hiring is simple, right? You put up the job post, we're online. So, we put up the job post online, generally with one quick little Easter egg, right? So, make sure that they read it and they're not just sending the generic what's your favorite color? What's your 'my go to' is what's, you know, what's your favorite cand. I just want to know. I'm a candy guy. So, I'm like, yeah, what's your favorite candy? Include that with whatever else you send me. If you don't, boom, weed that person out right away.

Step number two is email questions. I have five email questions I send everybody. Doesn't matter what position they're in. I send that out to them that weeds out about. You'd be surprised. 50 To 60 of the people do not even answer your email questions. If you don't have the time to spend 15 minutes answering these questions, what am I going to waste my time interviewing with? They set the answers from that. We pick

two or three people to get to the interview process. Up to five depending on the position we're hiring for. And we interview those. That is our hiring process, right. And from that we take one three-month trial period. Usually, a lower salary for the first three months, getting the full salary after that once they get hired. Obviously, I do believe the quick-fire method and I can't say always do it. Sometimes I hate, you know, like any rational human being, I think I hate firing people because it's never fun. I mean there's no, you know, it's not something you're going to ever enjoy. But usually, it's the right thing.

I've never had a time where I thought I should fire somebody, give them six months more chance that they've, it's worked out. It's always been like I should have fired them six months ago. So, if you get to the point where, you know, maybe they didn't mess up once, but if it's just like this is just not working out, don't like necessarily continue to give them the same work and same work, hoping that they will change. I found that in very few cases that happens not because there's anything wrong with them, they just might not be a right fit for that particular position. So, by firing them, you're letting them find the right fit for another position that's out there as well. So that's one of the things we do for the hiring.

And then the final one is, you know, it's cheesy, but the vision of the company, make sure that everybody understands it and is moving towards the same goal, that gets rid of a lot of the conflicts that you're going to have. Even if there are personalities that clash that's how we do it. And that's how we've kind of kept our company going. We have a core team of nine people and 150 contractors that work with us. And as long as everybody stays aligned in there with clear kind of, you know, monthly KPIs and all the rest of it, which is pretty standard stuff. The team's pretty cohesive. We have very low turnover.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit more about the concept of company culture? You mentioned vision and alignment. What is, in your opinion, the importance of company culture and how do you create that in a fully distributed, completely remote company?

Ray Blakney: It all goes back to the initial hiring that we were talking about. Make sure you bring in the right people in the beginning. Right. And the second step, I kind of glossed over it. But a lot of the questions in there are actually culture questions that you don't even see as culture questions. Right. Where would you like to travel to? This is for our company. We're a distributor company. We teach language and all of us love to travel. So, if your answer is like, yeah, I don't really like traveling, sorry. I mean, that's not like a wrong answer per se, but it's not right for us. It might be right if you have a brick-and-mortar business and you want somebody to be there all the time. So, we go through that in the process.

Otherwise, it's listening to your people. I know there's all these things about, you know, setting the vision out, getting aligned. There's standard stuff. We have all hands meetings once a month where everybody shares and they have direct access to me that once a month in order to do it, they have my direct email when they need it. But generally, I ask them to kind of go talk to their direct reports instead of me. Unless it's a really bad thing that they need to talk about. But having that trust of communication, I think, has been key for us, for the culture.

The fact that they know they can contact me and my wife Laura, who runs the academic department, makes a huge difference in the culture of the company. We are not Ray and Laura driving their Ferraris while you guys do all the work and they get all the benefits. That creates a toxic culture in the company clear lines of communication trust across all levels. I'm going to say we have silos in the traditional sense, but not in communication sense, which means you can communicate with anybody at any level you want in the company and you should not feel upset or nervous in doing so.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit more about your leadership Style, Ray. And when you think about executive leadership in general, the tips that you have for people in terms of what makes a great CEO or a great executive leader.

Ray Blakney: Well, I'll start with the humble part and say I'm like, yeah, I'm still trying to figure that part out, but I do my best. So, the first one is going back to what we were talking about, the culture. And I, this is the key, not only in language learning but in business. It's the ability to, to listen. As I said, I have open lines of communication with everybody in the company. They know they can come to me about everything. One of the things I learned over the years especially is just to listen because I had to put my foot in the mouth so many times when I kind of, I talk instead of listen to people, right. Something goes wrong and I went and accused somebody and then you find out their mom died, right? You're like, oh, now I'm the bad guy. I mean, I, of course they're doing badly. If I just ask what's wrong, they would have felt better. I wouldn't have put my foot in the mouth. I mean, you know, there's all these kinds of things.

So, if I had to sum up one thing about being a good leader is knowing when to listen to others and trusting people who are better at their jobs than you are. Because this is especially for people who bootstrap businesses like me and startup people. It's very hard to pass responsibility on to others. Right. Because nobody can do that as well as me. You know, the ultimate startup bootstrapper fallacies. Like nobody is better at this is my business. So, nobody can do X better than I can. Nobody can answer those sales emails as well as I can. Nobody can update the website and write copy as well as I can. You have a physical product. Nobody packs that box as well as I pack that box before we take it to DHL. I mean, it's just these ridiculous things which if you say them out loud make absolutely no sense.

But this goes into my leadership philosophy of listening and trusting people to do what they want. I am not a very hands-on leader in the sense that, you know, I don't have time to micromanage you. You have a responsibility. I need you to get this done. We're virtual team, as you mentioned, all over the world. I care that you get your job though. I don't care if you took a three-hour lunch today to go to meet a friend at the beach, as long as you came back and you worked an extra hour at night. I mean, we don't have these kind of set nine to five hours. You need to take Friday off because you're taking your kid to school. Want, you don't want to miss their play. That's fine with me. I trust you to make up what you know the day you're going to make this up. You know, you're going to work Saturday. You decide yourself what that's going to be. And that has worked for us. But again, back to the hiring. We hire people who that works for. Some people need you to be hands on and they wouldn't, you know, my management style would not work for those people.

Matt Bowles: I want to go a little bit deeper with you on a couple tactical questions. You'd mentioned that at the very beginning of your business, it was SEO that really helped to catapult you. And any business owners who have been in business for any period of time know that SEO has changed over the years as Google has done all sorts of algorithm adjustments and different configurations and things of that nature. And it's kind of a moving target in many ways, although I'm sure some of the principles stay constant. But I'm wondering if you can share with us, Ray, today what are the highest leveraged SEO techniques that are working now that business owners should really focus on and pay attention to.

Ray Blakney: So, number one that I'd recommend for SEO is the smallest and easiest one is make sure you're on-page SEO is on, you know, right on. Because that's kind of something we have 100% control over. The rest of SEO, as you said, is kind of like, you know, black magic where Google doesn't really tell us what the rules are and we just kind of have to figure them out by ourselves. But on page is pretty, pretty standard. Make sure the links, internal linking to your page is going to the right place. Everything links that's there. You

can find checklists online for on page. And literally even if you're not a programmer, you can get somebody on Upwork for do that for like 100, 200 bucks. As long as your website not too big, right? So that's the first thing that I would do that still works today. You get your website, you know, working well, that'll work for you.

The second thing that you need to do for SEO is have great content because SEO is, there's debate, but you still need backlinks for SEO to work, which means other websites have to link to you. Back in the day, that was a lot easier when I started off. I've lost websites to SEO before, right. But back in the day you could just like spam forums and you had software that did all that and get links to go back to your money, quote unquote, money pages, your sales pages. And that would work these days Google's gotten a lot more sophisticated and that does not work anymore. But you can still build links. But you need to make sure that the page they're linking to adds a lot more value. Nobody's going to link to that. You're an Ecommerce site. Let's say nobody's going to link to your page where you're trying to sell your widget. There's almost no rational reason that somebody would link to that. But if you had another page which where you were explaining all the health benefits of X widget, that is something that people would link to. So that is what you have to do. Make sure you create some great content on your website.

Great content can be everything, whatever you're comfortable with. Videos are great content, podcasts are great content, articles are great content, infographics are. But even though they're getting a little kind of overused these days, so there's a lot of noise, you'd have to go through there. My favorite content trick is going and find something that the government has made in your industry. Right. Some report. If it was made by the government, I'm going to speak to the U.S. Audience and probably applies to other countries as well. If it's made by the U.S. Government, it is public domain, which means there is no copyright on that thing. So, all you have to do is go and take that report or whatever it was data statistic that the government came up with. And I guarantee the government's version looks like crap. And make it pretty, make it something that somebody wants to read and put it up there. The way I did it was through my time at the Peace Corps. I found out that the government's created all these cool language teaching programs over the years through the Foreign Service institute for the U.S. state Department and the Peace Corps.

That's all-public domain because taxpayer dollars paid for it. So, I filed a Freedom of Information act with the government, had them send me all their free courses, scanned them, threw them up online. And now I get links, what they call evergreen links, back to my website all the time because we have the only Kiswahili course in the world. We have like some languages. I don't even know where they speak it. Like, small group of people, like 5,000 people in the north part of Afghanistan speak a language and the U.S. Government Made a course for it. So, we have that on our website right now. So that is my favorite personal trick is find some stuff the government made and put it on your website prettier so people can get access to it. You'll get links without doing anything.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. So, Ray, at this point you have built multiple six figure and seven figure businesses. And when you reflect back on the process, maybe just advice to folks that are sort of starting out in their first business. What are the biggest leverage points for getting a bootstrapping a business? And the other thing I like about you is that you bootstrap your businesses. So, without raising investment capital and that kind of stuff for, for people that are trying to bootstrap a business, what are the biggest leverage points to getting that business into the six figure and seven figure realms?

Ray Blakney: Perfect. So, I actually have a process that I've done with all my businesses, but only in the last like 12 months, being on a few podcasts, have I actually said it out loud because it wasn't something I

consciously did. I have a few steps that I go through on every single business I launch which will lead into leverage points later. But without doing these steps, the leverage points are kind of irrelevant. Let me take a step back for a second. There are two types of entrepreneurs in the world, according to me, right? So, take it with a grain of salt. They're the visionary entrepreneurs, right? Those people who change the world and invent things we didn't even know we needed and make it for us, right? iPhone, right? Nobody was like, I need an iPhone. So, somebody built it. It was, here's an iPhone, suddenly all of us need it, right?

So, you know Steve Jobs does that. Space travel, right? You know, right now all these billionaires are going to space. It's kind of the same thing. There's not like a million people out there like, woo, I want to go to space. There's a number of us, like, that'd be kind of cool. But it's not like there's this huge market that's already there that people are looking for. They're building something that's there. I'm not that kind of entrepreneur, right? Those are the ones that write the books and everybody reads about. And I think that's why people get stuck in that mindset. The second kind of entrepreneur, and this is where I put myself into, is a lot less sexy and a lot less interesting. It's entrepreneurs who see a need that's either not being met or not being met well, and then they build something create something that meets that need or solves that problem. That's the kind of entrepreneur I am.

So, whenever I'm starting a business, the first thing I do is I see if there's anybody out there looking for it, right? Because I know there's a need. Is there already a market in place? I don't know how to create a market, but is there a market in place? How do you do that? It's simple. You go to Google AdWords, you type in, you know, whatever it is your product is. Pink flamingos, lawn flamingos or something like that. Look at how many people are looking for it, right? In the United States, whether, if you want to be local, internationally, if you want to be international about it. And my rule of thumb is calculating if you can sell to 1% of those. Just as the thought experiment, right? Figure out what your profit margin is. Figure out if you can sell the 1% of those, how much money would you make on that business, right? So, let's just go with pink lawn flamingos.

You go into Google and you figure out a thousand people a month. Look for that, I can sell the 1%, which is 10 of them. What's your profit margin on the lawn flamingos? If you figure out, I can make 5 bucks on lawn flamingos and sell 10 a month, \$50 a month, do you really need to launch that business? Probably not, right? But if you have like, I don't know, diamond lawn flamingos, and you're making 50,000 a month off of each one, you figure you can sell 10 of them. You're like, wait, that's a business I want to launch, right? So, people skip that step. They don't even calculate whether there's a market there first before they launch their businesses and whether that market will actually meet their needs. So, a lot of people spend years building this business. It's "successful" because they sell a lot, but they realize that doesn't even pay their rent, right? They just spent two years building something that absolutely had no way of being successful. So that's point number one in the business.

Next step is you look there, any competitors, right? So, you find something that actually makes money, go on Google and see if there's anybody else selling it. Because if you're like, oh, that makes, I don't know, look for books. You know, go to Google, you type in books. Oh, I'm going to sell books online. That's an amazing idea, right? And then so you're. Because you're like 10 billion people. Look for it a Month, I can sell the 1%. All the math works out. You go on Google and then you see Amazon, and then you see all these other Barnes and Nobles or what, you know, whatever other bookstores are out there. You can't compete with that. So, the next thing is you go in there, you find a niche that either has very few competitors. Two or three is fine because there's a market there, but not that many competitors.

And then the final question you ask yourself is, can I do better than what's already out there? Right. If your business idea is, I'm going to do exactly the same as those three people already in the market, don't do your business either. Right. Because what's the point? You need to have an offer either cheaper or better. I would strongly lean towards the better side because that means you can charge a premium, not the cheaper side, which is, you know, then it's just the race to the bottom and your profit margins will be really low. So those are the first three steps. Not quite leverage points, but those are the first three steps of launching a business. Once you do that, I always start with SEO because that kind of gets me in front of the right audience. I can sell. It's cheap. Well, it's free. If you're doing it yourself. It takes a lot of work, but it's free. That'll actually help you test the market.

If within a year it's not making an X amount of money for you with SEO, then you might want to ditch the idea. If it is, then you take some of the profit and you start putting it into paid ads. You start kind of growing out from there. That's the same step. That's the same process I've done with launching every single one of my businesses.

Matt Bowles: Well, you have also launched a podcast, learn Spanish with [Live Lingua](#), and you have catapulted it to one of the top language learning daily podcasts on iTunes. And I am really curious about your experience and your tactics and strategies for doing that. And maybe just start with explaining to people, like, what the podcast is and why you chose to launch it. And then I really would love to hear about what your tactics and strategies have been for building the audience that you have for it.

Ray Blakney: Okay. Yeah. So, the simple answer is it's a daily podcast that teaches you Spanish. Right. So, I am the host. And then we have some native Spanish speakers who do conversations and words, and depending on what each one of the episodes has their different exercises we do in all of them. The basic idea is that 365 episodes and we listen to all of it. It's serial in that sense, from the beginning to the end. You will be able to hold basic conversations in Spanish. It's the teaching method that's, it's around conversational Spanish from a marketing point of view, obviously it's the market life lingua. Because once you kind of get through this course, you might want to speak more Spanish than just the basics of the situations that are on the podcasts. How did I grow my audience? I figured out a way to hack the iTunes system to get into the top 100 podcasts pretty consistently across most of the world.

There are a number of things that rank you in iTunes. The two biggest ones though are download numbers and reviews, right? Then, you know, more downloads you have, the higher you go up. And the more reviews you have, the higher you go up. So, I figured most people release a podcast every single week if you're really ambitious. Because I've had a bunch of fail podcasts too, just to put some kind of context in there, right? So, I had weekly podcasts that nobody, my parents listened to it. Like three downloads, it was my mom listening to it three times, right? It's like nobody listened to those things. So, I'm like, let me try something else. That's "less work". So, what did I do? For the first phase of it, my wife and I rented a cabin in the mountains on a Lake for two weeks and I recorded 170 episodes in two weeks. Sounds big, but not quite as big when you think about them.

My episodes are two to four minutes long each. I wrote them in a week and then I recorded them all in a week. Then I hired some voice actors to do like the Spanish speaking parts of it. The beauty of it is then I went and found somebody to edit the audios because as you know, Matt, podcast editors are expensive. Audio editors are cheap. So, I'm not asking you edit podcast episodes. I need you to edit audio. So, for 500 bucks, I got 160 podcast episodes edited and then I launched one every single day. So, in two weeks I made the entire podcast and I'm like, let me just start launching it every single day. And that's what did it

like. People started listening. One person subscribes. When you subscribe to it like every day, it's like they're downloading three new episodes, right? Once you hit subscribe on iTunes.

And since I have new episodes all the time, literally if you're just subscribed to me, you have like, 21 downloads for one person. I have subscribed to me by the end of each week. How long would it take you to do that? For somebody who launches one a week, it would take them 21 weeks to do what I do in a week. So those numbers are what helped. So, we did that. I did, you know, some emails to my mailing list, shared it with people. In one year, we've gotten a little over 300,000 downloads. So, it's about 12 months old, and it's 300,000 downloads. So, after the first six months worked, I created a bunch of more episodes. And honestly, I'm never going to record again. I've already recorded.

So, all we do is we launch on January 1st. And the only difference is on the January 1st, my episode says, welcome to 2022 to learn Spanish with [Live Lingua](#). We have one year of Spanish with you, and we're going to go and teach you Spanish over the next 365 days in chunks of two to four minutes. That's it. Then I release exactly the same episodes for the next 364 days. I've already recorded that through the next 10 years. I already have the 2022-2023-2024-2025 audios ready. They're sitting in Google Docs. And when we're ready to, one of my assistants goes in there, is going to launch the next six months of podcast, and we're done. I will never have to record another podcast again. And we're hoping to hit a million in four years.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. And how do you market the podcast? How do you alert people that the podcast is available and they should subscribe to it? How do you get it in front of more people?

Ray Blakney: I don't need to anymore. We're in the top 100 in iTunes, people just find us. If you type in Spanish, learning podcast will be one of the top five results that are there. We have not too many, but 50 to 100 reviews on there. People see you. I have some good copy on the description of the. You know, we had a professional cover made with our branded logo, Learn Spanish in two to five minutes a day. People like, oh, that's interesting. So, they go and listen to it. They subscribe. Hopefully I make it kind of fun for people to learn. And that's it. So initially I sent it to the mailing list, and I did a little bit of Facebook ads at the beginning, like a month's worth, like a thousand bucks just to kind of get that initial push. To get us in the top 100. And we've never gotten lower than that.

And there's some of those tools that are out there. I'm like, shout out to my fans in Jamaica because we're like number three in Jamaica for language learning. I have no idea why. And they're like, Kazakhstan. We're like top 10 for a while. Good for you. I don't know why you're listening over there, but once you get to the top, it's kind of easier to stay there. The way that the algorithm works, right, the more people listen, the higher you go, which means the more people listen. So now that we kind of did that initial jump, you know, just that thousand buck investments to just get kind of get that first thousand listeners in there, I've never had to spend another penny on keeping us up at the top.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. And you have also launched a podcast related business called [Podcast Hawk](#). Can you talk a little bit about what the service offering is there, who it's for and what it does?

Ray Blakney: Yeah, absolutely. So apparently all my best business ideas come up during pandemics because, you know, [Live Lingua](#) launched during the swine flu podcast talk was actually inspired by the beginning of the COVID pandemic. So, when Covid hit [Live Lingua](#) grew 40% in a month, right. Everybody was stuck at home. They're like, well, I might as well learn Spanish, Chinese, German. So, people were coming into the business and I wanted to try to get in front of new audiences, right? We have our own

podcast working pretty well, but I wanted to get in front of new audiences. And one of the things that it kind of worked relatively well for me in the past is appearing on podcasts. I hadn't done too many. I'd been on like 30 over a course of five years. Like you, you know, you meet people, you get introduced, you're on their shows. Not no kind of outbound marketing on my end.

So, I figured I'm like, huh, let me go and find some more podcasts to get on, right? People are looking for language learning right now. Let me get on some podcasts. Let me get in front of some new audiences. So, like everybody else, the first thing I did was I googled it. Like podcast to be guests on. Yeah, that doesn't work. You get half the podcasts are inactive and otherwise the iTunes comes up. I mean, it's just ridiculous. There's like, there's nothing that really helps. I'd heard there were agencies out there that get you booked on podcasts. So, I reached out to a few of them, like, ah, that should work. They came back to me, the prices ranging from like two to \$5,000 to get me on five shows. And I remember talking to them, so, wait, are we talking like Tim Ferriss, Joe Rogan? They're like, no, these are other, you know, more middle range shows. I'm like, are there any listeners? I'm like, we can't guarantee that.

So, I remember thinking, I'm like, wait, you might be getting me on a show that some kid is doing in his basement that nobody listens to and I'm paying you a thousand dollars to get me booked on that? In respect to the podcast bookers, they do have a little higher standard than that, but they just don't guarantee anything past that. And I was like, no, I'm not going to pay \$5,000 for it. I mean, you know, this is an investment for me. It's a marketing tool. I need to make back a thousand ten at least for every thousand I spent, or something like that, right? I need to get a return on my investment. And they could not guarantee anything like that. So, I started looking around. I'm like, this is crazy. There are all these amazing podcasts out there. I know as a podcast host who looked for guests for a while, it was sometimes hard for me to find guests, right? I mean, you know, once you go through your own network and all the rest of it, if you're not at the top tier podcast with a thousand people applying every single day to be on your show, it's really hard to get on them.

So, I went out there and I spent a week in this computer programmer, really rusty right now. Is there any way I can get every podcast in the world into a database? And I'm like, wrote some code. I'm like, yeah, I can do that. It didn't finish in a weekend, but I just physically, I'm like, it is possible for me to do that, right? It took multiple months to finish that process. Can I get the email information of all these podcasts? And I, you know, spent a few days doing it. I'm like, yeah, looks like I can do that too. Now the emails, there's a few little things and we have some proprietary stuff for cleaning up emails and we even have humans look at it and all the rest on our back end of Podcast Dog as well. But in theory we can do that. So, what we've done in podcast talk, I spent a year building the system is we've built a system where you can go in there, Matt, let's just say you want to get on podcasts. I know you're, you know, interested in real estate, right?

So, I want to get on real estate podcasts. And I challenge everybody who kind of hears it, okay, go to Google now and look for some real estate podcasts. If I'm doing demo calls, meanwhile, I go into podcast talk and I go in there and I say, okay, we allow these multiple search filters. So, you can say, give me every podcast in the world that has the word real estate in the description, has launched an episode in the last 30 days, has at least 50 episodes, has at least 4.5-star ratings. We have all these search criteria. You can just add as many as you want and then I hit search and within five seconds, usually a lot less. I will give you every podcast in the world that meets those criteria. Every single one. Some of them are inactive, of course, but you can tell when was the last release date, right? So, you will filter all those inactive ones out for you. You

don't have to go through it. But we take it a step further than that, right? Because initially when I did that, I'm like, cool. And then I downloaded like 200 emails.

Now I got to do that myself and find an email software which charged me a hundred dollars a month to send emails out to these people. I'm like, that's not practical either. So, what you go in there is you go in and you just pick all the podcasts you like from our list. You can pick 5,000, for example, right? You just go in there like real estate. I'll get rid of the ones I don't like and leaves me with 4,000 podcasts on real estate that I want to appear on. You click on a button that says create campaign and we actually build the email sequence for you and you can even customize it. So, right. Hi, first name. And you can actually go into the top-rated ones and customize those, while the lower rated ones get your more generic pitch. We'll do the three day follow up; a seven day follow up. They don't answer a 14 day follow up. If they don't answer those as well. And it's set and forget.

So, if you went in there today, you spent like an hour, you went and got all the podcasts on real estate in the world because we continue to check. So, we'll just keep on adding them to your list. List. If they meet your criteria, you set up your campaign, you hit save, and depending on your plan, we, we pitch 25, 50 or 100 of them every single Month. Now, that might not sound like a lot, because in the beginning we were offering 100 to everybody. But if you write, find the right niche, people get 30% response rate. So, yeah, I did the test in the beginning for travel podcast just because I did the, you know, I was testing it myself and I'm like, I'm an email marketer. If you get 2 to 3% response, that's usually good. So, let's email 100. I'll get on two or three shows. Yeah, I got on 34 shows in one email blast. So, I was in there like, oh, my God.

I mean, literally for the next 30 days, I was like doing two shows a day for like the rest of the month. It was crazy. So that's why we have the lower planet 25. That'll pretty much get you on a show every week. If you go on the mid-tier plan, it'll get you on a, you know, two shows a week and you get the higher tier plan. It'll probably get you on a show every single day, all day, and then you'll burn out at that plan. But some authors would like that, right? But they just need to get on a lot of press release at the same time. That's what that plan's for. So, we set it for you once. Let's say you do it, Matt, lowest level plan. You set it up, you put 5,000 in there at the lowest plan. That means you have enough podcasts to pitch for the next five years. You just let it go running, and every week you're going to have something arriving your inbox saying, yeah, Matt, we'd love to have you on your show. Yeah, Matt, we'd love to have you on the show. That's all you have to do.

Matt Bowles: That is absolutely brilliant and amazing. And as someone who has gone through all of those laborious processes that you're describing, this is an absolutely incredible, groundbreaking development in the industry. Let me just say that and commend you on that as a podcaster, because by the way, folks, we are going to put the link to podcast talk in [the show notes](#) for this episode. So, if you are interested in the service, you just go to [the show notes](#) at [themaverickshow.com](#), go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. We'll have the link there where you can check out the service. So let me ask you this now, Ray, at this point, you are running multiple concurrent six and seven figure businesses. I want to ask for your tips on how you optimize your productivity.

Ray Blakney: I'll start with saying I'm a martial artist, right. So, I'm actually. I love processes. I love things to be repetitive in a way, predictable. And that's how I optimize my productivity. If anybody asks when my superpower is, it's really boring. It's this discipline. I wake up in the morning, you know, me and my wife go to the lake, we do yoga in front of the lake, we come back, I can tell you what I'm doing every minute of every day, every single day. I eat the same lunch every Monday through Friday. This week is, you know, salmon with rice and a salad on the side. That's how we optimize it. Kind of going into the Mark Zuckerberg

thing of like using gray sweatshirts every day, I take it to the next level. I don't think about what I do every day. I know what I'm doing at every hour of every day of every week.

I only have meetings on Tuesday and Thursdays. You know, I, I do certain things on certain days. That is how I keep everything under control. My whole, all the teams and all my companies know that. That's when my times are. This is when I'm available. You can email me. As I mentioned, everybody in the company has direct contact to me, but I will only answer you on these two days unless it's like a super big emergency. And that is how I optimize my time. So, to get the most done, make sure your routine is as boring as physically possible and that will take your productivity to the next level. Nothing kills productivity as something that's not planned. Coming in the middle of the day and just kind of totally taking you off on another direction.

Matt Bowles: And what are your stress management techniques in terms of not only protecting your time, but your emotional energy as well, which is of course very important to be productive.

Ray Blakney: Absolutely. So, there's two sides. So, the first one is I hit people over the head with a stick twice a week and I get hit over the head with a stick twice a week so that nothing helps with the stress as much as that. For those who are looking at want to look into that a little bit more. It's called kendo. It's a Japanese martial art, which is sword fighting. But wow, I feel great after coming out of that. And the second thing is I have an 18-month-old and I spend two hours with him every single night. That's non-negotiable. From 7 to 9, it's daddy time. I take care of him, gives my wife a chance to rest as well. And I take care of him. And that nothing grounds you as much. Because as entrepreneurs, we're always worried about six months from now, 12 months from now, a year from now, as spending time with the baby. Because they are fascinated by that little stain on the carpet. And they will just sit at it and laugh and stare and point at it for all that time. And you're sitting there, I'm like, why am I worrying about six months from now when something that little can bring so much joy to somebody? I need to learn from that. So those are the two things that I use for that. I also meditate every morning when we go to the lake, and that helps keep me grounded as well.

Matt Bowles: Before we move into the final section of *The Lightning Round* here, I wanted to ask you one more question. See if you can elaborate a little bit, because you are actually a semiprofessional sword fighter. Can you talk a little bit about the history of that and your relationship with kendo and what that means to you at this point in your life?

Ray Blakney: Kendo has been a huge part of my life for years, right? So I was that little geeky Asian kid who got picked last for the PE team all the way through high school, right? So, like a lot of kids like that, we always kind of go towards those martial arts movies, right? I think we're inspired by that. Again, the little geeky kid who learns martial arts. I grew up in the 80s and 90s and those kinds of movies were like really popular, right? Where they learn martial arts and they get the girl at the end of it and all the rest of it. So, kind of I grew up and I'm like, yeah, I want to be a kung fu master and all the rest of it. Unfortunately, I was really skinny and not very good at sports. So, any martial art I tried, I was actually not very good at. The first thing happened, I moved to California and my roommate was a bodybuilder and he taught me how to lift weights. So, I suddenly started putting on muscle mass.

During that time, I started tried a lot of martial arts. I did kung fu for like three years, taekwondo, I've done karate, jiu jitsu, all the rest. I was not particularly good at any of them. Then I was just googling and I found this thing called kendo. I'm like, oh, this is kind of cool. Never heard of it before. Went for a trial, you know,

like just one of those trial classes. Like, this is actually kind of a lot of fun. Started doing it for like six months, then 12 months, went to my first tournament. And this was like at the Beginner level, and I won the tournament. Then I went to another one and I creamed people in the tournament. Got up to the next one. I was still winning much more than I was losing. Got up to the next level, still winning much more than I was losing. I ended up actually making it to the U.S. Nationals as well. I didn't get too, too far in there, but I was good enough to compete at that level, and I found that I really loved it.

And the philosophy of kendo is kind of a lot of the philosophy I use for life. Kendo's a very odd martial art, so it's Japanese fencing. There are only four attacks in Kendo. Kendo, there's only four target points. That's it. You don't learn like 50 different kind of fancy moves and all the rest of it. You spend your entire life mastering four different attacks. There are no defenses in kendo. There is no such thing as a block. If somebody attacks you, you attack back and you try to dominate the center. But you never block in kendo. And it's very kind of a Zen, very philosophical. Your kind of, you know, you don't have time to think. You need to know what your next move is before the other person even makes the first step or you have to kind of make them make a mistake. So, there's a lot of, like, this mental chest that goes into it. And I loved it. I fell in love with it. You know, I practice it in my free time. You know, I would love to go to Japan to practice over there if I could figure out a way to make that happen on a regular basis. And I use that philosophy in business as well. There's a lot of respect. It's not about killing and crushing your opponent and doing that. You have to bow and say thank you to your opponent when you start and bow and say thank you when you. When you end, even if you lost. And I love that kind of philosophy about it.

Matt Bowles: Well, that is also, I think, an amazing place to bring the first part of this interview to a close. And Ray, at this point, are you ready to move in to *The Lightning Round*?

Ray Blakney: Ah, I wish that, you know, I wish we did this when I was more sober at the beginning, but I will do my best.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. All right, what is one book that has significantly influenced you over the years you'd most recommend people check out?

Ray Blakney: [The Millionaire Next Door](#).

Matt Bowles: Awesome. Who is one person currently alive today that you've never met that you would most love to have dinner with?

Ray Blakney: [Richard Branson](#).

Matt Bowles: Knowing everything that you know. Now, if you could go back in time, what is one piece of advice you would give to your 18-year-old self?

Ray Blakney: Focus on one thing and don't get distracted by too many things at the same time.

Matt Bowles: What are your top three favorite travel destinations you'd most recommend people?

Ray Blakney: Check out Number one, Japan. Number two, Italy. Number three, Mexico.

Matt Bowles: Awesome picks. Last question, Ray, what are your top three bucket list destinations? These are places you've never been highest on your list you'd most love to see.

Ray Blakney: Ooh, top three will be a little harder but number one is easy. Tibet. Love to go and check out Tibet at some point. Number two, I'm going to go with Kenya. But the whole point is I'd love to do an African safari. So, kind of any one of those countries in that part would probably be pretty high on my list as well. Number three, I'd actually like to check out Indonesian Bali because I've never been there and I'm kind of pretty involved in the digital nomad community and everybody else has and they think it's amazing. So, I think I need to check out Bali. So that would be number three.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome man. I did a safari in Kenya in Masai Mara in 2018 and it was truly spectacular. So, when you're ready to plan that East Africa trip, just hit me up, my man.

Ray Blakney: Will do, Matt.

Matt Bowles: Awesome brother. Listen Ray, at this point, first of all, I want to let folks know that you have very generously offered The Maverick Show listeners some special discounts and deals on your services and folks can just go to [the show notes](#) from this episode and get a special coupon code to get number one, 10% off any one on one online language lessons at [Live Lingua](#). And number two, a free month of [Podcast Hawk](#) so they can come in and try your service for a first free month. So, I want to first of all thank you and appreciate you for offering those to The Maverick Show listeners. And we are going to link up those coupon codes in [the show notes](#). So just go to [themaverickshow.com](#) and just go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. There you'll see the special Maverick discount codes where you can check out those things at those discounted prices. And Ray, beyond that, how can people find you, follow you on social media, connect with you? And how would you like The Maverick Show listeners to come into your universe?

Ray Blakney: Yeah, so social media, I date myself because [Facebook](#)'s pretty much the only place I'm active. I like to tell people I don't look good in a bikini. So, [Instagram](#) is probably not the best place for me. If you want to contact me directly, I have a personal small website called [rayblakney.com](#). You can go there. It's a one-page website. It kind of shows the conferences I'm speaking at, the podcast that I've been on or going to be on, and has a little Contact Us at the bottom that does convert directly to me. Not to an assistant, not to anybody else. So, you go in there, fill out that Contact Us form, you can get in touch with me. Otherwise add me on [Facebook](#), say hi or [LinkedIn](#). And say hi as well. Look for *Ray Blakney*. Both of them. A picture of somebody sword fighting is kind of like the banner at the top up and then picture me.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. We are going to link all of that up in one place at [the show notes](#) just go to the maverickshow.com go to [the show notes](#) for this episode we'll have all of Ray's handles, URLs and ways to contact and connect with him. Ray, you are amazing. You inspire me and thank you so much for coming on the show, brother. I appreciate you Matt.

Ray Blakney: Thanks for having me on. It's been a blast.

Matt Bowles: All right, good night, everybody.