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BOOK MARKETING: How to Harness the Power of the New Freelance Economy Interview with Laura Pennington Briggs

Susan Friedmann: Welcome to Book Marketing Mentors, the weekly podcast where you learn proven strategies, tools, ideas, and tips from the masters. Every week I introduce you to a marketing master who will share their expertise to help you market and sell more books. Today my special guest is a freelance expert. Laura Pennington Briggs is a freelance writer who launched her business in 2012 with no formal training and scaled it to six figures in just 18 months. Since 2013, she's worked full time as a freelance writer online. Today she manages her freelance writing business in the morning, and coaches, other freelancers in the afternoon. A digital nomad with a passion for freedom-based careers, Laura uses her skillset to help freelancers launch and grow successful, sustainable and flexible careers from home. She's a two-time TEDx speaker, host of the podcast Better Biz Academy, and her first book, *Start Your Own Freelance Writing Business: The Complete Guide to Starting and Scaling from Scratch* will be released in July.

Laura, I am so thrilled to welcome you to the show and thank you for being this week's guest expert and mentor.

Laura Briggs: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to chat.

Susan Friedmann: Laura, so that we're on the same page, let's first of all sort of establish, what exactly is a freelancer?

Laura Briggs: That term is used a lot of different ways, but there's a very specific definition of a freelancer, and it's simply someone who's working on contract. That can be part time or full time, it can be short term or long-term, but essentially a freelancer has multiple clients who pay them to work on a project or retainer basis, whereas an employee is being paid a salary or hourly to work for that specific person or company.

Susan Friedmann: You see the world changing. The world we're working in is just not what it used to be 10, 20, 30 years ago, and you're seeing more of it becoming this, you call a freelance economy. Why do you think this is?

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Laura Briggs:

I think that two interesting things are happening at the same time. First of all, we live in an age of technology where we have the opportunity to work from anywhere, in a lot of different situations. So in the past, where it just would have been expected that you have to report to a physical place of work and do your job from that specific location, that is shifting to where a lot of jobs, especially these knowledge based jobs, creative jobs, can be done from anywhere, and you can still meet with people and in your office through video conferencing and telephone conferencing software, but there's less and less of a need to have an office space for a lot of businesses. Even those businesses who have office space often make use of remote workers or remote contractors who can be located all over the world, so that makes it easier for companies to hire the best person for the role as well.

At the same time, we've got a lot of people who are kind of disgruntled with what the options are in the economy when they graduate college or when they come to a natural end with one job or are forced out of a position. The workforce has changed so much that it's not really the case that people today go to college or university and graduate and end up in a job they work for 30 or 40 years, and then retire with a pension. For a lot of people, that's just not an option. We change careers and jobs so many times, so the idea of having something that's flexible and freedom based is appealing to a lot of workers. So those two things happening at the same time have made it more possible than ever for companies to hire freelancers rather than only in-house employees, and it also matches up well with the fact that a lot of these freelancers are looking for something different out of their work experience.

Susan Friedmann:

It's interesting, as you know, that most of our listeners are authors in their own right, and so welcome to the club, by the way. Why did you pick online writing as a freelance opportunity for yourself?

Laura Briggs:

As you mentioned in my introduction, I didn't have any real formal experience with writing outside of an academic situation as a student. I had heard of freelancing a little bit, but I'd never known anyone who had done it, and when I looked at the different options that were out there, I saw graphic design, and I'm thinking, "I don't have any of the skills to do that. It might take me six months or a year to teach myself how to make logos and things like that." So, I knew that was out. I didn't have any of the equipment to do web design or be a voiceover artist, and I thought, "I've been told I'm a good writer, so maybe I can teach myself some of the mechanics of online or business writing, and I already have a computer and an Internet connection so I don't really have to buy too much else to get started with that." And then found

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that I had a real knack for it and that there was a great demand in the marketplace for it, so that's something that I stuck with as my primary freelance offering.

Susan Friedmann: What kind of projects would you be working on?

Laura Briggs: I work on a broad range of different types of projects, many of them driven by that same digital economy that I was sort of talking about a little bit earlier. Most of my work is search engine optimization writing, so it's meant to inform the end reader, like a blog, but it's also signaling to search engines like Google what that website is about, and most of my clients have the goal of ranking their website within search engines, but I also do email copywriting and social media writing for the various types of clients that I have. So of course, all of this is due to this new technology, new media online that makes it another great opportunity to be a writer, because one of the avenues that I explore first was pitching magazines. Well, most people know that magazines and newspapers, those are industries that have changed dramatically and not really for the better for the creatives working in them in the last decade, but online content creation is in very high demand and almost every competitive business today, big or small, has to have a content strategy. So I saw the opportunity there to land work quickly and for there to be consistent demand for that type of work.

So I sort of learned as I went, and I've taken courses and read books and gotten feedback from clients to sort of decide which types of writing I like, doing blogs and doing email copywriting, and then I've also had some projects I didn't love, writing a technical white paper or a software manual. I learned very quickly that I would never work on those kinds of projects again, so it's been a really unique trial by fire experience.

Susan Friedmann: I'm with you on those kind of projects. They do not appeal to me at all. You've written a book, *Start Your Own Freelance Writing Business*. There's obviously some profit in doing freelance writing. What about the research behind that? How would you find out what in fact is profitable and where there's a need?

Laura Briggs: I start by encouraging people to take a look at what clients are asking for already, so you don't have to actively be a freelancer to see some of the types of jobs that are in demand. You can visit websites like Upwork, which is the biggest freelance job board site in the world. Take a look at the writing category. That's where clients are posting actual paying gigs for writers. You can get a sense of what types of writing work are in

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demand. ProBlogger is another great website to take a look at, and I even look at contract jobs on LinkedIn or Indeed.com because you can start to see trends of, what are the terms even that people are using? Because content writer is a little bit different than copywriter sometimes, versus SEO writer or marketing writer. So you start to learn the language that your clients are already speaking, and you can also get a sense of what it is that they're looking for. Why are they trying to produce this content? Is it for engagement? Is it for search engine rankings? Is it for marketing purposes? That way you can start to see what you naturally gravitate towards and might be good at.

Susan Friedmann: We always talk about finding your niche. Now, yeah, I would consider that freelance writing is a target area, but if you were to drill down and look at niche markets within that, what would you come up with?

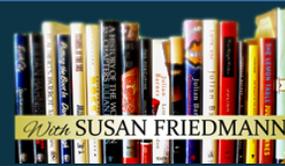
Laura Briggs: There are two different ways that you can niche as a freelance writer, and you can do one or both, or you can stay as a generalist. I often recommend that people do move down further into a niche because it makes it easier to market yourself as an expert within whatever it is that you're doing. So you can niche by project type. That would be a person who says, "I only write white papers." "I only write sales copy." "I only do email newsletters," or you can niche by industry. So I'm actually niched by industry and by project type. 90% of my clients are people that I am writing blog content for attorneys and law firms. So I have a very specific industry that I target and then I do a very certain type of project for them.

I still take on projects outside of that, and email marketing and copywriting is becoming a bigger portion of my business, but that has helped me market myself as the legal copywriter, the legal SEO writer. So when a client lands on my LinkedIn profile or my website, they kind of can instantly say, "Oh, this is somebody who's an expert. This is exactly the type of person that I need on my team." And that makes it that much easier for me to have a conversation with them and to convert them.

And one of the great things about online freelance writing is that you can change your niche. You can pivot into different things. You can try something new, and then you're not committed to it if you don't love it. And that's one of the things I really like about being able to freelance online.

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- Susan Friedmann: And it sounds as if there are jobs available. It doesn't sound as if you're short of work. There must be a lot going on in this environment. I know that content marketing is so high and more and more companies are paying and having content marketing as a specific budget, might that you've picked up on something important there. Now when it comes to starting these different ventures, [inaudible 00:10:58] authors decided to, that this was an area for them to even look at, talk to us about the mindset going into an adventure like this. What would they need to be considering?
- Laura Briggs: Well, one thing that's really unique and a great point for your audience is that they already have the writing skill. If you are writing a book or have written a book, you probably have the necessary writing skill to sell your words in another way, so that is writing them for clients as opposed to specifically putting them in books and trying to generate revenue that way. That's one of the biggest barriers that people face when getting started, and even a professional writer who's a writer of another type can still have some of those mindset issues. I know when I started writing a book I thought, "Wow, I'm a great ghost writer. I love to be behind the scenes and create content for my clients, but do I have what it takes to be an author?" So even I saw that as like a different field where I wasn't sure I was qualified.
- So one of the biggest mindset issues is knowing that you already have that core writing ability, and most writers also tend to be lifelong learners. So you're not going to know much about business writing and online writing at first. Understanding that it will take you time and practice and picking things up from various resources can help you feel more confident about it. Most people talk themselves out of successful freelancing before they're really too far into it, and they either assume that it's going to be far too difficult to get a client, or much easier than it really is. So sometimes I hear from people who say, "Well, I sent five pitches to prospective clients and no one hired me yet." That's very common. Some new writers send 50 or 100 pitches before they hear anything. And then there are other people who think, "Well, you know, it's going to take me at least six months to get my first client." And that's not necessarily true either.
- I coach a number of intermediate and advanced freelancers, and one of the things that always surprises them the most is how quickly things can change in their business. So they might be making \$2,000 a month, and a few months later they can be making \$10,000 or \$12,000, and that sort of opened a whole new can of worms of addressing the challenges of the business at that level, but it is not extremely easy to get started,

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but it's also not as hard as most people imagine. So having that grit, which most writers have, that interest in being a lifelong learner and that core writing skill can take you a lot of the way.

Susan Friedmann: Now, when you have worked with a client and obviously they like what you've written, does this guarantee any kind of future business, or is it a one job and you've got to go out and look for the next job?

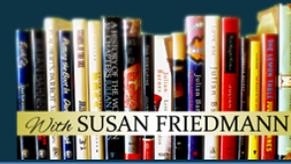
Laura Briggs: Most freelance writers start off with what I call the one-off project. So they're trying something out. It's smaller size projects. It's irregular. It might be someone who sort of throws projects your way as they have it. But ultimately the goal for many people who want to have a consistent part time or full time income is to move towards a retainer based business that has some one-off projects built in. So the goal is to impress the client with the projects that you deliver, because even if they can't provide you recurring business, they might be able to give you a testimonial or a referral to another client. So I always tell new freelance writers, "Your first couple of clients are key. Deliver above and beyond. Make it an easy experience for the client, and then ask them for testimonials that you can use in your marketing elsewhere. Ask if they can add two sentences to your LinkedIn profile about what a good experience they had working with you, and then you can leverage even a project that was only one time and didn't lead to recurring work into future work with other clients." So the goal is always for a lot of freelance writers to look for recurring work, but that is something that many new writers have to work up towards.

Susan Friedmann: I can just imagine our listeners thinking, "Wow, this is something I could even contemplate as a possibility." If that was the case, what would the first step they should take be?

Laura Briggs: The first step to take would be to see what kinds of writing projects would appeal to you. So online writing, there are some people who sell personal essays and still do more of that traditional journalism style of freelance writing, but that's not what I consider to be the highest volume of work available. So within the realm of online writing, there's several different types. There's sales copywriting, which is always driven to make someone buy something. There's also things like landing pages, where you're encouraging the person to take a very specific action, like make a phone call, or attend a live workshop. There's blogging and article writing, which are designed to educate, inform and engage. There's writing for social media. There's writing that's based on interviews, so a white paper would be a great example. You usually have

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to go interview people, so if that's something that you enjoy doing, that could be a well paid way to get started.

For me, I like doing things that are short and quick and require very minimal edits, so it's easier for me to write blogs, which are 500 to 1,200 words, than try to bring on a client where they're going to ask me to write an entire book, because that might still be a really well paid project, but for me, the scope of it is very, very long and I'd much prefer to use my brain in that way to write my own books rather than doing it for a client. So there's a lot of different personal preference factors that can go into deciding what your next step would be.

Susan Friedmann: Yes. I would think writing a book for somebody else, I would have a hard time. I'd want to do it for me, very selfishly. Yes. I would agree with ... Laura, there have to be mistakes that freelancers make when they're starting out. What are some of those common mistakes that you can share with us?

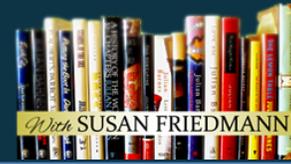
Laura Briggs: I would say that one of the biggest ones that I've seen a lot in the last year or so is people assuming that they're going to get a yes much easier than they actually will. As a freelancer, you will hear the word "no" or you will get no response, which is almost worse for a lot of people because then they don't know what it was that made the client not interested. You will hear or get those kinds of responses more often than not. Rather than letting them derail you or assuming that you're entitled to a yes or entitled to somebody's business, you have to start thinking about, "Well, why am I getting a no or a no response? What can I tweak in my process?"

And then the biggest mistake that new freelancers make is focusing completely on themselves. Clients are self-interested people. They want to know just enough about you as a writer to believe that you're competent and qualified, and that's it. That might only be two or three sentences about you, and the rest of everything that you use in your marketing, in your pitching, and your communications with clients should all be driven towards the benefits that you provide clients as a writer.

So a lot of people will send four or five paragraph pitches. "I've been writing for 20 years. I've won these awards. I've published 15 books." Clients care a little about that, but in a very brief way. They want to know why you're the right person to write for them, so that transition should be made pretty early on in the communication with any

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prospective client about what it is you do. So a sales copywriter, for example, might mention their expertise personally and then dive right into, "My content helps you not only get the traffic, but get people intrigued to click 'buy now'." That's something that resonates with a client, because they're saying, "I want people to buy this product or service that I'm promoting, and this is the writer to help me do that."

Far too many people focus too much on themselves or make generic statements like, "I'm a really good writer." If you're being paid to write, it's implied that you're a good writer, so that's a useless statement to ever include in a pitch. Instead, start focusing on what you can do for the client, how you'll make their life or business better.

Susan Friedmann: How much research do you do prior to making a pitch to a certain company?

Laura Briggs: I do as much research as necessary given the scope of where I found that client, so if I'm pitching somebody who I consider to be a pre-sold client, that might be someone who comes to me via referral or they've already posted a job on Upwork, I might not be able to find that much out about them before we talk. If I can, I'm going to research that company, but if I'm pitching someone cold, they've never heard of me before, I'm going to do a lot of research, because I want to make that connection and have it seem authentic.

I spend probably more time thinking about how I can position myself as a writer than research on the actual company, but I like to use natural ways to open that line of communication, so I'm not going to add them on LinkedIn or send them an email and say, "Hey, I'm a writer. Let me know if you need copywriters." I'm going to spend time thinking about, "Why did I pick this company? Why do I support their mission? Why do I respect their CEO? Is it because that person was just profiled in a magazine that I respect? I heard them on a podcast? They gave a speech somewhere and I heard it?"

I'm going to use that as my inroads to open that conversation, because it's very authentic and it's much less salesy than saying, "I'm a writer." You know? "Let me know if I can help you with any of your content marketing." I'm going to say instead, "I love what you all are doing with your social media approach, and by the way, I'm a writer, so I could definitely tie in your success on social media with the blogging that we could do behind the scenes, and help you get even more results from what you're already doing."

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Susan Friedmann: That's fantastic. Such meaty information. Wow. It's like I want to go out there and pitch for somebody. Something that's intrigued me in your bio, Laura, is the fact that you're a two-time TEDx speaker, and I've just got to bring this into the conversation because it's not everybody that we have on these podcasts who's a TEDx speaker. Talk to us a little bit about that. How did it come about, and has it in fact helped you in your business? Is it something that we should aspire to do?

Laura Briggs: That's a great question. There were three major reasons that I wanted to do a TEDx talk. First, I knew it was going to push me outside of my comfort zone. I've been behind the scenes in my business and in a lot of other people's businesses as their writer, but I knew that I would have to approach creating, editing, and delivering a TEDx talk from memory very differently than a lot of the things I do day to day in my business. So I knew it would push me. I also saw, and I love listening to TEDx talks, but I saw that there weren't that many about the freelance economy. A lot of people actually don't understand freelancing at all, and these are conversations I've had with people in my own circle and world who've kind of followed my journey and said, "Well, how did you make this work? How do I get clients? How do I build my business this way?"

I really wanted to share on a bigger and more global stage how freelancing is really changing the way people work, because in the United States at least, freelancers are going to be a bigger component of the workforce than traditional employees in the next 10 to 15 years. Some people already know that because they're active in the freelance economy, but a lot of traditional employees might not see that coming. So whether or not you want to freelance or not, you should know about how that's going to change the workforce and how to prepare yourself as a normal worker, or as a contractor and freelancer. And also I just knew that it would be a lot of fun to kind of claim that level of expertise.

I really do want to become a go-to thought leader about the freelance economy. I help a lot of companies build their digital bench of freelancers, so I've kind of gone into consulting for these companies. "Here's how you hire freelancers. Here's how you treat them. Here's how you do this project effectively." So I wanted the talk to be twofold, to educate people who might be interested in becoming freelancers about how it works, and also to talk to companies about, "Here's why people freelance. Here's how you have to approach them differently." And I will say it has been a huge help. It was a long process, and I was rejected many times. Much like I mentioned earlier, you will hear the word "no" a lot. I was rejected 91 times for a TEDx talk, but I received five invitations to talk from that, and I accepted two of them. After

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rejection 91 and no yeses yet, I was getting discouraged, but I continued to stick with it because I knew it would just be a matter of time, and it was, and it has helped my business. Instant credibility builder.

Three of my current or prospective clients have seen that about me somewhere online, and have said, "I don't know if I can afford you anymore, because I saw you did a TEDx talk." And I'm like, "Well, that's interesting. They think that my rates have automatically gone up because I gave a TEDx talk." So there's a credibility and sort of respect for people who do that kind of talk, so it definitely has helped my business. Of course it's made my publisher happy, because it's an extra tool. It's directly related to the subject of my book, so it helps promote book sales and all of that. So I would definitely say it has pushed me, and it's the first time I've memorized something of that length.

Someone asked me the other day how many times I practiced my talks before giving them. I lost count, but it was hundreds. So to memorize something that's 13 or 14 minutes long word for word without it sounding too canned, that was a real challenge for me. Even just in the making me feel more confident about my future public speaking part of my business, doing those TEDx talks was a real confidence builder for me as well, so there's a lot I've taken away from that experience.

Susan Friedmann: That's pretty phenomenal, and I'd like to add that TEDx talk into the show notes, because it's well worth our listeners watching and learning from you, because you were so natural on the stage. And as you said, you're talking about the subject matter. Just as a matter of interest, did the publishing contract come before or after the talk?

Laura Briggs: Well, I landed my agent in May of 2018, and she was actually trying to sell another book. The proposal that she had was a different subject than what we were trying to sell, and the publisher that I'm with now came back and offered this instead as sort of a first way to kind of get to know each other and work together. And that happened in July, so it was very fast for all of this to kind of move forward. And in July, my agent had kind of said, "Whether it's this book that I'm trying to sell or another one," she's like, "something's going to come along quickly, so you kind of need to prepare yourself to write this book." When she told me that, I was like, "Wow, I need to start thinking about marketing this book then too," because I knew it was going to take me a while to land a TEDx talk potentially. Most events book speakers three to six months in advance, and sometimes even longer.

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And I knew I would probably have a lot of rejections before I got an acceptance. I started right in July before I even had the contract with the publisher, and then when that contract came through, it was great. As we were chatting about how this would all work, it was great to be able to say at that time I had only booked one talk, but I said, "Yeah, that really helped because I have a small audience." Right? And as all of your listeners know, in the nonfiction world, getting a traditional publishing deal is all about your platform size, so for me to be able to say, "Hey, I know I have a small crowd following me in a small platform, but I hustle really hard and I can land a TEDx talk and all of that." So it was also sort of my way to show the sort of world of traditional publishing that there's different ways of growing a platform, and I wanted to be able to showcase that. I could follow through on what I said I would be able to do as well.

So they've been very excited to hear that. It's a great way to get the word out there about the freelance economy, and then for many people, the book is the natural followup once they hear the talk, and that really intrigues me, because the book is just as much written as a, "Here's how to get started," as it is a, "Here are the pros and cons of being a freelance writer." So you could buy the book and you might read it and decide, "This isn't for me," and that can be just as helpful as deciding it might be for you, so they kind of work really well together.

Susan Friedmann:

That is such a wonderful approach to developing a platform for a traditional publisher, because normally, first of all, you get rejected by traditional publishers like 90 odd times. So the fact that you did it from another way, you rejected through your TEDx talks, but yet you landed a publishing contract, that was brilliant. Congratulations on that. It actually reminded me, when you were talking about your agent coming to you with a different proposal, one of the things on my bucket list was to write a For Dummies book, and when my agent came and said to me, "Oh, they want a book on Meeting and Event Planning For Dummies," and I was like, "Well, that's not really my subjects. I want to write about trade shows," because that was my area of expertise, and they didn't want that title. I was like, "I'm not going to give this up. I'm going to write a book on meeting and event planning, and I'll look up what I don't know about it." It was just a matter of doing what they want rather than what you want, which I believe is a message that's coming through in some of the things that you've been saying, and perseverance. You should add that to your resume. 91 times.

Laura Briggs:

Yeah. Absolutely, and I started to really think, "Well, maybe my idea isn't that good, or I put this application together improperly." And then

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it was almost a flood of, I started to get those responses of places that were interested. And what you just mentioned is really important, because my goal was to be traditionally published, and what we were trying to sell was an advanced freelancing book. That's really my core area of expertise, is helping intermediate and advanced freelancers figure out how to scale without going to burn out, how to make more money by growing a team, and all of that.

And I think the publishers didn't quite understand what a big thing freelancing is, and so when the publisher came back with this other project for beginners, which I don't really coach a lot of beginners, my initial thought was much like yours. "Well, can I do this?" Absolutely. I was a beginner once and I know how to get started, but was this what I had wanted to sell? No. And I talked with my agent about it and she said, "I think this could be a really great way for you to get your foot in the door." And she said, "You don't really coach beginners, but this could be a great place to direct them when people do email you and say, 'Hey, I want to get started.' You can just say, 'Buy the book,' right? And then they're in your world and you might be able to serve them in another way later on down the road."

But that was hard for me to sort of make that decision. I knew that I could write the book, but just like you said, I was like, "Well this isn't exactly what I wanted to do." So now I think actually going about it this way was more helpful. As a writer, I'm deadline driven, so I saw what it was really like to write a book, how long it takes, how much editing it goes through, so I feel in a really good position to work on my second book for myself now that I know what the process looks like.

Susan Friedmann: And you can be self published the second time around and write what you want to write about.

Laura Briggs: Yeah, absolutely. And it's just so interesting, because the traditional publishing world has changed so much. And my thing was, my agent kind of said, "Well, we can wait and we can see if this other book that we originally pitched will sell." I'm a first time author. I was kind of an unknown name, and I said, "I'm not going to wait, because this other book needs to be written. So if that means I have to self publish it," I said, "I'll give you this amount of time to try to sell it in the traditional marketplace, and if we can't then I'm going to go ahead and write it myself." And you're right. I learned so much in that traditional publishing process. The editors I worked with were great. The whole team at the publishing house was amazing, and it really opened my eyes

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to what this would actually take from me to produce a really high quality final book, so that gave me a lot of confidence and excitement about doing it again.

Susan Friedmann: And we'll just give Aviva Publishing a push for you, and they'll be able to help you, so [crosstalk 00:31:58].

Laura Briggs: There you go.

Susan Friedmann: Laura, I know that our listeners are chomping at the bit to find out more about your services, how they can get hold of you, and how can they do that?

Laura Briggs: If you're interested in learning more about the book, the Amazon page for it is at freelancewriting101.com. My website is betterbizacademy.com, so you can learn more about freelancing in general and then you can also get redirected to the book from there as well.

Susan Friedmann: We'll put the book link into the podcast show notes as well, so they'll be able to link and buy it off of Amazon. Laura, if you were to leave our listeners with a golden nugget, what would that be?

Laura Briggs: I think it would be to recognize that the path to the goal that you're trying to achieve might look a little different than what you expected. I knew it would take a while to land a TEDx talk. I had no idea I'd need to stick with it for 91 rejections before getting one. I wanted to publish a different book, but now it's not even been a year since I got my contracts from my publisher, and in 10 days I'm going to receive the physical copies of my first book. So being open to what the journey might throw at you and saying, "Okay, this isn't exactly what I envisioned, but it's still getting me closer to my end goal. Maybe I need to take a different route to get there." Being open to that can be a really wonderful thing and open different doors for you too.

Susan Friedmann: That's so wonderful. Thank you for sharing your wisdom. This was just packed full of really juicy stuff, so I really appreciate you sharing, and thank you so much for taking time out of your precious day to listen to this interview, and I sincerely hope that it sparked some ideas you can use to sell more books. Here's wishing you much book marketing success.