

Making Best Use of a Break Between Seasons

Season 15, Episode 3

Colin: Hey, folks, welcome to another episode of PodCraft. This is the show all about podcasting, from launching your show, to monetization, and everything in-between. I'm Colin Gray from thepodcasthost.com, I'm joined as always by Matthew. How're you getting on, Matthew?

Matthew: Very well, yes. I'm just bemoaning my burst teabag. Look into the cup there, there's loose tea leaves floating about, so--

Colin: Nothing worse, it's all green.

Matthew: Is that a first-world problem? I don't know.

Colin: Yes, that's definitely a first-world problem. It does mean though, you can then go and read your tea leaves afterwards, you can tell your future. You're going to be able to tell what's going to happen to you this week.

Matthew: Exactly. 1 million downloads I see in there, so it's going to be a good episode.

Colin: [chuckles] What would the tea leave sign for that be? Would it just write out the literal 1 million **[unintelligible 00:00:53]**?

Matthew: It's just an email address for one of the podcast promoters, the iTunes podcast promoters, so we'll get in touch with them after the show.

Colin: [laughs] All right. Well, for this season, if you've been listening along, everyone out there, you'll know that we're answering people's questions this time around. It's brilliant, actually. It's good to get these questions in, isn't it, Matthew, here from our wonderful listeners? **[unintelligible 00:01:18]** we chat folk and help some folk out. We've been playing some questions, and this time around, we have a great one by a wonderful chap called Laurent from Switzerland. [crosstalk]

Matthew: Yes, indeed. This gives me a fantastic opportunity, Colin, what is the best thing about Switzerland?

Colin: I do not know, but I dread to think what you're about to say.

Matthew: For me, their flag is a big plus.

Colin: [laughs] Oh my goodness. All right. Okay, moving on--

Matthew: Anyway, thanks for listening, folks. We'll see you on the next one.

Colin: Anyway, Laurent's question was better than Matthew's joke. Shall we just pop on Matthew? Play it just now?

Matthew: Sure, yes

Laurent: Hi, my name is Laurent, and it's great to be able to talk to you. Sorry about the reverb. My podcast is called Puissante Panoplie. Yes, it's in French, and it's about exploring the tools and the frame of mind that help creators clear their head so they can focus on doing their best work. My second podcast is called Puissant Chantier, which is the making of my first podcast. I have been podcasting for almost a year, and right from the start, I decided to do seasons. My goal in a few years' time is to have a network of podcasts.

I love podcasting, but I have been struggling to be consistent. I have mixed feelings about the break between two seasons. It is very enjoyable to be off for a while, but it does break my momentum. During the break, I tend to be like a headless chicken, doing a little bit of everything. I update my website, I do some planning, but not enough. I do a bit of promotion, and I follow a couple of online classes. When it's time to start a new season, I feel like I haven't done much. I am neither fully rested, nor ready to start another season. What would be the best use of my time during those breaks? Thank you for your help, and keep up the brilliant work. Kind regards from Switzerland.

Colin: All right. Good stuff, Laurent. First thing I'll say is, reverb? I think Laurent's being quite perfectionist there. I think that was a really good quality recording. [crosstalk] there have to say. [chuckles]. Yes, start with that. What do you want to jump into, Matthew? Where do we start here in terms of-- I mean, we've all had this, haven't we? We all have like a month of free-ish time, we think, "Right, I'm going to get some good stuff done here," and then it ends up, four weeks later, you're like, "What did I actually do with that time?" What's your first step when you get to a situation like that?

Matthew: I think the big picture planning helps a lot with this. It's not so much about waking up in the morning and thinking, "You know what? I could just grab my computer and do some stuff on the website." This is more about thinking this year, going into this year-- Whether that's your calendar year, or whether you do a financial year, or anything like that. You're looking at it like, "For the next 12 months, what ultimately do I want my podcast to look like? Then, what are the steps to get there? Then, how do I then break that down in monthly, or quarterly, or cyclical goals?" You're constantly breaking it down into small manageable chunks, aren't you?

Colin: Yes, I love that. Yes, totally, having those-- I used to love this. I don't do it so much for myself anymore, but in the olden days when we were just starting up The Podcast Host, and it was just you and me, and even just me a couple of years before that, I loved January time-- And it's a bit arbitrary taking January. I know it's like calendar year, but I did like it, there was something about a fresh start in January. I'd just write down like, "What do I want to have achieved by the end of this year? Like, 2017, what do I want by the end of this year? How many downloads do I want to be getting on our podcast? Where do I want it to be featured? How does that relate to the other stuff that I'm doing as well?" Just being **[unintelligible 00:05:19]** in a blue sky and having those goals there, I find really motivational.

Like you say, the next step is then to actually brainstorm those activities that may get you there. Write down all of the different things that you could do with your show. From how you create it, like workflow to make that more simple, to formats and things like that to try and make more engaging content, to the promotion stuff. Like, all the different promotion things you can do with your podcast, just write them all down, tons of stuff from big to small, and just have all that there. That's what drops then into your monthly planning, isn't it, Matthew?

Matthew: Yes, and I think there's a lot to be said as well-- Like, we talk about the themes of your seasons themselves, but you could theme your season [unintelligible 00:06:05] as well for you personally. You could, between seasons, focus on, "Okay, I'm going to get--" I don't think Laurent needs to do this based on his audio, but I'm going to get my [unintelligible 00:06:15] up to scratch, so this is my project [unintelligible 00:06:19] the next season.

I'm obviously working on what the content is going to be too, but privately behind the scenes, these are five things that I really want to do for myself. I want to [unintelligible 00:06:29], I want to get this new make, I want [unintelligible 00:06:31] new software, whatever that may be. Then the next mid-season or preseason break, maybe you're going to really focus and hone in on promotion.

The alternative is, like you're saying, you wake up one morning, "Let's just grab the website and [unintelligible 00:06:46]." It's kind of ad hoc, and that leads to that situation where you don't feel that you've had a rest too because-- It's almost a cliché that's getting said there, Colin, but scheduling and rest as well is important, isn't it? Because you're then not making the decision, you just-- You know that you've got a day off or whatever to set up, so--

Colin: For sure. Yes, totally. I think that totally ties in with the bigger picture stuff you were talking about. You take your bigger picture, you've got your big goals, and then every-- We plan in cycles with our company, so it's every two months, and that probably coincides with the season pretty well, like eight episodes. Maybe it's a quarter for you, maybe it's 12 episodes. Each quarter, you take a set of those big picture goals, and you say, "Which one do I want to work on this time around?" And just being focused on it. You can't do it all, that's the thing. If you try and do it all, you end up doing nothing.

Like you said there Matthew, take one thing, "This season break, all I'm going to do is promotion. Not only that, but actually, there's this one promotion technique that I want to focus on." Maybe it's communities, maybe it's getting involved in two or three different communities and helping them so that they then become aware of your podcast. That is all you do for the four weeks, and by the end of that four weeks, you feel quite-- A sense of achievement, because you have actually progressed that one thing really well, as opposed to doing 12 different things in a tiny way and not really feeling like you did any of them very well. It's all about that. It's all about that organization, that focus, and really just niching it down and aiming to do less, whereby you end up doing more, often I find.

Matthew: Yes, and giving yourself that wee bit buffer zone as well. Because you could sit down and say, "These things, I've got to do, I could do that in five hours over the next two weeks or whatever", but you're maybe better having that extra

couple of hours, because sometimes things do break. You wake up one morning, the website is down, or suddenly, another issue has popped up. Suddenly, **[unintelligible 00:08:49]** things happen, so giving yourself that wee bit extra time is always useful too.

Colin: Yes. I'm a big fan of-- It's maybe worth going into just briefly. I used to do a talk, I still do sometimes, but I haven't done in a wee while, around how to plan for your year. It was a planning structure that I used to use and developed over a few years for, and it particularly works for creatives, and it has a few different levels. I'll go into this briefly, Matthew. It should only take a couple of minutes, I think, but it may be useful to Laurent and other people listening.

Stop me if **[unintelligible 00:09:24]** it doesn't make sense from trying to rush through it too quick, but it started with the goals. I've already talked about that a bit-- You've got your goals for the year, and then I always broke it down into months, but actually, these days-- That was when I was working myself, just personally, just as a one-person one-man creator. Then even with you actually, Matthew, when it was just the two of us a few years back, a month-by-month plan worked quite well actually. Every month, on the first of the month, I would sit down, and I would look at the big goals. I would take a few of the activities that we were working on and jot them down, and these are the goals for the month. With only four weeks to work with, four and a bit weeks, you can generally be quite specific and think, "Is this achievable?" These three, four things-- Three, four big things that will progress as towards these big goals. That's your month plan, and you write that down as the month plan.

Then the next level of that is the week. That's when you go from the kind of higher-level strategy to more of the day-to-day. You're not quite planning your days yet, but this week, I'm going to take two or three-- Or one thing let's say, from the month plan, and we're going to break it down into a few steps, and I'm going to get those steps done this week. Then you say, "Right, that's my three to five things for this week," and that'll be quite focused as well.

Then actually-- And you'll know, you're a fan of this as well, Matthew. I would take that, and I would actually put it into a structure for my week. I would actually have 10 sections generally, so half a day for every day. Monday, you've got two, you've got morning and afternoon. Tuesday, morning and afternoon. I would have-- Each day is actually quite strictly planned to certain things. Tuesday morning would always have blog post set there Wednesday morning would always have podcast episodes set there. Thursday morning would always have growth activity set there.

I would take those activities that I've taken from the goals that feed into the month plan, and then I would take them, and I would break them down into really small little activities that only take three to four hours, half a day, and I would pop them into that week plan. That then is my boss for the week. That's my boss, I go and look at that. I plan that out Monday morning, I write in my diary saying what I did last week, what I want to do this week. That's me thinking all through, sort of strategic-level thinking, "Am I making progress? Am I doing the right things?" I would set it out on a spreadsheet, and then that's the boss, and then I would forget about that stuff.

I would look at that every morning, and I would just do what it told me. I wouldn't think anymore about the strategy, I wouldn't think about what I should do. All I do is

look at that spreadsheet, and I just do it, because I trust that on the Monday morning, I spent enough time strategically thinking intelligently about what I should do. I trust that I did that well, and I just get it done through the rest of the week. It takes so much pressure off you. It takes away so much of the cognitive load, the decision-making, all that kind of stuff during the week. It takes away a lot of that stress, because you know that you've planned it out well, you know that you're making progress towards those big annual goals. It all ties together, and so you just get it done, and it just helps you execute so much more effectively, I find.

Matthew: Great stuff. You're a Cal Newport in the making, Colin. [unintelligible 00:12:37] Cal would be very impressed.

Colin: Oh, indeed. Anything else you'll add in on this? There's one other thing I want to bring up, but you jump in, Matthew-- I just talked for a bit there. Anything else you want to put in?

Matthew: No, I don't want to labor the point, but I really like that too, that knowing what's going on. I hate that feeling of turning up to my desk in the morning and thinking, "What am I doing today?" I like to at least have a very rough outline of like, "These are the three things that I'm definitely doing today," so yes, I'm kind of the same when it comes to that.

Colin: Totally. Yes, it's so much more stressful, so much more apt to go wrong if every single day, you have to turn up and figure out what the best thing to do is, the best next thing to do. Instead, put it all into one, one or two-hour section on a Monday morning that bases on maybe a half-day planning the whole month at the start of the month, and that all brings it together.

Anyway, sorry, the other thing that I thought worth mentioning to Laurent because I think it is such a valuable thing to do between seasons, between every season I think almost, is listener feedback, bringing in listener feedback. We do that a lot between seasons, and I think it's really worthwhile because of the way it kind of brings in your listeners, engages your listeners, and creates better content based on that, so-- Worth diving into that just for a couple minutes, Matthew.

Matthew: Yes, of course.

Colin: I think you can do this along-- This is one of the things you can do alongside the other focus thing. At the end of the season, one of the big things about making sure seasons work is making sure that you tell people what's going on. Not just like stopping recording for four, six, eight weeks, and they don't have a clue. At the end of the season, you say, "Right, we're away for four weeks, we're away for six weeks, we're away for eight weeks. We're going to be back on this particular date, but over the next six to eight weeks, I'd love to get your feedback on what you want us to cover on the next season," and give them a bit of direction. Say like, "We're thinking about covering--"

Well, you can keep it really open. You can say literally like, "What is your biggest struggle right now?" Just see how many questions come in, and see what the most common questions are, and maybe you base your next season on that. If you don't

have a better idea of what your season should be, then you can do that, and that can direct to the entire topic of the season.

The other method is, if you do have an idea of what you want to cover, you get listeners involved anyway. Let's say we wanted to cover gear on the next episode. It's something we always love talking about, Matthew, about shiny gadgets and stuff, so we put a question, what is your favorite microphone, what's your favorite mixer, and what are your biggest problems with gear, or what are your biggest questions related to gear in podcasting? Therefore, you get some feedback, and you can bring that listener feedback into that season. You can include some listener voices, you can include some of their questions. You can base it around the real questions that are coming from your listener.

The great thing about this is you can put this question out at the end of the season, because that's the most recent episode, that's the one a lot of people will hear. Even new listeners during that break will come up with that. You can have the survey running throughout the four weeks, the six weeks, the eight weeks, whatever your break is, and you don't really have to do anything with it, because the question is already out, the survey is already there. Set one up on Typeform, SurveyMonkey, whatever it is. Then when you come to the week before your season starts again, you can get in there, look at the questions, and there's a ton of material there all ready to help you plan out that season.

I just think that's a great way to go about it, because it's involving your listeners. It's something that doesn't take a lot of work during the season, so it isn't going to ruin your rest. It doesn't sabotage any of that other focused work you want to work on, Laurent, and it's something you can do every single time, I think.

Matthew: Yes, and be sure to get yourself a beer as well mid-season, and preseason. That's always important. Have a wee rest, you deserve that.

Colin: I know. Well, that's part of the reason, isn't it? A lot of people we talk to that their pod fades, stop their podcasts because they just get burnt out. It's like sitting on this treadmill, coming up with new episodes every single time. That's why I love seasons, actually, the excuse to take a break, put your feet up, and not do anything actually related to your podcast. There's nothing wrong with that too. Okay, thanks for the question, Laurent. I'll say this episode is supported by our own tool, Alitu, so if you are out there-- Laurent, if you want another thing to make your podcast easier to create, anyone out there as well, Alitu is our podcast maker tool.

We are recording on Alitu right now. We're recording this call on Alitu, and it will be cleaned up straight afterwards. It'll do the noise reduction, the leveling, and all that stuff for us, the stuff you used to do manually, Matthew, taking up your job. That just means you can spend much more time [crosstalk]--

[laughs] It just means you get to spend much more time actually creating the content instead. Then you can edit your episode right in there in the podcast custom editor, and build your episode, add in the adverts, add your music, automatically fades and transitions, big music library in there that you can use as well, and then links to your podcast hosting.

Plus, we've just launched hosting inside Alitu as well. It's in beta testing right now, so it'll be actually everything anyone needs for podcasting. Go over to alitu.com, A-L-I-T-U.com, and you can get a seven-day free trial, see how you'll like the call recording tools, the editing tools, all that kind of stuff. It'll help you take less time to make your podcast, make it much easier. All right. Do you know what we're doing in the next one, Matthew?

Matthew: I surely do, yes. We've got a question on how to optimize your podcast, so we're looking forward to digging into that one.

Colin: [unintelligible 00:18:27] for search and engagement, and try to get more people listening. Is that the [crosstalk]--

Matthew: Yes, exactly.

Colin: Perfect. Good stuff. All right. Well, thanks for joining us, everyone. I hope you enjoyed this question. Join us again for next week where we'll be answering another listener question. Hope to see you then.