



# **Selling Disruption™ Show**

**With Mark S. A. Smith**

*Connect with Your Community with  
Consistent Content*

*Ted Bauer*

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Mark S A Smith: My guest today is Ted Bauer, who is a freelance writer, ghostwriter, and copywriter, and he writes for a variety of clients in industries large and small. What he does is helps put the ideas of disruptive products and services into the minds and hearts of clients and influencers. Welcome to the show, Ted.

Ted Bauer: Thank you so much for having me, Mark. I really appreciate it.

Mark S A Smith: I love the name of your company, called Context of Things, and I think that's how we have to sell today. We have to talk about context. How did you get into this business of writing?

Ted Bauer: I've been writing in general as long as I can remember. The first thing I signed up for was a newspaper as a fourth grader. There's a lot of problems with the standard office job, and I feel like I had experienced a lot of them, so I was ready to move forward from that, so I put a lot of myself into this.

Mark S A Smith: How did you choose this particular industry to write in?

Ted Bauer: I probably have the most knowledge about different types of organizational disruption. There's a lot of stuff around the HR and recruiting space that can be improved, if you know the whole expression about garbage in, garbage out. If you're going to start your funnel of people working on your products and services with a poorly contextualized hiring process, then you're not going to have amazing results long-term.

Mark S A Smith: Without that culture in place, you're going to kill yourself?

Ted Bauer: Yeah, 100%. I had gotten a master's about 2013, so in hindsight I don't know how amazing an idea that was because I still have debt from it. It was in organizational development with an MBA, but the focus, instead of like the finance/consulting side, was more like HR side. I think strategy and operations are obviously tremendously important, but if you don't have that culture and you have people in unclear roles everywhere, the strategy doesn't really mean anything. Because I had some background in it at the master's coursework level, I think that helped me get in front of some bigger companies and vendors in terms of helping them define messaging.

Mark S A Smith: What is your system for writing about disruptive topics?

Ted Bauer: The first is you do want to do some independent research, whatever the industry or the space is, and you want to see who out there is already talking about it in a non-BS way because you can always find stuff on Forbes or Inc., and I'm not even knocking those publications because sometimes they have good stuff, but you can usually find a bunch of people on sites like that talking about any business topic. Maybe six out of ten of it is going to be largely BS or not actionable to someone.

Mark S A Smith: There's a lot of non-thought leadership out there in the common media, non-thought leadership.

Ted Bauer: Yeah, people described as thought leaders who are offering essentially no value. Sites like BuzzSumo and stuff are good for figuring out what people are actually responding to or sharing in a more meaningful way. In most of these cases it's going to be client work for me. I'm going to be writing on behalf of a specific client or person, so you do have to understand how they speak about topics or what words they choose to use, because I've probably done three or four quote/unquote big time thought leadership people.

I've done ghostwriting for them, and a lot of those people, they've been around 20 years. They've been talking about whatever their niche is in a specific way so long that they have these terms that they want to fall back on. When you're initially working with them, you kind of have to use those and work those into their stuff because it's going to be important to them. As you get a better relationship with some of those people, you can guide them towards more substantive stuff instead of the phrases they've been using forever, although that comes with time.

Read things that are non-BS. Some of your stuff, some of the stuff you share from other sales guys, is real good. I have a couple European-based sales guys that sometimes I read. In each niche, like customer experience, general organizational development, there are people who are writing stuff that's above average. If you read stuff like that and bring in some academic research, then you always have a baseline. If somebody wants you to write about XYZ thing, you've probably seen something about it and spin off from there. I think keeping yourself abreast of what's going on is obviously a huge chunk of it too.

Mark S A Smith: No doubt about it. You're a beast, though, when it comes to writing. As of the day we are recording this, you have 718 articles posted on LinkedIn with 7,500 followers. You're a beast, man. How do you crank out that much content?

Ted Bauer: I just kind of made myself a deal that unless I'm really busy, I try to write once a day. Usually in the morning while my dog is eating, before I take him back out, I'll just try to write something based on something that I've seen elsewhere. For my own posts, not client work, I usually try to find some piece of research or someone that I respect and spin off something from that, because then it's not just pure opinion. There's going to be some rooting in fact there.

Anecdotally, I listened to a UPenn interview with Mitch Albom once and he was like, "If you want to classify yourself as a writer, write every day, even if only 15 people are reading it every day." I've had some days where I'll put up 30,000-plus and then I've had some days that are like 500, but even if 500 people are reading stuff that I've written across the course of a day, I technically can classify myself as a writer, per Mitch Albom, who's a pretty good source on that topic.

Mark S A Smith: Indeed. If I could boil down your system into really fundamentally three steps, number one is you look for inspiration. You're searching out inspiration of what to talk about. I agree with you. I'm always looking for things to inspire me to write and to think about things in a different way for my tribe.

The second thing is have discipline, the discipline of writing. The way that you be a writer, the way that you do anything ... pick something. The way that you become a salesperson is you go sell. The way that you become a writer is you sit and write. The way that you become a tennis player is you play tennis, so just do it.

Then number three is you let go of the impact of what you write. You realize that the people who are going to need to read what you have to say are going to find it, and I think that's a really important loop. If we're attached to what we're writing, then we end up not writing from our heart. We end up writing for an audience, and while we've had that advice of writing to an audience in the past, it's a bad one.

Ted Bauer: I hate that advice, personally. This is going to sound maybe a little bit weird, but I think that you should almost treat some of what you write ... even though you have to make sure that it's professional to a degree because of the ecosystem we live in, you should treat the stuff you put out there in a way as a diary. You can expose some personal stuff about yourself periodically. Prove to everybody over time that you're literally writing for yourself and because you know that this is going to be interesting to somebody, but you're not going to jam it down their throats.

Like you said, the necessary audience is going to find it, if they're supposed to find it and you did a good enough job putting it together. I wholeheartedly agree with that. I hate people that you can tell in their writing or in their presentation that it was designed for the audience. I know that's advice that's commonly given, but it just seems almost disingenuous in a way to me.

Mark S A Smith: It's pandering, and it's also unauthentic.

Ted Bauer: Right. Right.

Mark S A Smith: Today, people want to connect with people who are authentic, the real deal.

Ted Bauer: In this vein too, I would say one of the big things that always gets me when I do like future-of-work-related stuff, you almost have to start any future-of-work discussion from a place that so few of the articles and stuff around it seem to start from. Even though everyone's using it in articles, there aren't really that many people right now that understand artificial intelligence that well.

I think Musk said that he thinks that there's probably less than 10,000 people globally that could work at an advanced AI level, which if you think of that, I think there's 1.2 billion people in the world with full-time jobs right now and you're

saying 10,000 can work at this thing that's going to transform everything? Even beyond that, there's only a small percentage of people that really care about a topic like the future of work. Most people just want to know if I'm in my 30s or 40s now, am I going to have a job in 20 years, stuff like that.

Mark S A Smith: That's right, and can I get a raise.

Ted Bauer: Yeah, can I get a raise. A lot of stuff about future of work or disruption in the organizational HR, those types of spaces, it doesn't even start from the right basic assumptions. A final thing on that too would be I honestly think we downplay the fact, even though we kind of all secretly know it, that there's a lot of people out there that just straight up hate their jobs, you know?

It's like the Gallup research that they did I think in late 2015 is saying 15% of people globally are engaged with their work. Now, you can put "engaged" in quotation marks because nobody 100% knows what that means, but generally assume that it's like a positive connection to work. You're saying 85% of the global workforce does not have that, which doesn't seem very promising.

Mark S A Smith: No wonder customer service sucks.

Ted Bauer: Yeah. It's almost disingenuous to start all these articles talking about purpose and vision and mission and defining all that. I'm not at all saying that that's not important. It is important. There's 85% of people out there that are struggling to make it to five or six p.m. every day. Instead of starting every conversation with purpose, which is an ambiguous, amorphous word to a lot of people, maybe we need to start figuring out where the actual problems are occurring and how we could bottleneck those.

Mark S A Smith: For a lot of people, purpose is, "Man, I just gotta pay my bills."

Ted Bauer: Yeah, 100%.

Mark S A Smith: We're living from paycheck to paycheck. It's really frightening how many people are mal-employed. They're just not in the right jobs, they're not doing the right thing. I saw a shocking statistic about how one in six Americans have missed a rent payment or a mortgage payment in the last 90 days.

Ted Bauer: It doesn't actually surprise me, but it should, because you think about the general notion of American prosperity. There was a study about six months ago. I think it was at Ohio State. The whole thing is called firm-size wage effect, which is a concept that economists have been talking about since the '70s. It takes your grandmother's advice to most people and turns it on its head. For people in their 30s to 50s now, their grandmothers were probably like, "Get a nice job with a big firm, and that'll suit you well for 20 to 30 years."

Mark S A Smith: Right, exactly. Security.

Ted Bauer: Yeah. The tenure argument died out probably in the '90s on that. People started working a lot less at one specific place.

Mark S A Smith: Let's take a look at Grandma's advice. Grandma probably was raised on a farm.

Ted Bauer: Yeah, 100%.

Mark S A Smith: Grandma probably went through a lot of crop failures. She really went through the ultimate in business cycles, which is feast and famine. Her suggestion was, "Look, don't do this. Don't become a farmer. Don't raise pigs, don't raise chickens, don't raise corn." She had great advice then. It probably was a better lifestyle. Grandma loves you and wants you to have a better life than she had. Well, today it's a little different. We have to realize that what got us to the job is not going to get us promoted, and what got us promoted isn't going to get us our next job. It's that continuous learning and relearning.

One of the things that impresses me about you, Ted, is because of the amount of research and writing you do, you have an extraordinary amount of knowledge, ideas, tips, at your fingertips, as has been exhibited in our conversation here. What's been the most surprising topic that you've researched and written on?

Ted Bauer: This one guy, he has a whole argument that for the large majority of people, work isn't really about productivity or progression at all. It's really just a quest for relevance and self-worth. If you think about it, a lot of people you've probably worked with would fit that criteria or that description. When I came across this guy, I was just running through dozens to hundreds of people that I've worked with in different white-collar jobs. It becomes evident that there's some validity to that theory.

I do think some people are real passionate about where they work or what widgets they work on or whatever, but I do think a lot of people are doing it as a means to an end both monetarily and psychologically, but we don't talk about the psychological side. We talk more about, "Oh, I gotta make rent or pay my mortgage." You've got to be somewhere for 10 to 12 hours, so you want to think that you're relevant in the eyes of others there and that you're generating self-esteem from it. I think sometimes we don't acknowledge that that is a huge part of work, and that gets us in trouble.

Mark S A Smith: Indeed. Well, I think Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs plugs right into this conversation. For a lot of people, they go to work to manage Level 1 and Level 2, which is fundamental physical needs and then security. As we move up the list to loving our tribe and then loving ourselves ... self-esteem is Level 4 ... to self-actualization, I think most people are operating at a Level 2 of Maslow. Unless you can get to Level 3, Level 4, your life is pretty much miserable.

Ted Bauer: Yeah. I unfortunately agree with that. Sometimes too, the way work is even structured for people, I wouldn't say it prevents them from getting to Level 3 because that is an individual path to a large extent. This has become a buzzword

during the last probably three to five years, but you kind of have to have a huge degree of self-awareness and resilience to get through a lot of jobs right now.

Mark S A Smith: That's right, which is Level 4 and Level 5.

Ted Bauer: That's right. It's almost normative now that you're going to have at least one to five terrible managers supervising you in a conventional hierarchical structure. This is a little bit dated. I think it's like 2012, but Gallup did a study once that said 82% of managers end up being the wrong hire. Now, some of that is through the eyes of executives, which means they're probably not generating enough revenue or moving the trains enough or whatever executives want them to be doing.

A lot of it was also through the eyes of the people that report to them. An 8.2 in 10 failure rate is terrible. If you brought that home on a test in high school and told your mom you got an 18, she'd probably be like, "This is really bad."

Mark S A Smith: Yeah. "I think we need to figure out some other way of making you a living somehow or another." Right, of course. I think there's two fundamental problems in this, and I want to bounce this off of you based on your research and work. First of all is culture. We started the conversation with culture, and there's an issue where we hire the wrong people for the culture of the organization. The second thing is that a lot of organizations don't do the appropriate training to teach managers how to manage.

Ted Bauer: No. One of the problems is that a lot of the way we do corporate training or organizational training, all it really is designed to do is to create more managers. It doesn't actually create leaders or anything transformative. It creates more box-checkers, which is fine. Especially as companies scale, there is a need for box-checkers and train conductor-type people. That is unavoidable. Obviously, some people are going to have individual flair or passion and rise above that, but I do think a lot of the problem with training is that it's almost designed to create more drones for the middle ranks, and that doesn't really help us transform organizations.

Now you get to this whole thing with disruption as a concept. The thing I think people sometimes misunderstand is that disruption is obviously hugely about technology and lowered cost of entry in certain industries and all that. That's obviously the building blocks of it. Why companies get disrupted, it's not usually because they don't have access to the tech stack. A big company has access to a better tech stack than an upstart usually. A big company has so much slowing them down in the middle in terms of decision-making and actual productivity. Seventeen meetings have to be had to approve one tweet.

That is actually what I think is a part of disruption that people probably understand but don't seem to acknowledge publicly as much. What it really comes down to is how jammed up these bigger places get with all this garbage in the middle, and people owning processes to boost their own relevance. That's

where the rubber actually meets the road in industries where you're seeing legit disruption.

Mark S A Smith: Yeah. I think there's two things that are driving it, both of which you've identified. I'll restate them in my words. First of all, middle management is going to be automated away.

Ted Bauer: Oh, yeah, 100%.

Mark S A Smith: Anybody who's growing more middle management is at massive disruption, because that's where AI takes over. Virtually every manager's job can be replaced with AI. If you're in that position, I recommend highly upgrading, upleveling your skills as soon as you possibly can, to survive. Number two, because of the way that corporations have treated their employees in the past, managers tend to make decisions around what is best for their careers versus what's best for their customers.

Ted Bauer: Right. I would agree with that. This is crazy that you're only recently even seeing this get better in an industry like hospitality, but a lot of times managers aren't even empowered to make customer-facing decisions, you know? They're basically taught you're supposed to protect the people above you, and that may benefit you in the next two to five years.

Mark S A Smith: Here's the problem, though. Most managers at the middle level don't have the cognitive capacity to decide what's best to protect the people at the upper levels of the organization. As you ascend in an organization, you typically see another ten points of IQ for every level higher.

Ted Bauer: I would say that's about right.

Mark S A Smith: You have to, otherwise you can't handle the complexity of everything below you. You get overwhelmed by that insane complexity that happens. If you have a middle management that is three levels above them, they're 30 points of IQ less than the person that they're trying to protect. There's a problem with this. There's a complete mismatch in the view of the world.

Ted Bauer: Yeah, I would agree with that. There's a lot of good stuff from Paul Graham, who founded Y Combinator in Silicon Valley. In 2008 he wrote an essay about the anthropological context of work. There's the whole thing about whether or not humans were even meant to work in organizations of 5,000 people, which we probably weren't. Then he goes into the whole tiered thing and he calls it like a tree system or a limbic system, but it's basically like there's a gigantic mismatch.

There's the Bain research, that a company that gets to \$5 billion in I think it's valuation, but it might be revenue, so \$5 billion and above companies, they average 11 layers between the top person, the CEO, and the lowest person. Let's say the lowest person is like a customer service, call-center person. You've got 11 layers between those two.

That means you probably have at least seven layers of legitimate middle management. Basically this whole tree system, almost to your exact point, is that topmost layer of middle management that's maybe right before reporting in to the CEO and the bottom layer of middle management, you're talking about maybe a 60-point IQ difference there.

Mark S A Smith: That's exactly right.

Ted Bauer: It's a completely different worldview and ability to process information too.

Mark S A Smith: That's exactly right. Well, let's go back to the tribe size, because you really triggered that thought and I did a quick search. Dunbar, who is an anthropologist, Robert Dunbar.

Ted Bauer: Dunbar's Number? Yeah.

Mark S A Smith: That's exactly right, Dunbar's Number of small, medium and large, and so small is 30 to 50, medium is 100 to 200 and large is 500 to 2,500. I think that's really a fascinating concept. Thanks for bringing it up, and I think the reality is truly most of us have medium-sized tribes. Most of us have tribes of 100 to 200 people.

Ted Bauer: Yep. The last Dorie Clark book ... which was a couple of years ago, I think she has a new one now ... but the one from a couple of years ago, she talks about that too. Even in the context of LinkedIn, LinkedIn started doing the 500-plus probably about six, seven years ago, and people were all into that like, "Oh, I'm 500-plus," and now they've got a couple of other designations you can be. In reality, the majority of us have a tribe somewhere between 100 and 200, and I think I've seen 120 as the landing number. That's about what you can keep in a professional context. For some people, you're talking maybe 60 personal, 60 professional. Maybe some more advanced people can keep two separate spheres.

You might be pushed into collaboration with 500-plus people in a year if you work in a big organization, or especially if you do sales and you have all these prospects funneling through. There's no way that all 650 connections you make are going to be valuable relationships at the end of the day. There's a degree of self-awareness that comes back in there too, where you have to know how to prioritize and parse out what's going on around the relationship-building side of your career too, which I feel like a lot of people don't know how to do either.

Mark S A Smith: Well, they don't. There's a lot of bullshit. I think the idea though of tribe size is going to vary, and can be multiplied thanks to technology. For example, your tribe and my tribe are similar. We have on the order of 7,500 people on LinkedIn each, and the reason why we maintain that is because we write. A lot of our tribe interacts with us in one way, that is they read what we write. They like it, they follow us. We make suggestions, and then quite frankly, only several percentage

of those people end up having conversations and interaction like you and I do. We met through LinkedIn.

Ted Bauer: Right.

Mark S A Smith: We had a conversation, I liked where it went and here we are, you're on my show. You're a widely-studied man with an interesting viewpoint. That's why I invited you to be on the show. If you want to have a large tribe, you must write.

Ted Bauer: I just looked up something that I wrote about two years ago about the Dunbar's Number concept. It lands at about 120 to 150, generally speaking. They used to do these exercises in Silicon Valley where they asked people to identify quote/unquote legends in their life. That would be a group of 20 to 30 people who have consistently demonstrated support for you. They did it across the course of 16 months, and they asked about 300-plus leaders, "How many of these self-identified legends have I made contact with in the past 30 days?"

Okay, Silicon Valley's a business-first type of place in general. The average number was about 35%. If you think 20 people support you, you often go a full month speaking to probably, what, seven of them? Probably because you're very busy with your own day-to-day. In a time where we talk about relationship-building seemingly around every corner, even in super-business-first places it's not really being done that effectively.

That does go to your point that you just made. Writing, to me, is the easiest way. That might just be me. Obviously if you're a podcaster or a video host or whatever, you just have to have a regular channel whereby you can both draw other people into your tribe, but also give the people that you consider in this legends group a reason to be following you during those 30 days, so that they want to reach out to you and vice versa.

Mark S A Smith: I would like to put out the challenge to our listener that I want you to identify your legends in your life and I want you to have regular contact with them, because they're the folks that are going to pull you up in the next level.

Ted Bauer: Yeah. We've been alluding to throughout this whole thing that a lot of the hiring, recruiting side of it is still kind of a mess, and I get largely why that is. A lot of times HR departments are detached from the core business model or value prop, either by their own siloing or by executives don't want HR in those discussions. A lot of times that process is a mess, so as a result if you want to get new opportunities externally to wherever you are presently, you're going to need these quote/unquote legends and you're going to need to be top of mind for them.

Obviously that works internally too. If you have one of these legends levels above you at where you currently work, that's going to drive more than going through the conventional 23-step HR process, jargon-laden thing that they're going to throw at you, you know?

Mark S A Smith: Absolutely right. What a wonderful, wide-ranging conversation on a variety of topics. Ted, I have this feeling that like me, you are psychologically unemployable.

Ted Bauer: Probably, yeah. Yeah, probably.

Mark S A Smith: I expect to see a lot more of your writing, and how does our listener get ahold of you if they'd like to engage with you to do some ghostwriting or copywriting? What's the best way to get ahold of you?

Ted Bauer: On the Twitter machine, it would be @TedBauer2003, and then my website is Thecontextofthings.com. There's a contact form on there. My LinkedIn, I'm pretty easily searchable. It's Edward (Ted) Bauer because that's my legal name, but only really my mom ever calls me that. You can always email me and we can always shoot the breeze about any of these topics too. You alluded to I have a bunch of research around them that I can always share with people, and I always enjoy talking about hopefully the demise of middle management. That's probably holding us back more than we know, or anything else in this sphere. Definitely I'm always receptive to being reached out to.

Mark S A Smith: Excellent. Thanks, Ted. It's been a real delight to have you on the Selling Disruption show.

Ted Bauer: Thank you so much, man.