

## Interview with Randy Cassingham

**Randy Cassingham: Celebrated humorist, journalist, author, publisher; World-Renowned Internet and technology expert; Founder: ThisIsTrue.com, StellaAwards.com, HeroicStories.com, SpamPrimer.com;...**

Interview by Stephen Ibaraki, I.S.P.

This week, Stephen Ibaraki, I.S.P., has an exclusive follow-up interview with Randy Cassingham who continues to win acclaim globally for his writings and unequalled contributions to the Internet community.

With a six-figure subscriber base in over 200 countries, Randy is author and publisher of the highly successful newsletters and websites, *This is True* ([ThisIsTrue.com](http://ThisIsTrue.com)) and the True Stella Awards ([StellaAwards.com](http://StellaAwards.com)). He is also the founder of HeroicStories ([HeroicStories.com](http://HeroicStories.com)), and The Spam Primer ([SpamPrimer.com](http://SpamPrimer.com)).

With a degree in journalism from California's Humboldt State University, Randy has explored a number of careers including photographer, freelance writer (articles, fiction, and screenplays), editor, publisher, paramedic, search and rescue sheriff's deputy, process engineer, business consultant, software engineer, and speaker.

As an international expert of the Dvorak Keyboard, Randy has served as a technical advisor to the American National Standards Institute's (ANSI) keyboard standard committee. In addition, he worked for the prestigious NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory for ten years starting with the Space Station Project, editing and publishing the satellite communications technical journal SATCOM Quarterly, working with the flight project mission operations office, publishing the Lab's "strategic vision" for future information systems, working with JPL's Intelligent Vehicle Highway System, and finishing as a software and process engineer for the JIT material acquisition project.

Discussion:

Q: Randy, with your long unparalleled career of considerable successes, we are so fortunate to have you do this interview. Thank you for making time out of your very tight schedule to share your valued insights with our audience.

A: You bet. I thought you did a very thorough job in our first chat, so I'm interested to see what new questions you've come up with!

Q: Share two life-changing events from your paramedic and law enforcement days that continue to shape your views today and explain why?

A: There was no single event, but the entire experience shaped me greatly. I was able to see that when people are in crisis, there is very little qualitative difference between rich and poor, black and white, American- or foreign-born, or any other factor people like to use to shoehorn others into categories. We all have the same basic feelings, the same basic needs, the same basic reactions to being hurt, lost, or simply facing tragedy. And we all have the same basic joy of coming out on the other side of it OK. My emergency services experiences taught me how people react under stress, what people are really like when they let their guard down, and what things different kinds of people consider important. It was very eye-opening to me, and it taught me a lot about the "human condition" that still figures into my work today.

Q: What was your top challenge in starting your own business?

A: The hardest thing for me was making the leap in the first place. I had a very good and stimulating job at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, and as someone very interested in space and

astronomy there's pretty much no better place to work. I had been there for 10 years and had worked up to a pretty darned good position and salary. My work was starting to get noticed by the higher-ups, and it was clear that I could move up to a very good, perhaps life-long, career there. But a few things gnawed at me: I really, really hated living in Los Angeles. I really, really wanted to do more creative, non-technical work. And I really wanted to work for myself.

Work on *True* necessarily overlapped work at JPL for awhile since *True* couldn't support me until I ramped it up. I'd come home from work, boot my computer, and go back to work. My business plan projected that I'd be able to quit JPL after two years to concentrate on *True* full time. And it worked out exactly that way: I quit JPL two years later almost to the day, but it was very hard to do. I was quitting a good job with amazing colleagues and with a good salary and excellent promotion potential. (Read: "secure"! ) And I was throwing it away. Was I insane?

It was very scary to do, but I knew I had to take the plunge. In order to ensure I wasn't tempted to go back to the security of JPL, I moved to Colorado. I arrived at my new apartment on July 4, Independence Day! Living 1,000 miles away removed any temptation to return to the security of JPL. And it worked: by any measure – job satisfaction, recognition, money, work environment, where I live, anything – my work life and personal life are hugely better. But taking the chance, leaving the comfortable security of a Day Job to be my own boss, was incredibly frightening. Even today, after 10 years, I still have dreams that I have returned to JPL "temporarily" to work on a project, and when I wake up I smile about it. But I definitely don't think I should have done anything differently.

Q: You have been online since 1982 and have several highly successful ventures with record revenues even during the dot com meltdown years. Can you comment on these businesses and their growing appeal worldwide? What new challenges are you're facing and how are you resolving them since we last talked?

A: I've only had one down year since I starting my online businesses in 1994, and that was 2003; even the worst of the meltdown years, 2001 and 2002, were up years for me. Why 2003? The recession. I presume that shows pretty nicely that I didn't depend on riding the wave of venture-capital-funded madness. Happily, 2004 was up again.

Still, things change. Advertising is getting more important, and Google's Adwords/Adsense program is in the driver's seat. Google has a terrific lead in this sector, so you can be sure other companies are going to go after some of that money pile. MSN and Yahoo have the power to do it, but I think the big contender will be someone most haven't heard of yet. It'll be interesting to see who it turns out to be.

So yes, people like me can face challenges in this ever-changing environment. I deal with it by not assuming my business models don't have to change when everything else around me is changing – which would be a sure recipe for failure. So I'm adapting as I see things change. To see things change, you have to keep your eyes open. And so far, so good: I project another up year this year.

Q: You have a highly anticipated book to be released soon. What prompted you to write the book?

A: That's probably a good example of keeping my eyes open and my business model flexible. I consider my *This is True* work to be "evergreen" – in general it will probably be as fun to read in 20 years as it is today. I was content to publish the book compilations myself, letting them sell slowly over the years as people discovered the work and came back to look at what came before. That has worked very nicely; even in this "I don't read books" world I sell thousands per year.

But my newer site, the True Stella Awards (TSA), is different: it was designed to provoke public discourse about a problem that's getting to urgent proportions: the abuse of the civil court system. I think the cases I write about are quite interesting, even entertaining, but they won't be as fun to read in 20 years; by then, the problem will either be solved or much worse, and what's deemed "ridiculous" today will pale by comparison to what's going on then. Thus, self-publishing a book based on the site is not the best idea: you want a "big" book that's promoted in a big way by someone who can sell a lot of copies in a short amount of time so that it's available as the public discourse heats up. That takes a big publisher, not a guy working out of a spare room in his house. So my book "The True Stella Awards" comes out just before the 2005 Christmas season, published by Dutton, an imprint of book giant Penguin. That's about as big as you can get, and I'm sure they'll be very successful with it.

Q: Can you share any interesting or surprising stories about it?

A: You know I can! What's interesting is that I didn't go and knock on publishers' doors to try to get this book published. Instead, publishers and literary agents came to me. I established a reputation with *This is True* with quality writing, fun stories, and a unique way of looking at the world and expressing what I found. So when I announced the True Stella Awards, it gained a lot of attention quickly. And since it was addressing a large and growing problem in society, they immediately saw book potential. "Big" book potential. Which amuses me, since when I wrote the business plan for TSA I specifically noted that the resulting book should be shopped out to a big publisher, and not published in-house. I was almost right: I didn't have to shop it out since they came to me. We played right into each other's hands. The lesson other site owners can take from this: quality really, really counts. Plus, you never know who is out there, reading your stuff!

Q: With HeroicStories, a spin-off from the "Honorary Unsubscribe" in *True*, you shared stories about people who have a huge impact on our lives though they may be unknown [for example, Reynold Johnson who invented the hard disk, video tape mechanism, and bubble test forms: [http://www.honoraryunsubscribe.com/reynold\\_b.\\_johnson.html](http://www.honoraryunsubscribe.com/reynold_b._johnson.html)]. In 2003 you turned HeroicStories over to another publisher to devote more time to TSA. Can you update us on your involvement and how do you see them evolving—both HeroicStories and TSA?

A: As I noted, TSA has a limited life. It's interesting and fun now, but probably won't be as fun 10 or 20 years out. I tend to be a long-term thinker, and I've found TSA to be a nice diversion, but I think it will die a natural death after a book or three. And that's fine; by then I'll be ready to either start something else, or relax more. HeroicStories is more "evergreen" – the stories are timeless. It's really, really hard to sell "good news", but it does have a devoted following. The "Chicken Soup" guys had their book rejected by what, 250 publishers? That proved how hard it is to sell "good news," but they also proved that there is a hunger out there for good stuff, even if it is upbeat and thoughtful. I still have hopes that HeroicStories will take off in a big way. It's hard to say what will get it to the "tipping point" that makes it go big, but I hope it happens, even though I'm not involved with it anymore; there's a need for the underlying message it has.

Q: How have your *This is True* stories evolved over the years? Is there shift in what was appealing in past years versus today? How do cultural differences influence story interest? What themes are universal?

A: Interesting question. I think the whole "human interest" category is universal. *True* has always been news commentary, but over the years I've realized that it's really more than that: It's social commentary. By seeing the infinite variety of stupid things humans are capable of, we start to realize that we can all be stupid sometimes. On the flip side, we gain comfort in the realization that we rarely do things as stupid as the people I feature! But it goes deeper than that: over time, my readers start to realize that things they see all the time in real life are just as stupid, and they start to demand better. A good example is my stories on "zero tolerance" in schools perpetrated by people we pay, often very highly, with our tax dollars. And they're perpetrating their outrageously stupid acts on what we consider our most precious resource: our children. First they see story after story in *True*, and sure enough they then see one happen in their own town, or in the school their kid goes to. Or, sadly, to their own child. They understand it's not an "isolated incident" but part of a huge pattern. They understand it's within their power to say "this is not right!" and that they can demand that things change. Yes, *True* is meant to be entertaining, but I'm starting to see people say "No!" more and more to stupidity, and demand better. Simple, entertaining human interest stories can change the world; I'm watching it happen.

So while I'm not really seeing any shift in what's appealing to my readers, I'm seeing a shift in what I write about. It's just as entertaining, but I'm finding it more rewarding and, I think, the readers are finding it more interesting. When I first started *True*, I wondered how long I could comment on every story I wrote. Would I get bored? Run out of things to say? I just finished my eleventh year of writing *True*, and I'm definitely not bored, and am rarely at a loss for words. And the best part is, my readers still say they love it.

Q: You founded a number of widely followed micro-sites such as "Get Out Of Hell Free" (GOOHF.com) and Spam Primer (SpamPrimer.com). Any further plans, new sites, and what impact do you wish to make?

A: I've already added more sites since we last talked. Because I'm a humor writer and because I have a lot of friends, I get a lot of jokes sent to me by e-mail. Yes, I know everyone gets jokes by e-mail, but I get a lot more. I used to send them out to my friends --- hey, it's the real meaning of e-mail, right? But now, I clean up their formatting, maybe apply some subtle edits to smooth them out, and post them on the web at [www.JumboJoke.com](http://www.JumboJoke.com) instead. *True*'s very popular "Honorary Unsubscribe" feature has resulted in hundreds of brief write-ups about interesting people; they're now posted on the web at [www.HonoraryUnsubscribe.com](http://www.HonoraryUnsubscribe.com). Another *True* feature, the "Bonzer Web Site of the Week", is a treasure trove of interesting places to go online. They're now archived at [www.BonzerSites.com](http://www.BonzerSites.com). Last, and this is in the category of being open to changes in my

business model, I've started to post the archives of *This is True* on the True web site, since I know not everyone wants to read stuff in books. For those who do, and hate to read lots of text from a screen, I have books. For those who don't like books and prefer to read off the screen, I'm now accommodating them, too. I think it's the best of both worlds. It's at [www.thisistrue.com/archive.html](http://www.thisistrue.com/archive.html).

Q: For those who want to write, having diverse interests and education is important and so is writing and more writing. What key attributes led to your writing success?

A: Without going back to see what I said the first time we talked, paying attention to quality cannot possibly be overstressed. There is a lot of competition online, pretty much no matter what field you choose to concentrate on. Mine, widely, is "weird news". Is there competition in the "weird news" sector? You bet! When someone goes to a competitor and finds poorly written garbage, and they compare it to *True*, who do you think they're going to read?

Second, paying attention to the audience's needs is important. If you go to my sites you won't find ads that flash in your face demanding attention, and you won't see pop-up/under ads. I could make a lot of money from those since I have a lot of traffic. But people hate them – don't you? I sure do. I may be giving up some short-term income, but having a fun site that doesn't irritate you probably means you'll bookmark it and come back later, which may lead to long-term income growth. Heck, maybe I even make more money in the long run. It'd sure make an interesting case study!

(Another example of paying attention to audience needs: my offering my archives in both book and online form. So much of this stuff is interconnected.)

And, as you point out, having diverse interests and education helps. I would not be anywhere near as good a writer without my emergency services experience, or my college education, or if I hadn't read as many different things that I have (fiction, non-fiction, even screenplays). And of course just sitting down and writing a lot; experience doesn't just make your writing better, it makes it easier.

And, let's be honest, a little good luck helps too. I've had plenty.

Q: Since we first chatted in 2003, a lot has transpired within Information Technology, the Internet and business. Open Source has gained tremendous ground including with many major vendors, IBM has spun off their PC division to a China-based company, Google is achieving record revenues and their stock has soared, world economies have shifted with China gaining considerable press. You have the well-deserved reputation of understanding these complex events and their interplay today and into the future. So, give us your predictions and opinions of the top future events that will shape our world. Why are they important to business, IT professionals, and Internet users?

A: Open source is easy to explain: those major vendors paid attention to their customers' needs. Why has Google soared? Because they're the best at what they do. Why did IBM falter? Because they didn't stand out as worth the higher price they charged over their competitors. The bottom line in all of this: quality. People are fickle: they say they want quality, but they then go out and shop by price – and very often end up disappointed. I've always stressed quality, and good customer service, and I think that will get more and more important as time goes on. People are sick and tired of garbage, of products that don't work, of customer service that sucks. They learn that buying on price alone is false economy.

Dell is moving a significant portion of their tech support back to the U.S. from India. Why? Because their tech support was starting to be a joke, rather than an example of high-quality, excellent customer service. And very importantly, it was affecting their bottom line; despite having significantly better prices than, say, IBM, they were losing sales, despite the quality of their hardware. Ah, but if they could offer good merchandise at good prices and back it with good customer service? What do you think that would be worth? The answer: it will help Dell stay in the Number One position if they pull it off right. And I think they will. If they don't, they'll deserve to die and someone else will do it instead.

It's going to be a tough future. Companies like to salivate over China: "A billion new customers!" Sure; that's one way to look at it. Try this on for size: "A billion new low-cost competitors!" Want to update your sales projections now? So how does a company compete in that scary new world? By paying attention to what the customer wants and needs. Price is important, but it's far from the only thing they need to pay attention to. Just ask "Toys 'R' Us"!

Q: What are your views on blogs, and Internet syndication technologies? What will Internet communities and user interchange look like in 2010? How will you get involved?

A: I don't get all misty-eyed about it. RSS feeds can be useful – and *True* has had one since before most people knew what it was. But “all” it is is a different way of getting at the content that's already there. What good is an RSS feed of garbage? The product is what's important; once you have that in place in appropriate quality, only then is the delivery mechanism important. I really don't see a whole lot changing between now and 2010. RSS will be better, easier to use, and thus more important. But people will still be using e-mail and web sites. And there will be a surprise: something new will pop up. Anyone who really figures out what it is five years in advance will get very rich.

Q: You have hard-won expertise accumulated over 25 years of actually “doing it.” Your phenomenal success is a validation of your experience. Will you increase your consulting work and if so which areas do you favour and why?

A: Probably not. I love my writing and publishing work, and the positive effect my work is having on the world is important to me. I want to continue doing it, and trading away the time to do other things doesn't attract me. Sometimes consulting work interesting and challenging, and I'll do it if I like what the company is doing -- I don't say “never!”, but neither do I seek such work.

Q: Let us turn it around and get you to ask the questions – there really is no one better. If you were doing this interview, what three questions would you ask of someone in your position and what would be your answers?

A:

Q1 What's the most important factor that makes the Internet so powerful?

A1: In the old days, people talked about “the power of the press” — newspapers and (later) television had real power to shape public thought and perception. And, not incidentally, to make a lot of money. The problem was, it was very expensive to get into the newspaper or TV business to grab some of that power. Not anymore: the Internet is the press, and will increasingly be “TV” too. It's no longer expensive; in fact, it's incredibly cheap to get online and become part of “the press” and have a powerful voice. There's a lot of competition for attention, of course, since everyone else is starting to realize this too, but you can stand out by having something important to say and saying it well (there's that idea of “quality” again!)

Q2: Is it too late to get started and “make it” online?

A2: Definitely not. If you have something interesting to say, can say it in a new way, work very hard and exercise patience, you can definitely meet your goals, whether it's income, getting an opinion aired, or getting attention of people who will want to hire you.

Q3: Then is it easy to get online and make a small fortune? Should I quit my day job?

A3: Definitely not. It takes a lot of work to run a business, and publishing online is very definitely a business-like thing to do, especially if you do it well. I work about 70 hours a week. I don't mind that because it does pay off for me, and I truly love my work. I can see that I'm having an effect on the world. That's not bad. But I knew what I was getting into when I pulled the plug on my day job, and others should similarly go into it with their eyes open. It's hard, but it's satisfying.

Q: Randy, you continue to be an innovative force in a dynamic space initiating change worldwide. We thank you for your many contributions to history and for the many thoughtful insights you have shared with our audience.

A: My pleasure. I'll chat with you again in a few years!