

**Matthew:** Hello. Welcome to Marketing Smarts, a podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs. I'm your host Matthew Grant, Managing Editor here at MarketingProfs and I thank you for listening.

Our guest this week is Erika Napoletano, Head Redhead at RHW Media, a Denver based online strategies consultancy. Erika also has a book coming out next month, *The Power of Unpopular*. And it was to discuss said book that we invited her to Marketing Smarts.

What's the book about? Well, on the one hand it's about getting organized and starting or restarting your business. On the other hand it's about finding your true voice and building an audience by paying particular attention to being unpopular with the right people.

Now, why would anyone running a business want to be unpopular? One reason is that being unpopular, again with the right people, can give you some much needed clarity and can help you define what is truly important to you individually and, more importantly, help you identify the specific types of people, customers, and clients that are going to be critical to your success.

We'll go into how this plays out in the real world, why unpopular doesn't mean unlikable, and why striving for a particular kind of unpopularity calls for a lot of courage. But before we do, I want to remind everyone that if you like what you hear on Marketing Smarts and even if you don't you can always leave us a review in iTunes or on MarketingProfs.com. You can also reach out to me directly via email, my address is [mattg@marketingprofs.com](mailto:mattg@marketingprofs.com).

Without much further ado, let's get started. Erika, welcome to Marketing Smarts.

**Erika:** Thanks for having me, Matt.

**Matthew:** I'm very excited to speak with you today. For our listeners, please just tell them a little bit about what you do and we'll start things off that way.

**Erika:** I try to cause as much trouble as possible on a daily basis. My name is Erika Napoletano. I am a consultant based out of Denver, Colorado. I run a digital strategies agency, which in English means that I keep companies from looking like idiots online.

The majority of my work is building digital strategies for companies that help them get from where they are to where they want to be, have a personality in the process, and establish great relationships with the people that matter most to their business, which is their customers.

I am also a writer, that is other part of my business. I'm a monthly columnist for Entrepreneur Magazine and I have two books coming out this year, one of which is *The Power of Unpopular* published by John Wiley and Sons. We're debuting that at SXSW Interactive in not so long a time, in March.

**Matthew:** It was funny, I got to read the proof that sent over prior to this interview and it was funny when you were describing going back to your high school reunion and telling people you were a writer, giving that spiel, and people would say, “Congratulations on becoming a writer.”

**Erika:** Yeah, I didn’t know there was an award.

**Matthew:** I mean, I’ve made my living one way or the other by writing for a long time. I remember being at an event and someone said, “What do you do?” and I was like, “I’m a writer.” They were like, “Gosh, I wish I could be a writer.” I guess sometimes when people hear “writer” they think published authors with books they can find in the library, which you are soon to be – I’m not saying you’re not.

**Erika:** I am. I’m very fortunate that I’ve developed an audience that warrants that. But, it is interesting because anybody who says, “I wish could be a writer,” – you know what? There’s people who say, “I’m a web designer,” and I’m like, “I wish I could be a web designer.” It’s what makes the business world go around, you find people who have skills that complement yours and together you create a business.

**Matthew:** I was thinking, too, about this writing thing because I was talking to a guy, someone to whom I had several years ago introduced myself as a writer, and he was talking about, “For some of the websites I’m setting up for my clients I’m using this one service and they can produce 500 word posts for \$50 each. What do you think of that?” And it did make me sad, I’ll be honest.

The commodification, particularly on the web and especially if people are thinking of writing strictly from an SEO “how am I going to be found in the search engines” perspective – totally legitimate in certain ways and if that’s the way your business works. But, there was something that made me a little sad about what that meant to writing, this intense commodification of it. I don’t know if you see the same thing happening.

**Erika:** There’s no argument that there are some businesses out there that have made words a commodity. There used to be this standard to which all writers aspired. It was AP style, Chicago style. There were journalistic standards and then there were other writing standards that were common in literature.

Today things are different. Books come out in a matter of months, depending on if it’s a timely issue. There are collections of things that people have previously published online that they’re taking to a print audience. There are more ways than ever for people to get information, and the internet being one of them.

The internet has made writing a McDonalds menu. What we have to decide as consumers of that writing is some days we want a cheeseburger and other days we'd really like to sit down, enjoy a great bottle of wine, a steak, a delightful pasta dish, and have exceptional service throughout that dining experience. The experience at the McDonalds and the Morton's Steak House vary greatly, but they all have their place.

And it doesn't mean that one is bad and the other is superior, it's just they fill different needs. Especially with a lot of the outsourcing that's being done, sure you can get 400 word articles for \$9.00 outsourced out of India, but it's how those words make you feel that I think is really the differentiating point.

You're not going to get a lot of evoked emotion out of a \$9.00, 400 word post versus a writer who has devoted their life and has a knack for the craft and is really an artist in that trade to deliver a message that you need. That's why we read the writers that we read, it's why we like the things that they do. It's because they make us feel a certain way.

I think that's an important thing for people to remember. You can only be commoditized to the point that you allow yourself to be commoditized. And if you're going to play the price game and you're a talented writer, you're selling yourself short.

**Matthew:** I also think that people, from a business standpoint if they're hiring writers and trying to get them to do something for them they need to appreciate that as well. Though I think too that writers do need to be honest with themselves in terms of what is – and this is something that you talk about in your forthcoming book, *The Power of Unpopular* – the writers need to think about the specific value that they bring and be realistic and honest with themselves about it, “Am I the person who can bring something Faulknarian to this company website? Am I really the person who is going to be good at churning out things quickly that are keyword rich and that fit the bill and actually help serve the business purpose?”

I did want to get back to one of the things that you said in your little introduction there, which was that you help you clients not look like idiots online. I was wondering if you could talk about some of the things that actually make companies look idiotic online.

**Erika:** Absolutely. I'll go ahead and take that foot that I put out for everyone's display and shove it firmly into my mouth, chew on it a little bit.

When I sit down to work with new clients I start by taking a poll of people in the room and finding out, “When you're surfing the web what are the things that annoy you the most?” And it's usually websites that start playing music as soon as I click on them and I can't figure out where to shut it off.

And depending on what I know about their company I'm like, "What annoys you about using Facebook? What annoys about LinkedIn? What's get your goat on Twitter?" So before they even know anything about me or what I do for their company I've got this list of things that the people in the room hate. What I then go and do is, "All of these things that we hate, we're going to develop a strategy so that your company never does any of those things, because I'm not going to turn your company into something that you already hate."

So let's take a look at all of these things. These are things that companies shouldn't be doing.

They shouldn't be jamming your Facebook feed full of all of this where the volume is at 11 all the time. On Twitter it shouldn't be just all about them, "Me, me, me," it's the most popular radio station in the world. People want to hear about them. What makes them seem interesting? Why do find them interesting? How do we make your company interesting to other people?

That's the easiest way that I do it. I figure out what annoys people and then we don't do that, we do things that actually work.

**Matthew:** I could also see, and I thought maybe you were going in this direction, are you able to turn that around and say, "Yeah, this is a great list of all the things you hate. I get it. We all hate this. Now let's look at what you're already doing and see the ways that you're already hateable."

**Erika:** Absolutely. I don't use it as hateable, because whatever we do, anybody listening to this podcast started something at any given time and we did it to the best of our ability.

Maybe we went out and we bought a book or a DVD if we wanted to learn how to play the guitar. Maybe we just picked up the guitar and figured out we had a knack for it and we were able to watch somebody and we picked it up. Maybe we picked up the guitar and were like, "Wow, there's nothing in this world that I stink at more than this instrument right here and I need help," and then we go and hire a teacher.

So everybody takes a different approach to learning how to do something. And companies are no different. They're like, "We should really be getting into social media, we should be building a marketing campaign and a marketing initiative for this next year." Baptism by fire, let's get out there and let's do it. But, that's how business gets done.

Nobody ever got anything done through analysis paralysis. You took a leap of faith and you jumped in and you told yourself jumping in, "Oh man, I hope I float." You make mistakes. Mistakes happen. Experience is what we get when things don't turn out how we planned.

**Matthew:** Right.

**Erika:** So when companies think that everything is going to be perfect from the get-go, it's a fallacy. There's that certain sense of humility that comes with trying anything new, because humility means you're open to receiving input from the outside to make whatever you're doing better. Arrogance is when you turn that channel off and you go, "You know what? I got it. I know best and I don't want to hear it." That's when companies really crash and burn.

I try to bridge that gap between "We gave it a college try, but we want to do this better." I'm the person that a lot of times comes in and goes, "You know what? Here are some great things about what you started. Here's how we can build those into strategies that we can launch, we can measure, and we can see if they're best for the long term. Here are some things that weren't so great. Let's just kind of get rid of those. But more importantly, let's look at why they weren't great and see how we can learn from that."

It's all a learning experience. I think a synonym for business should be learning experience.

**Matthew:** I think people sometimes get impatient with that or are not quite sure how to appreciate that learning experience of making mistakes and screwing up, and trying things and having them blow up a little bit.

What you were just talking about in terms of doing this looking at what worked and what didn't, and how to learn from the failures, reminded me of a technique I had heard someone talking about which was pre-project postmortem where even before you get into it you have a meeting and say, "What went wrong?" A lot of interesting things get surfaced when people have the plan and they're ready to go and then they sit down and have to pretend that the project is already finished. It can help clarify the vision.

But since we talked about business, I wanted to turn our conversation to your forthcoming book, *The Power of Unpopular*. When I reading through it was surprised, I mean your own blog writing is sort of personality driven and you talk about being unpopular when you were in high school and things like that. Though I'm not totally convinced that's true, because you seem kind of popular to me, Erika.

But, it's a very interesting take on entrepreneurship and trying to give people a handbook of here are the things you should be thinking about and considering as you start out, or as you launch your business, or try to rebuild your business. There's a sentence you had early on that I want you to talk about, "Popular is the last thing smart business people should want to be." Could you explain to our listeners what you mean by that?

**Erika:** No, you're going to have to buy the book. I'm kidding.

Our current definition of unpopular as we're growing up it's really driven by juvenile principles. I'm not saying that in a derogatory way. As we were growing there were popular versus unpopular, it was the first definition that we had of the have and the have-nots in this world. Who got invited to all the cool parties, who had the cool jeans, who had the sneakers that lit up, who had a new bicycle, who had the biggest group of friends, who got a car when they turned 16, things like that. Everybody experienced unpopularity on some level.

But, when you get into the world of business the reason that popular is the last thing you want to be is because think back to when you were a kid – if you ever had an inkling of unpopular in your life what it meant is you were starting from a disadvantage. You didn't have a herd of people supporting you in whatever you wanted to do. Maybe you had a group of kids that were just as unpopular as you were, but it made you pretty darn resourceful.

That's the entrepreneurial spirit. Being popular is about following a herd. Being unpopular is about making the best decisions possible even though you know there is a certain audience that's never going to like the decisions that you make, but you know they're the best decisions for you.

To sum it up, think of every brand that you perceive as popular in the world from the Oprahs to the McDonalds to the New York Yankees, the Dodgers. Each one of those brands is highly unpopular with a very distinct demographic. Are you part of that demographic? That's okay, because you know what? They didn't build their brand for you. They built it for the people who are going to love them.

That's what we have to do as business owners. Popular businesses are popular with all the right people and unpopular with everyone who doesn't really matter.

There's a distinct difference between unpopular and unlikable. People get them confused often and I go through that in the book. Being unpopular doesn't mean that you're a jerk. Being unpopular means that you know who you are, you're ready to stick to your guns, and you're building a product and a service that's going to serve the audience that you seek to serve.

**Matthew:** I think that point comes out really clearly in the book. One of the things you did say there is that unpopular brands or unpopular businesses are designed to be unpopular with just the right audience. I thought you made it really clear how figuring out exactly who is not going to like you and kind of eliminating who swaths of the population actually helps you focus your vision.

Reminding me that Steve Jobs, you can see him on YouTube talking about the power of no and the importance of saying no, and how there's literally an infinite number of things you could do at any given point and you need to pare away and strip away all the infinite possibilities until

you've honed it down to the one possibility that makes the most sense for what you're trying to do.

I thought that was a very valuable way of thinking about audience definition. You do talk about building personas and avatars and having this clear picture of the person you want to serve and you want to be popular with, but figuring out who that person isn't is also a critical part of that process.

I wanted to ask you something else because there's a lot about planning and research, building info structure and thinking about scalability and how you're going to craft your personality and the personality of your brand and things like that. But, it's not clear to me that when people do businesses or when they start businesses that they actually know what they're doing. You know what I mean?

**Erika:** I didn't. I had no bloody idea.

**Matthew:** Exactly. I worked for a company for awhile that ended up being a \$500,000,000 company, but we used to always tell the story to new employees of all the different businesses that the founders were engaged in before this one happened to take off. It wasn't their plan at all. So that's why it was curious. There were two contrasting messages I found in your book.

On the one hand, as you write, "Unpopular brands aren't built by taking shots in the dark." There is work you do to kind of hone things. But then later you write, "We have to let our businesses find their own rhythms as we travel the path of unpopular."

So how do people or how are people supposed to navigate this you've got to plan, the more you plan, plan your work, work your plan, the more targeted you're going to be and the more effective you're going to be, balanced with the fact that it's up to your audience, it's up to this world to kind of tell you what's going to work and what isn't?

**Erika:** Oh, gosh. Let's start off with a very G-rated example of an illustration that I offer to clients quite frequently.

Put two empty jars on a table side by side. You can fill one up with hopes and dreams or the other one up with M&Ms. Which one is going to fill up first? Probably the one with M&Ms in it. That's because wishes and dreams are ethereal, they don't have any concrete substance, and you have to see how they take form.

To talk about your point, I am grateful that somebody thought the ideas I have to share were important enough to put in a book that people might go out and buy and put on your bookshelf and wave "hi" to every morning as they get up to go walk the dog and they show it to people

when they come over. See, I have a really grandiose expectation of when people bring my book into their home.

But, this isn't what I planned on doing. I graduated college with a degree in Technical Theater. In other words, I had a college degree that taught me how to build things, build scenic construction, do lighting design, do costume design. I was going to go work in the theater industry because that's what I loved.

That was 1996, this is 2012 – 16 years later I'm writing a book on branding. Everywhere in between that I was The Director of Stage Operations for the Virginia Opera, I pulled cable through Telecom central offices for AT&T all up and down the east coast, I became a personal trainer and ran my own personal training business for three years and I moved to Japan, I came back to the states, went back into the entertainment industry because somebody told me that I should be an actor and then I made my living as a working actor for three years.

I was tired of the entertainment industry, so I went back into sales, which is pretty much all I knew outside of the theater industry. I worked in capital medical device, I got tired of that. I became a financial advisor for UBS Financial Services, I got tired of that. I went to go work for a real estate company doing private investments, got tired of that one and I walked out of a six figure a year job where I worked pretty much an hour a day because I asked myself the question, "What makes me the happiest?" And it was the other seven hours of my day that I spent writing and solving problems with words.

If it sounds like I'm breaking up a little bit, it's because I am. I spent 17 years of my life doing what other people thought I should be doing. I spent it in pursuit of the should-haves. The day that I walked in and left that job I was multiple six figures a year, I took my next position as a 1099 employee for \$35,000 per year. I had a mortgage, a car payment, bills, and I walked into that job every day happy as a clam because I got to use words every day. That's when I knew I was never going to fall victim to the shoulds again.

I think there are a lot of people out there who have felt the same way. They feel like they want to build something and nothing quite fits, like you're wearing somebody else's clothes or somebody else's shoes. You wake up and you go, "I know what I want to do." It's that feeling in your gut, it's that thing you can't ignore. It's not what you should be doing, it's what you must do.

When it comes to business and all of this planning, you know what? Our parents didn't plan for us to be entrepreneurs. They wanted us to grow up, get married, have a great job, have kids, and live a long and happy life. We're the ones who decide to follow this nutjob of being an entrepreneur and business owner. All of that planning, it's great and it can get you to a certain point, but then there's also that tears running down your face moment of glee where as a



business owner you go, “All of that planning got me here and now I’ve just got to take a leap of faith and see what works.”

You can plan and you can plan and you can plan, and it gives you a great foundation. I wouldn’t be who I am today without that 17 years of following my shouldas. Your business, no matter where you’re at in your business, you wouldn’t be where you are without all of the shouldas you followed and all of the planning that you’ve done to get you where you are. But, you can’t hold it so tight that you choke it to death. You have to let it go, step away and go “Show me what you can do. Dance, monkey, dance.”

Have a sense of humor about it and know that when you wake up tomorrow whatever stinks today is not going to look as bad. Things always look different later.

**Matthew:** True.

**Erika:** That’s the discrepancy between planning and business happening as business happens.

**Matthew:** I think that also comes back to the message of humility you were talking about, in the sense that, I always think about this, we don’t know what today means really until tomorrow and people jump to a lot of conclusions about what exactly does this mean, “Oh my gosh, this whole crisis,” or this bad thing that’s happening. They don’t realize how much of human life is just determined over the course of time.

On some level you have to have faith that even though this might seem bad right now or this might be the biggest mistake ever made, as they say only time will tell. In fact, that time will tell we actually have the power to even remake what it was and make something of this past.

I’m so curious thought about your bravery of what you were describing of walking out of your job. I think you’re speaking to a lot of people when you talk about everyone walks with this “This is my life,” or, “Here’s my true passion, my strength. I’ve got all these million reasons I couldn’t do that. My mortgage. What about these responsibilities?” Just everything that kind of holds you back from making that leap of faith.

I was just wondering was there a precipitating event or voice in your head, or those voices in your head that you don’t usually talk about. That’s why I think people are always wondering for themselves, “What’s it going to take? What’s going to be that moment? What’s going to be my Jerry Maguire moment in the middle of the night where I say ‘this is what I’ve got to do?’”

I think one of the issues of taking leaps of faith is that they’re almost impulsive on some level. Is that you experienced it or was there really one thing led to another and there was a straw that broke the camel’s back?

**Erika:** It was a combination of one thing led to another and the straw that broke the camel's back. There was a relationship, a three and a half year relationship, I was engaged and I had ended that relationship in December. That following February is when I walked out. Actually, it was a year after that – talk about a revision of history I have.

I spent another year trying to push myself into these shouldas and even though I wasn't happy I went from being a financial advisor to working for the real estate investment firm. I think there are probably some people listening to this call who can relate to the trap of money. I didn't come from a wealthy family and when you're looking at a check every two weeks that has five figures on it and you look at your bank account and you have to worry about going through the drive through and them handing your card back to you and going, "I'm sorry, this card didn't go through." When you're at a point in your life where you think that everything – Louis C.K. says it best, he's like "Everything is amazing and nobody is happy."

When you're having that internal struggle with yourself you're waiting for that catalyst event or you have to create that catalyst yourself. Well, the catalyst for me was walking into the office one day and being told that I was receiving a 40% pay cut because the company was hitting hard times. This was at the beginning of the real estate crisis in 2007. That trigger right there, a 40% pay cut on an "oh my god" salary I was still at "oh my." It was enough for me to go though.

And how I was being treated at that company, like this recession coming up was my fault, it was enough for me to go home that night and be honest with myself about what I loved. And if everything in this world went away tomorrow what did I want to do? I wanted to write, I wanted to solve problems, I wanted to help.

At 8:30 the next morning when I walked into the CEO's office and I said, "I'm not going to be here on Monday," and they asked me, "Are you taking a vacation? We didn't have that down." I said, "Yeah, I'm not going to be here on Tuesday either." A day later I walked out, left everything and I had a position at an ad agency in town based on me, my writing, and what they wanted to do, and me going "I want to help you get there."

That was the catalyst for me. How many people listening to this call – you've either been at the point or you've had that critical mass point where you made the shift between what you were doing and what you want to be doing. There is something that comes along that makes the what you are doing no longer worth it and what you want to be doing, it just fills you up. It does take a certain amount of bravery and it's an unpopular decision with a lot of people, because we have spouses, kids, responsibilities.

I think it takes a commitment to communication with the people in your life to reach out to them and ask them for their support. And more so than asking for their support, asking them how you can earn their support for this decision that you're making because you're making it

and it's just a matter of when you're pulling the rip cord on the parachute. I don't know about you, but I jumped without a parachute. Saying, "This is what I want to be doing and this is what I must do. How can I earn your support so you're with me every step of the way because I don't want to take this journey without you?"

**Matthew:** Wow.

**Erika:** Sorry.

**Matthew:** No, that was perfect. Actually we're at the end of the time that we have for the podcast. But, what I wanted to say is I feel like the journey from where we went from the work you do for clients to the secrets or keys to successful entrepreneurship to this very personal, very open, even sort of vulnerable way of talking about yourself and your experience. That sort of is, if people want to explore more of what Erika Napoletano is about, I feel like they got it sort of in a half hour chunk.

So if people want to find more and learn more about your journey and also find out more about your thoughts on things like SEO copywriting and very nitty gritty practical stuff, where should they go?

**Erika:** First, you can visit my website at [RedheadWriting.com](http://RedheadWriting.com). Just a disclaimer, the site is uncensored and it is persona driven. You've heard the person on today's podcast and that's the person driving that persona. So come in with an open mind and maybe a few choice black bars that you might want to put over things that you might not like.

And then you can find me on Facebook and Twitter @RedheadWriting. If you feel compelled that you might want to dig into *The Power of Unpopular* it is on presale right now, you can get it at Amazon and Barnes & Noble, just search for The Power of Unpopular. I think Amazon actually has the best price, it's about \$16.00 right now. If you order it right now you should receive it between March 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>.

And if you're coming to SXSW come see me. I have a book reading event and a book signing on Sunday the 11<sup>th</sup>. The best part of what I do is meeting people, because you're the humans behind the fact that I get to do what I love for a living. So a preemptive thank you for that.

**Matthew:** I would say check out *The Power of Unpopular*, it's a very interesting book. It's a very practical guide book to either starting your business or redefining your business, and also with a lot of good case studies from companies you probably never heard of, which I find refreshing in a business book.

**Erika:** Yes. There are no Southwest Airlines or Zappos as case studies in the book. By the time this podcast airs you can actually check out the website for the book, which is [UnpopularBook.com](http://UnpopularBook.com). Come on down and see what's waiting.

**Matthew:** Thank you very much, Erika, for taking the time to talk to us on Marketing Smarts today. And thank you, listeners, for listening here to the very end. This has been the Marketing Smarts podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs. I'm your host Matthew Grant and thank you for listening.