



Tiny Wood Stove: From Blog to Million-Dollar Business



BLOG CUSTOMER STORIES WRITTEN BY BUS BIRCH

Lots of entrepreneurs launch stores without the kind of rich blog content that drives customers to their site.

That's why we love the inspiring story of [Tiny Wood Stove](#). We sat down with founder Rick Peterson, a 35-year-old Kansas native, to get the scoop on how one blog post about wood-burning stoves for tiny spaces turned into a flourishing online business.

Q. How did you end up deciding to live in a tiny space?

My wife Sheri was a teacher and I was working as an outdoor education teacher. Having our daughter, Presley, made us look at what we were doing and how we were spending time. It was clear that we were focused on serving other people's kids even though we'd just brought our own little life into the world.

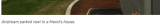
We did a lifestyle audit and asked ourselves, "What do we want our life to look like?" We made a list of barriers to spending time together as a family: debt, health insurance, housing, etc.

Jo always followed a bunch of blogs written by nomads and was intrigued by small spaces. I knew any vehicle could be turned into a bedroom.

So we said, "Let's get something mobile, travel and spend more time with family, and get rid of our housing expenses."

Q. What was the first step in your freedom journey?

We bought a 1998 Airstream travel trailer but didn't know anything about it. We just dug in and started remodeling. We paid off our debt, my wife quit her job, and we hit the road.



Airstream parked next to a family house.

We didn't want to be dependent on campgrounds, which can be as expensive as a mortgage when you add up the cost per night, so we wanted to be off-grid. We installed solar panels, and got a wood stove for heat.

Q. What was the wood stove market like then?

At the time, there were only a handful of options. In the U.S., most of the stoves were made for old wooden boats.

We had a blog called [Insightfulnomads.com](#) which catalogued our journey. One post covered the reasons we chose a wood-powered stove instead of propane. And while looking at our blog's analytics, trying to figure out how to monetize it, we noticed that 75 to 80 percent of all traffic was to that single post. Visitors were finding us through searches like "wood stove small space" or "wood stove tiny house." From that discovery, I bought [tinywoodstove.com](#).

Q. You had another business at this time, correct?

Yes, a [Brazilian] site that was a vegetarian and vegan meal-planning service. It was gonna be our main ticket. But I spent five years on it and way more money than I made. It was a nightmare.

Q. It sounds like [tinywoodstove.com](#) was the exact opposite of that?

I read [The Lean Startup](#), which talked about testing your assumption as quickly as possible and adapting with agility. Initially, I was thinking about an affiliate website for wood stoves. We couldn't have a massive list of stoves because we were nomadic. We were thinking we could be a resource for information and earn a passive income peddling other people's stuff.



Taking a nap after a long day.

Q. How did that go?

We spent 2013 to 2015 testing and making content and content and more content. I contacted different stove manufacturers in the U.S. and UK. But when I talked about an affiliate arrangement, they didn't really get it.

Q. So you tried another tactic?

We saw that people were searching for one stove, a Pinguine, which is made in the UK. We wanted to sell it on our site, but to make it work, we had to purchase an entire pallet. So we started a crowdfunding campaign and made a landing page with [PledgeMusic](#). We offered the stove for \$95 off if people [pre-ordered](#), with a promise that if we didn't get enough orders to buy the pallet, we would refund their money. In seven days, we sold more than enough and were in business.

Q. What was the next step?

We continued to sell the stove, but began to realize that finding the correct pipe to connect to the stove was difficult. The only pipe you could get in the U.S. was six inches, which is too big. So we started taking a line of three- and four-inch pipes.

Q. What other gaps in the market did you notice?

The Pinguine was kind of a big ol' stove. It was cute but wasn't very practical.

We needed a more robust stove, so we went ahead and made our own too. We didn't know much when we started, so just jumped in and learned along the way.

Q. How was that learning curve?

We were pretty lucky to find a manufacturer for our [Pinguine](#), but it was definitely a hard education in international trade. The first shipment came with a broken pipe and we ended up spending three months sitting on the middle of the ocean. We were able to deliver our pre-sale orders. People were really understanding and we only had to issue a couple of refunds. I take this as a testament to the market being very underserved.

Q. It sounds like you really have a connection to your followers and customers.

We're not just peddling products, we're passionate about tiny living and the freedom it affords. Every day we communicate with people getting jobs, starting businesses, and looking to downsize. The wood stove is just a little part of it. We're helping them take that step. If we were just peddling a product, that would be devoid of meaning.

Q. And your team is all nomadic as well?

We have five members on our support team who all work remotely and live tiny and off the grid. Everyone in a support role is actually living the lifestyle, so they can really relate to customers and be on the same page with them. We advertise jobs through Instagram and the types of places where we can tap into the community.



An old fire-drummer and built a 160 sq. ft. off-grid tiny house in 2018.

Q. So why would you opt for a wood stove in a tiny space?

Putting any flammable thing in a structure can be dangerous. A wood stove is no more dangerous than a propane appliance. Propane can leak, it's volatile and you have to buy it continuously. It's a finite resource. Also, for every pound of propane you burn, water enters into your space. Moisture and mold can be huge issues in a tiny space. A wood stove is dry heat.

Also, with a wood stove, I can sit up somewhere, create some stories over my knee and look them in the stove and heat up the space. But it is definitely messy work.

Q. We'd love to hear about how you set up your site.

I'm not a technical guy and I built what I have here. I know the basics of creating a WordPress site and used plugins for the rest, which made it super easy. The beauty of [WooCommerce](#) and [WordPress](#) is that they're very bootstrap, and DIY-friendly. You begin to figure it out.

I would say right now the site is a "B-." But you don't have to have the best site when you're just starting up. It just has to work. We're now in the process of polishing the website. Now that we have the revenue we can hire a professional to take it to the next level, but it's always worked.

Q. What plugins do you use with WordPress and WooCommerce?

In the beginning, we set up [WooCommerce](#) for our very first pre-sale. It was simple and easy.

Initially, the theme we used wasn't great for speed, so we transitioned to [Janna](#). Auto rocks. The theme is built for optimization. We installed it and there was a very noticeable increase in speed. It's all about performance.

We use [Beaver Builder](#) to create content which, for someone like me, is very easy. We use [Gravity Forms](#) to create custom forms on our cart to action page. People fill in their details and email us. That's how we start conversations about what they need.

Q. And as for WooCommerce features go, which are your trusted favorites?

We use [variable products](#) to offer options, which works well because we have an install kit with twenty components. There are lots of ways to configure your kit, so it would be a nightmare to offer each individually. It's much easier for customers to select their own options — four-inch pipe, this type of vent, the other type of clamp, etc.

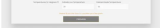
It also makes it much easier to keep track of stock on our end. As a customer makes their selection — like a four-inch pipe — it takes one unit of four-inch pipe out of our inventory.

We really like [Cart Abandon](#). It's great for offering additional products to customers directly on the cart page.

We also use [WooCommerce Backorder Manager Pro](#) for managing backorders and checking inventory levels.

Q. Is there any custom code on your site?

We have a few custom solutions. One is a [stove-size calculator](#). People add their measurement details and it tells them the size stove and pipe they need.



That's really great about WordPress: its deep community. If there's not a plugin tailored to what you need, you can build something relatively inexpensively. Anyone we want to solve a problem, we don't have to recreate the wheel. We can dive into the library and see what other people have done. Even if it's not a perfect fit, it can be customized to work perfectly.

Q. What do you use for payments?

[PayPal](#) and [Stripe](#). We're now debating a transition to [PayPal Braintree for WooCommerce](#), which has lower rates and a more streamlined checkout experience because you can accept credit cards directly on your site.

A hidden benefit of using PayPal and Stripe is that we've been able to access lines of credit. As a new business, we didn't have a credit score, so our local bank wouldn't lend to us. But our payment providers had direct proof of our sales and were able to give us a loan based on that. That's been really helpful to our growth.

Q. How about your marketing and customer acquisition process?

There are a lot of ways now, which makes things more challenging. But we still work pretty well. SEO is a big factor, along with [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#). That's how we connect with the community. We do some Google AdWords as well.

We use [MailChimp](#), which integrates with Gmail, for email marketing, and [Gravity Forms](#) on our contact page.

Q. Why is a CRM important?

Going tiny is a big decision and it's a long process to figure out how you want to heat your space. You need to decide if it's a good idea to put a stove in and punch a hole through your roof. The sales process could take a couple of weeks or three months.

Q. Do you still produce a lot of content?

Our site has tons of content. We use [WooCommerce](#) and not [Shopify](#) because it's so important. We have lots of articles and guides and videos and case studies. We're really trying to leverage those, which is really clunky in [Shopify](#) WordPress and [Woo](#) give us more ability to tailor our site to what we're doing. [Shopify](#) is very versatile.



Q. What's next for the business?

We're in the process of developing the company to other things like competing heaters. The long play is to be Tiny Supply Co. — offering the whole gamut.

Tiny Wood Stove is a great example of a business that was driven by their community. Rick and Sheri had an audience — those wanting to live tiny — that they were familiar with and passionate about.

Then, they listened to that audience. They found a problem they could solve and confirmed that customers were willing to pay for their product.

If you're thinking about starting an online business, or even if you've already jumped in, read our series titled, "[From Idea to First Customer](#)." It walks you through all the steps from identifying an audience to making your very first sale.