

Instapaper

October 23, 2014

Getting Press | Force of Good: a blog by Lance Weatherby
blog.weatherby.net

One of the great misperceptions that people in the startup world have when it comes to marketing is that issuing a press release will result in people writing about your news. Nothing is further from the truth. The vast majority of press releases do not result in news coverage. It takes a little more work than that to get noticed. I am going to use the recent Half Off Depot acquisition as a case study.

We closed the deal mid January. We had planned to announce sometime in mid-February. At the Half Off Depot February board meeting turning the transaction into news became a topic of discussion. Here was our general plan.

We were to drop the release at 10:00 am EST on Monday February 11. At that time I personally put it on the wire using PRWeb.

But before putting the release on the wire we reached out to four national technology news outlets that we targeted. We provided them with some details of the release and offered to share it with them under embargo. Embargo tells a reporter they can not publish anything before the embargo time date. You have to slap this on the release in large font red letters. The embargo time/date we used was 9:00 am EST on Monday February 11. This gives a reporter a jump on the release, an opportunity to break the story. It gave us an opportunity to figure out who, if anyone, would be our national lead.

After getting this cranked up and some interest from two of the four targeted nationals I reached out to the trade press. In this case Street Fight and Daily Deal Media. We gave them a 9:30am embargo. I did not want them to dork up the national publication coverage. If a national sees local before they publish more times than not they will kill their story.

I also selected local press in Atlanta and Tampa (home of CrowdSavings) and did the same as with the trade press. In Atlanta I focused more on the Atlanta Journal than the Atlanta Business Chronicle because I thought I could get the former to bite and they are a bigger outlet with broader reach.

We did this ourselves, because if you can get a hold of them, a reporter is much more likely to listen if talking to management instead of a public relations firm.

This all worked.

All Things Digital turned into our national lead, publishing their story at 9:00am. That was picked up by VentureWire. It became a reference point for the locals and trade writers to update their stories. All, to remind you, before Half Off Depot officially released any news. This was also picked up by Pando, another of our target national outlets.

Building on this locally the Atlanta Journal gave us some nice coverage both online and on the first page of business section of the print edition the following day. The Atlanta Business Chronicle and Tampa Bay Business Journal had coverage. And the trades covered as well. Daily Deal Media and Street Fight published stories.

So it worked. The key is talking to reporters who you think might have an interest before you issue a release. I am not really sure you need the release at all. It is mostly a tool used as a basis to start a conversation with reporters about your news.

If it works for me, and I have seen this type of thing work countless times, it will work for you.

Update: My dear friend and marketing maven Erika Brookes provided great strategic direction on how to get news coverage of the CrowdSavings transaction. Or put another way, she told me how she would approach it and I did what she said.

No Emails on Saturdays

swapped.tumblr.com

The last time I sent out an update for one my projects, I did it a bit differently. Instead of mailing all 2000 subscribers on the mailing list at once, I sent the newsletter in 5 batches, one batch a day, from Saturday to Wednesday.

This was three weeks ago and today I got around to looking at the stats.

The opening rate

Long story short -

Saturday	-	27.7%	(lowest)
Sunday	-	40.3%	
Monday	-	39.1%	
Tuesday	-	46.3%	(highest)
Wednesday	-	44.3%	

With the overall opening rate being 39.4%.

So it's painfully obvious that people don't like receiving newsletters on Saturdays, and that they probably have better things to do on Mondays too.

The engagement rate

To understand this metric, take at the actual newsletter.

It announced the completion of the website redesign and then asked if the redesign was good or not. So the engagement simply tracks how many people bothered to cast a vote -

Saturday	-	25
Sunday	-	47
Monday	-	35
Tuesday	-	35
Wednesday	-	39

With these numbers in mind, the corrected take away is this -

Not on Saturdays.

Not on Sundays or Mondays, but if pressed, pick Sundays.

Whether Tuesday or Wednesday is optimal is an open question. If I haven't had a brain spasm and picked 7 days instead of 5, we might've had an answer. But my guess would be that with an exception of Monday (and *possibly* Friday) all mid-week days perform about the same.

For those arguing that the data sample is too small - yes, it is, but it doesn't preclude making general observations and validating them against, you know, common sense.

In any case, raw data is below. Take a look if interested.

Fine print

Each batch worked out to be about 400 emails and they were grouped by (Subscriber-ID mod 5), where ID is a basic incrementing integer. So for all intents and pseudo-scientific purposes all batches had roughly the same mix of early/late subscribers.

The newsletter was sent out at (North American) night, so the emails were in the inboxes, when the

majority of subscribers checked their mail in the morning.

Comments

<https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=5236970>

How do I know where to advertise? by @ASmartBear

a smart bear

How do I know where to advertise? by @ASmartBear

Advice from Jason Cohen, founder of WP Engine & Smart Bear Software.

Join 40,000 subscribers Follow asmartbear @ASmartBear Startups + Marketing + Geekery Subscribe

- Home
- Bio
- Archives
- Work with me!

How do I know where to advertise?

by Jason Cohen on June 5, 2012 16 Comments

*This is part of an ongoing startup advice series where I answer (anonymized!) questions from readers, like a written version of Smart Bear Live. **To get your question answered, email me at** [asmartbear -at- shortmail -dot- com](mailto:asmartbear-at-shortmail-dot-com).*

Adventurous Advertiser writes:

I'm ready to spend my first \$1000 on something other than AdWords.

There's lots of options and I don't know where to start. How do I pick?

Since you didn't say what field you're in, you'd think I have no answer, but I do!

There's a thousand places to advertise and a hundred ways to do "lead-gen," i.e. getting CSV dumps of contact information for so-called "pre-qualified" people who were tricked into downloading a whitepaper you've supplied.

Which are best? Are any actually good at generating sales?

At Smart Bear I tried literally a hundred campaigns: paid search, trade shows, postcard mailers, newsletter sponsorships, and magazine ads (yes, print!). I eventually built a system that could measure campaign efficacy with pinpoint accuracy, even with traditionally different media like print. (I once promised an article describing this system and have yet to deliver... I'll remedy that...)

So here's what I learned:

Nothing. I learned I have zero ability at predicting which campaigns would produce. The only way to tell was to ensure accurate measurement was in place and try it. And negotiate a lower "first time" rate for the trial.

Also the quality of the campaign would change over time. When I first started with Dr. Dobbs magazine I had a little 1/4-page ad in the back. ("In the zoo" I'd say to the ad salesmen, who disagreed with my characterization of their remnants.) It worked great, and a full-page ad worked better. But as the years wore on it became less and less effective, like clockwork, and I kept demanding a lower and lower price.

"But our readership is increasing" the ad salesman would say, pointing to their BPA stats (a 3rd-party "auditor" who always certifies strong growth and a monied readership). "Besides that, you'll lose credibility if you stop advertising. People will wonder whether you've disappeared."

The magazine went under a few months later.

But remember, three years before it died, it was one of the top lead sources. Things change. Can't predict.

So here's how you decide which to start with. Of the dozen possibilities in front of you pick the one

that maximizes these things, in this order of precedence:

1. Measurable — you have to know objectively if the value to the company is greater than the amount of money spent. Generally online is easier to measure than offline, but that's not true for things like contests or special offers or secret landing pages.
2. Quickest time to discover whether it worked. Fast learning means you get to a working advertising model faster.
3. Cheapest. At this stage the valuable thing is seeking/learning what advertising works, not trying to maximize total revenue right out of the gate. Once you've got a handle on how to spend money to make money, it then makes sense to pour money on it as fast as possible.
4. Comfortable — something you like, like a news site you already read, or a Twitter contest-runner that seems particularly smart about it. Since your gut isn't too useful, you might as well pick something you like, especially if you already understand the culture of the site, and therefore could build an ad perfect for that audience. For example at Smart Bear I was particularly successful on StackOverflow, which I was an early beta user in, and on Coding Horror, which was was a long-time reader of."

So don't waste time fretting about picking the "right" campaign. You can't. So make sure these key things are in place, and just go.

Add your advice to the discussion section!

Share this:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Google
- StumbleUpon
-

« The mid-market briar patch When do I *stop* doing customer interviews and start writing code? »

- CliffElam

Oh, god, you had me at Dr. Dobbs. I was cleaning out a bunch of junk last year and found my carefully saved Objective-C issue. Swoon.

I was still a subscriber when they went under and I think I switched my remnant to Computer Shopper.

Yep, old.

_XC

- Sam Decker

Great article.

One other thought...

Find the place to advertise that is closest to a relevant decision to buy.

When I was at Dell and ran university marketing in 2005, Facebook approached me to advertise. But why would anyone think of buying a computer when they're trying to 'hook up' with someone in college class? The best advertising for Dell was CNET, where people were actually thinking about technology. The further you get away from intent, the less relevance and impact.

- Matt Fry

I want to know how you measured print efficacy with pinpoint accuracy!

- <http://blog.asmartbear.com> Jason Cohen

You bet. It's on the list to write about it.

- <http://twitter.com/infocaptor> Disruptive Dashboard

Let me guess, custom domain names or URL??
Or am I way off?

- John Haugeland

This is actually a clear case of the Multiple Armed Bandit.

Currently many people are calling the algorithm Epsilon Greedy (actually a broken version of it) MAB because they don't know what they're talking about.

Multiple Armed Bandit is simple. "Suppose you're in a room full of slot machines, many of which are positive. You don't know the statistics. What strategy will maximize your take?"

Clearly, this is an adequate description of advertising.

The epsilon greedy algorithm is one good approach. (Weirdly, it's being tossed around as an alternative to A/B testing, because again, the people who are doing this don't know what they're talking about.)

Choose a threshold, commonly 1 in 10. For every lever pull, choose a random number. If it's under your threshold, pull a random lever; otherwise, pull whatever lever has statistically had the best performance so far.

Over time, all levers will be progressively pulled at some low rate, meaning even if you get bad pulls, eventually you'll tend towards the good levers (though on big payout long odds, that can take a very long time.)

Another good algorithm for approaching this is UCB-1, but it's non trivial, so I won't describe it here; the long and short of it is "use a confidence interval (the Hoeffding bound) to begin to trust your knowledge of certain levers, and drop pulling them off by the natural log of your confidence."

You'll lose less in the long run, but it can be really wrong on big payout long odds, so you need to be careful using it in some circumstances.

The advantage of a multi-armed bandit approach is that it inherently keeps track of changing landscapes over time. Dr Dobbs and Digg dead? Reddit and Imgur doing better? No worries: the algorithm will adjust on its own.

The downside, of course, is that your marketing budget has to be large enough to encompass these fringe-case lever pulls in budgets their hosts will actually sell at. Not hard on google's \$5 line; very difficult with campaigns that start at \$1000.

- <http://blog.asmartbear.com> Jason Cohen

That's a good algorithm, and the one used by AdWords.

It requires a few things to be effective, like immediate and dependable result-measurement, and an N which is sufficiently high for the number of tests being run.

AdWords satisfies those conditions nicely; so do landing pages which are getting lots of traffic.

Other things like "trade shows" and "magazine ads" usually don't, so unfortunately you might need to use other measures.

But thanks for the description — I agree this should be used far more often than it is.

- <http://www.facebook.com/people/Matt-Sharper/100000807088310> Matt Sharper
how much would you say you need...

- <http://www.brandingmasters.com/> Stephanie Hackney

OK, this might seem obvious, but I try to never assume anything when sharing advice with start-ups. I think it's important to start at the beginning, especially for those who might never have advertised before.

1. Start with who you are trying to reach. It does no good to advertise in the "in" publication or on the "hot new" site if your target customers aren't there.

2. Then, determine where that target audience lives, works and plays. That's where you need to be speaking to them.

3. Once you know where they "hang out," it's important to give some thought to whether or not

they will be receptive to your message, and most importantly, take action, when seeing your message in that location.

For example, if I am a business owner you are trying to reach and I read a variety of business publications, as well as inflight magazines and leisure publications, which ones are most likely to be read by me at a time when I am receptive to what you're selling? And, during the reading of which one am I most likely to act on your call-to-action? It's not likely that I will act on a business decision while reading my leisure publications, but somewhat likely that I will act while reading an in-flight magazine, something I do (without being interrupted!) while traveling on business.

The key is that advertisers must have a message that not only resonates with readers, but that entices them to act.

Of course, a clear call to action is essential for that to happen, and I can't tell you how many ads I have reviewed that have no clear call to action.

Businesses advertise for two reasons: 1) to entice action (make a sale, get someone to sign up for something, etc.); and, 2) to build a brand. If you have no clear call to action, your ad is simply an exercise in brand-building. And, if you have no call to action, how will you ever measure effectiveness?

- carmenmardiros

"Find the place to advertise that is closest to a relevant decision to buy... The further you get away from intent, the less relevance and impact."

I agree. Having a strong SEO background means I have "visitor intent" imprinted firmly on my retina. When you have limited funds or when you test new advertising channels you are seeking measurable and immediate benefits (otherwise how would you know if they are promising?). If there is a mismatch between audience intent (not just audience type but intent) then you will not get adequate immediate returns (note emphasis on immediate).

Having said that there are huge benefits in other types of marketing like inbound marketing but that's not quick and may not pay off for a while so they are hard to test quickly. However reaching out to your target audience and forming relationships with influencers can only be beneficial in the long run as they not only have access paths to your target customers that are invaluable but may actually have valuable input on your product.

Jason, I'm interested in how you measure the effectiveness of campaigns. In a world of multi-funnel marketing channels (multiple touch points before conversion) and delayed conversions, looking exclusively at conversion rate by source may miss the whole impact of the campaign (someone comes from campaign A, subscribes to newsletter, downloads PDF, then leaves only to come back referred by campaign B and convert – who gets the credit?). This is a common scenario which makes accurate attribution to campaigns difficult, increasingly so in a multi-device world.

One theory I have is to look at the size of convertible pie referred. By "convertible pie" I mean referred visitors who exhibit a certain behaviour making them likely to convert (now or later).

convertible pie = total visitors referred – visitors who bounce – visitors who have no intention to convert.

visitors who bounce = mismatch between their intent and the landing page/product.

visitors who have no intention to convert = low engagement or have different purposes to accomplish on our site (we can assume that visitors are convertible if they take specific actions which we perceive as influential and leading up to that final conversion).

The reality is that a large proportion of traffic will NEVER convert. Looking at the size of the convertible pie within the entire traffic referred puts pressure on campaigns to deliver the best quality prospects (who match not only the traits of the target audience but the intent as well). It's then the job of the landing page to maximise relevance relative to the campaign and the rest of our website to do the selling and the converting.

- Weezer

That \$1k might be best spent on a Consultant helping you develop a marketing plan

- <http://www.facebook.com/people/Matt-Sharper/100000807088310> Matt Sharper
heck no
- Serge
Probably the worst thing you can do.

- weezer

Really? Why is that?

- <http://xiliumonline.com/> Suji

Hi, I've just read your post. Thanks for the tips that you've shared. I think you're right. It is really important to weigh things first before picking the campaign and your tips are helpful. :)

- Gamex23

Join PS3Trophies today if you love collecting trophies on your PlayStation 3!
<http://www.ps3trophies.com/forums/register.php?referrerid=1585>

Get my blog posts in your inbox

Most Popular

- The unprofitable SaaS business model trap
- 10 things successful startup founders don't say
- Never say "no," but rarely say "yes"
- The unfortunate math behind consulting
- Color wheels are wrong: How color vision works
- Rise of the "successful" unsustainable company
- "Stealth mode" and other f'ing brilliant strategies
- Impostor Syndrome - Why I feel like a Fraud
- Business advice plagued by survivor bias
- Your idea sucks, now go do it anyway

Subscribe to my podcasts at iTunes

Look for this icon in my blog posts for the audio versions, or subscribe to my iTunes podcast feed.

•

Follow @asmartbear on Twitter

•

•

•

Custom designed and powered by

© 2007 - 2012 Jason Cohen. All rights reserved.

Hosted by super-fast, super-secure WPEngine.

- Blog
- Bio
- Archives
- Work With Me
- RSS Feed

- Google+

73.6% of all Statistics are Made Up
bothsidesofthetable.com

How to Interpret Analyst Reports

The headlines in the media are filled with that latest stats. Stats sell. The stats are often quoted from the latest reports. People then parrot them around like they're fact when most of them are complete bullsh*t. People throw them around at cocktail parties. Often when they do I throw out my favorite statistic: 73.6% of all statistics are made up. I say it deadpanned. Often I'll get some people look at me like, "really?" "It's true. Nielsen just released the number last month."

No. It's irony.

Or as Mark Twain popularized the quote most attributed to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Benjamin Disraeli, "there are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies and statistics." The quote is meant to highlight the deceiving but persuasive power of numbers.

So, where is this all coming from, Mark? What are you on about? Anyone with a great deal of experience in dealing with numbers knows to be careful about the seduction of them. I'm writing this post to make sure you're all on that same playing field.

Here's how I learned my lesson:

I started my life as a consultant. Fortunately I was mostly a technology consultant, which meant that I coded computers, designed databases and planned system integration projects. OK, yes. It was originally COBOL and DB2 – so what? But for my sins I got an MBA and did "strategy" consulting.

One of our core tasks was "market analysis," which consisted of: market sizing, market forecasts, competitive analysis and then instructing customers on which direction to take.

It's strange to me to think that customers with years of experience would ever listen to twenty-something smarties from great MBA's who have never worked in your industry before – but that's a different story. Numbers are important. I'd rather make decisions with uncertain numbers than no numbers. But you have to understand how to interpret your numbers.

In 1999 I was in Japan doing a strategy project for the board of directors of Sony. We were looking at all sorts of strategic decisions that Sony was considering, which required analysis and data on broadband networks, Internet portals and mobile handsets/networks. I was leading the analysis with a team of 14 people: 12 Japanese, 1 German and 1 Turk. I was the only one whose Japanese was limited to just a sushi menu.

I was in the midst of sizing the mobile handset markets in 3 regions: US, Europe and Asia. I had reports from Gartner Group, Yankee Group, IDC, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and a couple of others. I had to read each report, synthesize it and then come up with our best estimate of the markets going forward. In data analysis you want to look for "primary" research, which means the person who initially gathered the data.

But all of the data projections were so different so I decided to call some of the research companies and ask how they derived their data. I got the analyst who wrote one of the reports on the phone and asked how he got his projections. He must have been about 24. He said, literally, I sh*t you not, "well, my report was due and I didn't have much time. My boss told me to look at the growth rate average over the past 3 years and increase it by 2% because mobile penetration is increasing." There you go. As scientific as that.

I called another agency. They were more scientific. They had interviewed telecom operators, handset manufacturers and corporate buyers. They had come up with a CAGR (compounded annual growth rate) that was 3% higher than the other report, which in a few years makes a huge difference. I grilled the analyst a bit. I said, "So you interviewed the people to get a plausible story line and then just did a simple estimation of the numbers going forward?"

“Yes. Pretty much”

Me, sarcastically, “And you had to show higher growth because nobody buys reports that just show that next year the same thing is going to happen that happened last year?” Her, “um, basically.”

“For real?” “Well, yeah, we know it’s going to grow faster but nobody can be sure by how much.”

Me, “And I suppose you don’t have a degree in econometrics or statistics?” Her, “No.”

I know it sounds like I’m making this sh*t up but I’m not. I told this story to every consultant I knew at the time. Nobody was surprised. I wish it ended there.

The problem of amplification:

The problem got worse as the data flowed out to the “bulge bracket” investment banks. They, too, were staffed with super smart twenty somethings. But these people went to slightly better schools (Harvard, Stanford, Wharton, University of Chicago) and got slightly better grades. They took the data from the analysts. So did the super bright consultants at McKinsey, Bain and BCG. We all took that data as the basis for our reports.

Then the data got amplified. The bankers and consultants weren’t paid to do too much primary research. So they took 3 reports, read them, put them into their own spreadsheet, made fancier graphs, had professional PowerPoint departments make killer pages and then at the bottom of the graph they typed, “Research Company Data and Consulting Company Analysis” (fill in brand names) or some derivative. But you couldn’t just publish exactly what Gartner Group had said so these reports ended up slightly amplified in message.

Even more so with journalists. I’m not picking on them. They were as hoodwinked as everybody was. They got the data feed either from the research company or from the investment bank. And if anybody can’t publish something saying “just in, next year looks like a repeat of last year” it’s a newspaper. So you end up with superlative amplification. “Mobile penetration set to double next year reaching all time highs,” “venture capital market set to implode next year – more than 70% of firms may disappear” or “drug use in California growing at an alarming rate.” We buy headlines. Unless it’s a major publication there’s no time to fact check data in a report. And even then ...

The problem of skewing results:

Amplification is one thing. It’s taking flawed data and making it more extreme. But what worries me much more is skewed data. It is very common for firms (from small ones to prestigious ones) to take data and use it conveniently to make the point that that want to make. I have seen this so many times I consider it routine, which is why I question ALL data that I read.

How is it skewed? There are so many ways to present data to tell the story you want that I can’t even list every way data is skewed. Here are some examples:

- You ask a small sample set so that data isn’t statistically significant. This is often naivete rather than malicious

- You ask a group that is not unbiased. For example, you ask a group of prisoners what they think of the penal system, you ask college students what they think about the drinking age or you ask a group of your existing customers what they think about your product rather than people who cancelled their subscription. This type of statistical error is known as “selective bias.”

- Also common, you look at a large data set of questions asked about consumer preferences. You pick out the answers that support your findings and leave out the ones that don’t support it from your report. This is an “error of omission.”

- You change the specific words asked in the survey such that you subtly change the meaning for the person reading your conclusions. But subtle changes in words can totally change the way that the reader interprets the results.

- Also common is that the survey itself asks questions in a way that leads the responder to a specific answer.

- There are malicious data such as on Yelp where you might have a competitor that types in bad results on your survey to bring you down or maliciously positive like on the Salesforce.com AppExchange where you get your friends to rate your app 5 out of 5 so you can drive your score up.

That doesn't happen? "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on here." We all know it happens. As my MBA statistics professor used to say, "seek disconfirming evidence." That always stuck with me.

Believing your own hype:

And this data subtly sinks into the psyche of your company. It becomes folklore. 13% of GDP is construction – the largest industry. 40% of costs are labor, 40% are materials and 20% are overheads. 23% of all costs are inefficient. 18% of all errors come from people using the wrong documents. 0.8 hours are spent every day by workers searching for documents.

It's important to quantify the value of your product or service. I encourage it.

You'll do your best to market the benefits ethically while still emphasizing your strong points. Every investment banker I know is "number 1" in something. They just define their category tightly enough that they win it. And then they market the F out of that result. That's OK. With no numbers as proof points few people will buy your products.

Obviously try to derive data that is as accurate as possible. And be careful that you don't spin the numbers for so long and so hard that you can't separate out marketing estimates from reality.

Continually seek the truth in the form of better customer surveys, more insightful market analyses and more accurate ROI calculations. And be careful not to believe your own hype. It can happen. Being the number one investment bank in a greatly reduced data set shouldn't stop you from wanting to broaden the definition of "number 1" next year.

Here's how to interpret data:

In the end make sure you're suspicious of all data. Ask yourself the obvious questions:

- who did the primary research on this analysis?
- who paid them? Nobody does this stuff free. You're either paid up front "sponsored research" or you're paid on the back-end in terms of clients buying research reports.
- what motives might these people have had?
- who was in the sample set? how big was it? was it inclusive enough?
- and the important thing about data for me ... I ingest it religiously. I use it as one source of figuring out my version of the truth. And then I triangulate. I look for more sources if I want a truer picture. I always try to think to myself, "what would the opposing side of this data analysis use to argue its weaknesses?"

Statistics aren't evil. They're just a bit like the weather – hard to really predict.

And as they say about economists and weathermen – they're the only two jobs you can keep while being wrong nearly 100% of the time

Treat the Website Like a Product « 10,000 Startup Hours – David Cummings

davidcummings.org

Image by Pixy5 /Babushka via Flickr

Startups often put up a cool website as quickly as possible and focus the vast majority of their efforts on the app. In some cases the app is also the website but often it is a separate endeavor that gets neglected. The website needs to be treated like a product and given serious attention. What good does it do to build an amazing product only to have a website that doesn't attract visitors, doesn't convert visitors into prospects, and doesn't have focus?

Here are some ideas for treating the website like a product:

- Clearly assign the website responsibilities to one person in the startup
- Schedule engineering time to work on the website on a regular basis
- Don't set it and forget it – consider assigning a product manager to it
- Incorporate analytics like new qualified leads (if B2B) and unique visitors (if B2C) into your core

KPIs

- Use inbound marketing and marketing automation to maximize site value

Treating the website like a product is tough with all the other demands of a startup. Building a sales and marketing machine is even tougher and the website is a critical part of the equation. My recommendation is to treat the website like a product and spend more time on it than you initially thought.

What else? What other ideas do you have for treating the website like a product?

Startups Need Focused Websites « 10,000 Startup Hours – David Cummings

davidcumplings.org

Image via Wikipedia

There's a startup tendency to be more broad than more focused when it comes to websites and messaging. Part of it stems from trying not to cast a wide net for potential customers and part of it comes from the search for a repeatable customer acquisition process. Startups are better off with a focused website that speaks to their ideal customer in a direct manner. There's only so much time to capture someone's attention and the most likely outcome for a visitor is the click of death: their "Back" button in the browser.

Here are some questions to ask regarding the focus of a website:

- How many "products" are listed and how many do you really have?
- What are the three most important buyer personas and how do you appeal to them?
- What one or two call-to-actions are found on every page?
- What are the three most important things you want visitors to do on your site?
- What social proof (testimonials, videos, references, etc) do you provide?

Staying focused with messaging is difficult. Startups don't have the luxury of established brands and need to appeal to the busy visitor by staying on point and getting the message across.

What else? What do you look for in a focused website?

A List Apart: Articles: How to Write a Better Weblog

A List Apart

Issue № 138

How to Write a Better Weblog

by Dennis A. Mahoney February 22, 2002 Published in Community, Writing

There's been a recent retread of the weblogging phenomenon following a few articles at PC Mag, Time, and The Morning News. After posting my own short list of things that ought to be banned from weblogs, I realized that a list of things to be *encouraged* would be more useful. Some people are new to weblogging. Others want to raise the bar. In the end, everybody wants better sites, and some of these suggestions might help.

Article Continues Below

Share This:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Google+

Ad via The Deck

Job Board

Job listings via We Work Remotely

The bulk of this advice focuses on writing, which is generally at the heart of weblogs. All of them are obvious yet often ignored, to the detriment of both the readers and the writers. They're aimed at people trying to improve the general appeal of their weblogs, but folks writing privately for friends and family might also find them useful. We'll begin with an example.

Professional vs. Amateur

The professional writer writes:

New York is magnificent in spring.

The amateur writer writes:

I know this is a cliché nowadays, especially after 9/11, but I live in New York, which is much cleaner and safer now because of Giuliani, who really ought to be president after handling the crisis so well, and I know I've had some issues in the past with the mayor's handling of the NYPD in regard to African Americans and his war against art involving sacred religious icons and feces (hello!? freedom of expression!?), but when all is said and done, New York, as maybe the best example of the 'melting pot' etc. etc., is a great city, especially when it starts getting warmer and people go outside more, like around March or April.

The amateur reads the professional and cannot bear the understatement. The professional reads the amateur, gives up after the word "nowadays," and decides that he/she has been video-gamed to idiocy; the amateurs are hopeless; this new wave will be the last.

Not true. Amateurs are writing as they've always written. Self-consciousness, self-doubt, awkwardness, and overcompensation are perennial hallmarks of the beginning writer. The reason today's amateurs seem more profoundly un-profound could be a simple matter of exposure.

There used to be impenetrable gatekeepers. Now, CNN roundtables, documentaries, independent films, MTV, and the web—which has no gatekeepers in most countries—are broadcasting every poorly crafted phrase and half-cooked idea imaginable. Patience, readers. All is not lost.

Great writing can't be taught, but atrocious writing is entirely preventable.

The Rules

There are, in fact, rules—even online. Rules are not restrictions. Grammar, spelling, punctuation, rhythm, focus, syntax, and structure aren't especially romantic terms, until you get to know them. Writers want to make sense. They want to move the reader. It ain't never gonna happen if you got busted paragraphs, mistaken punctuation and, bad rhythm, not to mention kreative spelling: see? Clarity is key. Learn the rules. Break 'em later.

The best rules can't be stated, but you can learn them by reading excellent writing. Develop an ear. If you know what works, you'll start to emulate it. Conversely, it's good to study truly horrendous language, stuff that makes you embarrassed for those responsible. You'll find yourself mortally afraid

of—and automatically avoiding—the same mistakes in your own writing. Hemingway said, “The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in shock-proof shit-detector.” (They’re cheap if you haven’t already got one.) This is especially important for web writers, most of whom are publishing without the benefit of editors.

Declarative sentences are good. Web readers demand pith.

Bold statements are dangerous, but they won’t kill you. Timidity will—or at least your traffic. Everyone has a hazy opinion or two. The writer’s goal is clarity. Vague feelings or ideas don’t have to be vaguely written. Imagine two sites with similar descriptions of an indescribable sensation. Which would you remember:

A: “Her physical affections made his world feel somehow different and indescribably alive.”

B: “She kissed him with her tongue until the leaves on the trees, the soles of his shoes, and even his thoughts, felt like happy tongues.”

First-person point of view is not the only point of view. I should be necessary, or else avoided. This is not to condemn first person, but to suggest that it needn’t be the default choice. If first-person perfectly suits your subject matter, use it. But maybe second- or third-person is more effective. Consider your options.

The advice “write only what you know” increases the likelihood that you will know the same things forever.

Offer Something New

And are you attempting to produce quality material, or just killing time? If you’re killing time, O.K., but don’t be startled when your audience is small and no one links to you. Instead of publishing disconnected diversions (by the way, look at this, check it out, here you go, really cool), connect the dots or offer a full opinion.

Better yet, take The Nick Hornby Challenge. In *High Fidelity*, the narrator is described as a professional critic. He’s good at it. Music criticism is what he does. Then he starts an independent label and produces a record made by a couple of talented, shoplifting skate punks in order to, as his girlfriend says, “put something new into the world.”

The web is a tremendous hodgepodge of media. There are sites about books, sites about music, and sites about sites. Plenty of weblogs center on consuming and critiquing other people’s work, and all this recycling and redistribution has its place—a very important place that we’ll make note of later on. But why not make something new? Instead of linking to a few articles every day, write one. Instead of showcasing and discussing the latest designs, design something. You’ve got this absolutely batty opportunity of instant global publishing. Publish! The world is your oyster!

Amuse Your Readers

If you want to share an anecdote or story from your life, pretend the readers weren’t there. Because they weren’t. “You had to be there” never makes a joke funny.

Readers crave your anecdotes and stories. They really do. So give ‘em the whole megillah. Instead of, “The party was a riot!” or “I’m depressed today,” carefully explain why. Elaborate. Parties and depression are perfectly good writing subjects. *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, has plenty of both.

Anything makes a good subject, as long as you take your time and crystallize the details, tying them together and actually telling a story, rather than offering a simple list of facts. Do readers really want to know how miserable you are? Yes. But they’re going to want details, the precise odor of your room,

why you haven't showered in a week, or how *exactly* somebody broke your heart. One-liners won't suffice.

At the same time, you don't want to over-explain yourself. Understatement can be thunderous, or humorous, or heartbreaking. Or all three.

Have a sense of humor. Everything is funny. Being gay is funny. Being straight is funny. Being American is funny. It's OK to laugh at things. Making light of serious situations or emotions doesn't have to be disrespectful or hurtful. And just because something is funny doesn't mean it has to be light. Example: "When the kidnapper called the blind woman, he told her that she'd never see her son again." Some of the best humor is heavy.

Being a writer is funny. Don't take yourself too seriously.

Have a thick skin. If your site gets singled out for attack by some malicious web devil, relax. You've gone public and you have to expect both rational and irrational criticism. Listen, people rag on Shakespeare all the time. If you're a genuine talent, there'll be plenty of people complimenting your efforts. If someone has a bona fide gripe with something you've produced, pay attention—it's worth considering. If someone has a petty gripe or simply gets nasty, let it go. Get back to producing your site. If novelists spent their time responding to negative reviews, we'd be fresh out of novels.

Beyond Wired

One popular complaint about weblogs is that they all link to the same sites, over and over and over. Sometimes that's true and sometimes it isn't. But if you do find yourself linking to a *Wired* article that's already been noted on ten other sites, you might consider finding something else.

Sharing great discoveries is largely why weblogging got so hot and sultry in the first place. Big, heavily funded sites weren't acknowledging the grace notes and hidden talents of the web, so it was up to webloggers. For some webloggers, it still is. *Wired* doesn't need your help as much as undiscovered sites, which may be offering equally good (or better) material.

Successful Weblogging

Producing a successful weblog, however you define that, is tough. Instead of money, fame, and Jacuzzis full of sexy nude readers, you'll probably feel like you're shouting in outer space. And you probably will be. In 1994, you could hook a thousand readers if you wrote about the mold underneath your refrigerator. Now, you're lucky to get a hundred regulars, even if your work is excellent.

No matter what your audience size, you ought to write as if your readership consisted of paid subscribers whose subscriptions were perpetually about to expire. There's no need to pander. *Compel* them to re-subscribe.

As the beginning of this article noted, a big audience isn't everybody's goal, and most of these suggestions are intended for people working to expand their readership. As for actually achieving that expansion, it's back to the hard sell.

Also in Issue № 138

Slash Forward (Some URLs are Better Than Others)

by waferbaby

The days when simply having a website equated to visibility are over. The average person doesn't even know to look for weblogs. When someone does, there's an array of choices so endless that finding *your site* will largely be a stroke of luck.

Links and word of mouth can go a long way, but don't expect a big following right off the bat. You

might never get a following. More than ever, you'd better be doing this to satisfy yourself, because it could be your only reward. But if your goal is to satisfy readers, satisfying yourself is a good start.

About the Author

Dennis A. Mahoney

Dennis A. Mahoney writes daily at 0format.

More from this Author

- Global Treaty Could Transform the Web

More from ALA

Columns

Nishant Kothary *on* the Human Web

The Politics of Feedback

We're obsessive about collecting input from a wide range of potential users and stakeholders. But with such an onslaught of feedback, there's always a risk of having your motivation and faith in humanity sucked right out of you. Sometimes, you just need calm critique from the few people who really get you. So which kind of feedback is best? The answer is both.

October 16, 2014 Laura Kalbag *on* Freelance Design

Breaking Stuff

Designers may do CSS, but not JavaScript. Some may do JavaScript, but draw the line at git. Some may be willing to use git with a graphical interface, but not with Terminal. When we get out of our comfort zone, it's great to have a safety net so we can learn without breaking stuff too badly.

October 02, 2014

From the Blog

Learning to Be Flexible

As a freelancer, I work in a lot of different code repos. Almost every team I work with has different ideas of how code should be organized, maintained, and structured. Now, I'm not here to start a battle about tabs versus spaces or alphabetical order of CSS properties versus organizing in terms of concerns (positioning styles, then element layout styles, then whatever else), because I'm honestly not attached to any one system anymore.

Susan Robertson October 22, 2014

Personalizing Git with Aliases

Part of getting comfortable with the command line is making it your own. Small customizations, shortcuts, and time saving techniques become second nature once you spend enough time fiddling around in your terminal. Since Git is my Version Control System of choice (due partially to its incredible popularity via GitHub), I like to spend lots of time optimizing my experience there.

Jeff Lembeck October 15, 2014

Routines Aren't the Enemy

I recently read Greg Smith's piece on Bocoup's blog about how they think about time tracking, including all the fascinating data about how your brain works to solve problems. It interested me a lot, since I've been thinking about not just how I track projects, but also how I structure my day as a freelancer.

Susan Robertson October 09, 2014

Making Our Events More Inclusive For Those Under 21 (and Also Everyone Else)

On Saturday, Benjamin Hollway, a 16 year old front-end developer, wrote a post about his recent experiences attending industry events. He's been coding since he was eight, and earlier this year he was shortlisted for *Netmag's* Emerging Talent category. Yet none of the people in this category are able to participate fully in the sort of activities most of us take for granted.

Anna Debenham September 29, 2014

Shellshock: A Bigger Threat than Heartbleed?

A newly-discovered Linux flaw may be more pervasive, and more dangerous, than last spring's Heartbleed.

Tim Murtaugh September 25, 2014

A VC: Finding And Buying A Domain Name

avc.com

Finding And Buying A Domain Name

I believe that a good domain name is an important success factor in building and launching consumer web services. It's not in my top ten but it could be. It's certainly something we think about a lot when making investments and working with companies post investment.

A number of our portfolio companies have acquired their domain names in connection with or shortly after our investment. Del.icio.us purchased Delicious.com with some of the proceeds of our investment. Foursquare purchased Foursquare.com with some of the proceeds of our investment (they launched with playfoursquare.com). We've advised and assisted a number of our portfolio companies in this effort.

A good domain name is short and memorable. It doesn't need to mean anything. Etsy is a good example of this. The word etsy doesn't have any meaning in the english language. But it is short, memorable, and fits well for a handmade marketplace. As a marketing person once told me "find a name that means nothing and inject your meaning and brand into it." All you need to do is a google search on Etsy to see that is what they've done with that word.

I remember walking home one afternoon from the office on the phone with Mark Pincus. He had launched texas hold'em on Facebook operating under the name Presidio Media. We were talking about what he should call the company. He knew it needed to be a consumer brand. He said "Domains are so hard and expensive. I'd like to use a name I already own." And he proceeded to list a bunch of names he owned. He stopped at zynga.com which was his dog's name. I said "you own the .com of your dog's name?" He said "of course I do." I told him I liked the idea of naming the company after his dog and it had the added benefit of being a short and catchy name. He agreed it was a good idea. A few weeks later, after thinking about it some more, running it by a bunch more people, that was the name Mark chose. It is a fantastic name and brand.

That conversation with Mark was in the summer/fall of 2007. Since then domains only gotten harder and more expensive. We've noticed the average price of a good domain has risen fairly dramatically in the past year. We used to advise companies to spend \$10k or less on a domain, then we upped that

recommendation to \$25k. We recently upped it again to \$50k. I suspect domain prices and pre-money valuations of newly launched startups are highly correlated.

Here are some suggestions on finding and buying a domain name:

- Don't obsess about getting a name that is descriptive. It's great to be Kickstarter if you are building a funding platform for creative ideas but it is not required. Do focus on a word that is short, catchy, and memorable.

- If you own a domain that can work, give it serious consideration. You'll save yourself a ton of pain and agony.

- Be prepared to pay up for a good domain. It is very unlikely that you'll find a great domain name these days for less than \$10k. And it could cost a lot more.

- Think about rent to own. My friend Jamie Siminoff is a proponent of this approach and he clued me into it a few years ago. If you find a great domain that you can't afford but you absolutely love, you can often rent it for a few years with an option to buy it at any time. Let's say you are launching a website to buy boats online and the person who owns boats.com wants \$100k for it. There's no way you can afford it right now. But the owner is willing to charge you \$5k per year for it and will let you buy it anytime over the next three years for \$100k. You do it because you figure that in three years, you'll be selling 10s of millions of dollars of boats and your business will be worth 10s of millions and \$100k will be easy to raise for not a lot of dilution. And if you don't sell any boats online then you don't need the domain and it didn't cost you much.

- Think about offering equity instead of cash. Many owners of sought after domains have this idea that their domains are going to be worth millions some day. And who knows, they might be right. So it is hard to pry the domain out of their hands. The one thing you have that might be worth millions some day is the equity in your company. If you have a hot company (like foursquare was when it purchased foursquare.com), you might be able to trade some equity for the domain.

- Find an intermediary. We've used a few different intermediaries and played that role ourselves. Eric Friedman, who worked at USV and now works at Foursquare, was a very useful intermediary in a number of transactions. There are also a few lawyers we know who specialize in this kind of transaction and are very experienced and skilled at procuring domains. A neutral third party who can hide the identity of the buyer is often very helpful in domain transactions.

This whole exercise in finding and buying a domain is a huge pain in the rear. I've seen startups spend endless hours on it. It is an important issue, particularly for consumer web startups, and it is worth getting it right. But there is also a limit to how much time and money you want to spend on this effort. Remember that a name is what you inject into it over time. So don't let getting the perfect name be the enemy of getting a really good one.

Correction: The Zynga story in this post is not quite right. Here is the correct story straight from Mark: "I did not own zinga.com, her real name. I had tried and failed to buy that domain for 8 years. One of our engineers had the idea to spell it as zynga so we could get the domain."

April 28, 2011 –

Tweet

The Law of Shitty Clickthroughs | Andrew Chen (@andrewchen)
andrewchen.co

@andrewchen

Subscribe · Featured · Recent

The first banner ad ever, on HotWired in 1994, debuted with a clickthrough rate of 78% (thanks @ottotimmons)

First it works, and then it doesn't

After months of iterating on different marketing strategies, you finally find something that works. However, the moment you start to scale it, the effectiveness of your marketing grinds to a halt. Sound familiar?

Welcome to the **Law of Shitty Clickthroughs**:

Over time, all marketing strategies result in shitty clickthrough rates.

Here's a real example – let's compare the average clickthrough rates of banner ads when debuted on HotWired in 1994 versus Facebook in 2011:

- HotWired CTR, 1994: **78%**
- Facebook CTR, 2011: **0.05%**

That's a 1500X difference. While there are many factors that influence this difference, the basic premise is sound – the clickthrough rates of banner ads, email invites, and many other marketing channels on the web have decayed every year since they were invented.

Here's another channel, which is email open rates over time, according to eMarketer:

While this graph shows a decline, the other graph (which I don't have handy) is that the number of emails sent out has increased up to 30+ billion per day.

All these channels are decaying over time, and what's saving us is the new marketing channels are constantly getting unveiled, too. These new channels offer high performance, because of a lack of competition, big opportunities for novel marketing techniques, and these days, the cutting edge is about optimizing your mobile notifications, not your banner placements.

There are a few drivers for the Law of Shitty Clickthroughs, and here's a summary of the top ones:

- Customers respond to novelty, which inevitably fades
- First-to-market never lasts
- More scale means less qualified customers

Let's examine each in more detail, and then discuss the options for combatting this force of gravity in marketing.

Novelty

Without a doubt, one of the key drivers of engagement for marketing is that customers respond to novelty. When HotWired showed banner ads for the first time in history, people clicked just to check out the experience. Same for being the first web product to email people invites to a website – it works for a while, until your customers get used to the effect, and start ignoring it.

One of the most important tools you have at your disposal is the creative and calls to action that you use in your marketing – this might be like “X has invited you to Y” or it might be the headline you use in your banner ads. Recently, Retargeter posted an interesting analysis on the Importance of Rotating Creatives, which showed how keeping the same ad creative led to declining CTRs over time:

Publishers often have a similar problem in consumers ignoring the advertising on their site, which drives down clickthrough rates for both of them (bad for CPMs). This problem is often described as banner blindness, and you can see it clearly here in an eye-tracking study by Jakob Nielsen:

You can see here how users, almost comically, avoid looking at any banners.

The point is, humans seek novelty yet are pattern-recognition machines. Your initial marketing strategy will work quite well as your users try it for the first time, but afterwards, they learn to filter your marketing efforts out unless they are genuinely useful (more on that later).

First-to-market never lasts

It's bad enough that your own marketing efforts drive down channel performance, but usually once your marketing efforts are working, your competitors quickly follow. There's a whole cottage industry of companies that provide competitive research in the area of how their competitors are advertising and give you the information needed to fast-follow their marketing efforts.

For example, with a quick query, I know how much Airbnb is spending on search marketing (turns

out, millions per year) what keywords they are buying ads on, and who their competitors are. And this is just a free service! There are much more sophisticated products for every established marketing channel:

Airbnb Search Engine Marketing

- Daily ad budget: \$10,638
- Keywords: 62,729
- Example ad: Find Affordable Rooms Starting From \$20/Day. Browse & Book Online Now!
- Main competitors: Expedia.com, booking.com, hotels.com, Marriott.com

Any clone of their business can quickly fast-follow their marketing efforts and use the same ads in the same marketing channels. This quickly degrades the performance of the marketing channel as the novelty wears off and clickthroughs plummet.

Any product that is first to market has a limited window where they will enjoy unnaturally high marketing performance, until the competition enters, in which case everyone's marketing efforts will degrade.

More scale means less qualified customers

Another important way to think about the available market for your product is in terms of the popular Technology Adoption Lifecycle, in which early adopters actively seek out your product, while the rest of the mainstream market needs a lot of convincing. The quant marketing way to look at this is that early adopters respond better to marketing efforts across any given metric (signup %, CTR, CPA) than the later customer segments. In the TAL framework, the early market seeks out novelty, whereas the mainstream market just cares if you solve a problem for them.

As a result, a marketing strategy focused on early adopters is bound to look better than what you get later. You can get some limited traffic from PR and targeted advertising from niche communities and media properties. However once you get past this group, the CTRs can drop substantially.

If you're a SaaS or ecommerce company that's road-tested your marketing strategy by acquiring limited batches of customers, the problem is that whatever assumptions and projections you make off of this base end up fundamentally skewed positive. If your model indicates that you can acquire customers at \$10 and break even within 6 months, it's not hard for a 30% increase in CAC and 30% decrease in LTV to double the time it takes to get to profitability. This could be the difference between life and death for a company.

Lesson to investors is: Beware marketing metrics done at a small scale, and beware marketing tech companies that facilitate momentary marketing opportunities without a bigger vision. These are arbitrage opportunities that will disappear over time.

How to fight the Law of Shitty Clickthroughs

I call it a Law, of course, because I really believe it's a strong gravitational pull on all marketing on the web. You can't avoid it, and in many ways, it's counter productive to try.

You can always get incrementally better performance out of your marketing by taking a nomad strategy – always keep developing new creative, testing new publishers, and so on. That's all easy, but is mostly about maintaining some base level of performance. This can push the Law of Shitty Clickthroughs to act over years rather than degrading your marketing efforts over months.

Similarly, this law provides a litmus test as to the difference between advertising and information. When you are marketing with useful information, then CTRs stay high. Advertising that's just novelty and noise wrapped in a new marketing channel has a limited shelf life.

The real solution: Discover the next untapped marketing channel

The 10X solution to solving the Law of Shitty Clickthroughs, even momentarily, is to discover the next untapped marketing channel. In addition to doubling down on traditional forms of online advertising like banners, search, and email, it's important to work hard to get to the next marketing channel while it's uncontested.

Sometimes I get asked “have you ever seen someone do XYZ to acquire customers?” Turns out, the

highest vote of confidence I can give is, “No I haven’t, and that’s good – that means there’s a higher chance of it working. You should try it.”

Today, these (relatively) uncontested marketing channels are Open Graph, mobile notifications, etc. If you can make these channels work with a strong product behind it, then great. Chances are, you’ll enjoy a few months if not a few years of strong marketing performance before they too, slowly succumb.

PS. Get new essays sent to your inbox

Get my weekly newsletter covering what’s happening in Silicon Valley, focused on startups, marketing, and mobile.