

“ I couldn't imagine a better person to write such a book ”

Top 100 blogger Daniel Scocco of DailyBlogTips

How to Build a Successful

BLOG BUSINESS

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FOREWORD

The web is a hotbed of opportunity. While the press understandably spends most of its coverage on the Facebook's and Google's of the world, the really interesting stuff is actually the many new ways that regular people are able to earn a living and build businesses online.

Ray is a good friend of mine from back when I was at university. At six foot and a hundred-odd kilos he's a former junior bodybuilding champion from Singapore – not someone you'd want to get on the wrong side of! Today he works at a gym in Sydney instructing, managing the weights room and pushing others to get in shape.

Although Ray's bodybuilding days have left him with numerous injuries and war stories, he also carries the huge depth of knowledge and wisdom of his craft that are only earned through years of dedication. He has two degrees in environmental engineering and education to his name, but he chooses to work in the gym because that's where his passion lies.

While his job gives Ray the chance to share his experience and skills, it's fundamentally limited in scope. Moreover, it's someone else's gym and, like many people, he dreams of working for himself.

That's why for Ray, building an online business is the perfect solution. It combines his passion for fitness, a way to create genuine value for people by teaching his methods and ideas, and importantly allows him to build something of his own that will potentially set up his future.

It's been a steep learning curve getting to know the ins and outs of blogging, registering his first domain name, negotiating meetings and quotes from web designers, and recording hours of fitness footage for his new site. Along the way Ray often asks me questions about blogging, business and how to bring his plans to fruition and we have some great chats about my favourite topic! While everyone's business has a different path, these conversations have highlighted to me that my own experiences in building blogs are worth sharing with others.

I've written this book with Ray and every other aspiring entrepreneur out there in mind. I hope that in it you find insights, tips, and ideas to help you build your own online business, so that one day I might find myself by chance among the crowds reading your blog!

Collis Ta'eed
CEO, Envato

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BLOGGING AS A BUSINESS

Approaching blogging as an entrepreneur looking to build a business, is very different from the view taken by a hobby blogger. From the very beginning, you will be planning and thinking about the blog as a product: what it will cost, what it might return, how it will grow, and where it's heading. You might be alone, or you might have partners and investors. You might begin with a lot of capital, or you might bootstrap the operation with whatever resources you can find. Most importantly, as someone looking to build a business, you will always have your eye on the bigger picture, and that's what this chapter is about.

Opportunities in Blogging

Publishing is changing quickly as more and more readers migrate from paper-based products to electronic media, whether it's a computer, a tablet, a mobile device, or an e-reader. Change of this sort always creates opportunities, and in the last few years it's become clear that professional blogging is one of them.

The last decade saw a generation of blogs grow from being side projects and hobbies, into sites with enormous readerships and real revenues. Very quickly blogging has become a legitimate publishing business, and today a survey of the top 100 blogs shows that with a few notable celebrity exceptions, almost all of them are backed by real publishing businesses.

While today the blogging industry has some very professional outfits operating, there is still lots and lots of room for the newcomer. To start with, there are very few household names in blogging. While most people might recognize and know names like Time, Wired, Vanity Fair, and Vogue, there are significantly less who know **Gawker** (<http://gawker.com>), TechCrunch (<http://techcrunch.com>), **Huffington Post** (<http://huffingtonpost.com>), and **PopSugar** (<http://popsugar.com>), which are just three of the more high profile sites. There are still many, many people who don't read online but who will eventually. These folk mean that blogging is an industry with a lot of growth ahead of it, and growth is good for business and good for newcomers.

Opportunities in blogging also arise from the many niches and topics that are still wide open. If you walk into any bookstore and look through the myriad magazines that line the racks, you'll find there are audiences interested in reading about everything from sewing to tattoos, boating to cooking, movies to shopping. Can you name *the* blog to read on tattoos? How about a great blog about boating? Think you can find one?

Moreover, for every niche that is big enough to sustain a real paper publication, there are dozens more that are too small for print but big enough online. Where the distribution costs are small and even nil,

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distributed groups can be clumped together to form real audiences, and bloggers have access to audiences that have never really counted before: the so-called “long tail.”

As was often touted during the dotcom boom, the internet is a great equalizer. The difference between one domain name and another is just a few keystrokes. And while you shouldn't read too much into this (after all, people have to know your domain name to type it in), it is worth remembering that a new voice in blogging can quickly catch on.

Of course *because* blogging is so accessible, it's a tempting first business to get into. There is a perception that it's a zero-cost set-up, and in some ways that's true. You can start a new blog with not much more than a domain name and a cheap-as-chips hosting account. This is certainly a claim that you could never make about, say, starting a magazine or newspaper, where the physical costs of making and distributing the product can be prohibitive.

What isn't so obvious, is that to build a blog that is *self-sustaining* and eventually profitable, does require cash, and it can be a significant amount at that. For as easy as it is to start a blog, it is still hard to produce consistent levels of content, to acquire traffic and readership, and to ultimately generate revenue. While thousands of blogs may open their proverbial doors every day, the funnel of survival can be harsh and many fall into disrepair very quickly.

For hobby bloggers, the costs of operating a blog are hidden in the blogger's own time. They do the posting, the marketing, and all the other chores of running a blog themselves, effectively eating the costs by doing it in their spare time. But make no mistake, those costs are there and if you want to approach blogging with a business mindset, you need to account for them all.

On the flip side, by looking at blogging as a business, you also bring the longevity that blogging needs to succeed. While hobbyists and less organized competitors fall by the wayside, your operation will keep chipping away, building audiences, growing search traffic, creating a bigger and bigger content archive. In many ways, blogging is an endurance race, requiring a lot of momentum to build up to become a true success story.

So building a business out of blogging, like any business, involves investment both in time and money. The questions you want to ask are: What costs need to be accounted for? Where will the revenue come from? How long will it take? Along with these high-level business questions, you'll also be wondering about the practicalities of running a blog as a business, planning direction, finding and hiring staff, creating content, and marketing.

In this book I aim to answer all these questions as well as to give you a practical, hands-on guide to building a business out of blogging. Like any business, it will take hard work, dedication, savvy, and a bit of luck. As someone who has built a number of blogs, I hope reading through my experience and methods will help you find your path to success.

Risk and Reward

Every business investment comes with risk and certainly blogging is no sure thing. The risks in creating a business out of blogging include:

1. Choosing a Low Potential Niche

Perhaps the biggest risk you run is creating the wrong blog. If you start a blog in a niche that has limited potential either because of the audience, the competition, or the revenue potential, then you create a significant impediment to success. You can shift the blog, reinvent it, invent a new way of finding revenue, trounce the competition somehow, or grow the topic's audience ... or you can choose a niche with strong potential to begin with! We'll deal with selecting a niche in the next chapter.

2. Not Producing a Popular Product

Assuming you've picked a good niche to blog in, you still run the risk of producing a bad product. Maybe you hire the wrong staff, maybe you don't figure out what sort of content people want, or maybe you get the frequency of publishing wrong. There are plenty of factors that go into a good blog. The best way to learn about them on an instinctive level, is to read and think about other blogs in your spare hours over a reasonably long period of time. You'll also get to read about what goes into hiring and content in later chapters of this book.

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3. Competition

Every business has competition of one sort or another. It might be other blogs or it might be traditional media. If your business grows beyond blogging, then it might simply be other service providers. Competition vies for audience, for revenue, and ultimately for dominance. Even if you scope out a niche very thoroughly and deduce that there is little competition, you can never account for the competition that is sitting in a garage somewhere plotting and planning their strategy for domination. Aside from thorough research, the best defense is to be on guard all the time, to always be looking for ways to be the best, and to think about ways to differentiate your product from your competitors.

4. Running Out of Capital

The simple reality of business is that in the beginning you will burn through your cash with little or no return. Later in this book, you can read about three case studies from my own experience where you will see that each blog took many months of losses before hitting break even, and that one set is in fact *still* burning through cash!

To combat this you'll need to make sure you have a reasonable amount of capital to begin with. You'll also need to look for ways to get some revenue as fast as possible to help slow the losses. You'll need to constantly evaluate whether you are on the right track, whether you can save money somehow, and how much longer you can last.

5. Market Conditions

No one can control the broader market conditions. At this point in time, blogging looks to be a good bet with lots of growth potential and more and more advertising moving online. Whether this is true, whether it lasts, who knows? The most important thing is to keep your finger on the pulse. Stay up to date with tech blogs, advertising blogs, blogs for bloggers and publishers, and stay informed. If you feel a change in market conditions coming, adjust your business plan to compensate. If you think there are lean times ahead and you are low on capital, pull back on your plans. Conversely, if you think there's a boom coming in a particular niche, then you might ramp up to take advantage of it.

While blogging is not without its fair share of risks, there are also plenty of rewards. First and foremost is the satisfaction of running a successful publication. Watching your readership grow, seeing comments and discussion happening on your site, hearing from readers who enjoy the site, and seeing link-backs from sites you respect are all incredibly rewarding.

On a monetary level, a blog business can grow very large. One of the earliest blogging companies, Weblogs Inc, which included powerhouse blogs like **Engadget** (<http://engadget.com>) and **TUAW** (<http://tuaw.com>), sold for a reported \$25m to AOL in 2005. Another high-profile sale occurred in 2007 when environmental blog **Treehugger** (<http://treehugger.com>) sold for \$10m to the Discovery Network.

While a big sale to a listed company isn't on the books for every blog, it's certainly possible to do well purely on operating profits and revenue. In the case studies in this book, you'll read about two blogs that I've worked on which have been fortunate enough to hit profitability and turn over enough cash to grow other businesses and to expand themselves to bigger revenues and larger audiences.

In fact, later in this book we'll look at how a blog can not only become very successful in its own right, but can also become the engine that drives new businesses such as blog networks, apps, services, or products like books and job boards.

A Sketch of a Blog Business

What does a blog business look like? Who works there? How does it operate? While every business is unique in its operation, it's possible to sketch out a broad set of roles to get a picture of what a blog business might look like, what staff will be needed, how workflow might be organized, and how a blog business might actually function on a day-to-day level. We'll expand on this sketch in later chapters to flesh out a fully function model of blog business.

Roles

There are some roles that must be filled in any functioning blog. They are:

1. Writing

The most basic function of a blog is to generate content, so someone is going to have to write that content day in and day out. We'll discuss writing content in detail in Chapter 5.

2. Editing

For a professional blog, some sort of editing will be essential to create a consistent standard of quality. We'll cover editing in detail in Chapter 5.

3. Managing Writers and Contributors

Writers and contributors will need management to ensure their work is in on time, their questions are answered, and they get paid. We'll cover site management in more detail in Chapter 4.

4. Marketing

Until a site is a well-known destination, there is always work to bring readers, to generate buzz, and to build the blog's brand. We'll discuss generating traffic in Chapter 6.

5. Monetization

Generating revenue requires planning and work, whether it's chasing up ad payments, comparing affiliate programs, developing products, or implementing some other monetization plan. We'll discuss building revenue in detail in Chapter 7.

6. Accounts

Like any business, your blog will need good accounting and tax records. The bigger the business gets, the more important these will become.

7. Web Development and Server Admin

Thanks to blogging packages like WordPress, you can often get by with very little web development. Nonetheless, even the most basic blog requires someone to set up the server, configure the software, and make

sure the site doesn't fall over if your traffic should spike. We'll discuss finding and working with a developer in Chapter 4.

8. Web Design and Branding

A serious blog business requires some web design. Although themes can be pretty impressive, your site will need its own brand to stand out. We'll discuss branding in Chapter 3, and working with a designer in Chapter 4.

9. Management and Direction

Coordinating the business is the job of the business manager. From early questions about topic and editorial calendar, to hiring and managing staff, to strategic direction and competitive analysis, this is in many respects the make-or-break role in the business.

A Simple Arrangement

The functions described above need to be accomplished somehow in order for a blog to succeed. How those roles are apportioned between staff is, of course, flexible. Hobby bloggers for example will often fill all roles by themselves. However, if you're creating a blog as a business it's not a good idea to tie up too many duties in a single person. Having only one person in all capacities means you are heavily reliant on that one person not getting ill, leaving, or otherwise putting you in a tight spot. Here's a simple staff structure that could work:

Editor

- Manages writers and contributors
- Edits articles
- Occasionally writes

Writers

- Write content
- Add content to the blog

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Web Designer and/or Web Developer

- Set up hosting and blog installation
- Branding and design work
- Customize blog installation
- Make adjustments
- Server admin

Yourself (with the help of specialists!)

- Marketing
- Accounting
- Legals
- Business Registration
- Monetization
- Management and direction

This arrangement would require two main staff members in the persons of the editor and yourself, one or two semi-permanent freelancers for the design and development, and then a variable arrangement of freelance writers depending on how much content the blog puts out each day.

Generally speaking it is best to start with a simple structure and then expand as the blog expands. Not only is hiring many staff expensive, but in the early days of a blog there is generally less work to do. Over time you can specialize out tasks such as marketing or copyediting to have a larger, more capable organization, but early on, simple is best.

In Chapter 4, we'll look in more detail at these roles in a blog business, as well as discuss the differences between freelance and salaried staff, where to find good people, how to work with remote staff, and other issues related to staffing for a blog business.

Your Role and Blogging Experience

As an entrepreneur you should be expecting to get your hands dirty in building your new business. If you are partially or completely bootstrapping the operation, this may mean taking the approach that hobby bloggers take and doing pretty much everything yourself. But even if you plan to hire staff, it's still good to actively work in one or more of the roles in the business.

In particular, it's a very good idea to have experience in the writing and editing capacities. These are the pillars of blogging and knowing them intimately is not only important should you be short-staffed, but it will also help you with planning and strategy.

Beyond writing and editing, your role as entrepreneur is really to do whatever is needed. This might mean high-level tasks like marketing, accounting, monetization, and management. It will probably also include a lot of strategy and set-up work. This book will guide you through the many and varied tasks you will find yourself working on.

If there is one piece of advice I can give that will serve you well in building a business in blogging, it is to get some experience as a blogger before you commit money and resources to the project. Even if you are a horrible writer, even if you aren't sure what to write about, the experience is so useful that I encourage you to do it anyway.

It's very easy to get started, and the difficulties and questions you encounter will make the following chapters much more useful and interesting. So if you haven't blogged before, pick a topic you are interested in and set aside a few weeks to intensively blog on the subject, to do your best to get noticed, and to learn about the mechanics of blogging.

At the end of this book is an appendix chapter (The Blog Basics Crash Course) where you will find an absolute beginner's guide to blogging, covering setting up, common terminology, and many other basics. If you've never blogged before, I can't recommend enough reading through this and starting your own blog while you plan your larger blog enterprise.

Setting Up as a Business

The first steps in creating your new enterprise are ones that virtually any business needs to go through: registering the business, getting advice, and opening a bank account. Here's a quick rundown of some of these tasks.

Legal Counsel

When setting up any business, it's important to know a lawyer who you can contact for legal work such as writing a privacy policy, trademarking a brand name, setting up a business structure, drafting contracts for staff, and other general legal work. Early on, you are unlikely to need their services often, but it's best to establish a relationship *before* the need arises.

Moreover, a quick consultation might give you a heads-up on an issue to keep in mind for the future. When my company set up our first website, it never crossed anyone's mind that we had another company's trademark (whose products were heavily related to the site) as part of our own site's name. Years later, we ended up having to change the name, hand over the domain name, and the whole thing was very time-consuming and expensive. Had we had some simple legal counsel early on, the whole issue could have been avoided!

If you don't already have a legal firm or lawyer you have used in the past, ask around for a recommendation. If you cannot get a personal recommendation, then find out if there is a local law association or business development centre who can assist you.

The law firm that I use at work was recommended by a small business incubator that the government was running in my city. We visited the incubator while looking for office space, and while we were there asked the person who ran the organization if he knew any good law firms. As it happened, they had a lawyer who came in on Fridays to offer free introductory counseling for startups. We got in touch with him and years later we still work together!

When you have a company in mind, you can ask for a consultation and give them a rundown of what you are planning on doing (i.e., opening a blog). Tell them you want to set up a relationship, and maybe ask if there are any particular legal issues you should be thinking about this early on. Many law firms won't charge for the first consultation (though you should double check this) so it's a good time ask any broad questions you have. Always ask for an estimate for any actual work you discuss before commencing so you don't get any surprises.

It's not a bad idea to meet with a few different firms and lawyers. This will allow you to find someone you feel comfortable talking to, that you understand, and that you feel knows at least a little bit about working online. It will also give you a chance to compare rates if you ask each lawyer to estimate on a specific comparable job such as trademarking a business name or writing a privacy policy.

Accounting

Having well-maintained and accurate accounts is vital for any business because your accounts allow you to map out what is happening in the business. These accounts only get more and more important the bigger the business gets, as everything becomes more complex with more money involved. Moreover, if you don't have a solid foundation to begin with, then you will have a lot more trouble putting it in later, so it's best to get this right from the very beginning.

A good accountant can help you with financial advice, help plan your business, make sure you pay as little tax as possible, and ensure you don't get into trouble with the tax department. As with finding a lawyer, the best way to find an accountant is to ask around. Look for recommendations from people you work with, friends and family, anyone you know in a similar business, or any local business groups or associations. You should be looking for someone who is a registered accountant, and whom you understand and feel comfortable talking to.

While an accountant will provide advice and manage the more major financial events for your business, you may find that they are too expensive

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for your day-to-day book keeping: writing up financial records of incoming and outgoing transactions. If this is the case, then you can either do it yourself or hire a bookkeeper.

Keeping your own books is largely a matter of being organized and consistent. If you go down this path, get yourself some bookkeeping software such as QuickBooks and pick up a book, or enroll in a seminar on the subject. Because it's such a common necessity, bookkeeping is often a popular crash course at universities and local colleges. The most important thing is to be extremely diligent about keeping everything up to date. An accountant will often suggest a system that works well with their own processes, so that you can deliver your books to them on a regular basis in order to have your taxes done or your books audited.

Even if you choose to maintain your own accounting books, you will still want an accountant for high-level advice on tax, set-up, and how to structure ownership. If you don't want to keep your own records, an accountant can usually also recommend a bookkeeper or even do the job themselves.

Regardless of whether you keep your own books, if you aren't very familiar with accounting and business, it's not a bad idea to buy a basic book on the subject such as a Dummies guide on the subject. Getting an understanding for terminology and concepts like balance sheets and profit and loss statements will go a long way toward making sure you know what your accountant is saying to you and ensuring you have a fair understanding of the financial realities of your business.

When you choose your accountant, you'll want to ask them questions about how to keep your financial records, what types of paperwork you need to keep, what types of receipts and expenses should be coming out of the business, and what issues they foresee for your blog business. Before your first consultation, write down every question you can come up with and just run through them. If you don't understand what they are saying, ask. If you still don't understand, consider finding another accountant – not all of them are good communicators!

When you are setting up the business, make sure you record every expense related to your business, so at tax time, you will be able to claim a wealth of new business-related deductions and save yourself a lot of money. Again, your accountant will be able to tell you what is tax-deductible in your region.

The most important thing to remember is that having consistent good habits from the very start makes life much easier in the long run. In particular, documenting everything will ensure that even if you have to change accountants or run into problems, you can always backtrack and work it all out again.

Set Up a Business Entity

As with any new business, there are government requirements you must fulfill in order to operate legally. These differ in different countries, so be sure to consult your local government. Moreover, it is a good idea to ask both your lawyer and accountant for advice on how to set up your business. It can be time-consuming and costly to change these types of decisions further down the track. Here are some basic things you will probably have to do:

1. Choosing a Business Structure

In most countries there are a variety of business structures that you can use for your new business. They usually range from a simpler sole trader or partnership structure, to a corporation or company structure. A sole trader or partnership usually involves less paperwork, but leaves you personally liable when things go wrong – think lawsuits and disputes. Corporation or company structures are more complex to set up and involve higher registration and annual fees, but provide a degree of personal legal protection.

It's important to spend time deciding how to set up your business as it may have implications for things like filing accounts with the tax department, liability when things go wrong, and what business paperwork you need to complete. Ask your lawyer and accountant what they recommend. Professional consultants aren't cheap so this will be an investment, but the wrong choice of business could potentially cost you a great deal of money and stress in the long run. A qualified

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professional will help you understand your options and make an informed choice.

2. Consider How Ownership is Structured

You should also consider how the ownership of your business works. In some countries additional entities can reduce your tax exposure. For example, sharing ownership between yourself and a partner, or setting up a family trust, can distribute the income from your business and thereby reduce the tax liability you incur. Ask your lawyer and accountant for tax advice, particularly if you have partners or investors in the business.

3. Registering or Incorporating Your Business

You will need to register or incorporate your business with the government for it to become a legal entity. In the U.S. this also means selecting what state you wish to register in, since different states have different laws. Wherever you are, you will need to ensure that your business name is unique in its industry area. This can usually be done by consulting a database of local businesses. Contact your local government for more information and resources. We will discuss naming and branding more in Chapter 3.

4. Registering for Tax

Once your business is registered, you may also need to register it for tax purposes. Many countries give out an identification number to businesses to be used when lodging accounts with the tax department. You can ask your accountant for more information on what sorts of registration are needed. Ask about payroll taxes if you plan on hiring employees as well as withholding tax on their behalf. If you are planning on selling something via your blog, you may also want to ask about sales taxes and whether you need to charge them.

It's important to accept that taxes are an unavoidable reality of doing business. Planning for them means you've factored them into the equation and won't have any nasty surprises. Trying to avoid them through ignorance is never a good plan. So even though it may not be

the most exciting thing to think about in the early stages of setting up your business, take the time to research this thoroughly.

5. Insuring Your Business

Ask your accountant what their view is on taking out business insurance for your new enterprise. Depending on where you are, there may be some mandatory insurance requirements such as worker's protection or compensation insurance that will be relevant if you plan on hiring employees.

Set Up a Credit Card, Bank, and PayPal Account

Spend some time investigating different business banking options and find a suitable bank and account type for your new business. Opening a bank account in your business name will ensure that your business transactions and personal transactions remain separate. While at first it might be tempting to use this business account for your personal use from time to time, avoid this at all costs. It only makes your accounting much more complex come tax time. And even worse, if you have set up a corporate structure for your business to avoid personal liability, mixing accounts can void your protection. So always keep work and personal finances separate.

If possible, you'll also want to get a business credit card to pay for things like web hosting and domain names. Many banks won't issue a card to a business until a sufficient amount of time has passed and money has gone through the system, if this is the case, you may want to set up a new personal card that you only use for business expenses. Ask your accountant for advice on managing your credit card if this is the case.

PayPal is the de facto way of moving money online, particularly with freelance writers, designers, and developers. It is also useful for taking payments from advertisers, affiliate networks, and other companies associated with making your site money! Since it costs nothing to set up, you may as well register a PayPal account immediately and link it up to your new business bank account.

Capital and Investment

No matter how much “sweat capital” you plan to put into your new venture, to get it off the ground you are going to need some sort of capital, even if it’s just to pay for costs like business registration and your accountant’s fees. Typically your starting capital will come from one or more of the following four sources:

1. Your Own Cash and Time

Because blogging is quite a low cost business, you may very well be able to fund your blog off your own savings. If you can manage this then I personally recommend you do so. Building a business off your own cash means you don’t go into debt, you don’t have the weight of someone else’s investment or debt, and most importantly you really count every penny you are spending because you had to work to get it in the first place!

If you don’t have a lot of savings, you can start a business while working part-time to pay bills and cover costs. This can be painful and distracting, but effective – provided you have a high tolerance for working all hours of the day and night while you get your business up and running. If you choose this path, make sure you don’t let the business set up drag on because you don’t have enough time to make a real go of it.

2. Taking a Loan

There are many types of debt that you can take on to fund a small business. Virtually all will involve putting down some sort of security and paying interest back over time. You should consult your accountant and banker to discuss options that suit your particular financial needs.

3. Taking an Investment

Typical investors for a blog business will be friends and family, a business partner, or an angel investor. Businesses this size are below the scope of most venture capitalists and private equity firms who are usually looking for bigger investments with bigger returns.

If you are taking on an investment, make sure you have a rock solid business plan, have invested a lot of your own money as well, and consult your lawyer and accountant to draw up concrete agreements to keep all parties happy and satisfied. If your investor offers up terms and agreements for investing, then read them carefully and get your lawyer to do so as well.

Whenever money is involved, it's important that everything is very clear between you and your investors. If your business should go splendidly well and be worth a lot in the future, these agreements will be even more important and you'll want to know that you made them fair and clear from the beginning.

4. Having a Co-founder (with Capital)

A variant of taking investment is to have a co-founder or business partner starting the business with you. In this instance you both contribute capital and both work in the business spreading the load on both fronts. You can even both work part-time jobs as described above to help keep the business afloat. Co-founders can bring other advantages as well, which we'll discuss in the next section.

Co-founders

Like many things in life, starting a business is a lot harder to do by yourself. In fact, not only is it harder, frankly it's a lot less fun. That's why we have co-founders! But how do you choose who to work with? What should you look for in a co-founder? And what should you avoid?

What Co-founders Bring to the Table

Before we discuss the traits that make for a good partner, let's first look at some of the benefits of having a co-founder, because there is, of course, one big drawback. Namely, having co-founders means giving up a share of the ownership pie. Your fundamental aim is to find co-founders who bring enough to the table that this is worth doing. In essence, you are looking for

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people who through their contribution will make the overall pie larger, so that a lesser share of this bigger pie is actually worth more than the whole of the original.

I must say that I am also of the belief that if you're going to be successful, there will be more than enough pie to share around. And if you're going to flop, then it doesn't really matter whether you have 100%, 50%, or 25% of nothing, because it's all nothing anyway!

Co-founders can contribute a number of things to the business:

1. They Can Keep You On Track

Starting a business can be a very difficult experience, particularly if you are doing it with normal life going on at the same time. I've known many people who started businesses and then simply never finished because there were too many distractions. Having co-founders means that even if you get temporarily distracted, there are other people who have a vested interest in keeping things going and getting you back on track.

2. You Can Bounce Ideas Off Each Other and Get a Second Opinion

Wondering if something is a good idea? Well, a co-founder is there to wonder with you. Having a team means you can throw ideas around, discuss the merits of pursuing certain options, and share in collective wisdom.

3. They Spread the Workload

Starting a business is hard work. There is a lot to do on a practical level as well, like registering trademarks, opening bank accounts, finding an accountant, hiring a lawyer, choose web hosting, writing a business plan, and all the other nitty-gritty of getting things started. Co-founders mean you don't have to do everything all by yourself.

4. They Spread the Investment Load

As described in the previous section, a co-founder can and should contribute to the total starting capital put into the business. This can be a significant benefit if it means you avoid having to take on debt and interest repayments.

5. You Can Share the Startup Experience

Startups are exciting, and unless you have a team, you're going to bore the pants off your friends talking about your new blog business. Having co-founders means you can share the experience, both the highs and the lows.

6. You Begin with a Bigger Team

Two people are a team that is double the size of one. If you have one or more co-founders, it means you're already ahead of the game. You already have way more resources, and often they are cheap resources as opposed to employees who you have to pay in cash from Day One.

7. You Have More Connections to Draw On

Knowing people is a big leg up in business. Whether it's knowing a good accountant, knowing someone who can give you business advice, or knowing people in the industry who can help, connections can pay off big-time. Every co-founder in your team brings their own set of unique connections and people to draw on.

8. New Skill-Sets

Perhaps the most important benefit is that co-founders bring their own set of skills to the team. The question is: what skills do you need? Partnerships work best when your skill sets complement each other. For example, if you are great at marketing but terrible with accounts and money, then find someone who is the reverse. If you are a brilliant editor and know a lot about blogging but don't know how to get the word out about a site and generate PR, then find someone with that skill set.

What you need from co-founders are people who think and act differently to the way you do. People who have strengths where you have weaknesses, and weaknesses where you're strong. People who bring balance to your team.

Trustworthiness and Commitment

Of course it isn't just a balance of skills that makes for a good co-founder. Getting into a serious business together is up there with getting married in terms of commitment, so you need to be sure about the people you choose.

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This is incredibly important because if you do well, there is going to be money involved, and if there's one thing we can all agree on, it's that money can cause a lot of weird behavior in people. If you work with people you trust, then it means you'll spend your time working on the business and not working against each other.

It's essential that you seal any co-founding deal in paper and ink with your lawyer making sure that everyone's rights and shares are sorted out in black and white. Having said that, you should choose people you trust, such that even without the written agreement you'd be okay with them. No matter how much legal documentation you have, the wrong people can create problems and it could get pretty nasty.

So don't skip out on having a legal agreement with your co-founders under any circumstances, but when you choose those co-founders, choose them as if there wasn't going to be a piece of paper holding you together.

Unity of Purpose

In medieval Europe, a not-uncommon method of execution was to tie a man's limbs to four horses and then spur the horses to run in different directions. This morbid analogy sums up what will happen to your business if you and your co-founders all have different aims.

When you get into business with someone, it's important that you figure out what their plan is. Are they looking to just invest some money and then not do anything? Are they looking for a quick exit? Do they see the business as being all about them? Are they passionate about growing a business or just after a cash cow to fund their lifestyle?

Sometimes you will have to turn away from someone who complements your skill set perfectly and whom you trust implicitly, simply because they want different things from the business.

Having unity of purpose means you avoid friction caused by your team each trying to fulfill different objectives. So instead of working against each other, you're working with each other.

Finding co-founders means making a lot of big decisions. In Chapter 4 we'll discuss how important it is to take the time to pick the right staff, but picking co-founders requires ten times more care and thought. Go with your instincts about people, take the time to ask them what they are after, and ask yourself if you complement each other in skills and personality. Remember, you're going to be stuck with these people for a long time to come, so also choose nice people who make you happy!

Your Mission and Vision

Business just for the sake of making money is neither inspiring nor fulfilling. While that shouldn't mean you ignore finances, it does mean you should set a higher priority and let that inform the business of making money – not the other way around.

Having a mission for your business can be as simple as deciding that you want to create the most informative blog on a particular topic, or to be a site that is known for breaking news first, or to create a blog that creates value for its readers.

Take some time to imagine what you'd like to create. Remove money from the equation and instead, consider what sort of product you could make, how it could impact people, and what sort of success would inspire you. Look at sites and businesses you admire and ask yourself what values do they have? What are they aspiring to?

When you write out your mission statement in your business plan, in your notebook or wherever you decide to commit it, don't feel you need to make it sound grandiose or wordy. It's just as valid, and probably a lot more inspiring, to have a simple plain mission that you really relate to!

Business Planning

When investing any significant amount of money into a business, it is worth creating a business plan to document your predictions, goals, and position.

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While you might think that a business plan is only necessary for startups and businesses looking for loans and funding, in reality, it pays for any business to plan ahead. There's an oft-quoted adage that says that "failing to plan is planning to fail." The benefits of writing a business plan are:

1. It forces You to Think Through Your Plans in Detail

The great dangers in starting a business are all the unknowns. A business plan is structured so that you need to think through all the different aspects of your business from financials to organization to marketing, questioning assumptions and hopefully eliminating any unknowns caused by simply forgetting to plan.

2. You Have a Plan You Can Refer Back to for Guidance

In the planning stages of your new business, you have the luxury of time to draw up plans that you can refer back to later, when you may have a lot more work to do or a lot more pressure on you. A business plan is something you can not only refer back to, but also keep updating. A good business plan should be a living, evolving document that changes as the business changes.

3. They Are Useful When Looking for Loans and Investment

On a very practical level, if you are looking for loans or investment, you will often need a business plan complete with detailed financials to explain what you're going to be doing with the money.

What Goes Into a Business Plan?

A business plan should always have clear, measurable objectives. You want to define what you plan to do, the results you expect to achieve, and the assumptions you are making. In setting this all out, you will not only have a yard stick to measure by, you will also think through whether your finances really meet up with your plans, whether it's realistic to imagine that your marketing plan will yield the traffic you hope to gain, and so on.

A typical business plan is a document that contains information about the organization you are building, the product you are developing, how you plan

to get traffic and market, and projections on how your cash flow will look for the first year of the business.

There are many good reference guides on writing a business plan that include examples, headings, and summaries of what to put in the different sections. A good handbook for business planning and other small business information is the *“Small Business Guide”* by Nicholas Humphrey.

It’s important to understand that it’s okay not to know exactly what is going to happen. Just think through and estimate everything to the best of your abilities. You’ll be surprised at how useful it is to think through your plans.

It’s also good to keep in mind that you shouldn’t fill a business plan up with information just for the sake of it. Celebrity venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki in his book *“Reality Check”* writes that *“The ideal length of a business plan is twenty pages or less, and this includes the appendix. When it comes to business plans, less is more. For every ten pages over twenty pages, you decrease the likelihood that the plan will be read, much less funded, by 25 percent.”*

When you’ve written your business plan, show it to your accountant for feedback. You may find that some assumptions you’ve made are less realistic than you’d like. Accountants pore over the records of many businesses, qualifying them to give solid advice and feedback to ensure your plans stack up.

Over-planning

As important as planning is, it’s not as important as *doing*. While you should take the time to write up a business plan, you also don’t want to get stuck there and never make it to launch day.

Keep your business plan relatively brief, don’t obsess about details that you can’t possibly know at this early stage, and if you notice that the planning stage is dragging on too long, then just force yourself to sit down and write out the remainder, and then move on.

It’s a good idea to make planning less of an up-front activity and more of an along-the-way one. Planning on the fly means that you are constantly

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updating your plans with new information and details. It requires some sort of initial plan, and then as you run the business, you periodically check back and update your ideas and reevaluate your assumptions. You may also develop the plan in new directions you wouldn't have been able to foresee in the early stages of your new business.

2

PLANNING AND RESEARCHING

Perhaps the most critical decision in starting a new blog is to select your topic area or niche. Needless to say, it's worth investing the time to research and plan it thoroughly because while choosing the right niche doesn't guarantee success, choosing poorly can make succeeding much more difficult.

In this chapter we'll consider tools and techniques you can use to research a blog niche, to analyze competitors, and to gauge how much traffic and advertising potential it has.

Niches

Although personal blogs often wander through a variety of themes and topics, for a serious blog project you will want to focus on a limited range of topics. Defining a single main area or niche for your blog topic has three main benefits:

1. It's Easier to Build a Memorable Brand

The strongest, most memorable brands are the ones most quickly and easily understood by consumers. Building a brand for a blog that changes topics regularly is much harder as the blog becomes harder to mentally categorize. By contrast, a focused blog is easily simplified into a memorable idea. So for example it's much easier to think "Stock Market Tips" than "Covers topics like the Stock Market, Television, and Cars."

You can in fact still build a great brand around a bizarre set of topics; it's just a lot harder! A good example of a blog that isn't easily defined is **BoingBoing** (<http://boingboing.net>), which covers many things, including technology, sci-fi, gadgets, politics, and Disney.

2. Your Readers Know What to Expect

A focused topic attracts and retains a strong audience because readers quickly learn what the blog is about, and if they like it, then they stick around. They are also more likely to recommend the blog to other people interested in the same topics. If you move between a variety of unrelated topics, you are likely to lose readers who aren't interested in some parts of the blog, or who simply can't be bothered to wait for the next post on the topic they are interested in.

3. It's Easier to Attract Advertising

It's much easier to attract advertisers to a focused blog because the topic of your site defines your audience. For example, businesses selling financial advice are likely to see a blog about stock market tips as an attractive place to advertise given the clear overlap in audience, whereas they may be more hesitant if the audience match wasn't so clear because the stock market tips were mixed with posts about other topics.

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Sub-niches

For any topic, you will always have the option of either taking a broad view of the topic or focusing on specific parts, or sub-niches. Here are some examples of niches and more focused sub-niches:

Broad Niche

Blogging

Investment

Weight Loss

Travel

Focused Sub-niche

Professional Blogging

Tech Stocks

Low-Carb Dieting

Travel in Asia

It is possible to break topics down further and further. For example, “Travel in China” would be a sub-niche of “Travel in Asia,” and even more specifically “Travel in Hong Kong.” Both broad and focused blogs have their advantages and disadvantages. These are summed up in the tables below.

Broad Niches

Pros	Cons
Large depth of content	Might be a bit TOO much to write about if you have limited resources
Larger potential	More competition and often more organized competition

Focused Niches

Pros	Cons
Less competition makes them easier to dominate	Smaller potential
Can act as a foothold into the larger niche	Not as much depth of content
Can be better for branding to have a strong “angle” on the broad topic	Can get boring!

In essence, the choice to focus is really about whether you aim to be a little fish in a big pond, or a big fish in a little pond. If you have limited blogging experience, it's usually better to go for the smaller niche and dominate there before trying to shoot for the broader niche. Not only will you then have a foothold to use to broaden your site, but you'll also have a much easier time doing well on a topic with fewer competitors.

Should You Cover Multiple Topics?

As a general rule, the smaller your topic area is, the smaller your potential audience will be. To broaden your subject matter you could choose to add multiple topics to a blog. If you do this, it's always best to make them related subjects.

For example, an Investment blog about stocks might benefit from articles about other types of stock market investments like derivatives, options, and so on. On a broader scale still, it would also work to have articles about real estate investment since investors often move between stocks and real estate depending on how the markets are faring. Another broad option would be to have posts on luxury goods such as cars and accessories, the sorts of things that high income investors might like to buy.

On the other hand, mixing in articles about blogging would be a much tougher sell as there are no natural overlaps between the two subjects. As stated previously, diluting your topic area presents more drawbacks than gains.

Your Interest Level

It can be very difficult to blog on a topic in which you have little or no personal interest. There is no simpler way to make blogging a chore than to force yourself to write, read, and learn about a subject you don't actually care about.

As an entrepreneur approaching blogging, you will most likely be hiring writers to write on the subject so you have a bit more leniency in this than a hobby blogger. Nonetheless, a personal interest in the subject matter of your blog has numerous benefits:

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- If you do end up writing yourself, blogging is more enjoyable and feels a lot less like work.
- You are likely to already know a good deal about the subject matter.
- You are likely to be reading/learning about the subject anyway.
- Your passion will show through in how you interact with the community, your staff, and in your writing.
- You know how to solve the problems your readers face, or at least you know what those problems are.
- You are probably already involved in some networking groups, forums, communities in this area. If you aren't, it won't be a problem to get involved.

Given the profusion of available topics, unless you have seen an incredible opportunity that's too good to pass up, it's probably best to stick to something you are interested in. If you're worried that the topic is too narrow, then try opening that topic up to a broader view of the same area.

Can You Create Value?

A key question in selecting a niche to blog in is to ask yourself whether you can create value for your readers. At all costs you want to avoid simply launching a "me too" blog that solely imitates (whether consciously or coincidentally) other blogs in the niche.

For a blog to be successful it must create real value for its readers. It must be a worthwhile addition to their reading schedule. Creating value doesn't mean you necessarily need to create a blog that is totally unique. It might simply mean that your blog explains a hard topic in a really simple way, or it might mean your blog has a much more frequent posting schedule giving more up-to-the-minute updates, or it might mean your blog provides great entertainment (you can never have too much entertainment!).

Creating value is the difference between offering something that is already available and providing something new, different, or better. Without a solid

point of differentiation it's very hard to catch up to competing blogs. After all, why should readers bother switching to your new blog if it doesn't provide anything new or better?

If you are unsure whether your blog can create value in a certain niche, try asking yourself these questions:

1. Can you generate a lot of content in this niche?
2. Do you know or are you able to find out things that others want to know?
3. Can you create content that isn't currently available elsewhere?
4. Do you have a different take or angle on existing subject matter?
5. If someone else came out with the blog you are planning, would *you* read it?

Researching a Niche

When deciding on a blog topic, it's important to take some time to do your research to find out how big the potential audience is likely to be, how hard it will be to make money, who else is out there, and whether there's a demand for content in that particular niche. There are lots of tools freely available to help you do your homework and it doesn't need to take long at all.

How Big is this Niche?

While intuition and common sense will tell you a popular topic is popular, it may not always be obvious for smaller niches. For example, it's pretty clear that photography is a popular subject, but you may not be so sure about purely black and white photography.

The simplest way to get a feel for how big a niche is would be to check how large the search market is. If there are a large number of people searching for keywords in your niche, you'll know it's probably a big area of interest. Two great tools for assessing search volume are Google Trends and SEOBook's Keyword Research Tool.

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SEOBook's Keyword Research Tool

<http://tools.seobook.com/keyword-tools/seobook/>

Simply type in a keyword and the tool returns a set of associated search terms along with an estimated daily search volume. For example, at the time of writing this, “photography” was searched for approximately 20,051 times a day on Google, while “black and white photography” was searched for approximately 1,603 times, or about 8 percent of the first term. That doesn’t necessarily mean that the black and white photography market is exactly 8 percent the size of the photography market, but it does give you a rough idea of comparative sizes.



Fig 2-1: SEOTools Keyword Suggestion Tool.

Google Trends

<http://trends.google.com>

Google Trends will plot out a graph of search volumes for different keywords. It's useful for comparing trends over time and trends against other keywords. Searching for “photography” and “black and white photography” reveals that the latter term's volume appears to be declining. This might indicate waning popularity for that subject.

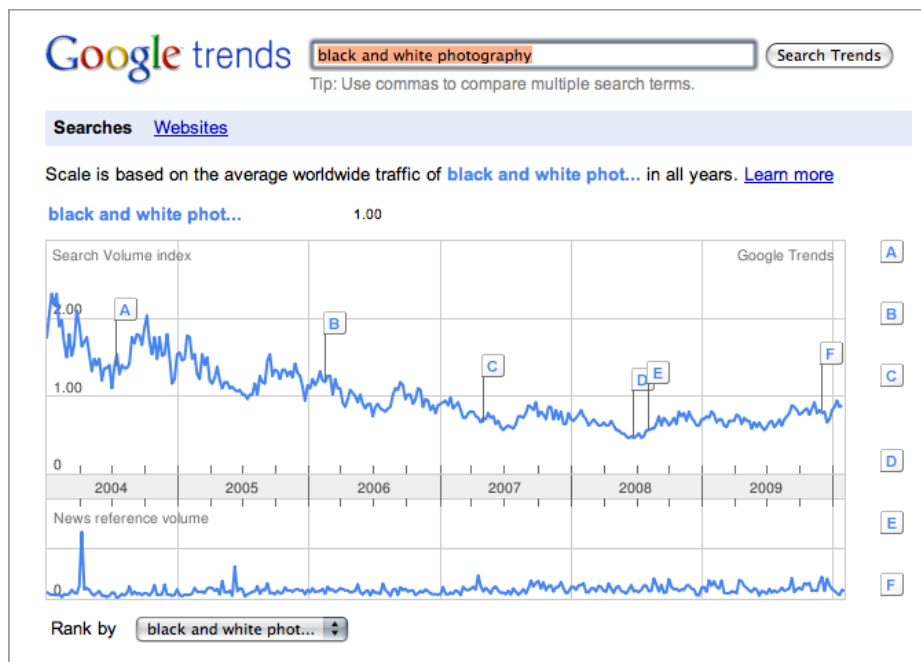


Fig 2-2: Google Trends graph for “black and white photography.”

The comparison also shows that according to Google Trends the plain “photography” term is a hundred times more popular than “black and white photography.” Again, this doesn’t mean that photography is a hundred times more popular than black and white photography, but it does provide some food for thought.

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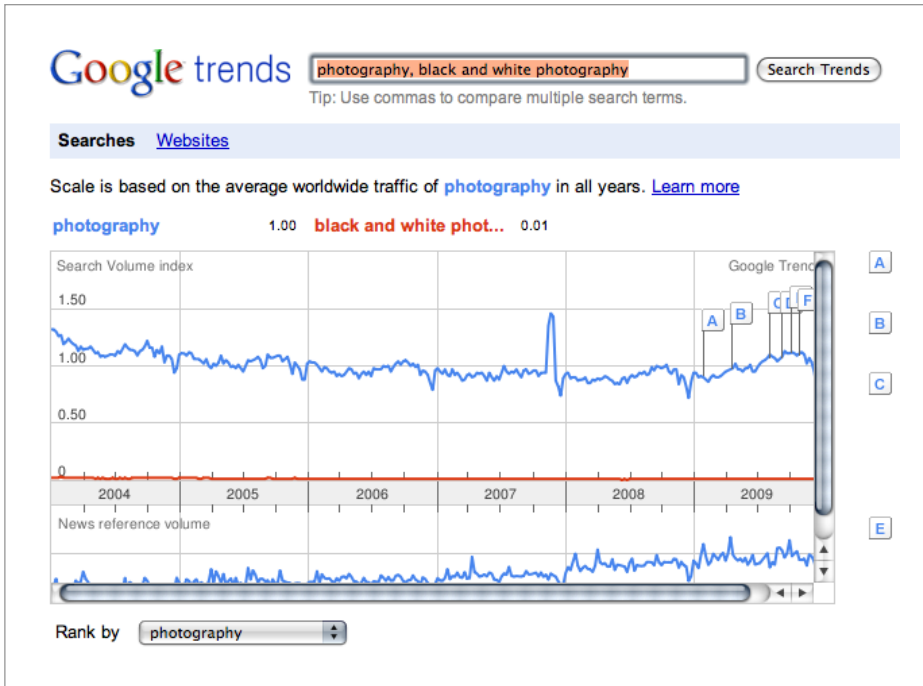


Fig 2-3: Google Trends graph for “photography” vs. “black and white photography.”

Another interesting example is to graph the terms “Mac Apps,” “iPhone Apps,” and “iPad Apps.” You can see that “iPhone Apps” quickly eclipsed “Mac Apps,” while the much newer “iPad Apps” is starting strong and looks to have much potential. A trend like this concurs with our common sense assumption that iPhone apps are a big market and that iPad apps are likely to follow suit.



Fig 2-4: Google Trends graph for various “app” terms.

How Monetizable is this Niche?

It is important to determine how easy it will be to generate revenue in a particular niche. To do this, we look at what potential advertising exists for that topic. While there are a lot of other ways to monetize a blog, all of which we discuss in detail in Chapter 7, advertising is the best way to test a niche because it’s so universal. Thanks to Google’s AdSense and similar networks, any site can earn at least some money, even with very little traffic.

As a general rule, if you can amass a large audience and high levels of traffic, it will be possible to generate revenue by selling advertising. However, the sums advertisers are willing to pay to reach a particular audience varies wildly. Consequently, in some niches only the very biggest sites can get the volume to turn a profit, while in others, much smaller players can still do well.

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Of course, knowing that eventually the very best blogs in a niche will make money is small comfort when you're just starting out, investing a lot into the new business, and aren't sure whether your blog will ever get to that top tier. It's much better to be in a niche where you know that even some success will surely reap benefits.

Here are three quick tests you can do to give you an idea of how profitable a niche will be. You may wish to go through this process with a few different topics to see how different ones compare.

1. Check Adsense

Google Adwords Traffic Estimator – <http://adwords.google.com/select/TrafficEstimatorSandbox>

Adsense is Google's ubiquitous text advertising service. It's generally not a very high-yield source of ad revenue and it can cheapen your image, however it is very useful for figuring out whether a niche attracts advertising dollars because it is so popular in virtually every niche.

The Adwords traffic estimator is actually for ad buyers, however we can use it to assess how much advertisers are willing to pay for certain keywords. In the example below, I've entered a few different niche keywords: photography, gardening, iPhone, and mortgage.

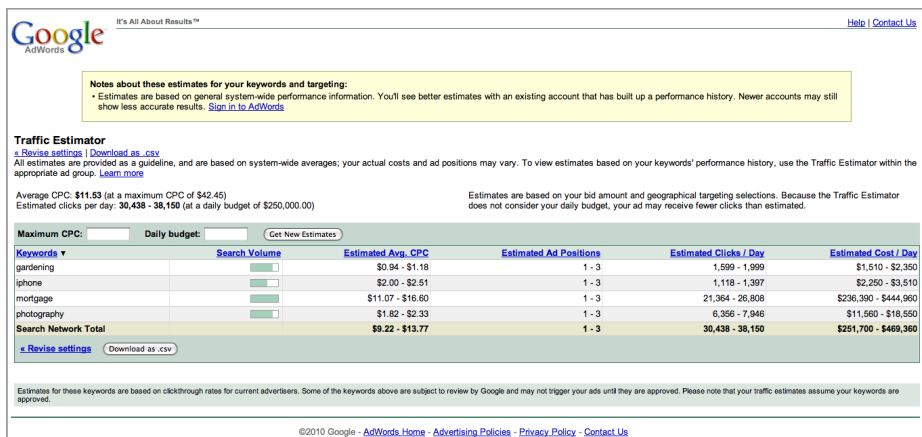


Fig 2-5: Google Adwords estimation for various terms.

As you can see, there is a tremendous range. A keyword like “mortgage” can bring in a lot of money per click (between \$11 and \$16), while “gardening” is down around the \$1 mark. You can also see the estimated clicks per day to see that a blog about mortgages that had a lot of traffic could potentially be a license to print money.

Of course it’s also probably very difficult to make a popular site about mortgages and there are likely to be a lot of make-money sharks out there trying to capture those keywords too, so it’s important to understand that this is only one half of the equation. Try looking at a variety of other keywords and niches to get a feel for what the ranges are and what advertisers are interested in paying for.

2. Look for Affiliate Programs

Affiliate programs are referral schemes offered by companies selling products and services. A typical affiliate program will pay every time you send them a lead who then buys a product or service. This is usually done through an affiliate link that you can embed in a blog post or use on a banner.

Affiliate programs are a simple, self-service way of generating revenue, and we’ll cover them in detail in Chapter 7. For testing purposes, the presence of a lot of affiliate programs is a good sign for a niche, because when used effectively, they can be quite lucrative.

A good place to find affiliate programs is an affiliate marketplace like **CommissionJunction** (<http://commissionjunction.com>). Browse through the site to see what companies related to your niche are offering programs. Ask yourself if readers of a blog in that niche would be likely to buy products and services from the various vendors. For example, readers of a photography blog would be fairly likely to buy photographic equipment, so companies selling those types of goods who offer generous affiliate programs would be a great sign for such a blog.

3. Research Competitors

In the next section we’ll discuss how to find potential competitors in a niche. When you are researching these other blogs, pay attention to how they are

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making money. If it's through advertising, try to find out what their rates are and how full their inventory is. If it's through some other means, ask yourself whether it's a form of monetization you can see yourself applying on your new blog.

Competitors are probably the best way of assessing how much money is in a niche, as they are there ahead of you doing the hard yards. For example, you might think there is going to be a lot of advertising dollars in a niche, but find that the biggest site in that niche has half its ad inventory empty. This would be a very strong signal that advertising revenue is not easy to come by.

Of course, once your blog is established it may very well end up being larger, better, or more successful than these competitors, but until then, it's a good idea to use them as a yard stick.

Who Else is Out There?

No matter what niche or topic you choose, it is unlikely yours will be the first blog on that subject, so it is important to know what other blogs are out there. But the web is a big place; so where do you start?

First you need to keep in mind that you are searching not only for blogs focused entirely on the same topic area, but also for blogs in a broader niche that sometimes publish articles on your topic.

The best ways to search, are to use blog search engines and blog directories as launch pads to find likely suspects. Once you find a blog that fits the bill, you will often be able to simply follow links off that blog, either in the text of posts or in a blogroll, to locate more blogs.

For now, begin by making a list of blogs in your niche. Later in this chapter we'll discuss how to analyze the competition, and understand the lay of the land for your niche.

Blog Search Engines

There are two major blog search engines:

1. **Google Blog Search** – <http://google.com/blogsearch>

Google's blog search, like its regular search engine, does an excellent job of returning relevant and current results. It's a good place to start

your hunting. Search for keywords relating to your niche and see what pops up.

2. **Technorati** – <http://technorati.com>

Technorati offers a simple way to gauge how successful a blog might be with its “Authority” rating for different blogs. A blog’s authority is the number of individual links to it that have appeared in the last 6 months. It’s not a perfect measurement, but it will give you an idea of where a blog sits in a particular niche hierarchy.

Blog Directories

Blog directories catalogue sites by tags and categories to help readers discover new blogs to read. They work usually on submission so they won’t house every blog in a niche, but they can still be a good way to search around.

The best known blog directory is **BlogCatalog** (<http://blogcatalog.com>); however, other directories like **BlogFlux** (<http://blogflux.com>) and **BlogTopList** (<http://blogtoplist.com>) are also worth visiting. Explore the tags and categories most related to your niche to hunt down sites relevant to your niche.

Is there Audience Demand?

A good way to assess how much demand there is for a particular subject, is to look at the popularity of blog posts on that topic. If posts are consistently popular, then you’ll know that there’s a solid market for the subject.

Measuring Popularity by Audience Reaction

While you are browsing blogs to find potential competitors, search for posts on the specific topics that you think would work particularly well. Look to see how many comments appear on these posts versus posts on other topics on the same blog. Also, read the comments themselves to see what people are saying.

You should quickly get a feel for how ambivalent readers are to the types of topics you want to blog about. Try to look at a wide range of blogs from small to large so you get a good sample of readers. On some blogs, readers just don’t comment much, and on others the community may simply be a

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bit negative or nasty, so if you take just a couple of blogs as your sample size then you may get distorted results. Look through enough, however, and you'll get a good idea of how your blog and subject matter is likely to be received.

Measuring Popularity through Social Media

Searching through sites like Digg, Reddit, Tweetmeme, and Delicious is a good way to gauge interest in a particular topic. If you find lots of posts that have appeared on the Digg and Reddit homepages that have accumulated a lot of Delicious bookmarks, or that have been tweeted a lot on Twitter, chances are good that the subject matter is in demand.

If you *don't* find much social media popularity, this could be simply to do with the audience group and how they use, or more precisely *don't use*, social media. So don't be disheartened and read too much in an absence of social media engagement.

Conversely, searching social media sites, can be a good way to find popular content and learn what types of topics people love hearing about.

Aside from the big social media sites there are plenty of smaller niche sites like Sphinn for search engine news, Tiptd for stock market posts, Showhype for entertainment, DesignMoo for web design, DZone for development, and Hacker News for entrepreneurship. If a niche social media site exists for the topic you are going to be blogging in, then you'll find an invaluable amount of information on what your market is interested in.

Measuring Popularity through Volume

An obvious way to figure out if a subject is popular, is to simply look at how many blogs and posts there are on that topic. The more popular it is and the broader the niche *is*, the more likely it becomes that you'll find lots and lots of content, implying that there is a market there. The best way to do this is to look through blog directories to see what tags and categories are the fullest. Keep in mind, however, that niches with a lot of volume are also going to be much harder to crack since audiences already have a wealth of places to get popular posts.

Unmet Demand

Demand comes in different forms. The best type of demand is unmet demand. That is, to find that there aren't many blogs or posts on a topic, but that when they do appear they are really popular. This is a sign that you have found a relatively untapped niche.

Look for topics with high concentrations of popular posts but few, if any, dedicated sites. Although this gets harder with every passing year, there are still many areas of unmet demand. In the case studies at the end of this book we'll look at three examples of sites where there was some sort of unmet demand and how we found it.

Competitive Analysis

As you begin to amass a list of blogs in your niche, you will want to see how they fit together. Who are the serious competitors and who are the regulars? Which sites are you going to need to strategize around, and which might you model your blog on?

Fortunately, there are many free tools online that you can use to perform your competitive analysis to get an idea of how large, how popular, and how successful different sites are.

Traffic Analysis

Given how vital traffic is to web business, it's no surprise that traffic estimation tools are probably the most useful of all the tools we'll use for competitive analysis. They can be notoriously inaccurate for trying to work out exact traffic data, but they are useful for assessing relative size. There are four main tools that you should look at using:

Alexa's Traffic Rankings

<http://Alexa.com/siteinfo>

Alexa's Traffic Rankings have been getting better over the years and thanks to a browser add-on, they are very handy. Installing the add-on means you

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can see at a glance the Alexa ranking for any site you visit. This makes it very easy to spot larger sites as you navigate your competitors. Alexa also offers a graphing comparison tool that you can use to plot a few different competitors against each other to look at their relative size over time.

Alexa works by offering a ranking system ranging from #1 (the largest trafficked site on the web) into the millions for low-traffic sites. Alexa also provides a variety of other statistics like Pageviews and Reach that can be useful as well.

Alexa has a propensity for showing a lot of random fluctuation that hides most small traffic trends, however it does have two big strengths. First, it estimates traffic for even tiny sites, meaning it's useful when looking on the lower end of the market, which often happens when analyzing other blogs. And secondly, unlike its competitors, Alexa looks at global traffic not just US traffic.

Compete Traffic Estimator

<http://Compete.com>

While Compete only estimates US traffic and offers little information for smaller sites, it does feel more accurate on traffic trends than Alexa. Another benefit of the service is that it actually gives you a traffic count whereas Alexa provides less tangible numbers like ranking and reach.

Google Trends for Websites

<http://trends.google.com/websites>

Earlier when examining niche topics, we touched on Google Trends as a way to measure search volume for various keywords. In its other mode, Google Trends for Websites functions more like Alexa, providing comparison and trend data for larger trafficked domains. It doesn't provide data for small sites, but for larger sites it appears to provide relatively accurate graphs.

Google AdPlanner

<http://www.google.com/adplanner>

This tool is offered by Google to help ad buyers decide what sites to purchase their advertising on. Simply enter a URL in the "View a Site

Listing” text field and you’ll get a great site analysis tool offering solid traffic estimates for most websites including visits, pageviews, and unique visitors.

Feed Analysis

RSS feeds are a good source of information about a blog, not only for analyzing the content of the feeds, but because many blogs make their subscription numbers public as a way to provide social proof to encourage other subscribers. Here are two tools to analyze a blog’s feed:

PostRank

<http://www.PostRank.com>

PostRank is a tool that sifts through an RSS feed to return the most popular feed items. You can check these items on social media sites, check how many comments they are receiving, and look for frequency to determine how successful a blog is in generating popular content.

FeedCompare

<http://www.FeedCompare.com>

This is a simple tool for tracking how a feed has grown over time. The tool only works if the feed has been pushed through Google’s Feedburner service and have made their count public. Happily, this is true of the majority of blogs. FeedCompare lets you graph multiple feeds to see how their growth compares, providing much more information than a single snapshot figure.

Site Analysis

Beyond traffic and feed numbers, there are other ways you can analyze a competitor. Information on how a site has looked in the past, its optimization for search, and the domain details can be useful in understanding a competitor. Here are two sites which can help:

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Web Archive – Competitor's Site History

<http://Web.Archive.org/web>

The Way-Back-Machine is a non-profit site that has recorded over 85 billion pages in an archive of the web. It's pretty amazing and can be entertaining to see how sites you love used to look. When it comes to established competitors, it's great to look back and see how their sites have evolved, often with revealing information about how they've grown, readership numbers at different times in history, and so on.

Website Grader – General Site Information

<http://Website.grader.com>

Hubspot's Website Grader is a neat little tool that runs a whole lot of different services and queries over a site to return a score out of 100. It returns statistics from the different services and recommendations for improvement, and has a feature to compare multiple sites, which is useful for seeing how different competitors line up against each other.

Human Analysis

Up until now, we have just gone through tools and services that automatically produce information about a competitor. The major utility these tools provide is to quickly separate the wheat from the chaff, allowing you to quickly discard smaller or less successful sites, and focus on the dominant competitors that you are most interested in learning about, as you choose your niche.

Once you have a master list of those dominant competitors, it's time to do some old-fashioned investigation. If the site has an "About" page, use it to learn who is behind the site, sift through comments, and look for site news posts to get a feel for the personality of the blog, and above all read some of the site's content!

You may also wish to Google the brand name and search for news stories, or other sites' reviews or links to the blog in question. The internet is awash with information, and you should very quickly be able to put

together an accurate portrait of the blog, the people behind it, and the audience it targets.

Understanding the Niche

At this point you have gathered a fair amount of information about your competitors and the topic area you are planning to build a blog in. With this knowledge, you are ready to map out the lay of the land and to plot a course for your new blog that accounts for challenges particular to your new niche.

The Niche Pyramid

As you've been analyzing, you will have been slowly putting together a picture of where different sites stand in relation to each other. Let's formalize that a little.

In every niche you can organize the blogs into a pyramid structure according to size and importance. Take this pyramid to have four levels, marked A to D, with the top level of "A" blogs being the biggest, most trafficked, most authoritative blogs, and then proceeding down. You should categorize these principally according to size in traffic and subscribers.

As the pyramid shape suggests, there are usually only one or two blogs in the A category, a handful in the B category, a fair few in the C category, and lots and lots in the D category. Here is a diagram categorizing blogs about blogging:

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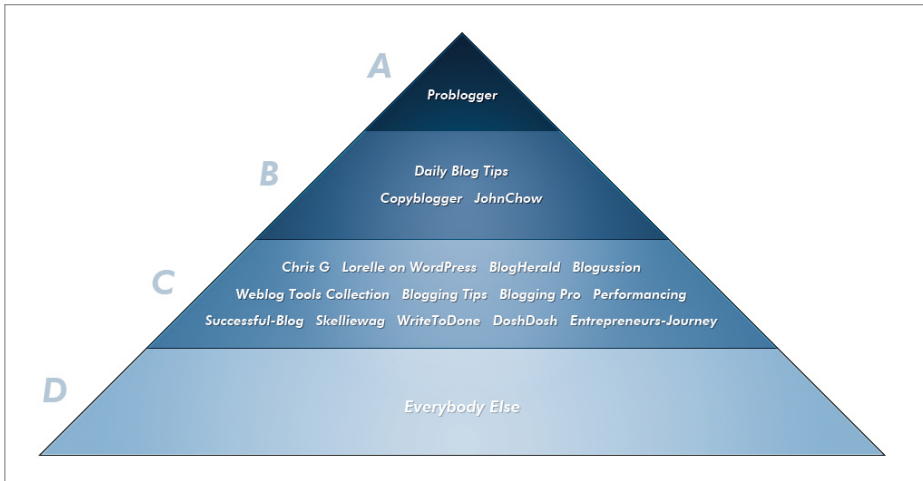


Fig 2-6: Pyramid describing the “blogging” niche.

What you will usually find is that A-level blogs generally cover the broadest angle on the niche you are investigating. For example, the top-level blogs in the gadgets niche are likely to be about gadgets in general. One level down, B-level blogs usually have a bit more of an angle. So a blog at this level might be about a particular genre of gadgets, or focus only on gadget reviews, or perhaps only focus on mobile devices. C-level blogs often have a much narrower angle on the main topic, might be newer and less established, or simply may not be as good in terms of writing, coverage, and content generally.

In our blogging example above, Prologger is about blogging in general and is also one of the oldest, most authoritative names in blogging. DailyBlogTips is close behind Prologger with its daily tips slant, while CopyBlogger takes the angle of being all about copy and writing. Still on the B-level, JohnChow focuses much more on the money-making and affiliate-earning aspects of blogging and mixes in a lot of personality. Down at the next level, we have sites that tend to be younger (e.g., BloggingTips), less popular (e.g., Performancing), less frequently updated (e.g., Skelliewag), or with yet other angles (e.g., BlogHerald with its news focus).

Why Niche Pyramids Exist

There is generally only space in a consumer's mind for a few brands. This is why you tend to see two or three main competitors at the top of most product lines: Coke and Pepsi, Intel and Athlon, Apple and Microsoft, Google and Bing, and so on. Once a consumer's needs have been met, there is little incentive to seek out a new product to fill the same need. A second and sometimes third competitor, can still get their foot in the door, but beyond them, the market shares tend to drop off significantly. For example, Google is top for search tools, and since the deal with Yahoo, Microsoft's Bing is running second, but ask yourself who comes in third, fourth, and fifth? Companies like Ask are a *long* way off.

So for a new company to break in, the only option is to create a new market by adding an angle. To use the search example again, there are sites that dominate in job search such as SimplyHired and Indeed, or in travel search such as Kayak. These search engines have realized they can't compete on the broadest top level, but are dominating their own sub-niches.

If we put together a pyramid diagram for search, we'd have Google and Bing at the top. On the B-level we'd have smaller competitors like Ask, along with the niche search engines like Indeed and Kayak and significant but smaller non-English search engines like Baidu and Taobao from China. Then on the C-level we might have country-specific search engines, newer "Google-killer" search engines like Wolphram Alpha, old has-beens like Altavista, and so on.

It's important to realize that if you were to then put a pyramid diagram together for say, job search, then all of a sudden SimplyHired would be on the A-level of this niche, and there would be a new set of Bs and Cs and Ds.

The same reasoning and rules apply for blogs and topic areas. In every niche there is only space for a few top-level sites. They tend to be blogs that have been around for a while, that have done an exceedingly good job, and that have been really consistent. In larger blog niches, the top blogs have often gone commercial either by becoming stand-alone companies like TechCrunch, or being acquired by media companies the way Engadget has been by AOL.

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It is extremely difficult to displace an A-level blog, but it is possible. To do this you would need to bring something really new to the table, such as a new format, a new standard for breaking news, build on different audience demographics, a magnetic key personality, new partnerships somewhere in the industry, or all of the above and more. You would also want to bank on the A-level blog stumbling somehow and possibly eroding some of their own mindshare.

It is much easier to create a new sub-niche to dominate, or to build a serious competitor in an existing niche and aim for the B-level and then from there to slowly edge your way into the A league. To do this, you simply need to find, and then thoroughly mine gaps in the market.

What Gaps Are There?

Finding a gap in the market is a fundamental strategy for any startup. A gap is an untapped demand that you can fill to create a viable business.

You want to ask yourself what is the competition not doing? What reader needs aren't being met? What angles haven't been explored? What features are missing? What type of content do readers want? The more populated the niche is, the harder this is to do because many bloggers have gone before you looking for the same gaps.

With that said, there are always gaps somewhere that you can exploit to get a foothold. Here are some strategies for finding gaps:

1. Start Blogging in the Niche

Working in a niche is the best way to see gaps because you naturally get a very strong feel for what is happening there. If you are really committing to a particular niche, you can start a small test blog for a month or two to evaluate post strategies and ideas. Alternately, you can get work writing for established blogs in the niche to find out how they work and what they are doing.

2. What is the Competition Not Doing

Focus on what isn't there rather than what is. Maybe the site focuses on one particular country or language, maybe it's only covering some

aspects of the niche, maybe its format is a particular style, maybe the volume of posts isn't there, or maybe the depth of coverage is missing. Look for missing elements and evaluate them as potential key differentiators.

3. Ask!

Ask other readers what they would like to see. You can do this on forums, in comments, in a blog post if you have a small test blog, or informally by contacting people you know are interested in the niche.

4. Be the Other Guy

A common strategy for differentiating is to position yourself as the antithesis of the top competitor. You can do this by posting opposing opinions, focusing on different aspects of the niche, or simply beating the top competitor to stories. For every dominant business, there is a certain segment of the niche that simply doesn't like the top guy and is looking for a replacement.

Popular Niches

There are three big benefits to starting a blog in an already popular niche:

1. Defined Audience

When there are lots of popular blogs on a topic, you can be assured that there is a market for the subject. That means if you can produce quality content and market it well, chances are you'll build a readership.

2. Sites to Get Linked From

One of the big challenges in starting a blog is to find readers and visitors. When blogs in your niche link to you, they naturally send over readers right from your core audience.

3. Lots of Experience to Draw On

If a niche is already popular, then you're going to find that there is a lot of information out there about what works, what doesn't, how big the audience potential is, what companies spend ad dollars, what to charge, what posts are popular, and so on.

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The big drawback of course is that in a crowded space, it is hard to draw attention or deliver something new. Some basic strategies for working in a popular niche are:

1. Sub-niches

Creating a new sub-niche means taking a different angle to create your own niche-within-a-niche. A great example of a successful sub-niche is the blogging site Copyblogger, that principally focuses on the written aspects of blogging. Sure it's still about blogging, and from time to time there are posts on other blogging topics, but primarily the site is all about writing. This focus has grown it to be one of the biggest and best known blogs on blogging.

There are all sorts of angles you can take for virtually any niche. Look at what the established blogs are doing and do something different.

2. Improving Quality or Quantity (or both)

If blogs in a particular niche tend to produce medium quality posts, or a medium quantity of posts, an obvious strategy is to improve one or both. Your aim is to stand out, so if everyone else is producing high quantities of average posts, then you might try producing fewer very high quality posts. If other bloggers are inconsistent, you might decide to consistently produce a set number of posts each day.

3. A Different Style

Another tactic is to find a different style of writing. This might mean highly personable posts, or only list-style posts, comic posts, or opinionated posts. Find a style that suits you and that you think will resonate with your audience. In the next section we'll look at content plans and evaluate different types of posting and content.

In popular niches your strategy is always to differentiate. How you do that is up to you. If you don't differentiate somehow, you stand no chance of finding an audience. If you can differentiate, and that differentiation fills a gap, then you will find success. In other words, your defining difference must meet an unmet demand.

Under-served Niches

The huge benefit of going into an under-served niche is the potential to hit a home-run and create a new market. The drawback on the other hand is that there may simply be no market for this particular topic, or in other words it may be under-served for a reason. If you've done your research, you should know whether a topic has at least some interest, so assuming you've found what might be a gold mine, the question is how do you exploit it?

Some strategies for entering an under-served niche are:

1. Hook into Neighboring (Popular) Niches

When you are entering virgin territory it's difficult to get links because there are no other blogs in the niche. A strategy to combat this is to use related topics to bring the links and then feed those readers into your regular topic. Look for natural crossovers with blog topics on popular blogs and work on developing relationships with those blogs by submitting links, networking with the operators, and writing guest posts.

2. Social Media

If your niche is genuinely under-served, then social media will often work well. Audiences on sites like Digg and Reddit are broad, and submitting links there should find their way to the right people. Links submitted to social media for an unmet demand also have a higher chance of becoming popular since (you hope) the demand is there but the content is not.

3. Search Optimization

If a niche has limited content but high potential, then search traffic should be a good source of early readers. Develop a site with content that is optimized for search engines and do your best to develop link-backs using neighboring niches as described above.

In an under-served niche your strategy is centered around building and consolidating a readership that doesn't yet exist anywhere else. This can be challenging if the niche has only moderate potential, but if you stumble on a hit niche that hasn't been tapped, then growth can be explosive.

Planning Your Content

There are many types of content that you can put into a blog, ranging from news posts to how-to tutorials. An important part of how you approach a niche is to determine what you are going to be publishing.

In Chapter 5 we'll discuss preparing, editing, and styles of content in detail. For now let's look broadly at some different content groups and formats to make the big picture decisions on what your blog will look like.

Content Types

1. News

News is the staple of the publishing world. It's constantly updating and changing, there is always new source material, and readers always return for more. The difficulty with news blogs is getting content *before* anyone else. Getting the scoop on a big story is essential to get readers, particularly if you are competing against popular sites and outlets. If you are angling for a news blog, then you should consider how you can break stories rather than just reporting via other news outlets.

2. How-to

Teaching readers how to do something – whether it's to lose weight, manage money, or learn a new skill – is another staple of publishing. The great thing about how-to content is that as long as you can teach something of value, you'll always get readers, even if there are lots of other sites teaching in the same area. People have a thirst for knowledge and will obsessively read all about their favorite topic searching for nuggets of information. As always, it helps to have a differentiating angle, however in education, even just creating a large resource is often a differentiator.

3. Opinion

Opinion content ranges from reviews of products like gadgets and games, to opinions on the news, to opinions on life. Opinion-based blogs work best with a strong editorial voice and are often driven by

individual personalities. Virtually all blogs will have at least a dose of opinion blended in; the choice is really more about what quantity.

4. Entertainment

Entertainment content is tricky to do well, but if you can manage it, then it is by its very nature differentiated. That is to say if you are entertaining people, then you've already managed to produce value. Audiences can never seem to get enough entertainment, so the throttle here really is that it's difficult to produce content that is genuinely engaging.

5. Content Aggregation

Aggregation is when a blog exists to filter out quality links, news, and content around the web. They will often rely on short posts with links or large lists of "the best" this and that. Aggregation is surprisingly popular, quite easy to do, and therefore somewhat overdone.

Each of these content types can be applied to virtually any niche. For example, a site about gardening could have news about new garden products, how-to posts about gardening techniques, opinions on gardening tools, entertaining posts about gardening stories or a comic strip about gardeners, and a weekly list of the best gardening links from around the web.

Moreover you can also blend content types. A news post could be packaged in the form of news plus opinion. If the post was about a new gadget being released, the blogger could then add their opinion about what the gadget might mean, their take on its utility, or how they personally would use it. Similarly, a how-to piece could be packaged in a humorous voice to be entertaining, an aggregate post could include short opinions on the links, news could have snarky entertaining comments, and so on.

Content Formats

Although blogs are primarily written, there are in fact four different media that are often used on blogs:

1. Written

Virtually all blogs have a written element to them, whether they are long articles or short link posts. The big advantage written content has over

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the other three content formats, is that it has far bigger search traffic potential.

2. Photographic

For some blogs, photographs are simply accompanying imagery to written posts. For others such as the popular **PostSecret** (<http://postsecret.com>), the photos are the content.

3. Video

Recently video blogs such as that of **Gary Vaynerchuk** (<http://garyvaynerchuk.com>) have been getting more and more popular.

4. Audio

Podcasts were very popular for a while, but today video has taken that mantle. Nonetheless there are some very popular podcast blogs around. Sites like **Odeo** (<http://odeo.com>) aggregate the more popular audio (and video) content and are a good place to see what is out there.

As with content types, it's quite possible to have a mix of content formats. Certainly written and photographic content are almost always mixed. More recently video has been making its way onto sites, particularly as the costs of producing video and audio content slowly drop.

Your Overall Strategy

As you research and plan you should be coming up with an overall strategy. This should include a niche that you want to blog in, an angle on that niche to differentiate your site, a plan for what types and formats of content you will publish, and ideas for how you will grow within your niche.

The most important thing is to research well before you commit to a particular niche. Make sure you have a great plan with a solid differentiator. Don't just try to do the same thing as others are already doing but expect to surpass them.

As you read through the following chapters to learn about branding, content, traffic generation and monetization, keep thinking about your strategy, as all of these elements should form part of an overall plan of attack.

It's vital to make all elements of your blog work in concert, particularly if you are taking on a popular niche where it will be a struggle to get noticed. This might mean creating a particular type of content roster married with a particular tone of voice, a novel way of making money to support the content, and a brand package that immediately gets readers to notice who you are.

Remember that even though a niche may feel like it's all sewn up, there are still always angles you can take, sub-niches to create, new markets to explore, and new takes on familiar topics.

3

CREATING A BRAND

People keep going back to Starbucks, using Apple, buying Sony, and drinking Coke partly because they have good products, but also because customers recognize the names, know what to expect, have a strong idea of what those brands represent, and have consistent experiences with them.

If you're building a business out of blogging, you need to apply the same principles to build a name for your site. Creating a memorable brand for a blog helps it grow, differentiate, and gain mindshare with audiences.

What is a Brand?

A brand is a collection of elements that help define what your product is. For a blog, a brand will include the blog's name, its logo, the tone of voice and style of writing, the types of articles, the look of the website, the imagery it uses, the way it markets itself, and even the style of headlines!

When you create a brand for a blog it helps readers remember who you are, what you stand for, and how to find you. If the brand is representing a great product – like a blog readers enjoy – then the brand provides the handle to recommend the blog to friends, to link to from other sites, and provides leverage that you can then use to create other products and services.

People naturally categorize their experiences of the world, and a brand is a label that they can attach to something when doing so. Strong brands representing good experiences are very powerful, particularly as they can be applied to new products and still carry all the connotations of the brand. That's why Apple can release a new product and have everyone excited about it, even if they've never used or experienced the product first-hand.

Take for example the prominent tech blog brand TechCrunch. After starting out in 2005, founder Michael Arrington has slowly built a company and leveraged the brand to create other blogs such as CrunchGear and MobileCrunch, events like the TechCrunch 50 and the Crunchies, services like startup wiki CrunchBase and job site CrunchBoard. They've even started venturing into products with a short-lived tablet PC called the CrunchPad, and research papers from TechCrunch Research.

Why would anyone use all these products and services, or go to those events or read those blogs? Because they've already connected with the TechCrunch brand and come to trust and know it. Make no mistake, branding can be very powerful, and it's important to take it seriously early on so you can build on your business later.

Naming Considerations

There are many considerations that should go into your choice of name. It is good practice to begin examining other brands in the commercial world to consider why they work (or don't). Here are some issues you should look at when devising a brand name:

1. Is the Name Short?

Brand names work best when they are not too long. You can use a few words, but often they wind up being abbreviated by users. An example of this evolution is the fast food brand Kentucky Fried Chicken, which everyone abbreviated to KFC, which subsequently became the official name.

2. Is the Name Pronounceable?

If your readers aren't sure how to say your brand name, then it's going to hold them back from recommending you verbally to their friends. It's also going to be harder for them to say the name in their head, which in turn makes it less memorable.

3. Is it Memorable?

Whether your blog is memorable, or not, is related to both the previous points, but even with a short, pronounceable name you can still run into problems. A great example is the bookmarking service Delicious. Initially the domain name it used was Del.icio.us so that while the name was pronounceable and short and the word itself was memorable, it was hard to remember where to put the dots when writing it. Unsurprisingly, the service soon acquired the delicious.com domain name.

4. Is the Name Unique?

Uniqueness is so important that there is a whole set of laws about it called trademark law. For readers it's important in making your name distinct and memorable, and avoiding confusion with competing brand names.

To avoid businesses trading off each other's brand reputation, trademark laws state that your name must be unique enough that it won't confuse

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readers. So you couldn't start a tech blog called "TechyCrunch"! Not only would this land you in a pile of legal troubles from TechCrunch's founder, who is in fact a lawyer, it would also have your readers confused. Worse still, your readers could wind up forgetting your name and just remembering the original and presumably much more famous TechCrunch.

5. What Does the Name Say About You?

A well-chosen name can communicate what a site is going to be about. A great example of this is **Gawker** (<http://gawker.com>); it's not only short, memorable, and catchy, but it also instantly communicates that the site is going to be about observation and gossip.

Conversely if you choose badly, a name can work against you. So give careful consideration to what the name communicates. You might want to ask others what they get from the name to make sure you have a range of views and don't miss something obvious purely because you personally don't hear the connotations.

6. Generic, Personalized or Descriptive?

Brand names come in many shapes and varieties. On the one hand you have completely generic words, often even completely made-up ones, that could be about anything. Take for example Google. Today you might look at the word and think "search," but in fact it has no inherent meaning. If you could jump back into the past before Google rose to prominence, the name could have been used on pretty much any business. Some examples of blogs with such generic names are Gizmodo, Kotaku, and BoingBoing.

Some brands are based on the founders' names, for example John Chow and JohnChow.com, Om Malik and GigaOm, Arianna Huffington and the Huffington Post, or Steve Pavlina and StevePavlina.com. These can be almost as generic as made-up words.

If like John Chow and Steve Pavlina you are using only your name, you should keep in mind that readers are likely to expect John and Steve to at least be the main writer for their respective blogs, if not the only

writer. If you are assembling a team of writers and approaching blogging as a publication business, you may wish to steer away from this route.

Descriptive brand names are perhaps the most common variety. These are brands where the name is simply a combination of real words, for example LifeHacker, CuteOverload, PopSugar, ZenHabits, or the Business Insider. The benefits of names like these are that they tend to communicate a lot about what the site is going to be about, and in some cases, have keywords that can help with search ranking. The drawback is names with common words can be harder to protect and keep unique. For example although **LifeHacker** (<http://lifelhacker.com>) is the original blog on the subject, there is a reasonably large blog confusingly called **LifeHack.org** (<http://lifelhack.org>).

Finally, there are plenty of combinations and variants. The best variants are made-up words that sound like they mean something: Engadget, Mashable, or Consumerist. You could also try misspellings, for example Joystiq, but keep in mind that you may inadvertently get readers typing the correct spelling and ending up somewhere else!

7. Can it be Sub-branded?

It's always good to plan ahead in business and consider what future products, services, and blogs you might want to launch as related or sub-brands. Earlier we saw how TechCrunch has used the "Crunch" part of their brand to extend the family while keeping a clear naming link. Another example of sub-branding is with the AppStorm blogs; the original Mac apps blog being Mac.AppStorm, followed by iPhone.AppStorm and Web.AppStorm. Using subdomains, the brand name extends out so that new sites are easy to add to the family.

Domain Names

Perhaps the biggest consideration when choosing a brand name is unfortunately the least fun. It's finding a name where you can actually still secure the domain name!

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Domain names have been hard to come by for some time now thanks in part to the dramatic increases in website volume, and partly because their scarcity has encouraged domain squatting.

Ideally you should be aiming to get a .com domain name as anything else will cause some confusion. Second best are .net domain names, but even here you will always wind up with a percentage of users accidentally going to the .com. Another common approach is to find domains ending in country level endings that look like they are part of the word. The site that made this practice mainstream was Del.icio.us which tellingly eventually also purchased Delicious.com.

Some tools and resources to find domain names are:

1. Domain Search and Registrars

Domain registrars usually have a search tool to check if a domain is available. There are tons of registrars and most of them offer very similar rates. The best known is **GoDaddy** (<http://godaddy.com>), but it's not a particularly pleasant experience using their service thanks to the large amounts of advertising and cross-sells they run.

Better services are through **NameCheap** (<http://namecheap.com>) and **MyDomain** (<http://mydomain.com>). These sites also offer Bulk Searching so you can get a lot of domain name ideas and process them altogether to see what is available, and more often what is not!

2. Domain Auctions and Brokerage

Chances are you're going to often find yourself wanting a domain name that is already taken. If after finding a domain name is already registered, you visit the site and there doesn't seem to be much, or sometimes anything going on there, then you can try acquiring the name from the owner. The best known company for domain brokerage is **Sedo** (<http://sedo.com>) who also have auctions and a variety of other domain services.

Alternately you can try contacting the owner yourself. Use a service like **DomainTools** (<http://domaintools.com>) to run a "Whois" check and if the owner has listed their details, you can often just send them an email.

If you work at a large company or have your details available through the domain on your email address (e.g., john@iamreallywealthy.com), then you might want to register a Gmail or other anonymous account for the purposes of not giving away that you can afford to spend tons of money on the domain. And remember to negotiate when purchasing domain names, as you can almost always do better than the asking price.

3. Domain Suggestions

Can't find a domain you like that is available and/or affordable? You can try services like **Bustaname** (<http://bustaname.com>), **Suggestly** (<http://suggestly.com>), and **Domai.nr** (<http://domai.nr>) to search for some ideas you might not have thought of. These sites sometimes help stimulate your creativity, but aren't always wildly helpful.

A more mundane suggestion system comes from checking a thesaurus (<http://thesaurus.com>) to look for variants on words you might be attempting to use.

4. Brands for Sale

Finally, if you are really having trouble finding a brand name, you can try services like **BrandBucket** (<http://brandbucket.com>) and **BrandStack** (<http://brandstack.com>) where you can purchase not only a domain name but a logo to go with it, which you may or may not wish to use.

Registering Domain Names

Your domain name is the most important asset your online business will possess. Everything flows downwards from your domain name: hosting, email, search ranking, traffic, reputation, and of course your brand.

If you lose control of the domain name you will have an extremely difficult time of things, so it's best to be careful about how you register and manage your domain name. Here are some important considerations to make:

1. Do It Yourself

The most important advice is to register and manage the domain name yourself. Domain management isn't too hard and it really is the key to your business. Here are some tips on registering:

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- a. Set up an account with a domain registrar yourself and buy the domain name(s) you want. Sometimes this job is given to a web designer or developer who has been contracted. This is not a good idea as they may move on and you may not think about it until months or years down the track when you'll wish you'd done it yourself.
- b. Make sure to set the account in your own name/your business name.
- c. Make sure that if there are multiple levels of user accounts, and you need to give access to someone else, that you keep yourself as the primary contact. If you don't have multi-level access, and you let someone else in, be sure to update your login details afterwards.
- d. Consider not giving domain access to anyone, instead doing any domain work yourself – under direction if necessary.
- e. Register your primary domain name for at least 2 years. Search engines give domain registration periods weight in determining how they rank your site. A lengthier registration period shows you aren't conducting a spam operation.
- f. Make sure you set your domain to "auto-renew" for when the registration expires, or at least make sure you will get plenty of notification emails so you don't inadvertently forget to renew. There have been a couple of high profile stuff-ups with companies forgetting to renew and either losing their domain names, or having to pay big sums to get them back. Moreover, there is a cottage industry around watching domains as they expire to see if a bargain can be nabbed.
- g. Although you can register a domain name with a domain registrar like NameCheap or MyDomain, often you can also have your web hosting company register it, and sometimes they will bundle this together in a package. Although you can always move a domain name, it's generally better practice to use a specialized domain registrar and then just point the domain to whatever hosting provider you are currently using as you may change providers periodically.

- h. If companies other than the one you registered your domain with write to you in email or regular mail, ignore them! Predatory companies will sometimes send letters close to a domain expiration to try to get a renewal to go through them.

2. How to Transfer a Domain Name

Transferring domain names is relatively easy. You first need to check that the domain is unlocked. If you are buying a domain name, make sure the seller has unlocked it. If you are selling, look through your domain registrar's control panel.

Most registrars will then allow the domain recipient to make a transfer request and they'll do the work. There will be an email sent to the domain owner to make sure they have consented to the transfer and then the process is generally quite smooth. Sometimes you will need an Authorization (AUTH) code from the original registrar to give to the recipient registrar. If you run into any problems, just contact your registrar's support.

3. DNS and other Domain Terminology

Although DNS can be a bit of a tech subject, there are a few key bits of terminology that will get you by even if you don't know (or want to know) too much technical detail:

a. DNS

DNS stands for Domain Name System. It's the system that allows a human-readable URL such as "example.com" to be translated to an IP address such as 208.10.291.3. Because IP addresses change sometimes, it's important to make sure your domain's DNS set-up is pointed to the right place, or else typing the address into a browser won't take you anywhere.

In most instances you personally won't actually point the domain name to a specific IP address. Instead your hosting provider will give you a pair of name servers (see below) that you set with your domain registrar. Once you have these set, the hosting company can then set the actual IP address, and make any necessary changes when their internal set-up changes.

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It can take a bit of time for records about your domain name location to spread around the world. This process is called delegation and can be the cause of some lag in setting up.

b. Name Servers

Most hosting companies will give you a pair of name server addresses such as ns1.dreamhost.com and ns2.dreamhost.com, which you then add to your domain's details at the domain registrar. This lets the registrar point the domain name to the hosting company's name servers. These servers then provide the correct routing information to make sure your server is called when someone types in your domain name.

c. Records

Please note in most instances you won't need to know anything about records. If you do, you can usually find very specific instructions about what record to set, or get a developer to help you with anything complex.

Every domain name has a set of records kept by the domain registrar. When you set the name servers for the domain, you are in fact setting the NS Records. Other types of records include MX Records for mail exchange, CNAME Records for aliases such as subdomains, and A Records for direct IP address mapping.

4. Related Domain Names

When you register a new domain name most registrars will encourage you to register related domain names. This is generally a good practice to make sure you keep the name as unique as possible. It's best to at least get the .com, .net, and .org (in that order of importance).

You can also consider registering various types of misspellings. For example a common misspelling is to leave out the "." between "www" and the domain name. So you could register wwwdomainname.com. Generally speaking this can get a bit expensive if you try to register every possibility, so you probably would not bother until your site gets off the ground and you're sure it's going to be a big success!

5. Ownership Records and Privacy

When you register a domain name the registration details are available publicly. You can find out a domain name's registration details by running a Whois request through a site like **DomainTools** (<http://domaintools.com>). This is how you can try contacting a domain owner privately if you want to negotiate a sale without using a broker.

When you are registering your own domain name, you should therefore use registration details that include a PO Box number or a business address of some sort, as well as a non-home phone number. When starting out you might be inclined just to put your home address, however you need to keep in mind that this information will be public and if your site is successful, you may receive unwanted interest in your address and phone number.

Many domain registrars offer privacy packages where they will substitute their own special registrant details so your details don't show up publicly. They then forward any mail to you. This is not a bad option except that spam services almost always use these settings. Consequently, it can look bad if your customers decide to look you up and instead find sites saying things like "Any domain name with these details is fraudulent and spammy!" Overall it's probably better just to use your own business address and phone so long as it's unrelated to any private details.

Visual Branding

As the saying goes, first impressions last. Online, those first impressions come in the form of a visual look and feel, and having a strong visual identity will immediately set your site apart as a publication worth (or not worth) reading.

The basic elements of a visual identity online are a logo and consistent website design. It's best to get these done by a professional graphic and web designer with a solid reputation. If this is beyond your means, there are ways to get started on the cheap that we'll cover later.

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Strong visual branding usually makes a statement about the site's personality. It might set the tone as modern, friendly, hi-tech, classic, personal, or any number of other traits. This look and feel begins with the logo, so it's a good idea to get that designed first.

In the next chapter we'll discuss finding and working with a designer. But first, here are some considerations for getting a logo and brand designed:

1. Simplicity

There shouldn't be too much going on in a logo. As a general rule, you should only have one main concept in the logo. For example, if you have an interesting icon, you should have relatively straightforward text set in a classic font, and vice versa.

If you're unsure of how simple is good, have a look around at logos of magazines, famous blogs, and even common retail brands. If a logo is too busy, it tends to look really amateurish. Simple generally is better.

2. Versatility

You want to get a logo that works well on both a light background and inverted onto a dark background. The logo should work at small sizes and big sizes and still be legible. The aim being to ensure your logo will work in a variety of places and situations.

3. Online Use

It's important to think about how your logo will look on a website. For example, a very tall and thin, vertical logo, might run into problems on many website designs, as they tend to favor horizontal dimensions. Similarly if you had a logo that had a big icon and some small text underneath, this might cause problems online because in small sizes the text underneath could be difficult to read.

4. Don't be Afraid of a Plain Text Logo

When you are spending money on a logo, it's tempting to feel like a plain text logo doesn't deliver value. After all, plain text logos don't look like there is much to them. Nonetheless, these types of simple logos often work really well provided there has been a lot of care put into typeface selection, spacing, color, and small touches to make them unique.

Examples of text only logos include TechCrunch, Google, Borders, Sony,

and most magazines. Look around and you'll realize that many logos are actually very, very simple.

One place that a plain text logo doesn't work so well is with longer brand names. With short names the words often become the shape of the logo. Whereas with a longer name you can't escape the feeling that you are reading words. That said, if you have more than three words in a name, you should probably consider changing the name, not the logo!

Web Design

Your website design should carry through the branding tone set by the logo, and package it in a way that presents the information to your readers in an accessible and easy to navigate way. A good rule of thumb is that there are two major components to good web design: looks and usability. But if you must only have one, choose usability. It's a much better experience using a really well thought out, ugly site than a beautiful site that makes no sense.

Here are some tips for getting a website designed:

1. Pages

Before you can get a site designed, you need to think about what is going to be on each page. Consider what pages will be on the site, and what elements you want on what pages. For example, do you want to have buttons for adding content to social media? Do you want an RSS icon to highlight subscriptions? Do you have a lot of extra pages in the menu, or just the blog home, an about page, and a contact page?

2. Identify Good Designs

Spend a few hours looking at other websites with an emphasis on what is working visually and what is not. Go through the Technorati Top 100 blogs, major competitors in your niche, and any other websites you are familiar with to decide which you like and which you don't. When briefing your web designer be sure to include examples of things you think work well and things you'd like to avoid. They may not be able to actually mesh different concepts together, but it will give them a feel

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for what is important to you. Likewise it will help you to start thinking about what constitutes a good site design.

3. Visual Precedence

Good designs will guide the user's eye through the page. When you are looking at concept designs or even final designs, think about where your eye is moving. Test it out on friends and ask them which parts of the design they find themselves looking at first.

Ideally you should look at the site's logo/brand first and then down to the first bits of content in the form of headlines or content rotators. Then from there, things like the sidebar and menu. This is so that the reader first recognizes what site they are looking at, then engages with the content, and finally gets a feeling of what else is on the page.

In a bad design your eye will be pulled to the wrong part of the page. A little bit of distraction is okay, but be careful that it's not overpowering.

4. Consider Advertising

If you plan to sell advertising on your site, it's really important that you have considered where and how it will be placed early on. This includes getting your designer to show you layouts with real ads placed in the ad spots. If you look at a design with empty ad spots you won't see just how distracting they might look in real life and how this is being dealt with visually. Remember you want your ads in a prominent spot, but at the same time they should feel like they are part of the design, not an afterthought.

Off the Shelf Themes

When you are developing a business out of your blog, it's generally going to be worth paying for a custom web design, however there are times when you just want something quick and cheap. For example, if you are setting something up to test out blogging, or you are really bootstrapping your operation and need to save every penny you can, or you want to get a site up as soon as possible to capitalize on an opportunity.

If this is the case, then you can usually get away with getting an off-the-shelf theme. WordPress in particular has a huge array of themes available for free, or for a small fee of \$20 – \$100 from sites like **ThemeForest** (<http://themeforest.net>). Other platforms including Blogger and MovableType also offer themes, though not with the same sort of selection. You can read more about choosing platforms in the following chapter.

You might also consider hiring a web designer to help you customize a ready-made theme by adding your logo and altering some colors and settings so it feels unique without costing the big bucks. Keep in mind however that if you ask for tons of alterations you may end up paying about as much as you would for a brand new theme. Ask your web designer what makes sense for a particular theme.

The critical drawback with using an off-the-shelf theme is that sooner or later you will run into another site that looks similar to your own. Uniqueness is important in creating an identifiable brand, and if you use a theme that users are particularly familiar with it, will make your site far more forgettable than were you to have used a custom design.

Other Elements of Branding

Branding certainly doesn't end with a logo and website design. In fact your brand should be developed using every avenue open to you. From the style of writing to supplementary materials, it's important to tie everything together into a single brand package.

1. Style and Tone of Voice

Blogs are written media so the style of writing you employ is going to give your brand a voice. Consider how you want to be perceived, look at sites and publications you admire and how they write, and determine how you'd like your blog to come across.

2. Editorial Roster

Just as Sony's products create the brand experience, so does a blog's content. What types of content you produce, what frequency you

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publish, and the variety of writers, will all impact how your site is experienced by the reader.

3. Consistent Look and Feel

Your visual brand begins with the logo and finds its main articulation in the website design, but you should also be thinking about choice of photography, screencast intros, sub-brands, products such as book covers, advertising brochures, and anything else that has a visual aspect to it. You want everything coming out of your site to feel like it's a visual family. It doesn't all need to look the same necessarily, but it should look related.

4

STAFF

For most small businesses, the early days involve a lot of work from you, the business owner. The cost savings from doing the work yourself can bootstrap the new business to get it off the ground. This practice also has the great benefit of providing you with a first rate education on the ins and outs of your business.

But as the saying goes: if you take a holiday and everything stops, then you don't have a business, you have a job. If your aim is to create a business out of blogging, then sooner or later you will need to bring on other people to share or even completely take the workload.

If you have a lot of capital, you may find you can skip right into hiring staff. However, if you've never seriously run a blog before, then you should probably either run a test blog first, or begin the new venture by doing much of the work for yourself. Once you've really come to understand the business well, then you can always go about hiring staff then.

This chapter will focus on finding and assembling a team. Whether it happens right away or later in your business, it's important to know what kind of positions you'll need to hire for, where to hire, and how to manage them. We'll look at how to go about finding writers, editors, and other members of your team, how to brief them, and how to manage them.

Freelance and Salaried Staff

To get a blog staffed, particularly when you are small, you will need to make use of freelancers. Although salaried staff bring more stability as they are there week in, week out, they also bring a significant cost and investment. Freelancers are particularly good for small or infrequent jobs that don't require the cost of a full or even part-time staff member.

Finding and hiring freelancers is relatively easy as it is quite a common way to work in the writing and publishing world. There is also very little you need to do in the way of preparing your business for working with freelancers.

Your staff, on the other hand, requires a lot more administrative work. Depending on where you are in the world, you will need to look after employee benefits like health insurance and pension plans, other types of work insurance, as well as payroll and withholding tax. You should consult your accountant and lawyer to find out what preparations are relevant in your country of operation.

Freelance work arrangements are also great for working with people in other countries. Trying to hire employees overseas creates numerous issues around complying with local government business and tax regulations. Working with contractors generally avoids these issues.

Ultimately, you will probably want a mix of freelance and salaried staff, with the salaried roles particularly suitable for editors and more permanent and regular writing positions. It's not a bad idea to get the blog going with freelance staff, and then once you have established revenue, have enough hours of work for them, and a solid company footing, to begin expanding the more long-term positions to accommodate the needs of your staff.

It's important to keep in mind however, that if you have freelancers who are earning the majority of their income from just one business and are in the same country as your business, many governments will view them as employees, even if you are paying them as freelancers. This is to ensure that companies give their employees the appropriate benefits of working for a single employer.

So although using freelancers is good for casual or even part-time work, it is not simply a way of hiring full-time staff and avoiding the hassles that come with them. If you have a freelancer who is working a good majority of their hours with you, you should take the time and investment to make them at least a part-time if not full-time employee. Not only will that ensure you are complying with the law, but it's also better for your staff if they get the benefits of working as an employee.

Freelancer Basics

If you've never worked with freelancers before, there are a few basics you should be aware of:

1. Invoicing

Freelancers charge clients by sending them an invoice for the work done. Invoices should be kept for your accounting purposes, even after they are paid so make sure you are storing them away appropriately. Also make sure that invoices comply with any local accounting laws. For example, in Australia, invoices from other Australian businesses must contain an Australian Business Number. Generally invoices must contain an invoice number, an amount payable, and details of the freelancer's business name and address.

If you are working with a lot of freelancers, you may wish to create a document specifying any details of how to invoice, how payment works, and so on. This can then form part of the briefing process for new freelancers.

2. Contracts

For larger jobs, particularly design and development work, it's a good idea to have a contract. The aim of the contract is to make sure the job is delivered as specified. However, for day-to-day work like articles or editing a site, the contract will exist more to specify terms that you both agree to. For example, a contract should cover how much notice you need to provide to a long-term contractor if the work is finishing up, and vice versa if they are moving on. It might also state who owns

the content that is created and what formats it is licensed for. If the freelancer is privy to information about your business such as financials or plans, you may wish to include confidentiality clauses. Finally, non-compete clauses particularly for permanent freelancers such as editors can be useful too.

Generally speaking you should have a fairly straight-forward agreement with your freelancers and then pick people you can trust. Contracts can get as complex as you want to make them, and if you're not careful can do more harm than good, giving a feeling of mistrust. Still they are important to have and it's worth talking to your lawyer about what is appropriate for the different types of people you are working with.

3. Freelancer Rates

Rates for a freelancer are generally higher per hour than an employee. This is because a freelancer needs to take care of all their own benefits from sick pay to time between contracts, health insurance to long-term savings plans for retirement, their own office space to computer equipment. Don't expect to pay a freelancer as you would a regular employee; there has to be a flip side to all the benefits of working with freelancers!

4. Taking Care of Your Freelancers

It's important to take care of the people who work for you regardless of whether they are freelancers or employees. Make sure you are always clear about what is expected of them, make sure you pay on time, try to provide regular work, give a lot of notice when arrangements are changing and generally look after their welfare. As an employer of any sort you have, an important responsibility to the people who help you build the business. In the long run, you will receive benefits back from loyal and hard working staff who love working at your company.

Employee Basics

If you've never employed staff before, there are a few basics you should be aware of:

1. Office Space

Your staff is going to need somewhere to work so your first responsibilities will be to have some sort of office space for them. Some employees may be happy to work from home, but generally speaking the more staff you have, the more you are going to need an office. Home offices can be an option for small businesses, but keep in mind that many residential areas prohibit the operation of business past a certain size, or require some sort of local council approval.

Along with office space you will need to think about desks, chairs, internet connections, computers, software, and everything else that goes along with creating an office environment. This can be a lot of administration, but for a new business it's also one of the more fun parts of creating a company!

2. Payroll, Tax, Benefits and Accounting

As mentioned previously, you are going to need to organize a range of accounting and financial aspects of employment. You will need to think about payroll and ensure you have enough cash-flow to pay everyone on time. Along with holding tax for your staff, you may also need to pay additional payroll tax to the government. And of course you will need to take care of employee benefits that include sick leave, holiday leave, health insurance, and retirement benefits. Consult your accountant about the logistics of employing staff and if you are planning on hiring a large number of people, consider hiring an HR consultant to help you set up policies for managing them.

3. Management

The more staff you have, the more you will need to manage them. In many ways these are problems that will crop up as you grow and you probably don't need to worry too much about them early on, particularly if you aren't planning on having many employees. Nonetheless keep in mind that your staff needs management, and if you wish to be hands-off in your business, that means employing a manager or giving managerial duties to an employee such as your editor.

4. Looking After Your Employees

It's imperative that you take care of your staff. For example, paying them on time even when cash-flow is bad, helping them develop their careers, paying staff well, ensuring they have appropriate time off and benefits, and are generally happy. As an employer you are directly responsible for a large part of your staff's livelihood and this is not to be treated lightly.

Finding and Identifying Good People

Perhaps the most critical task when it comes to staffing your blog business is finding the right people. The quality of a team can make or break a business, so it's important to hire well.

1. Advertising for Positions

The most obvious way to find people is to advertise! For employees you can usually advertise on local job sites online. Ask around to find out what sites are the most popular in your area.

For freelancers you have a wealth of options. A good job board that is free for advertisers is at **FreelanceSwitch** (<http://jobs.freelanceswitch.com>). You can also advertise for bloggers at the **Probloggger** job board (<http://probloggger.net>). Otherwise there are sites like **Elance** (<http://elance.com>) and **oDesk** (<http://odesk.com>) where you can find freelancers of all varieties.

When writing job ads, always write in a clear, straight-forward manner. Explain what you require, what the site is for, what criteria would be helpful, and how they can apply. Job ads can be very formal and stuffy at times, and a clear job ad will help attract the right type of people.

If you are receiving a lot of applicants you can put in a "bozo filter" which is a simple test to check applicants have read the job ad. A good bozo filter is to ask that applicants use a specific subject line in their email application. You can then automatically disregard any application that doesn't pass the bozo filter.

2. Asking Current Staff

It's always great to hire on personal recommendation as it helps eliminate some of the pain of hiring. Asking your current staff if they know anyone who'd be good for a role often yields good results as most people will only recommend someone who isn't going to soil their own reputation! Moreover people often know other people in the same field of work, so your current staff is likely to know other writers, editors, and bloggers.

3. Asking on Your Blog

Depending on what type of blog you run, it may be appropriate to simply ask on the blog itself for applications. Hiring fans and regular readers of a blog is a good way to ensure that the tone and style of a site are carried through.

4. Having an Open Contributions System

It's not a bad idea to have an open contribution form for writers who'd like to write for the site. This can just be a link somewhere on the blog that is effectively a "We're Hiring" sign. The form can either be an email application to write for the site, or you can actually take contributions and then pay for those that get published.

If you take the latter approach, you need to publish a good steady stream of submissions or otherwise it's not very fair to ask people to do work with little chance of actually getting paid.

Open contribution systems can work quite well as a staging ground for finding regular writers. When someone submits an article and it's good, you can simply write back and ask them to write more for the site.

5. Checking References

For more permanent jobs, always check references. The only real exception to this is if you are hiring a writer, you can simply get them to write a few articles and pay regardless of whether you use them. The downside is fairly limited and you'll quickly know if there is a problem. But for other positions such as an editorial role, you'll want to know they are up to the job before you commit too much time and energy into hiring and training.

6. Start Small

It's always good to get new staff started in small ways to get a feel for how they work. For freelancers this means a small project, for employees it means a trial period. If you are hiring a new permanent editor, you might get them to do a few weeks of work, or start them as a writer first before announcing them on the site to make sure it's going smoothly. There's nothing worse than announcing a new team member only to let them go shortly after!

7. Take the Time to Hire Well

It's really worth investing the time to hire well. It takes extra effort to search for the right candidate, to analyze everyone, to respond to all the applicants who don't get hired, and to give them the appropriate trials and test runs. But given how important your team is, it's a worthwhile investment.

What to Pay

Money is always a tricky subject and when you are starting out it's hard to know what to offer. At the end of the day choosing the right compensation is a question of finding an amount someone is willing to do the work for, that the business can afford to pay, and that is fair. Don't be afraid to be up-front and honest with potential hires and let them help with choosing the right amount. If you can find a figure that suits both parties, then it'll be the bedrock of a happy working relationship.

1. Specify the Job Well

Particularly important for freelance work is to agree on what work needs to be completed. Make sure you agree on approximate length, subject matter, any revisions or editing that needs to be done, and what rights you have to the work.

2. Ask the Candidate

There's nothing wrong with asking a freelancer or prospective employee what they think is an appropriate amount to be paid. Sometimes you may get the ball back in your court, and sometimes people will give a

number higher than what they might in some circumstances be actually willing to work for. But on the whole this is a good way, particularly with freelancers, to work out what a going rate is. As you get more experience with fair numbers, you can then just let people know what you pay, and they can choose to take the job or not.

3. You Get What You Pay For

It is important to pay fairly as underpaying tends to under-deliver. Freelancers and employees who aren't paid fairly will naturally cut corners, treat the job with less care, and be less loyal.

4. Salary Ranges Online

When hiring for new positions, it's good to research salary guides online to find what is normal for a particular job description in a particular country and city. Salary guides are available for many countries; simply Google your particular requirements or check a site like **Salary.com** (<http://salary.com>).

You can find more guidelines on freelance pay in the relevant sections later in this chapter.

Working with Remote Staff

Working with staff who aren't necessarily even in the same country let alone the same office is one of the most interesting parts of running a blog. It's a method of work that is unique to this generation of business and there is little written on the subject.

The Importance of Email

The bedrock of working with remote staff is email communication. While everyone knows how to use email, not everyone uses it well. To run a blog team via email requires some extra email skills:

1. Clarity

Expressing what you require from someone clearly is critical if you want to avoid pointless extra emails. Emails to staff should express succinctly

what you want, set deliverables or a call to action of what they need to do next, preferably in point form, and include dates or times for completion.

There is no room in written communication for hinting, being vague about what you need, or being wishy-washy. Get to the point.

2. Informative

If you are using email to brief staff, you must provide all the information they will require to complete a task. Think through the job as if you were going to do it, and set parameters, provide background information, make sure they have the right resources, and set it all out in clear point form.

3. Friendliness

The great danger with email is that written communication is missing a lot of the context of speech. In other words, email can be misinterpreted. As a general rule, it's good to lean towards being overly friendly instead of formal. If you are delivering criticism in particular, you should deliver it in such a way as to make sure the person doesn't feel they need to be on the defensive, that rather it's simply feedback on how they can deliver better.

Don't be afraid to use smiley faces and exclamation marks. Make sure to praise work well done. Make sure to be clear and straight about delivering criticism and then move past it. And be sure to give staff the opportunity to send back any questions, reservations, or feedback they might have.

4. Actionable/FYI

In general there are two types of emails a person receives. The first is the actionable email. These emails have a specific task or outcome expected. There is something the recipient needs to do based on the information in the email. Often the action is as simple as responding to the email to confirm something.

The other type of email is the FYI ("for your information") email. In this case an email is purely to relay some information you think might be useful or pertinent to the recipient. If you are sending an FYI email, it's

not a bad idea to put “FYI:” in your subject line. Get into the habit of differentiating these emails so recipients know how they are meant to respond (or not) and quickly deal with them appropriately.

5. Rereading Emails

Rereading emails can reveal flaws or missing information. It’s very good practice to reread all emails of any significance to make sure they really do say what you meant to say.

Needless to say, *always* reread critical emails. Preferably get someone else to read them as well to make sure the information you want to convey is delivered appropriately. Once you send an email, you can never get it back, so be particularly wary of negatively toned or angry emails.

6. Write Readable Emails

It’s difficult to read emails that have no paragraph breaks, aren’t written in proper sentences, use CAPS, use too many ellipses, or break any number of other standard writing rules. Be careful that you write as you like to read.

7. Ask for Feedback

It takes practice to work well over email. Don’t assume that you are doing it well as there are a surprising number of bad emailers around. Ask your staff for feedback on how you can improve and communicate better, and be sure to implement the feedback they give you!

8. Brief but Not Curt

Generally it’s best to keep emails brief. That said, you don’t want to stray into being curt. Try to avoid responding in one- or two-word emails, or even single-sentence emails unless it’s just the last of a string of mail and there is little to be said except a quick acknowledgement.

9. Always Reply – Preferably Within 24 hours

If you are going to work remotely over email day in, day out, it’s important to get confirmation on all actionable emails. There is nothing worse than asking a question, sending instruction or emailing any other type of actionable email and hearing nothing back. Moreover, taking a long time to reply is tantamount to not replying. Often it means slowing

down someone else's work while they wait for a reply, thereby making your staff less efficient.

If you aren't used to clearing your inbox daily, now is the time to get into the habit! If you receive a lot of rubbish in your email, set rules to send them to a secondary, less important inbox that you check irregularly. Keeping a clean inbox is an excellent way to stay on top of your email.

If you are very far behind, you can declare email bankruptcy, archive everything and start afresh. After all, if you haven't gotten around to reading and acting on old emails to date, you probably never will.

Other Communications

While email is easily the most important communication method for dealing with your remote staff, it is not the only tool you should use:

1. Instant Messaging

Textual instant messaging is a useful way for quickly conversing about questions or small issues. Skype, AIM, Messenger, and the rest all make for appropriate tools. They can be distracting but the efficiency created for staff in being able to quickly ask a question when it's urgent is often worth it.

2. Phone Calls and Teleconferences

Sometimes it's good to chat with people over the phone. Not only is this good for keeping a personal connection, it's also often the most efficient way to get a few people communicating all together. Skype and many other services offer free or extremely cheap solutions for phone calls overseas.

3. Wikis and Manuals

There is a large amount of information that you will need to repeat as you have more staff. Examples include style guides, information on using the blog platform, and even manuals for running a blog (if you have multiple blogs). This sort of information works well in an internal wiki that you can simply direct new staff to.

Once you have an internal wiki set up and working, you can add other information such as staff contacts, what to do if the site goes down, and so on. Your internal wiki will become a key component of a remote team strategy. A great solution for internal wikis is **PBWorks** (<http://pbworks.com>) though it can get pricey with a lot of users. Google Docs also provides solutions though sometimes sharing with non-Google accounts can be troublesome.

4. Social Updates

For large remote teams, having a social tool is a really effective way of capturing some of the office environment feel. Services like **Yammer** (<http://yammer.com>) – which is a “Twitter for Business” – or IRC will help generate camaraderie and encourage staff to get to know each other without adding email noise.

Setting Parameters and Focusing on Results

With both remote and in-house staff, it's really important to decide early on what is important to you. As the business owner, it can be easy to fall into the trap of wanting your staff to look like they are working hard. There are common ideas about what hard work looks like: overtime, silent typing, punctuality, and so on.

If you think about it though you will realize that it's not working hard that you are after; it's results. And those perceptions of what a hard working person does don't necessarily have anything to do with results.

Moreover with remote staff, you don't actually know what they are doing most of the time. For all you know they are chatting all day long, sitting in their underwear (don't ask me who they are chatting to), arriving at their desk late, and finishing early. Not only don't you know, but you can never know!

This is actually a very good thing. It will force you to realize that all that's actually important is that your staff produce results. If you can find someone

who can do in an hour what other people do in eight hours and then charge you as if it took four, that's still a great result!

The reality with remote staff is that there are no controls on how they work, and trying to add them is probably not a very effective pursuit. Instead you should concentrate on two things:

1. Set Clear Parameters

First you must always give your staff clear and defined parameters about what you need them to do. If it's important to have someone checking comments daily so that discussion can flow, then that's a parameter you need to communicate. If it's important that articles are published on schedule so that readers know what to expect, then that's a parameter you must tell your writers and editor.

Importantly you must provide context when setting parameters: Why is it important that comments are approved daily? Why is it important that articles hit the schedule? Adding context helps your staff to understand why your requests matter and encourages them to think holistically about their role on the site.

The most important parameters to set for jobs are the results you are expecting. For example, if you are looking to encourage discussion, then make sure your writers know that they are being judged on their ability to create articles that get discussed!

Providing parameters with context lets your staff know what is expected of them and why it's expected. This then gives them the freedom to deliver you the results you are looking for in whatever way is most suitable.

2. Judge Staff on Results

When looking at the performance of your staff you should be focused on just results. Did they fulfill the requirements of the job set at the beginning? Did they exceed them? Did they produce outstanding results?

Importantly, you can forget about whether they clocked exactly the right number of hours, or completed all the work at the last minute, or did the work while sitting on a cruise liner bound for Jamaica. The only thing you care about is the result! This will not only liberate you from worrying

about rubbish, but it will provide much greater freedom for your staff to do the work the way they are most comfortable, productive, and happy.

Judging staff this way is only possible, however, if you have set clear and context-laden parameters to begin with. If your staff doesn't know what is expected of them or why, it's going to be very difficult for them to deliver.

Other Staff Issues

There are lots of other issues to think about for your remote staff including:

1. Security and Password Management

It's a good idea to have a firm plan for password and security management right from the very beginning. The key is to have systems in place to store and keep passwords and to make sure different jobs have different access privileges to things like blogging software, hosting providers, domain registrars, and so on.

In general you should always create separate accounts for each individual writer, editor, and staffer. Passwords should always be strong, no matter how trivial the account seems to be. Whenever possible, restrict the highest admin privileges to just yourself, and where appropriate the site editor. This is particularly important on blogs where you have many writers contributing, and therefore with access to the blog management system.

It's a good idea to set yourself up with a password manager like **LastPass** (<http://lastpass.com>) or **1Password** (<http://1password.com>) so that you can manage the many, many passwords you are going to end up with as a blog business owner. LastPass in particular is good because it allows you to share passwords for use to staff without actually revealing the password itself.

Between email, blog software, social media, and web services such as analytics accounts, you will find yourself swimming in passwords.

Without a good password manager, it's all too tempting to use weak or repetitive passwords, which is an invitation for problems.

2. Email Addresses

For positions such as the site editor, you may wish to create a single gmail (or similar) account that gets passed over with complete archives. This means that when one editor finishes and another starts, the new editor still has access to the archive of emails between the editor and writers, sponsors, and so on. Because you can map a domain email address such as john@blogname.com back to a gmail account, the email address the editor uses can still change, but the archives will stay the same. This practice can help with transitioning when the two people won't ever be in the same place to discuss handovers and potentially emails could be lost in the process.

3. Time Off

For more permanent staff, you will need to consider what to do when they take time off. For example, if your editor is ill, you or another editor should be able to step in quickly and take over. In these cases, having a shared email address as detailed above can be very handy.

For planned time off, you can organize with your site editor to prepare a couple of weeks of content ahead of time with timestamps so that they go up over a period of time when the editor is not present. These situations are always best thought of beforehand, so that interruptions to the site are kept to a minimum.

4. Performance Reviews

It's important for staff to know how they are doing, where they stand, and what the future holds. For these reasons, whether it's remote or local, freelance or employee, you should always conduct periodic performance reviews.

These don't need to be particularly formal; they can take the form of a simple email giving general feedback, praise and well-formed criticism, and in return asking for feedback and comments.

Make sure you find out from your team what their own aspirations are, what they'd like to achieve, how they think they can contribute, and

what ideas they have for their work. Not only are staff often a gold mine of great ideas, but working to develop your team is amongst the most rewarding things you can do as a manager and entrepreneur.

5. Rights to Published Work

If you've never worked with writers before, you may be surprised to know that commissioning content doesn't necessarily mean you own the work. Usually writers are granting a perpetual license to use the content on your blog. However, unless you specifically agree beforehand, you cannot for example then create a book out of their articles and start selling that.

Generally speaking, it's a good idea to think about what you want to do with articles published on your site and make sure you've arranged (and compensated) any unusual plans with the writers beforehand.

Motivating Staff

Your team is going to produce their best work if they are motivated and happy. There are many factors that go into keeping people feeling good about their work, here are a few:

1. Your Business Mission and Values

What your business is all about has a great impact on how your staff behaves. If a person feels they are working for an organization that is genuinely set on being the best, doing great work, or creating value for readers, then they are more likely to produce great work themselves. If your organization is about making you money at any cost, this will most likely not inspire anyone to achieve much more than the minimum.

While what you say has some bearing in this respect, what is more important is what you *do*. It's not enough simply to have a nice mission or value statement in your business plan; it has to be part of the organization and its operations.

2. Helping Your Staff Achieve What They Want to Achieve

Having staff is a relationship and like any relationship, it works best when both parties contribute. While you will be expecting your staff to

deliver the goods in their work, you should make sure your business is giving staff value by building their skill sets and experience, providing opportunities to grow and try new things, and generally helping them get where they are going. Take some time to find out what is important to your staff and support them on that path.

3. Setting an Example

As the business owner you will set an extremely important example to people working with you. Companies generally often end up reflecting their founders and managers so if you work hard, you can expect to draw people who work hard. If you set the right priorities, you can expect your staff to do so too. If you want to lead a happy, motivated team – you need to be happy and motivated.

4. Keeping Everyone Informed and Involved

It's a lot easier to be invested in an enterprise when you really feel a part of it. This happens when you know what is going on and have a chance to affect the course of those goings-on.

Providing context to the activities of your business helps everyone feel they are genuinely part of the business. Taking input from your staff is not only a clever thing to do – chances are they have some pretty good ideas – but it also ensures that the creation is partly theirs. This feeling of ownership in turn keeps them feeling vested in the success of your enterprise.

Roles

As we discussed in Chapter 1, there are several common types of work in a blog business:

1. Writing
2. Editing
3. Managing Writers and Contributors
4. Web Development and Server Admin
5. Marketing
6. Monetization

Staff

7. Accounts
8. Web Design and Branding
9. Management and Direction

These can be drawn together to form a basic staff structure as follows:

Role 1: Editor

- Manages writers and contributors
- Edits articles
- Occasionally writes

Role 2: Writers

- Write content
- Add content to the blog

Role 3: Web Designer and/or

Role 4: Web Developer

- Setup hosting and blog installation
- Branding and design work
- Customize blog installation
- Make adjustments
- Server admin

You (with the help of specialists!)

- Marketing
- Accounting
- Legals
- Business Registration
- Monetization
- Management and direction

Other Roles:

- Social Media Marketing
- Ad Sales
- Comic Artists
- Screencasters, Video Production and Podcasters
- Additional Business Management

In this chapter we'll discuss the four main roles: editor, writer, web designer and web developer, as well as take a quick look at some of the other roles that can come up.

Role: Site Editor/Manager

Your site editor is the most important role on the site. This is the job that effectively manages the daily operations of the site. Typical tasks for a site editor include:

1. Finding and Managing Writers

Your editor will typically be responsible for finding new writers, managing existing writers, reviewing guest and casual contributions, and ensuring everyone is writing the right things.

2. Managing the Publishing Schedule

Planning a publishing roster, determining what day different posts will appear, dealing with last minute emergencies, planning in new content types or contributors and generally managing what gets published is the pivotal part of the site editor's job.

3. Preparing Content

Depending on the site, preparation of content can include just textual editing all the way through to adding HTML markup, finding images, and liaising with the writer to develop the content to its full potential.

4. Planning Site Initiatives

Site editors should be capable of planning and executing site initiatives like competitions, giveaways, new features, and content directions. As the front line of your operation, the site editor is the most in tune with what your audience wants, so pay attention!

5. Dealing with Site Contacts

Most sites have some sort of "Contact Us" page, and it's not a bad idea to have this route to the site editor. They can then handle potential writers, businesses looking for exposure, story tips, and general inquirers.

6. The Voice of the Blog

A site editor is a key component of the voice of the blog. In site news posts and general editorial, the editor helps humanize the site and give a face to the blog. This is why in many magazines there's a note from the editor at the opening of the magazine.

7. Representing the Blog Externally

For successful blogs the editor will often come to represent the site. A great example is Gina Trapani from **LifeHacker** (<http://lifehacker.com>), who for some years was the site's editor, wrote the official book, and has been interviewed and profiled numerous times about LifeHacker. For many people Gina was, and still is, Lifehacker.

8. Dealing with the Community

One of the most important jobs an editor has is to deal with the blog's community. This happens chiefly through comments, but can also happen when an editor asks for community feedback through some other means, for example through surveys, a competition, or a request for email feedback.

9. Running the Site's Twitter and Social Media Accounts

Site editors are usually the best candidates for operating a blog's social media accounts such as Twitter and Facebook feeds. They are usually involved in the subject matter of the blog, can publish interesting links, and are acutely aware of what is happening on the site.

10. Watching and Analyzing Statistics

Keeping an eye on Analytics is important for a blog editor so that they can check which types of content are working well, which are attracting search traffic, which are doing well on social media, and other interesting trends and data that can be teased out.

11. Setting the Direction of the Blog

It's a good idea to get your site editor involved in developing the blog's direction, voice, and personality. They will have experience in running blogs, know what types of things audiences are interested in, and in the end will be the person most responsible for running the blog!

Skills to Look for in a Site Editor

Because it's such an important job, you should look for an editor who has had blog experience before, and ensure you've gone through the blog they ran, read comments they left in response to readers, read their articles, and look at the general quality of the blog during their tenure.

The main skills you are looking for in an editor are:

1. Writing Skills

Being a good writer and editor are obviously essential skills for an editor. They don't need to be a Pulitzer Prize winning writer, but they should be able communicators.

2. Attention to Detail

Editing is very detailed work, as is managing a blog. This is not a job for someone who wants to focus on the big picture creative work only. You need to find someone who is happy to do the nitty-gritty tasks day in, day out.

3. Time Management

Running a blog is something of a juggling act, so you need to find someone who is good at not only managing their own time, but also at making sure their writers do so as well!

4. Strong Email Communicator

Given the importance of dealing with remote staff your site editor needs to have fantastic email skills. They should be not only able to get their point across, but also to do so in a friendly manner that keeps everyone happy and onside.

5. Interest in the Subject Matter

It's hard to run a site about a subject you have no personal interest in. Therefore you should always pick a site editor who loves the subject your blog is about. In the case where you have to choose between a person who is a great editor but has no interest in the subject and a person who is an average editor but who loves the subject, choose the latter. Enthusiasm comes across in a blog and will help your site connect with the audience. It will also keep your editor interested and working for passion rather than just paychecks.

What to Pay Freelance Editors

As we've just seen a typical site editor's duties are quite diverse and will include commissioning, editing, posting, and sometimes writing content, managing comments, organizing competitions or other on-site events, and a range of other tasks.

For freelancers it's a good idea to choose an hourly rate with the freelancer and then calculate approximately how many hours of work there is a week and set the rate from there. Because this type of work is steady reliable work, hourly rates need not be as high as for a web designer who works project to project. Additionally, steady work that can be done at home is often highly prized, which is an important consideration.

For regular part-time work on the order of 10–30 hours a week, a rate of US\$20 to US\$40 an hour is reasonable for a young editor with some experience. Keep in mind this figure must cover everything from their time off work to their health and benefits.

It's important to keep in mind that these numbers are purely based on my own experience. They are not intended as absolute figures in any sense of the word. You should take into consideration the local rates, a person's experience, the job details, and a host of other factors. The numbers quoted here are purely intended as a guide to help new businesses have a starting point for what might be an acceptable amount to offer. You may be able to get cheaper rates or may need to pay more for someone with more experience.

You should always discuss in detail with the person you are hiring, as well as conduct appropriate research of potential candidates.

Role: Writer

The most straight forward position to hire for is that of the writer. For most blog businesses you will work with a set of freelance contributors who submit work on an either casual or regular basis.

Tips for managing and working with writers:

1. Train Writers to Use the Blog Management System and Formatting

Taking content from a writer and preparing it for your particular blog management system can be time-consuming work. Having writers do this themselves is a good way to distribute that work and significantly lessen the site editor's load. To do this may require a bit of training and set-up to get your writers familiar with your particular system, but it's time well spent!

2. Provide a House Style Guide

Having a consistent tone of voice and style of writing is essential to creating a solid blog brand. Ask your editor to spend some time putting together a guide to writing for your blog, including any formatting instructions, tips, and guides on spelling and grammar variants.

3. Pay Regulars and Contributors Differently

It's important to reward regular writers and to make it worth their while to contribute consistently. Paying for regular gigs at a slightly higher rate ensures that it's a position that is worth earning and keeping.

4. Working with Writers

How much time and effort you put into working with writers is up to you and your editor. In some cases, working with a writer to develop an article can reap big rewards, particularly if it's a regular contributor who can put those lessons back into play. On the other hand, if a writer or contributor isn't quite up to scratch, spending time can be more costly than finding a better writer. Discuss with your editor what their feel is about working with writers and what is an appropriate amount of back-and-forth to develop a post.

Writer's Fees

Writer fees will vary according to how specialized the subject matter is, how experienced or well known the writer is, and how much research is involved. For example, a writer for a Photoshop tutorial is going to need to also be highly specialized with Photoshop *and* spend a lot of time

researching and developing the content, so that sort of blog post will likely be quite expensive. On the other hand, a quick news piece that is mostly summarizing a press release would be much cheaper.

For general writing, a reasonable rate to offer is about 10 cents a word. So a thousand-word article would pay US\$100. There are cases where you might get by with less, and certainly times where you will need more. However, in my experience this has been a reasonable rate for many freelance writers.

In addition to writer fees, there are also supplemental reasons that can be added incentives. In particular as your blogs become well known, it's not bad to have their names in a writer's portfolio. That said, writers will also expect more from an established blog that is clearly making money, as is fair!

Again, it's important to keep in mind that any numbers shown above are purely based on my own experience. They are not intended as absolute figures in any sense of the word. You should take into consideration the local rates, a person's experience, the job details, and a host of other factors. The numbers quoted here are purely intended as a guide to help new businesses have a starting point for what might be an acceptable amount to offer.

You should always discuss in detail with the person you are hiring, as well as conduct appropriate research of potential candidates.

Role: Web Designer

In the previous chapter we covered the importance of strong visual branding. Creating your blog's look is the job of your designer. Aside from the initial push of work, most professional blog outfits will need the services of a web designer from time to time for updates and small jobs. Unless you have a large family of sites, it is unlikely this will be more than occasional work, nonetheless, it's good to have a long-term relationship with a designer, as you will want to maintain a professional standard even for little bits and pieces.

The Difference Between Web Designers and Developers

It's important to understand that web design is the visual layout of a site, while development is the actual coding work. Some web designers will also do some amount of limited development, while in other cases you might hire a specialist designer to design your brand, web look and feel, and then hire a developer to build it.

Agency or Freelancer?

An important question to decide on is whether you plan to hire an agency to design and develop your site, or a freelancer. The answer is usually a factor of how much you want to spend.

If you can shell out for an agency, you will take a lot of the risk and trouble out of the equation, as they tend to provide more holistic services in a more reliable, easy-to-handle manner. However, you are also going to be paying a lot more, as agencies need to have sales people, as well as multiple levels of staff involved.

If you are going to use an agency you may wish to look for a smaller one that is somewhere in between a freelancer and full-blown interactive shop. This will usually yield the benefits of working with an agency without the rather large markups that can come with the bigger companies.

In this book I will assume you are working with freelancers as they are the more economic option. In the long run, if you expand into a bigger business, you will also likely end up with in-house staff fulfilling design and development jobs, and much of the advice for dealing with freelancers will apply in that circumstance as well.

What a Web Designer Does

Web designers can have varying skill sets depending on whether they specialize more in the design part of their job or in the development part. Typically a designer handles:

1. Branding

Designing a logo, brand, and overall visual identity is something many web designers can do. Although you can actually hire specialized branding designers, often a web designer can produce a decent visual identity at potentially a much lower cost.

2. Website Design

The bread-and-butter of a web designer's job is to design the visual layout of your site. They should put together a design of a homepage and typically any other key pages on the site, so for a blog this would include a post/comments page.

3. Auxiliary Graphics

If you need graphics that match your website and branding, then a web designer can usually create them. These might include banners for special promotions or articles, info-graphics such as diagrams, advertisements, and so on.

4. Web Development?

Many web designers can also provide some or all of your web development work. This varies wildly between freelancers, meaning that a web designer will offer one of the following levels of development capability:

a. No Development at All

Most web designers can do some building, however you will still find people who will only produce the visual part of the job and then either sub-contract or leave it to you to get the design built. Typically ,designers who do no development, are stronger at the branding aspect of the job.

b. Build the Design into HTML

The most basic web development is to turn a design into an HTML site and this is the most common level of development proficiency for web designers. Note that an HTML site is a static site. It then needs to have additional functionality added to it to turn it into a blog theme or to plug it into some other content management system. Nonetheless, web designers who can build a site into HTML

will have delivered a lot of value because it means they can make sure the visual design is carried through to the final site just as they'd intended.

c. Build the Design into a Working Blog Theme

If for example you are using WordPress, then your design needs to be first built into HTML and then turned into a WordPress theme. Web designers who can handle both steps will be able to help you get a very polished finished product. However, because the skill set is quite broad, it is possible that you will either have a very good visual look but average code, or vice versa. Having said that, there are some very talented people out there who can do the whole job really well!

d. Build the Design into ... Anything!

It's very unlikely that you will find someone who can do both a web designer and web developer's job well. Usually only agencies who have multiple staff will be able to deliver this level of service, and if you can find a single person who can do the whole thing, expect to pay a premium for such talent!

Finding and Working with a Web Designer

If you've never hired a designer you may be wondering where to begin. In fact, it's not unlike hiring any other type of contractor, so start by asking around. While the best way to find someone is through a personal or professional recommendation, you can also try searching a web design gallery such as **Creattica** (<http://creattica.com>) to find designs you like and then contacting the designers. Alternately you can try putting up a freelance job ad on a site like **FreelanceSwitch** (<http://freelanceswitch.com>) to have applicants contact you about the job. Finally, a site like **Sortfolio** (<http://sortfolio.com>) will help you sort through freelancers and agencies according to budget and location to pick out an appropriate candidate.

Some useful tips for hiring a web designer are:

1. Make Sure You View the Designer's Previous Work

Ideally you want to hire someone who has done work similar to what

you are looking for. Without this proof it's hard to know whether they are capable of delivering the right level of quality.

2. Ask for a Reference from a Previous Job

Contacting other clients of the designer is the best way to find out if they deliver in a timely fashion, what they are like to work with, and about any major pitfalls of working with them. Like all references, you will often need to read between the lines of what they are saying and listen to what is not said as much as what is said. Prepare a few open-ended questions and then just listen to what the reference has to say.

3. Get a Written Agreement

It's important to discuss and agree on terms about what the work includes and doesn't include. Ask about revisions and changes and how they work. Also ask about how many design concepts will be delivered. If you like choice, you can ask for multiple concepts, but keep in mind you will be paying for it.

4. Choose the Right Person; Don't Try to get the Wrong Person to do the Right Work

It's always wise to make sure you have the right person for the job in the beginning, and then get out of the way so they can produce something brilliant, rather than making hasty early decisions and then trying to copilot the project yourself.

5. You (usually) Get What You Pay For

Prices for design can vary wildly. Freelancers are almost always cheaper than agencies and less experienced freelancers are cheaper than the more experienced variety, at least in hourly rates. Freelance designers tend to be more variable and risky than agencies, particularly if you find someone freelancing in their spare time or with a short track record. Even amongst agencies and amongst freelancers, however, you will find pricing varying. This is often to do with quality, service levels, experience, the type of client they usually cater to, and where they are situated.

Unfortunately there are no hard and fast rules, so it's best to get a range of quotes and speak to at least a couple of different service providers before making a decision.

6. Hourly Rates, Quotes and Estimates

Most web designers will have an hourly rate they can quote.

Unfortunately this rate is mostly meaningless as a job can be quoted for very different lengths of time! Still it's a good way to get a first gauge for how expensive a designer will be.

After briefing the designer you should ask for a quote or estimate for the job. The difference is that a quote is usually fixed (though you might want to double check this!). That means if the designer quotes a price of \$2100 for the job based on their hourly rate of say \$70 and their internal estimate that it's going to be 30 hours of work, but that in the end the job takes 20 hours or 40 hours, you still pay the same amount. This is called a *fixed quote*.

An *estimate*, on the other hand, will just provide a best guess at how many hours of work will be involved. If you are getting an estimate, make sure you know what the hourly rate is for extra work. Moreover, you should check in at regular intervals to find out where the job is up to and how the bill is faring so you avoid getting an unpleasant surprise at the end.

Whether the work is done on an estimate or quote basis is often down simply to the individual preference of the contractor.

Hourly rates for web designers vary wildly depending on experience. It's best to simply ask a few designers who are interested in the job to get a handle on what to expect in relation to what level of quality.

7. Expect to Pay a (non-refundable) Deposit

Most freelancers and agencies will charge a non-refundable deposit of 20 – 50%. While it sounds obvious, you should know that you will *always* have to pay for the work done at the end of the job. You cannot choose to pay only if you like the design work, as the hours are put in by the designer regardless of your satisfaction with the result. This is why it's so important to pick the right person to work with.

8. How to Brief a Designer

Like all staff and contractors, if you don't brief a designer well, you cannot expect them to deliver what you want. So it's important to

compile the following information for them at the very beginning (preferably before they even quote for the job):

- a. Site name and logo OR
- b. Site name and what you want out of the logo and brand (if they are designing it)
- c. What pages are going to be on the site
- d. What information is going to be on those pages
- e. Examples of work you like such as other blogs, brands, sites, and so on. Explain what you do and don't like about each
- f. Any photos or imagery you'd like to use
- g. Any other information or assets you think would be useful to them

9. Specify the Files You Will Receive.

It's important that you get copies of all Photoshop design files and work done on your job. Make sure you double-check at the beginning of the job that this will happen. Additionally, find out the names of any fonts used so you can get copies for your own use.

If you are having a logo designed make sure you get a *vector* copy of the logo. This is usually in EPS or Illustrator AI format and is really important if you need to hand the job to another designer in the future.

Role: Web Developer

A web or software developer is someone who writes the code for your website. There are many types of developers out there, and in some cases your web designer may actually be a developer themselves. It's a good idea to ask around when hiring web designers and developers to assess what their capabilities are. You may also find you can hire one and have them subcontract the other parts of the project out for you.

The most basic type of web developer is someone who can take a design and turn it into a theme for a blog platform such as WordPress. More experienced and high-end developers will also be capable of building anything from advanced customizations for a blog through to custom systems and applications; although, the larger the product is, the more likely it becomes that you will need multiple developers.

Unless you have some specific plans for something more than a blog, you will probably not need more than just blog theming work done. In the long run however, you may need a more specialist developer should you decide to add new features to the site, or simply to help with performance optimization if your server is having trouble handling traffic.

Choosing Hosting

An important choice that you will make in setting up a blog enterprise is that of where to host your sites. Your developer will be able to assist in selecting a company that has a good track record, provides good value, and will give you the space to grow should you need it.

Here are some things to consider when setting up your hosting:

1. Do You Need to be Able to Manage the Server?

Many hosting packages will come with an admin control panel of one variety or another. These can help you set up email addresses, reboot the server, and do a variety of different tasks (depending on the server) that can even include installing WordPress and other packages with just a click or two.

However, not all companies provide control panel software. In particular, companies like **SliceHost** (<http://slicehost.com>) provide hosting aimed at developers and are often much more light-weight (control panels can use up a good dose of system resources) and cost-effective. The flip side of this is that they can also be harder to manage yourself if you aren't familiar with Linux.

2. Are You Just Hosting a Blog?

If you are planning on hosting more than say, just a WordPress installation, then you should definitely consult with your developer to find out what requirements your project has. Some applications will require specific features and functionality from your web host.

3. What Language/Platform are You Using?

In the next section we'll cover different languages and platforms in detail. Suffice to say you should double-check that a hosting company

supports your blog software or development platform before signing up with them.

4. Where Does Your Plan Fit in the Company's Range?

Check that you have somewhere to upgrade to if you end up needing more juice in the tank. There's nothing worse than realizing you have to move hosting companies because you've outgrown your current plan and there is nowhere else to go with the current host.

5. What Do Other People Say About the Web Host?

There are literally thousands of web hosts out there, making it quite difficult to figure out if you are choosing a decent company. Generally it's best to pick someone reputable and do some research on sites like **WebHostingTalk** (<http://webhostingtalk.com>) to find out what other customers think of their service and support.

Language and Platform Choices

An important decision to make early on is to determine what platform you will be working on. For most bloggers this simply means deciding on a blog software package, however if you are doing any additional development work, you may need to also consult with your developer to work out what language and environment they work in.

Blog Platform

There are a number of software packages you can use to build a blog. These packages are often called blogging platforms, or more generally Content Management Systems (CMS). For professional bloggers, you should be looking for a package that you host yourself on your own web server. This is opposed to hosted options, which are usually much easier to set up but may provide far less flexibility.

The overwhelming favorite blog CMS in recent years has been WordPress, and many books and articles for bloggers will simply assume that's what you are using. Nonetheless, there are other options and in some cases they may provide features that can be useful in developing beyond just a blog.

1. WordPress – Most Popular

WordPress (<http://wordpress.org>) is the world's most popular open source (and hence free) blogging platform and with good reason. It's exceedingly easy to use, is regularly updated, and has an enormous community of developers and designers making themes and plugins for it. If you are unsure of what platform to use, this is probably your safest choice.

One thing to know about WordPress if you are planning large scale development is that while quite a stable platform, many developers feel it's not very well built internally. So you may have trouble deeply integrating it into a big project. Ask your developer if you are planning something major.

There is also a hosted version of WordPress available at WordPress.com that is free to set up, which means you don't need your own web host. As with all hosted solutions, you should probably stay away from this option as it comes with a lot of limitations.

2. Google's Blogger and TypePad (Avoid!)

Blogger (<http://blogger.com>) is a hosted platform and while it is a decent product, the fact that it's hosted imposes many limitations on what you can do. A great many bloggers who start out on Blogger find themselves moving to another platform because they need more flexibility.

TypePad (<http://typepad.com>), like Blogger, is also a hosted solution. However, unlike Blogger and WordPress.com, it's a for-pay system. Nonetheless, like all hosted solutions, it's limited in its long-term potential.

3. MovableType (A worthy WordPress alternative)

MovableType (<http://movabletype.org>) is a powerful, feature-rich blogging platform from SixApart (the people who also make TypePad). It's written in Perl and isn't nearly as popular as WordPress, however it is a worthy alternative and often vies with WordPress with respect to new features and releases.

4. Joomla and Drupal (Open source CMSs)

Joomla (<http://joomla.org>) and **Drupal** (<http://drupal.org>) are respectively the second and third most popular open source CMS

products after WordPress. They are actually more general CMS products than WordPress, which focuses almost exclusively on blogging. Joomla and Drupal offer a range of features that can make adding membership and community features to your site a lot easier.

Neither is as easy to use as WordPress or as well-supported in themes and developers. However, both are very well known and you should be able to find help on either relatively easily. You can learn more about specific features they each offer at their respective websites.

5. Expression Engine (Paid CMS)

Expression Engine (<http://expressionengine.com>) is a very popular non-open source product which, like Joomla and Drupal, can be used for a blog, but can also do a lot more. Because it's a paid product there is lots of support from the company behind the product and because it's quite popular, it's moderately easy to find developers who specialize in the product.

6. Tumblr and Posterous (Microblogging)

Microblogging is generally for shorter, less involved blogs. However, recently the two most popular platforms – **Tumblr** (<http://tumblr.com>) and **Posterous** (<http://posterous.com>) – have been gaining traction and popularity, and in some cases being used even for full-scale blogs. Nonetheless, both are hosted systems and are much more limited in features when compared to WordPress or MovableType.

7. The Rest

There are literally hundreds of places you can start a blog and dozens of self-hosted platforms you can purchase or simply download for free. Hosted platforms range from the very professional **SquareSpace** (<http://squarespace.com>) to more amateur fare like **Blog.com** (<http://blog.com>). As always, unless you have good reason, you should avoid hosted platforms.

Self-hosted options can include blog platforms created in different languages and environments such as **Mephisto** (<http://mephistoblog.com>), which is built in Ruby on Rails, or which are simply more niche in use such as **TextPattern** (<http://textpattern.com>), which is a very minimalist solution.

Development Environment and Language

If your product is purely a blog, then the development environment is likely to be dictated by the software you are using. For example, WordPress is a PHP/MySQL solution and will require a hosting package that supports PHP/MySQL set-ups.

If you are building something more than a blog, then an important consideration is the environment and language your developer works in. For example, if you are hiring a .NET developer then you will probably need Microsoft hosting for them to work in that environment. This might then affect what blog platform you use as well.

Speak to your web developer to assess what is appropriate for your requirements and their services.

Typical Jobs a Web Developer Might Do

A web developer's role can include a variety of jobs. Depending on your developer's experience and skill set you may need a specialist for some or all of the jobs listed below.

1. Configure Your Server and Hosting

Your web developer can generally help you set up your server, install any appropriate software packages, and help get everything set up. It's important however that *you* be the one to initially set up the web hosting account, then set up your developer as the development contact. This way, if you change developers later down the track, you'll have everything you need.

Some developers operate their own hosting (usually on-selling a hosting company's white labeled services). You should *always* avoid these in favor of setting up your own account directly with a hosting provider. Locking yourself in with a developer in this manner can make changing developers difficult.

2. Build a Blog Design/Theme

Your web developer's main job is, of course, to actually build, install, and customize your blog's theme.

3. Create or Customize Plugins

If you need specific functionality on your blog, your developer may create or customize plugins or small applications to help you achieve that. They will usually need to tweak your site's theme and install them for you as well.

4. Search Optimization

Optimizing a site for search engines is generally a very specialized job with an entire industry catering to it. However, one aspect that your web developer can help with is ensuring that your site is well-structured and uses markup that search engines like.

For help with search engine marketing, link building, and general optimization you will probably need to find a specialist provider. You can find a list of companies to consider at **SEOMoz's Marketplace** (<http://seomoz.org/marketplace>).

5. Maintenance Work such as Upgrading and Bug-fixing

There is often ongoing work maintaining a blog that comes in the form of upgrading to new installations, patching plugins to ensure they are compatible, and fixing bugs that may crop up.

6. Server Issues

You may also require help with your server from time to time should you have problems with spam, freeing up resources, moving web hosts, and so on.

7. Setting up Caching

An important step when setting up a blog, particularly a WordPress one, is to have appropriate caching. This helps your blog perform under traffic pressure by reducing the number of times it hits the server. Basic caching plugins are relatively easy to install, however more advanced plugins like **W3 Total Cache** (<http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/w3-total-cache>) provide much better caching but are quite difficult to set up for someone without much web experience.

8. Setting up Backup Systems

It's incredibly important to have solid backup systems in place for your blog. If you don't and your site is lost somehow, you have pretty much forfeited your entire business.

It's best to have at least two levels of backup in place. Optimally, you should have a backup service with your web host, and a second that backs up your site from your web host to another location (in case your web host somehow vanishes off the face of the earth). On top of these two levels, it's not a bad idea to periodically download the contents of your blog to your own hard drive using the export function that most blogs provide.

Your developer can help you set up backup systems and then to regularly test them out. A backup system that has never been tested is not much better than no backup system at all.

9. Advanced Development

Setting up a blog is actually a pretty simple development task, which is why sometimes web designers will do it for you. If you need custom development, which can range from setting up a membership site to building a web app to installing other software products, then you should speak to your developer to find out what is involved.

Generally the bigger the project is, the harder it is to cost and estimate. If you decide to develop a large application, expect to pay a lot and for it to take a long time. There's a saying that whatever a developer says a project will cost and however much time it will take, you should double it, and double it again, just to be safe!

10. Advanced Server Management and Performance Tuning

If you have the good fortune to build a very successful and popular blog, you will at some point need help managing your server. Generally, you have to get pretty big before caching plugins and hosting upgrades cease to do the trick, so this probably isn't a problem to worry about until you are large enough that it starts manifesting. You will usually see the issues coming from a long way away as downtime begins to mount and you start noticing that your server is getting less responsive during peak periods.

One other advanced task that may unfortunately crop up if your blog becomes popular, is that of security. Generally speaking, simply keeping your blog software up to date will guard against most attacks. However,

now and again sites will be attacked using either vulnerabilities in the CMS software or through a Denial of Service (DoS) attack, which means your server gets so many requests it can't handle them all and falls over.

There's not a lot you can do to guard against some types of attacks, particularly distributed DoS attacks (which are virtually impossible to guard against as they are almost indistinguishable from regular traffic) and they are only likely to happen if your site is popular and targeted for some reason. Still, in the event that something happens, it's good to have a developer to work with, to help either stop the attack, or at least bring the site back up afterwards.

Finding and Working with Developers

1. General Tips on Finding and Contracting

Finding and working with web developers is mostly the same as dealing with web designers. Just as discussed in detail above, you can find developers by asking around and by posting job ads on freelance sites. You should also always ask for references from previous jobs, view previous work, and always get a written agreement.

Again, it's critical to spend the time to find the right person, and you will usually get what you pay for with experienced, skilled developers charging more on an hourly basis, but ultimately doing better work more efficiently with fewer problems. Developers compared to designers, are more likely to use estimates as development can be very open-ended, and expect to pay a non-refundable deposit. You can read more about all these issues in the previous section on web designers.

2. Briefing a Web Developer

Briefing a developer first involves letting them know basic information like what sort of site or app you are building, what platform you would like to use for your blog, what hosting you might have, and so on.

The most critical aspect of briefing a developer is to make sure you've thought through everything you want the site to do and included it in the brief. For a straight blog or theme build, this might not be too difficult as most of the details will be shown in the design they are building.

For larger projects, try to imagine using the app you are getting built and think about what you would do and what you would expect to see and happen. By mentally walking through the site, you are effectively thinking of user scenarios, which are descriptions of how the system behaves.

Giving a whole sequence of user scenarios is in fact one way of briefing a developer. So for a membership site you might have one scenario for sign-up, one for adjusting a membership, and another for an administrative user logging in and editing a member's details. User scenarios work well as they force you to actually think through what a person needs to *do* things. This will help tease out details you might otherwise forget if just trying to think out all the details.

A good developer will be able to guide you through the briefing process, gathering the information they need and piecing together a plan for the build. Different developers like to be briefed in different ways, so ask your developer what they expect to receive to get started.

3. What Files to Get at the End

At the end of any development you should make sure that you have a copy of any theme or plugin files, and access to the full codebase for any other development work. Generally, getting files is not a big deal as they are usually all on your server anyway.

4. Rates

Freelance rates for development range from as low as US\$30 per hour up to US\$200 per hour. Moreover, a good developer will be *much* better than a bad one for big jobs, not necessarily in terms of speed, but in terms of building a bug-free, working product that is easy to develop further in the future. With development, it's really key to find someone you trust by checking with past clients, speaking to the developer, and if at all possible, working on small jobs first before moving to larger ones.

If you know a good developer who isn't available for freelance work, it's not a bad idea to ask them to help you select a developer for your project. Code quality is naturally best understood by other coders and they may be able to help differentiate between an average programmer and an excellent one.

5. Testing

Whether small or large, you should *always* conduct thorough testing on anything you get built. This should involve two types of testing. The first is testing functionality: going over the entire site from top to bottom, clicking on everything, typing into text boxes, filling out forms, acting like a user, and generally seeing if you can find any holes in the system. The second type of testing is compatibility testing: trying the site on different computers, browsers, and operating systems.

It's also a good idea to ask other people to test out the site or app to get different perspectives. Sometimes people who don't know much about the project give the best feedback as they aren't constrained by plans and background thinking, instead just giving their fresh thoughts.

Make sure that your final payments are made *after* testing and bug fixing is completed to ensure you have a working product at the end of the job.

Large Development Projects

Building a blog theme or plugin is a pretty small development project. As your plans get more ambitious, at some point you will probably want to build something bigger. These can be much more risky as development can get quite complicated.

For larger projects, it's a good idea to break the project down into working release stages. For example, if you wanted to build a membership site with a whole heap of bells and whistles, you might make the first stage just having the membership system, then the second stage adding in one set of features, then maybe a third stage adding in the least important features.

This will ensure you see the project as it comes together and that you are involved in the process of development as it happens rather than trying to think of everything ahead of time. This style of agile development breaks with the past where projects spent a long time in the initial "requirements gathering" stage and then were locked down for the build.

Often before you've used and seen a working system, you may not know quite exactly what you want. When it's there in front of you all of a sudden you see features you forgot, or functions that are missing. Trying to add these late into a big project that was locked down already is called "scope creep" and it tends to make projects late, over budget, and badly prioritized.

On the flip side it's very difficult for a developer to accurately gauge how long a big job is going to take right at the beginning. Development jobs often have hidden complexities making it almost impossible to accurately quote. Therefore you are far more likely to get developers giving you pricing estimates that end up climbing as the job wears on.

Agile development works because it combats uncertainty on both the part of the developer and the business. For the developer, they are committing to estimates based on smaller chunks of work, which are of course much more accurate to estimate. Once a given part of the job is complete, they will be deeper into the project and able to more accurately estimate the next stage too. For the business, agile development ensures that you get as much value as fast as possible with a working system at all times. You can then add features or make changes, re-prioritizing as you go without undoing all the earlier specification work.

So for our membership system example, you might find after building the first stage, you'd forgotten some important features, or maybe after building that first working system, you see a potential new feature that could provide a lot more value. You can then change the second phase of the project to incorporate some of the new features and bump some of the things you initially thought were important into phase three. Finally, after the second phase, you might find that you are running out of budget and all together dump the third phase, knowing that you have a working system and you can always come back and build those later.

If you are contemplating a large development project with someone you've never worked with before, it's also a good idea to first work on a small project together. This will give you a feel for the working style, pitfalls, and hurdles of working on development. You can then use these lessons on the larger project where problems will be much bigger and more expensive.

Other Roles

A variety of other roles can exist in a blog staff. Oftentimes until they are big enough, roles such as marketing will fall under your responsibility. However, some specialist jobs such as cartoon illustration simply require a different type of freelancer.

- **Social Media Marketing**

Sites like **Digg** (<http://digg.com>) and **Twitter** (<http://twitter.com>) can send a lot of traffic. As such, specialist consultants exist who can help devise strategies for increasing social media presence to boost incoming traffic.

This is a role you would probably only consider if you had money to spare and really wanted to boost traffic. There is usually much you can do without the aid of a specialist simply by taking advice online. You can also read more about traffic generation later in this book.

- **Screencasters, Video Production and Podcasters**

For blogs publishing video or audio, you'll need to hire screencasters and podcasters as you would otherwise hire writers. Usually these roles need to be much more long-term, as there is considerably more investment from viewers in listening or seeing the same person. While many podcasters can also take care of the production of the audio content, video content may require video production staff, and if you're serious about it, equipment and a studio.

- **Comic Artists**

Looking to include a regular cartoon on your blog? You'll need a comic artist. They can be found on freelance job boards by posting a job ad for illustrators and artists. You'll need to find someone with the right measure of artistic and comic talent. Look at previous examples of their work to make sure you feel the humor and style would work for your blog.

- **Ad Sales**

One direction you can take for advertising is to directly sell advertising yourself without using ad networks like Google's AdSense. While you

can just rely on incoming requests, for a large site you may decide to pursue advertising through a sales team. It's best to build a sales team using incentivized packages to tie them to their sales success and to minimize the costs until sales are coming through.

- **Business Management**

Finally, the bigger your blog business gets, the more likely you will have management and business development positions open up. Like many problems with bigger businesses you will see these coming from a long way off and will have time to plan appropriately. If you are inexperienced in business, it's not a bad idea to find a mentor to help guide you through these important decisions, and to help grow the business as it gains traction.

Like any business, the particular roles you will require for your blog depend largely on what direction you choose to take the business. When you are planning out your enterprise, take some time to think about what work needs to be accomplished and who is going to do what. You may find you need jobs such as community management, moderation, copy editing, and all sorts of other roles.

Often to begin with, you can take a lot of roles on personally. Then as they grow, your budget increases and your time gets thinner, you can systematically replace yourself in one context after another. This has the added benefit of ensuring that you know all about each role and can have more context in choosing a replacement for yourself.

5

PLANNING CONTENT

While a solid brand and great staff are essential to the success of your blogging business, it's the content you publish that brings visitors back for more, and determines whether or not people recommend you to their friends and colleagues.

There's a fine line between content that works and content that flops, and that means there's a fine line between success and failure at any given time in the business of publishing and blogging. In this chapter, we'll look at the factors that make web content succeed.

Writing for the Web

People don't always consciously realize it, but they read on screens differently from the way they read on paper. When you pick up a printed book, you read linearly from start to end, word-by-word. On the other hand, content on the screen is read in bits and pieces and almost never in order.

The typical reader starts by scanning the page to find the content that's relevant to their needs. Large paragraphs aren't easily scanned, so the focus is on elements that stick out from the rest of the text. These things will become a big part of your blogging toolkit:

- Headlines
- Subheadings
- Images
- Block quotes
- Pull quotes
- Lists
- Links in the text

Once they've determined whether the content is interesting enough to warrant spending their time on, they might start from the top and read straight through, but often they'll find the section that answers their immediate questions and only hang around as long as it takes to get what they came for.

Your aim is to get the reader to stick around longer, come back more often, and become a loyal reader of your blog. To help the reader enjoy your site and give them more of a reason to keep coming back, you need to change the way you write and format content.

When a reader scans the page, they are trying to obtain context and locate information. However, elements that are easily scanned aren't always elements that give plenty of context!

For instance, thanks to the bad practices employed by traditional press such as tabloids, there's often a focus on making headlines clever or

scandalizing, as opposed to descriptive. This sort of practice seems intuitive to many beginning bloggers, but it won't help your readers at all.

- Use headlines that describe the content for the reader and for search engines. If you can make it clever at the same time, by all means go ahead!
- Images should represent the content as accurately as possible, especially if you're using several images in a piece; as great as images are for creating visual interest, they should also indicate a change of focus in the content.
- Pull quotes done properly are very useful. Find the strongest tip or piece of information in a section and turn it into a large, feature quote so that it draws the reader in to read the rest of it. Boring or meaningless pull quotes will lead the reader to the conclusion that there's nothing useful in the article as a whole.
- Link sparingly. I recommend no more than three links in a paragraph. It's hard to get readers to scan a paragraph, and the more links you include, the less they'll draw the reader's eye to a particular sentence.

Italics and bolding can draw attention to key points. Only use them when there's a really important principle to be conveyed, as they can make a paragraph look quite messy when overused.

We'll come back to headlines themselves later in this chapter, as they're almost as important as the article they represent. In the meantime, keep scannable content in mind and apply these principles to new content. Also bear in mind that there's nothing stopping you from going through older posts and making them easier to read!

Making Content Valuable

It may seem obvious to you that content needs to be useful and deliver value in order to become popular, but if you take a look at many less successful blogs on the Internet, you'll find they don't focus on providing value.

Planning Content

Obscure sites that are useful are usually up-and-comers, while the majority of less well known blogs simply ignore the fact that the reader needs to gain some benefit from reading a blog. As a reader, this gives the impression that the blog doesn't have a lot to offer and isn't worth revisiting.

If your blog publishes news-style posts, then the value in content will come from timeliness and exclusivity. A scoop is an exclusive story delivered at the right time and is the ultimate in value for this style of blog.

For entertainment sites, the value you deliver must be in the form of entertainment value whether that is humor, interest, or captivation. Delivering this type of value can be difficult, but extremely prized when done well.

For educational style blogs, you need to deliver knowledge in a specific area. You should be drawing on that knowledge to create good, informative posts to deliver value to your readership.

For opinion-based posts, the value is in the opinions themselves. If you have an editorial voice that holds interest, a novel angle, a well-articulated view point or an entertaining voice, then you're likely to deliver the value that has readers returning to hear what your take is on a given subject.

Delivering value is possible in all varieties of blogs. It does however take some practice and structure. A trap that new writers sometimes fall into, is to end up waffling because they have no plan of attack, but this can be avoided with the simple use of an outline.

Outlining

Start by writing your introduction and coming up with a headline. This is a very useful technique used by professional writers and journalists all over the world. You'd only need to leave the start to last if you don't know where you're going in the first place, and that approach doesn't work well in the blogging world. Having a headline and introduction means you have a clear purpose for the post and are less likely to fall into the trap of waffling.

Continue by outlining the major points you'd like to cover as sections, and even paragraphs, if you want to break it right down. If it's an opinion-based piece, you might outline your thought process to lead the reader down a

particular train of thinking. If it's a news piece, you'll want to focus on lead facts followed by supporting information.

For educational or opinion-based content, each point you're making (or each step, in the case of tutorials) will usually have two components. You make your point in clear language, and then you demonstrate it. Use anecdotal examples, case studies, links to someone else's work, or images and diagrams to show how the concepts you're discussing are used in real life.

Publishing articles and tutorials is mostly one-way communication, so the reader can't ask questions and get clarification from you the way they would in a conversation or class. The examples should demonstrate the point with the goal of making it totally clear.

Outlines can help you determine the overall structure of a post before committing to the more time consuming task of fleshing it all out.

Editing

As a blogging business entrepreneur, there's a good chance you'll be editing the work of other writers, at least until you have the capital to hire an editor to take care of the writers and their output. Hopefully you've been careful about who you hire and your writers are top-notch, but some degree of editing is always necessary, even if the content is great and you just need to make some changes so it works with the goals of your site or is more web-friendly.

Editing is a complicated profession, but there are two principles of editing that I find help professionals and beginners alike.

1. Writers may be precious about their words, but you shouldn't be.

Don't be afraid to make changes, cut chunks of text, or add content you feel is missing (or better still, have the writer go back and add it for you). Content, generally speaking, should be as sharp as possible and make for

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easy, non-repetitive reading. On the web, there's not a whole lot of room for waffle.

But let's be clear: anecdotes, interesting points, and anything that augments the main point the author is trying to make is not necessarily waffle that needs to be cut. It adds depth and dimension to the piece, and makes for more interesting reading than totally spartan content. Try to make what's already there as readable as possible, and don't cut things out until you can identify why it should go.

2. Read the article before you edit it.

If you don't, you could end up changing a sentence or cutting a piece of content that really should be there, but which you won't realize until you've finished reading the piece and have that "big picture" perspective. Leave a mark where you wanted to make an edit so you can re-assess it after your read-through. Leaving a mark and coming back to something you might want to edit after the first reading is a simple thing to do, but it makes a difference in the quality of the final product.

As an editor you need to listen to your mind and the subtle feelings that occur to you as you read (sounds a bit New-Agey, I know). Some editors spend their time looking for technical flaws that need to be fixed, which is important, but a good editor approaches the content as a reader as well, which helps you find places where the flow is broken, even if the language may be technically correct. If you find a sentence that is jarring or at any point you need to double back and re-read a sentence, then this could mean that the content isn't flowing properly, and you need to edit the phrasing, tone, and pace of the sentence until it does.

Short of learning all the rules and minutiae of correct language, the thing that'll make you a great editor is the ability to identify and rectify even the most subtly awkward phrasing. Flow is king in retaining reader attention.

Think of content flow like music: listeners get physically and mentally caught up in a good rhythm, but just one out-of-time beat can lose their attention altogether.

The Editing Process

Now that you know what to look out for, here's a process that will help you get the best results:

1. Read the Article from Start to Finish

Don't scan! Don't edit anything at this stage; leave a mark on anything you might want to come back to later.

2. Look at the "Big Picture" First

Are the sections of the article structured in the right way? Would this paragraph be more appropriate in that section? Get the structure of the content right before you move on.

3. Then Look at the "Small Picture"

The grammar and spelling, the phrasing of each sentence, the style, and tone of the author's writing voice, are all important components of the overall piece.

4. Format for Scannability

At this stage you'll be familiar enough with the content to know where the best places for headings, images, and pull quotes are.

5. Read-in-place

If you've been using the WordPress editor or something similar, preview

Quick Editing Tips

Although the purpose of this book is not to teach you to become an editor, here are some simple changes that editors will usually make to content (though not always – there are a few hard and fast rules):

- Active voice! Change passively voiced phrases to active voice. "The car hit the cat," not "The cat was hit by a car."
- Avoid repeating a word too much in a sentence or paragraph. Use a thesaurus if necessary.
- Vary pace and rhythm. Change sentence length and complexity so the piece doesn't take on a monotonous voice.
- A good editor will rectify the overuse of pronouns. Using too many pronouns makes it hard to keep track of what the writer is saying.
- Remove as many adverbs as you can get away with.

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the article as part of your site and read it through. The change of medium may help you pick up some things you didn't see before, and you can ensure your formatting works well with your blog design at the same time.

6. Schedule for Publication!

Know What You're Talking About

For content to succeed in attracting and retaining the interest of readers, it needs to be written by someone who truly knows what they're talking about. A worrying number of blogs are written by people who want to make a fast buck by tracking down a search engine keyword that seems popular and starting a blog on it, whether they know anything about the topic or not.

When writers depend on Google to find out about the topic they've been asked to write on, they don't have the context of experience to provide good advice and filter out the misinformation. It also means they won't have any genuinely new advice or realistic perspective on the topic. It's all too easy to detect this sort of content, and it's generally not helpful to the reader. If your article isn't helpful to those reading it, then you can forget about them coming back to your blog!

If you've started a blog on a topic you don't know much about, it's really essential that you hire writers who do, and leave the content generation to them. If you're planning to be the blog's sole writer until it earns enough cash to fund a writing team, then as mentioned before, you need to pick a topic for the blog that you know really well.

There is one exception to this rule and that's for blogs where you chronicle the learning process as you explore a new area of interest. For instance, you might start a blog where you post about your adventures in learning to ski or fish, so that visitors who are also interested in learning can find out how to get started and avoid the beginner mistakes you might have made.

Lists and Popular Content

Blogs need traffic to survive. If nobody's coming to your website, you're not making any money! There are a few types of content that are known for their ability to get a serious number of people to your site in a short period of time. The content isn't the only factor: how well they are promoted using social media is a big one, and as with all things, some luck is required.

You could have a great piece written for the purpose of traffic generation (often referred to as "linkbait") and execute the marketing properly and still fail. Don't let that get you down; it will happen and the only thing you can do is move on and try again.

Because linkbait is published with the hope of being picked up on social media sites and blogs with large readerships, the headline is incredibly important. A good headline is essential for getting your content noticed by the often fickle users of services such as Digg and StumbleUpon.

The List

The list article is pretty much the exemplar of linkbait in the blogging industry. When people think of linkbait, they think of the list article, and it's one of the most commonly published types of content. This is partly because it's incredibly effective when done properly, and partly because the new blogger thinks it's the easiest type of linkbait to benefit from.

The truth is that many list articles on the Internet don't succeed very well. That's not because the list post isn't effective – it truly is – but because it's approached as the "easy way" to get traffic and executed without much effort or consideration.

First you need a topic that's going to work well with the format. The list is often used as a format for humor content to great effect, but it really shines with practical information, such as "50 Ways to..." pieces.

Second, every point on the list needs to be there for a reason. Because the longer lists often attract more traffic than the short ones, people end up including filler points to beef up the count. Don't do it! You're better off

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writing a short list with great points than a really long list with a bunch of filler.

An example of the list in action is **FreelanceSwitch**'s *The Monster List of Freelance Job Sites* (<http://freelanceswitch.com/finding/the-monster-list-of-freelance-job-sites-2009-update/>). Freelancers are always looking for new places to find work and will gladly spend an hour each day checking a massive number of sites if it helps them make money, so this resource worked really well and every item refers the reader to a real, working job board they might not have known about beforehand. The post brought in massive amounts of traffic and was so popular that a 2009 update was commissioned two years after the original's publication. The update was as popular as the first post.

As I mentioned, humor list posts work well too. On the otherwise fairly serious site AudioTuts+, we ran a weekly humor list for several months that consistently brought in traffic from Digg and StumbleUpon. Check out *7 Ridiculously Upbeat Songs About Death* (<http://audio.tutsplus.com/articles/web-roundups/7-ridiculously-upbeat-songs-about-death/>) for an example.

The Tutorial

Tutorials and how-to articles are always very popular. Web surfers love to find out how to do new things, even if they never end up doing them!

Some tutorials work better than others. If nobody wants to know how to do something, nobody will want to read about how it's done! That said, sometimes the most popular pieces teach obscure (but awesome) techniques that nobody reads about simply because nobody knows they existed in the first place. Don't be afraid to publish things nobody else is publishing. Unique content is the best content you can ever publish.

We discussed demonstrating your points earlier in the chapter. It's essential that you include images, audio, or some other sort of example with each step of your tutorial. This can add visual interest for scannability, but it's also to reassure the reader that they're following along correctly!

The Interview

Interviews can do really well, but they're more of a challenge to get right than the list or tutorial.

People love celebrities (even if the person is only a celebrity to the niche of people reading your site) and those doing exceptional and unusual things. However, if you interview run-of-the-mill professionals, the reaction is generally pretty dull. It might sound a little elitist, but people generally don't care to read about someone else unless there's something that significantly separates them from the average individual.

Journalists are trained to interview subjects in a way that produces good stories, not transcribed conversations. They have an advantage in that they're trained to bypass their fear of being rude to or provoking the subject, and are willing to ask the tough questions that create entertaining pieces. If you're going to use interviews on your blog, read a few books on interview technique and practice regularly. Interviews can be really dull if done badly, and entertaining if they're done with the right subject and the right interview techniques. Take the time to get it right.

If you want to do an interview, ask lots of questions, chase every avenue of questioning, and if you find you want to ask something tough, just do it. If you can't do that, your interviews will lack the substance that makes those published by the traditional press interesting. While the traditional press may be failing due to its business model, they still know what makes compelling content. Don't make the common blogger's mistake of discounting the techniques used by the media.

If you can, avoid email interviews. They can be fine in some situations, but they give the respondent too much time to craft a press release instead of giving an honest, insightful answer. Email interviews are by far the most common on the web, and they are rarely as good as phone or live interviews.

Always get a picture of your interview subject to go at the top of the post. It's a small touch, but it gives the reader a stronger sense that the interview was conducted with a real person, whereas a wall of text doesn't have any personable qualities about it.

Breaking News

News is not an easy niche to get into because competition can be fierce. However, if you've got some breaking news in your niche and can get it published before anyone else, you've got a great opportunity to generate traffic and build your credibility. All you need to do then is drum up some interest on a variety of social media sites and hope that nobody with bigger marketing muscle steals your thunder!

Controversy

Controversy works because it gets people coming to your site to defend their position on a topic. For the blog owner, it can be a fine line to walk: on one hand, it could bring a whole bunch of new readers to your site, but if you go too far, it could alienate even more readers than you end up gaining.

Controversial posts take many forms: opinion pieces, exposés, and humor, are just three of the most common controversy starters.

The strength of controversial posts is that they generate comments and links. You want your readers to defend their point of view or expand on your argument. Other post types may bring in heavy traffic without adding to your comment count or inbound links at all. Getting your comment count beefed up may seem like a waste of time, and most blogging experts put too much of an emphasis on it, but it's important to show new visitors that they haven't stumbled upon a ghost town.

Polls

Polls are not something I'd classify as linkbait in themselves, but they do generate a lot more activity than I would have thought before I started publishing them. Readers love to be included and give their two cents, especially if they can do so without taking the time to think up their own answer.

Polls often have huge amounts of comments on them, which I believe simply indicates that answering the question gets people thinking about their opinions on the topic more than regular content does.

Polls tell the reader that you assign importance to their opinions and the interaction solidifies their relationship with your brand. While they don't generate much more traffic from outside the site, they're still a type of popular content that makes your existing readers happy.

A great tool for adding polls to your site is **PollDaddy** (<http://polldaddy.com>) which is free to use and can be customized to match your site's branding.

Frequency

New bloggers often ask how frequently they should publish new content. The right answer is highly variable. Large blogs like **Boing Boing** (<http://boingboing.com>), **Lifehacker** (<http://lifehacker.com>), and **Mashable** (<http://mashable.com>) publish new pieces dozens of times a day. Others, such as **Steve Pavlina's** personal development blog (<http://stevepavlina.com>), often won't see new content for weeks.

There are several factors involved:

- What kind of content do you publish?
- How long do readers take to digest your content?
- Who is your audience?
- What sort of resources can you commit to the publishing machine?

Type of Content

Boing Boing and Lifehacker are characterized by short, interesting posts. They often contain an introductory paragraph, a quote, an image, and a link. Mashable publishes the Internet and social media news of the day, many times a day.

If you're publishing news or light and interesting posts that can be consumed *en masse*, then you should be publishing multiple times a day. There are some exceptions when it comes to news. If you're covering a slow niche, don't try to contort something into news just to boost your frequency.

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Meaty content such as tutorials and how-to information or lengthy opinion pieces can be published less regularly, usually no more than once a day. This content takes a while to digest and readers won't be ready for another piece immediately afterwards.

Type of Audience

How much time does your audience have to read posts? How long is their attention span? Busy professionals may have a longer attention span but don't have a lot of time; pack information-rich content into small portions but don't water it down, and don't publish so often that it is overwhelming.

On the other hand, teenagers interested in gaming may not have the greatest attention spans but they do have plenty of time. There's no harm in publishing lots of short, image-filled posts over the course of the day!

Another thing to consider is how your audience will keep up to date with your site.

Before RSS came along, post frequency was a really important issue. If you didn't update your site frequently enough, people would eventually give up on checking back for new content and you'd lose traffic like crazy. Now, RSS will let your readers know when new content is available without them having to take any action, which makes it easier to retain readers while publishing less.

Unfortunately, RSS is not a universally well-known technology and is mostly used by the tech-savvy crowd of people who work in IT or are publishing via social media themselves. If the people who are going to read your blog are not computer and social media literate people, you need to publish more frequently just so they don't give up on checking back.

That said, make an effort to educate your readers on RSS and give them the option of subscribing via email, a service that can be provided by Google's **Feedburner** (<http://feedburner.google.com>). Make it clear that they can keep up with the site without any effort.

More important than getting people to check back is getting people involved. If you don't publish frequently, people don't get enough of an

opportunity to participate in comments and forge relationships with authors or fellow readers, or even just the subconscious attachment that occurs from repeated exposure to the site.

Those who form an attachment to the community on the site are the most likely to purchase your products, subscription services, and generally contribute to making your site a successful enterprise so this audience is worth spending time on to develop.

Available Resources

You may want to publish twenty times a day, but if you can only afford to publish three times a week there's nothing you can do about it but publish three times a week.

The key – and this really applies whether you post frequently or rarely – is to make those three pieces of content worth the wait. They shouldn't be “good enough” pieces; you want your readers to feel anticipation for the next one.

That's also the hidden blessing in publishing less often. Your readers have time to breathe and anticipate the next post. If there's always a new one sitting there in the morning, they'll never feel like they miss your site because they haven't had a chance to miss it, and creating that feeling in your customers does amazing things for your brand.

Maybe you have resources, but do you want to waste them? Experiment and find out whether or not your readership is ignoring content published at certain times. Some blogs are popular during the week and yet totally ignored on weekends. Why waste money by continuing to publish content that might be ignored?

Frequency Matters, But There are Bigger Priorities

The bottom line is that you should determine the frequency that suits your blog and the type of content you'll be publishing. Try to stick to it, but remember that the *quality* of your posts is the more important factor. If you

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can manage either ten mediocre posts a week or one great post a week, the latter is the best option.

Quality Evergreen Content

“Evergreen content” is content that will stay relevant for the life of your blog. It’s also content that is valuable for which people will continue to look for in the years to come.

Let’s look at books for a parallel. A book on criminal law published in 1850 is no longer relevant, other than as a piece of historical curiosity, and will usually no longer be in print. On the other hand, the writings of Plato are still published thousands of years later because they discuss concepts that will only cease to be relevant to us if humanity itself ceases to exist.

The problem with the Internet is that search engines are slow. It can take days, weeks, months, and even years on occasion, to get a good piece of content listed. If the content you’re publishing has a short shelf-life, then the effort put into getting content indexed goes to waste. This sort of content needs to be promoted via social media to generate traffic before it gets too old. Content that is useful forever continues to turn one-off search engine visitors into regulars for years to come.

I believe a piece of quality evergreen content, sometimes referred to as pillar content, has the following characteristics:

- It is relevant forever (or at least for a really long time!)
- It never, or at least rarely, needs to be updated.
- It is written to do well in the search engines, without compromising on human readability.
- It attracts inbound links from other websites.
- It serves as a platform for bringing new visitors deeper into the site.

You’ll notice that I am not focusing on social media appeal or fast traffic-generating ability here. Linkbait is about getting a huge injection of traffic to the site quickly. It doesn’t last long and not many of the visitors are going to stick around, but it gets the site’s name out there and known.

On the other hand, evergreen content is about the slow and steady race. You start off with no traffic, and over time, the article's position in the search engines improves because it's useful enough to receive links from other blogs. Eventually, you get large amounts of traffic from search engines on a daily basis, but it's a slow process.

Publishing Evergreen Content

There are a good many people out there who believe that you should only ever publish evergreen content. It's not the best strategy. We've established that linkbait and evergreen content are very different, and each serves a different purpose. A good strategy is to publish a mixture of the two along with more general content in between.

It's important to launch with quality evergreen content and it's the sort of content you want to publish most frequently in the very beginning. Of course you'll want to continue publishing evergreen content over the course of the blog's life, but it's especially important to get it out there right at the start because you want to secure good search engine rankings and a number of inbound links from the get-go.

Identify Problems and Solve Them

It's easy to get stuck for ideas with evergreen content, when posting another top ten list just seems so easy to throw together. The easiest way to come up with new evergreen content is to identify the problems people interested in your niche are having, and then solve them with an article. The reader you're after is the person typing, "How do I..." into Google.

Since you're (hopefully) no longer a beginner in the area you're writing about, some of the problems neophytes encounter won't come to mind right away – they seem too obvious to you now! Observe and interact with these people and find out what they're struggling with. Keep a running list of content ideas on your computer so you don't forget them.

Evergreen content is often how-to content. Keep in mind that it can also come in the form of less hands-on but equally useful educational posts, like

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a series of articles on the principles and theory of graphic design – in this case you'd be writing about the theory behind selecting color schemes as opposed to going through a step-by-step process in Photoshop.

Bringing Users Deeper Into the Site

Evergreen content serves as an entry point for new visitors to your site from search engines and inbound links, and it is high-quality stuff that gets people to stick around. Make sure they do stick around by linking to other content from your blog in relevant places. If there's a side note about a topic that's been covered in more detail elsewhere on the blog, link it up so that people who are interested in that topic go deeper into the site.

The more of your content visitors read, and the more time they spend on the site, the more likely it is you'll earn their loyalty.

Making Money from Evergreen Content

It's hard to make an affiliate sale or entice a reader to click on a contextual ad from a top ten list; the reader is a regular at the site, or came from a social media promotion, or is just reading for entertainment.

Evergreen content fulfills a need. It's a stable resource that educates the reader, who has probably discovered your article after seeking answers from Google. As we discussed in the previous section, your reader has a problem that needs solving, and the person with a problem is the best customer if you have a product that can solve it.

News Content

Many of the biggest blogs are built around delivering large quantities of short news posts a day. This style of content is kept very simple, and the focus is mostly on finding the news and reporting it in a timely manner.

Although it is possible to use the Internet as your news gathering tool, avoid simply rehashing everything. It's much more fulfilling and will deliver much more value, if you can actually break news yourself!

This will mean sending reporters to launch events, developing industry contacts, and growing your blog to become a place where press releases and news items are sent.

The advantage of news posts is that it's possible to churn out a relatively large amount of content for a relatively low budget.

In order to balance this sort of short post, it's a good idea to run periodic opinion-based content, heavy investigative pieces, and other long-form posts. These feature articles are essentially the evergreen content of the news blog model.

Filler Posts

Budgets don't usually support dozens of feature articles a week, especially not in the beginning. Even if you're happy with two feature articles a week, it can also help to post posts, in order some filler to keep the momentum going between one feature and another. If your content is very meaty, filler posts are a great way to break them up with something a little lighter.

The key is to make sure that your filler posts, while not as in-depth as a feature article, still serve some purpose and satisfy one of the reader's needs, whether it be education, entertainment, discussion, or just passing on links they may enjoy from elsewhere on the web.

Here are a few types of filler posts to consider:

- Link round-ups
- Polls
- Ask the readers
- Workshops
- Quick tips
- Humor

These all serve some sort of purpose for the reader. Filler posts that are useless and obviously exist just to increase the blog's post count don't just fill in the time between feature posts; they cause readers to unsubscribe and damage your reputation.

Link Round-ups

A link round-up is a list of links to great content you've discovered around the web. The list usually contains a quote from the page you're referencing or a short summary. If you fire up Google Reader to read your favorite sites every morning, this won't create much extra work for you. Those of you who are not avid blog readers will have to forage for links (or hire someone to find them for you).

Polls

Polls were discussed in our section on popular content. They're also listed here because they're quick and easy to come up with and publish, particularly with the help of a service like PollDaddy. The great thing about polls is that they provide you with information about your readers that you can use to come up with content that is more likely to appeal to them.

Ask the Readers

Ask the Readers are open-mic-style posts where you simply pose a question for your readers to answer in the comments. These posts are similar to polls, but you're giving away the ability to turn the responses into tabulated data in order to obtain more thorough and creative responses.

Initially these posts provide readers with a way to get involved with the site and leave their opinions. As more comments are left, the post becomes a resource in its own right – people who search Google for the question you've posed, looking for answers, will find the experiences in your comments valuable.

Workshops

If your blog is about teaching people how to do something, you can run workshops that provide readers with a chance to submit their works-in-progress for feedback from other community members.

We've done this on AudioTuts+ by giving readers the chance to get feedback on their song mixes, but you could do it just as easily on a site about woodworking, for example. In that hypothetical scenario, readers might send in photographs of their projects, and then other, more experienced readers, would give them feedback on what they're doing well and what they're doing wrong.

Quick Tips

Quick tips, or a Tip of the Day post, provide simple advice in 250 words or less. This type of content is so short and easy to come up with, but can give readers plenty to think about, that it might just work in lieu of a longer article. This content is also versatile in that it can augment your daily planned content, or fill in for it entirely once in a while.

Humor

Articles with a focus on humor are often full-length posts, but they can also make for filler content, particularly in the form of jokes, which are short, easy to read, and entertaining.

If you consider yourself to be pretty funny and want to write your own jokes, these pieces are more labor and resource-intensive and require a certain type of writer to get it right, but they're still great filler because they serve to lighten the mood between meatier posts.

A valid alternative, though not as good as having your own original humor content, is to find and quote jokes with proper attribution.

Images and Diagrams

As a rule of thumb, you should never publish a post without at least one image. You should always have an image right at the top; between the headline and introductory paragraph is one good spot for a picture, or you could have it lined up on the left or right of that first paragraph.

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Wherever you put it, to be clear, you should avoid publishing a post without at least one image in it. Images really freshen up a page, and work best if they are above the fold where they are easily seen.

Above the fold simply means the image is visible when the page loads without having to scroll down. What constitutes “above the fold” is different with every screen size and resolution, so you want the first image to be as high up on the page as possible to attract the attention of those readers with smaller monitors.

Newspapers have dedicated a massive chunk of front-page real estate to images for decades now. You’ll notice that the headlines are biggest on the front page too – that’s because well-chosen images and headlines are the most important factors in grabbing attention and getting people to purchase that day’s paper (or in your case, stick around and read your blog).

Using Images to Break Up the Page

Blogs have an advantage over newspapers in that they have the ability to use a lot of images without concern for page count, or extra print costs. You don’t want to smother your article with images, but a great tactic is to make sure an image is always on the screen so that long tracts of paragraphs are frequently broken up by some color. Most people recoil in fear at the sight of unbroken text; it’s just too hard to keep the eyes focused on it for long.

That doesn’t mean you should insert a new image in your post every two paragraphs, but set up your post so that once you’ve scrolled down far enough that the first image is no longer visible, a second one is coming into view.

Of course, it’s impossible to format the piece so this works on every resolution, but that’s okay, this is just a rule of thumb. If you can line up your images like this on the most common consumer resolution at the time of publication, you’ll have a good balance of images and text at just about any resolution.

In a post where the focus is on written content, this rule of thumb is a maximum. You wouldn’t want to break it up more than that, otherwise it

becomes too distracting, takes too long to load, and the scrollbar extends forever. Of course if your post is a showcase of great portfolio designs or trendy business cards, you can have a post that consists of nothing but images (in this case you may even like to use text to break up the page!).

That maximum is accompanied by a minimum. You'd do well to ensure that for posts under 2,000 words there's at least one image, and for anything over that, you need one image for the first 2,000 words and another for each 1,000 over that. You will do better with more, but we're talking about the least you can get away with after all!

How Relevant Should Images Be?

Try to ensure that every image is at least somewhat relevant to the content it represents, but you'll often need to make the most of limited options when it comes to images. Do the best you can with what you have.

Ideally, if you're using five images in an article, each image will be specifically relevant to the section it's in or the closest paragraph.

Diagrams

One tool at your disposal is the use of diagrams to explain content visually. Sometimes words just don't do a topic justice and the reader needs to see a representation of it in order to understand it.

There are a range of tools you could use to create diagrams of varying quality, from Microsoft Word to Apple Pages for the average consumer with an office suite, or Photoshop or Illustrator at the other end of the spectrum with the creative professional. But even if you don't know Photoshop, you're still a professional, and if you think you'll need to create diagrams regularly, there's middle of the road software specifically for creating diagrams that's more professional than Word or Pages, but not as much of an overkill as using Photoshop or Illustrator. Look into OmniGraffle for the Mac and Microsoft Visio for Windows. Dia is an open source solution for Windows and Linux users.

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For those of you who don't have a designer mentality, remember to use the color palette of your site when designing diagrams. If you don't do this, they might look a little out of place!

For feature pieces, creating diagrams could even be something you'd offload to your freelance designer to get consistent visual branding in your articles. The bigger your budget and audience is, the more this is worth doing.

Where to Find Images

You need to make a choice upfront: Do you want lower quality but free images, or higher quality but inexpensive images?

High-resolution stock photography at large sizes can be expensive, but the smaller sizes that you need for use on the web are quite affordable. Personally, I'd rather spend \$1 for a cool photo to go with each post (that's only \$7 a week if you're publishing each day) than have a terrible image turning potential readers off.

Images you can use for free can be found at **stock.xchng** (<http://sxc.hu>), though be careful to check the terms, as some images will require attribution and some will not. Despite the macabre name, **morgueFile** (<http://morguefile.com>) is another popular choice for free files, and even **Flickr** (<http://flickr.com>) can deliver, but you'll need to search for images licensed under the appropriate Creative Commons license using Advanced Search.

If you're willing to pay a little cash for better images, there are a plethora of options. The most well known microstock site is **iStockPhoto** (<http://istockphoto.com>), but **Fotolia** (<http://fotolia.com>) is fast gaining.

For celebrity and news photography you can try **Getty Images'** Editorial Content division (<http://gettyimages.com/EditorialImages>) or **PixMac's** celebrity category (<http://pixmac.com/celebrity>).

Alternatively, if you'd rather have illustrations instead of photography, **GraphicRiver** (<http://graphicriver.net>) has a great range of images, from people to monsters to fruit.

At the end of the day you can certainly find some free images that are great quality, particularly under a Creative Commons Attribution license. Paying for a stock photo just means you'll spend less time looking for something that's visually appealing and high quality.

Headlines

The headline is just as important as the piece that follows it.

For some writers, it can be hard to accept that five to ten words that are generally written in the space of a minute are equal in importance to the hours of work you, or one of your writers, put into writing an article, but the truth is that your work doesn't matter unless someone reads it, and that's what the headline's job is: to get people to read your work.

Over the years I've observed that one of the most important factors determining whether a piece is well-read or not, is the quality of the headline. A headline needs to not only describe accurately what the reader will find when they read the piece, but make it enticing and compelling to do so. It's a tricky balance to achieve at times.

There's also another kind of reader to consider: the search engine. While you should never fall into the trap of writing for the search engines, you should certainly take them into consideration while writing for the human reader.

Actively Seek Inspiration

To find out what sort of headlines have been working for decades, you need only consult the mainstream media who've got snagging an impulse purchase from you at the checkout line down to an art.

Headlines Galore!

A really great resource to help sharpen your headline writing skills, is Chris Garrett's FREE PDF: 102 Proven Social Media Headline Formulas (<http://socialmediaworkbook.com/102-headline-formulas/>), which contains 102 fill-in-the-blanks, tried and tested headline formulas.

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If you really want to study headlines that grab for attention, browse through the women's magazines at the news agency. You'll see things that might look a bit trashy ("How Normal is Your Sex Life?"), but which are hard to resist. What we're interested in here is finding formulas that work.

In our women's magazine example, the formula would seem to be "How ___ is Your ___" on the surface. But headlines aren't about words, they're about emotions and what sort of questions they evoke from the reader. The headline first has the reader wanting to find out how they measure up – it's a self-esteem thing and the odd human desire to be judged – and offers readers the possibility of reassurance and validation if they do.

You need to look beyond the words in the formula and ask what those few words are doing to the reader on an emotional level.

Where's the Benefit?

One important question to ask when writing headlines is, "What benefit will the reader see in this title?" That question can turn a generic title into a focused, effective one. Make it clear.

A FreelanceSwitch article, "The Business Name Checklist for Freelancers", promises the reader a way to ensure they choose a business name that's going to work in the marketplace. The benefit of clicking on the headline and reading the whole article is immediately clear.

It doesn't need to be that obvious. We discussed what the reader will get out of the article "How Normal is Your Sex Life?" but the benefits aren't explicitly stated; they're very much there, but in a subtle way that plays on the subconscious mind, and is the mark of an expert headline writer.

Understanding the Target Audience is Key

Headlines make a promise that excites the reader's interest. At the most basic level, that's what makes them work. But they have to make a promise to a specific kind of reader.

Ultimately, even the most effective headline is going to fail to interest a large majority of readers. One of the most important things you can do is

to understand the target audience and cater to them. Be as specific as possible, and don't fall into the trap of trying to please everyone.

For a controversial example, you've got an article on the history of abortion and whether your audience is liberal or conservative is going to influence the angle, in both the story and the headline, considerably. Come up with a few headlines based on this example as an exercise in how considerably different they'll be when catered to different readers.

Plausibility

For many years the Internet was rife with implausible headlines promising to teach you how to become rich or lose weight overnight. In fact, it still is, we've just (for the most part) become blind to them.

Though for a while those ridiculous headlines did work on a large portion of the Internet-surfing population, plausible but exciting headlines have always done better than ridiculous ones. Compare:

"How to Lose Your Fat in 48 Hours with This Amazing Detox" (based on a real Foxtel ad)

"How to Lose 10% of Your Body Fat in 8 Weeks" (something that people can actually do, but often aren't very good at)

Which would you be more likely to click on if you were looking for a way to lose weight?

Keep a Black Book of Headline Formulas

As you learn which types of headlines work, through trial and error and research, keep a record of those that worked for you, and even those that didn't. Until creating headlines becomes an instinct, this will help you when you're stuck. It'll help you find a formula that worked for you in the past and avoid those that failed.

Eventually, formulating headlines really does become an instinct. You don't need to think so much about how to word it so that the article content is described and how to hook the reader – it just happens, and as with all things, you just need to keep at it!

Write the Headline First

Most kids are taught that you should always write titles, introductions, and conclusions last. Unfortunately, this tactic promotes sloppy thinking and sloppy articles. It's important to know where you're going from the start, and writing the headline first helps you define your angle and the content you'll cover. It keeps the article on target.

While as a blog owner or editor you may not be writing the content, giving your authors a title to work with can yield good results. If you don't want to come up with the article idea, have them pitch one to you and then give them a title.

Popular Content and Headlines

Earlier in this chapter we examined popular content, and part of the reason those types of content work so well is because the naturally evident headlines lend themselves to success.

Words like "How to..." instantly create interest, as humans are inherently driven to learn how to do new things. List posts catch our attention because "7 Ways to..." must be better than learning just one method.

A list post featuring food that McDonald's used to make and has since discontinued with a headline like "Past McDonald's Products" won't work as well as "12 McDonald's Products that Failed" will. Don't cripple the effectiveness of popular content by hiding what makes them work in the headline.

Practice and Analyze

It's your job to practice the art of headline writing and analyzing the results from a business perspective. I haven't given you a list of formulas to use like many resources on headlines do because I believe that unless you understand how your headlines work you won't become adept at this skill.

You need to deduce those formulas yourself, to understand why they work in order and in which situations they will work.

Style and Tone

Style and tone are hard to measure, but they are factors that will be important to the success of your blog.

Your content needs to be informative and your headlines need to be compelling, but it's still all for nothing if readers feel like the content is boring, dull, passive, negative, condescending, or any other number of rather negative adjectives.

Most publications have a fairly unique style and tone. It feels strange when one of their articles, every so often, fails to capture it. Even when that publication is staffed by many writers, it still needs to be cohesive.

This is achieved in a few ways:

- Most publications create a style guide or employ an existing one.
- They educate writers on the tone and attitude that the content should convey.
- They educate writers on the angles and positions that should be taken on any particular issues important to the publication and its target audience.
- They ensure that editors do whatever it takes to bring content in line with the publication's style and tone.
- They ensure that editors provide writers with feedback on all aspects of their work, including issues of style and tone.

What is Style?

Style pertains to the style of writing employed – active versus passive voice, American versus British English, and sometimes includes formatting

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instructions. Style is about the technical matters of language that must be attended to in order to ensure the publication's consistency.

Style Guides

Style guides can be gargantuan works that provide the author with instructions on everything from which style of measurement to use to whether the publication in question uses a period after abbreviated salutations such as Mr and Mrs.

They can also be one-pagers that convey the basics, such as which style of English to use (American, British or any of those between), how to format content for the web and/or print, and so on.

If you want a short style guide but you don't want to go to the trouble of getting a complete one done, find an existing style guide from another publication and have your writers and editors learn it.

What is Tone?

Where the style of a publication dictates the technical requirements of language for publication, tone is about its emotional content.

Does the content focus on remaining objective, informative, and emotionally neutral as an encyclopedia would? Or does it have a sense of fun and encourage writers to make jokes and use a conversational tone as if speaking to a friend? Perhaps a drier, more British sense of humor is encouraged and the content is ironic and satiric (I'm thinking of political blogs in particular here).

Tone is about how writers should emotionally engage with readers.

Tone Guides?

I've never seen any such thing as a tone guide. You can't exactly tell a writer how to be funny, or how to stroke the heartstrings in a sad story.

Tone is something you discuss with a writer during the hiring phase. You have them read the site, and you tell them what kind of writing you're after.

Ask to see portfolio examples that reflect the tone you're after when you're hiring. Developing emotion in content is something that not all writers are good at, and most tend to excel in some of these areas and not in others. Many are good at sarcasm, but few do well with satire.

Of course, in order to explain the tone of writing you need, you yourself need to know it in the first place. It's important that you can define it succinctly and without hesitation if asked – not because you might be asked, but because you can't run the blog if you don't know these sort of things.

Staying Positive

I believe it's important to stay positive. Nobody likes to read content filled with endless negativity and doom and gloom! This doesn't mean you can't tackle tough content; you just have to know how to go about it.

Even if your blog is on the devastating effects of climate change, write your articles from a hopeful perspective. Be honest about the negatives, but let the reader know what they can do to help the situation.

If your climate change blog is trying to raise awareness, then you need to provide readers with hope in order to motivate them to take action.

Similarly, if you're trying to sell something through your blogging business, stay upbeat. Don't be emotionally void, as many sales sites are. The sales sites that work best engage the reader emotionally, and in a positive way.

Respecting the Reader

Don't let anyone posting on your blogs insult the reader's intelligence. Don't let them be condescending. Have your editors on the lookout for the kind of language that creates this unpleasant feeling in the reader's mind.

It might not be explicit. One tutorial writer used to include the words "don't we?" at the end of every sentence, as if he were speaking to a child. It doesn't explicitly state: "You're an idiot who knows nothing about this topic and you should nod and agree with everything I say," but it sure is the feeling you get after seeing this a few dozen times.

While the writer probably didn't mean to be condescending, a quick chat about this kind of language put an end to it.

The moral of the story: respect your reader. They're paying your bills.



GENERATING TRAFFIC

Before you can make money from your blogs, you need to get people visiting them. You could be selling products directly to the visitor, or selling the audience you've developed to advertisers, but at the end of the day every source of income you'll derive from your blogs depends to some degree on traffic.

Something that goes hand-in-hand with generating traffic is measuring and analyzing it. After all, how will you know if you're actually generating any traffic if you don't have a way of finding out how many people, and to a degree what kind of people, are coming to your site.

That's why it's important that, before you go and read and implement the traffic-generating methods outlined in the rest of this chapter, you implement a traffic statistics service.

Google Analytics

Google Analytics is one of the many traffic statistics services out there. It's free and it records in-depth data, and has many advanced features such as the ability to track conversions.

Head to <http://www.google.com/analytics> to sign up – you can use an existing Google account if you have one. Once you've logged in, Google will guide you through the process of setting up your first site. You'll then be given some tracking code to place in your blog's theme.

Visits, Visitors and Pageviews

Three important terms for dealing with traffic are:

- **Visits:** Instances of people coming to your site
- **Visitors or Unique Visitors:** Individual people who come to your site
- **Pageviews:** The number of times that each page of your site has been loaded

You can divide the pageviews by the number of visits to find out how many pages the average visitor views. For example, if you've had five visits to your site today and fifteen pageviews, the average visitor views three pages per visit before leaving.

This gives you an idea of how interesting your site is. If your pageviews are about equal to your visitors count, it may mean that your site isn't attracting people to stick around and explore. Consequently they arrive and immediately leave, totaling just one pageview per visit. While this happens for some users no matter what site you have, it shouldn't be the average as that should be taking into account people who explore deeply through the site.

A typical pageview per visitor ratio is about 2 or 3 pages per visit. This takes into account the people who leave immediately, or who just visit from their RSS reader to read the latest post, and balances them out with people who stick around for a long time.

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Analytics will provide you with another useful statistic that's relatively similar in terms of what it tells you, and that's how long (in minutes and seconds) the average user spends on your site. You may discover that despite your pageviews-to-visitors ratio being fairly low, the average user spends five to ten minutes on your site because you publish lengthy and engaging pieces.

Comparisons

One feature of Google Analytics that is particularly useful is the *compare date range* feature. On any page showing you a traffic graph over time, click on the arrow next to the date range text above the graph and you'll see a calendar appear. Tick "Compare to Past" and fill in the date ranges you'd like to compare.

Using this feature you can easily see how much you've grown in comparison to a certain timeframe. Maybe you're comparing 2010 to 2009, or just one month against another. Either way, this tool is great for seeing how your short-term growth compares to your long-term growth.

To be honest, it's also handy when you're feeling a bit discouraged about week-after-week traffic, because you'll usually feel better after seeing how far you've come in a year!

Visitor Demographics

It's important to keep your eye on visitor demographics because it can give you hints as to how you should tailor your content.

Americans and New Zealanders may want to read different things, as might people using Firefox and Internet Explorer. It's up to you to make an analysis and determine how these users are different, but if you pay enough attention, you can make a real difference in the quality of your content for the people that are most interested in your site.

There's also the possibility that you're trying to engage a certain demographic, so it's good to be able to tell whether you're succeeding or not.

Google Analytics provides quite a bit of demographic information, including location, ISP, connection speed, and information about the user's browser and operating system.

A lot can be gleaned from this seemingly useless technical data; if many of your users are coming from a university network, you're no doubt attracting a bunch of students. If your users are on dial-up, they may be older people or not very good with computers. It can also be an indicator of socio-economic status in certain countries where high-speed Internet is pricy. If your visitors are coming from a bilingual country, you can also determine what language they speak.

Traffic Source

Traffic source is one of the most useful types of data that Analytics records. It's very helpful to know where visitors are coming from, which search engine keywords you're doing well with, and so on.

You can find out who is linking to you and thank them (it's good public relations and holds you in good stead for the future). You can determine which target audiences you've attempted to draw traffic from are working best, and change your search optimization strategies for coming months based on how effective search traffic has been for you in the past.

Content

Finally, it's important to know which content items are doing well. Certain pieces will do wonderfully and others will flunk. Knowing which articles did well, helps you plan content for the future. There's no point in continuing to spend money on something that isn't working for your site.

Not only does Analytics provide you with the number of pageviews each content piece attracted in a given timeframe, you can also see how the visitor navigated your site and view a click overlay – a tool that shows you where the hot spots of activity on your site's layout are.

Analyzing the Data

Once you find out how your visitors are interacting with the site, what they're reading, how long they're spending on each page, and how they're leaving, you can analyze the data to find out what's going wrong for you and what's working.

If visitors happily read a single page for five minutes before leaving, maybe you're not doing enough to funnel them to other parts of the site or get their contact details onto your mailing list.

Maintaining Focus

The number one hobby of bloggers isn't blogging. It's checking stats. Don't become too obsessed with checking your numbers and hoping for immediate surges of traffic.

Tempting as it is, this can be a major time-wasting activity. There are many hours of productive work you could put into generating traffic during the time that so many bloggers (myself included) spend refreshing stats. If you don't have this problem, you may find it hard to believe that people really do sit there refreshing their stats all day!

Secondly, it gets discouraging. Your site might be growing quite well – new blogs tend to grow quite slowly, so a few new visitors a day is fine right at the beginning. But if you spend all your time watching the stats and anticipating the next visitor to stumble onto your site, you'll get frustrated and disillusioned. This loss of perspective and impatience has caused many bloggers to throw their hands in the air and quit. It really is a bit like watching grass grow or paint dry – it takes time!

Perspective is such a difficult thing to keep in blogging. There are stats to check, feed items to read, tweets to make, and other social media sites to get involved in. In fact it's possible to get so distracted that you lose focus on the thing you're meant to be focusing on: blogging! Measurement and analysis really should be treated as feedback tools.

Basic Techniques for Generating Traffic

Traffic generation is a complex business of trial and error. It often involves a lot of tinkering with strategies and techniques to find the ones that suit you best. And most of all it's a case of building momentum.

Early on, your traffic will be small and efforts to increase it will often have small increases. Over time you can get bigger and bigger wins as you not only fine-tune your techniques, but also build momentum behind the site in post quantities, readership, and brand awareness.

Grassroots Techniques

For those just getting started, grassroots techniques can be very helpful. There are different phases of site growth where certain methods are more effective than others, and some rely on a certain amount of critical mass (particularly with regard to generating traffic from social media). Grassroots techniques have that name because they don't require anything except some enthusiasm. If you and your site don't have a following yet, you'll need to start at the very beginning, and that means:

- Getting people to link to your articles
- Participating in forums
- Leaving comments on other blogs
- Developing your social media profile
- Networking

The most effective means of traffic generation often involve you, your staff, or your friends having well-developed social media profiles with plenty of reach, or money. These techniques don't require any of the above points, except perhaps networking, but we'll discuss that in a moment.

Asking for Inbound Links

This simply means publishing great content (and for this to work, I do mean *great* content) and then reaching out to influential people who might be interested in that content.

Here's the thing: all influential people are busy. If they weren't, they wouldn't be influential. There are people competing for their attention all day long, and they have their own job to do.

They may ignore you – not to discourage you, but that's just how it is.

So when you send them content, you need to make sure it's your best, or they'll blacklist you as someone who likes to waste their time. You then need to sit back and hope that they read your message to begin with. Many will not, and it's not something you can really blame them for.

Your email needs to be personable, honest, and humble. Simply direct them to your piece and suggest that if they find it useful, you'd appreciate a link.

A single link – even from a big blog – doesn't always mean a whole lot of traffic, and it certainly won't mean overnight success. This is a long-term endeavor, and you're just building up a foundation of inbound links and a trickle of traffic to start you off. Once you build enough of these inbound links the hard way, the trickle will add up to something worthwhile, but remember that it takes work to get to that point.

Be patient. Be persistent. And get used to people ignoring your emails.

Forum Participation

Forums are great because they allow you to identify a bunch of highly targeted individuals who you know for a fact are interested in whatever it is you're publishing content about.

Marketers realized this many years ago, and unfortunately for us, the abuse of these communities means there are a lot of obstacles in the way between them and you promoting your site.

This can be a good thing: if you were a participant in one of these communities, as you wouldn't have to filter out more promotional material than actual discussion. But it's still something you'll have to deal with nonetheless.

The best thing to do is to become a bona-fide contributing member of the forum, answering questions and helping people, participating in discussions and debates, and generally becoming a well-known contributor of the forums, before you can even think about including your URL in a signature without raising eyebrows.

This is a very time-consuming process, and it's tough becoming known as one of the forum's regulars, which is why once most blog owners start developing an audience of their own, they stop maintaining their presence on forums. There comes a certain point where it doesn't provide enough of a return for the time invested. But, when you've only got two or three readers on your site and one of them is your mother, it's certainly a way to attract some interest and make some relevant contacts without spending money.

Leaving Comments on Blogs

As most blog commenting sections allow you to have your name link to your blog, this is a good way to get other bloggers to notice you, interact with those who read the other blog, and hopefully get some of them back onto your website.

As with forums, there is etiquette to consider. Bloggers don't appreciate "yes man" comments that show you didn't read the post or ones that aim to incite their readers (yes, some bloggers think inciting a comment war on a competitor's site is a great way to draw some attention).

Make sure you also use your real name or your pseudonym, not your blog's name, and certainly not keywords pertaining to your blog.

Contribute something that's actually helpful to the people who will read your comment and you'll be fine. If you're finding that it's a stretch to come up with something to say, then don't comment just for the sake of it!

Generating Traffic

Finally, in the world of blogging, there's plenty of room at the top. You don't need to approach all your competitors like competitors. Think of it as being about cooperating and sharing knowledge, at least in terms of your relationship with other blog owners, and you'll be more successful in the long run.

If they don't like you, they won't link to you. Earning a link in one of their posts means a lot more to readers than the link on your name in the comment section.

Developing Your Social Media Profile

This comes in handy for traffic generation much later on as you develop a following, but in the meantime, it's a way to meet contacts and make friends. Some of those people might be starting blogs of their own with similar readership levels, publishing content relevant to yours, and therefore you can exchange links to share with your readers.

You might get lucky and befriend someone who's already established. Most established bloggers like to point out someone who is new to the scene but offering something helpful – the hard part is getting on their radar.

Either way, developing social media profiles is something every blog owner, editor, or writer should do, and will help you both now, and when it's more established. We'll go into using social media more in the next section of this chapter.

Networking!

Unless you've got a bit of a fan club of your own, you've probably found that I wasn't lying when I said busy and influential people will ignore you (a lot).

In the process of researching these people before you contacted them, you may have noticed some of the people who they do interact with, who are a bit more accessible to you. It could be an employee or a friend of the person you want to contact.

The best way to get in touch with people in high places is to befriend these people and help them out. Just chat and send them cool links or do them a

favor and build a relationship with them for the moment. You can ask for an introduction later on when it's appropriate.

Take the time to care about the person first, because there are undoubtedly many others who contact them wanting nothing more than that introduction. I don't believe in using people; if I can meet someone influential after I help someone they know, that's great for both of us.

Networking with other bloggers, regardless of their influence, is generally a good practice purely in terms of being part of the blogging community, learning from each other and helping each other out. When I started out in blogging, I spent a lot of time reaching out to other bloggers who were also starting out, and the occasional links, feedback, and camaraderie was well worth it! In fact, one of the bloggers I met two months in to blogging is now a top 100 blogger and runs a rather huge site called ZenHabits! So you never know who you might be befriending.

More Advanced Methods

This section puts the focus on grassroots methods of traffic generation, the kind of techniques you need to resort to right at the beginning, especially when you're bootstrapping your business. The rest of this chapter will focus on more advanced techniques that the professionals use on a day-to-day basis, but like everything that's highly effective, some can cost you in social or fiscal capital.

Social Media Basics

The term "social media" refers to Internet services that enable users to share and discuss information.

This means everything from social networks like Twitter and Facebook to social information sites like Wikipedia fall under the umbrella of "social media."

From the perspective of someone interested in it as a business tool, social media is about generating word-of-mouth traffic, where influencers (and

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regular users) pass your links and ideas on to one another, proliferating them further through email to peers, links published in posts on their blog, or sharing content on social networks.

Social media does two things, each by way of making new connections with other people and businesses:

- It helps you spread your brand
- It helps you spread your ideas

Both equate to very similar things, because your ideas reinforce, support, and define your brand. What are some of the things you want to do with social media, and how do they help you?

Make Friends

Forget about getting links to your site out there for a moment. Relationships with the right people can get you further than links, and this is where social media is really useful: it puts you in touch with people. People who use social media are making themselves accessible.

They might not be easily accessible, but you still have a better chance of interacting with someone influential in this sphere than any other if they've opened themselves up to it and participate in these social networks.

Tweeting your links might get you a few new visitors a day, but making the right friends can get your links far, far more than that.

Expand Your Readership

If you're networking with the right people and publishing great content on your blog, undoubtedly a portion of your new contacts are going to check out your blog and become a reader.

There are a number of techniques people use to achieve this. The most common way is simply to share links to new posts on your blog as a status update or tweet. Some people opt to simply include a link in their bio and focus on meeting new people and engaging with them. This results in fewer

clicks through to your site, but those who do, are more interested in you and what you do.

Of course, you need to be mindful of etiquette. Linking to yourself too often is equivalent to sending people spam emails, and the last thing anyone making a living from the web wants to do is to be perceived as a spammer.

Many Twitter accounts and Facebook pages link to new posts as they're published and this can bring in an influx of new traffic – it seems that many people are steering clear of the RSS reader these days, preferring to let their social network contacts dictate what they read through posting links and retweets.

Social media is good at directing traffic to your blogs if you use it properly, but I have to say that I've found that it's much more effective at relationship building – developing loyalty in your existing readers and contacts, and building credibility.

Build Credibility

As I mentioned, it's important to avoid looking like a spammer, and interestingly social media is something that can be used to actually *build* your credibility.

You do this by taking part in discussions, answering people's questions and helping them solve problems. You give away some of your time.

You can do this through monitoring the feed of status updates and tweets from your friends, or the comments on pages you're watching on sites like Digg (though you shouldn't expect to get much intellectual conversation happening there), or you could reach outside of your existing network and use something like Twitter Search to find keywords and communicate with people that way.

There's always someone looking for an answer to a question in social networks and going to Twitter before Google is a practice that's being called "crowdsourcing." Instead of searching for information on the web, people search the knowledge of their network, hoping that this information (while

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not as immediate) will be more credible and irrelevant information will be filtered out.

Communicate with people and make an effort to help them, and your social media presences will help you – and thus your business – build credibility.

As your sites become successful and your profile rises, you may find it's difficult to keep up individual communications with followers and fans. But fear not, there are other ways you can maintain credibility, including delivering useful content.

Offer Useful Content

It's important to show that you're not only interested in your own content. You should certainly tweet links to your posts, but you should also mention any articles relevant to your field that you found interesting or helpful.

That phrase “relevant to your field” is super important. If you're an individual posting on a social network, fine, post whatever you're into! But if you're posting from your site's account, be reasonable and stick to the general area you're posting about.

In short: share content. Make it interesting and helpful, and make it relevant to your field. By doing so, you deliver value to your followers and fans *en masse*, and this is a very useful technique for building your social media profile.

Social Media Sites

There are a multitude of social media sites around and it's important to pick out and focus on a few. Here are the most important:

1. Twitter

Twitter is currently the most popular social network for people who produce content. Twitter is known as a microblogging service, and you post status updates or “tweets” that are restricted to an upper length limit of 140 characters. This is just barely long enough to hold very abrupt conversations, link to posts, and complain about things.

The power of Twitter for content producers is in the Retweet. This is when someone duplicates someone else's tweet to transmit it to their own followers. Sometimes individual tweets can get retweeted enough to effectively go viral and the resulting traffic can be significant.

The best chance to get retweeted comes if you have been consistently delivering valuable tweets to your followers and building the habit of retweeting with them. It's also great to retweet other people's links from time to time so that they return the favor.

2. StumbleUpon

The StumbleUpon service allows you to explore new sites randomly within your areas of interest. Stumblers then press a thumbs-up or thumbs-down button to let StumbleUpon know what they thought of the site. The more positive reviews a site gets, the more likely it is that StumbleUpon will send their users there when they press the "Stumble!" button.

The key to using StumbleUpon effectively is to select categories carefully and experiment with the relevant options. Because Stumblers tell the service what their categories of interest are, you have a better chance of success when you select a highly targeted category.

3. Facebook

To many, Facebook is a social network for keeping in touch with friends and family. Companies are now setting up Pages for themselves or their products and using Facebook as a promotional outlet. Thanks to Facebook sharing widgets that you can embed on your blog, audiences are slowly beginning to share links.

The traffic that Facebook can send can be significant if your link appears in the right place. The Psdtuts+ blog that I work on occasionally has links published on the official Adobe Photoshop page on Facebook, and every time this happens we receive a solid 5,000–6,000 visitors!

4. Digg

While for most bloggers, Digg is increasingly difficult to get on, it can still benefit sites enormously when a post gets frontpaged. Digg is a social news site, which means news, blog posts, funny pictures, or

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other content types are submitted by a user, and their level of humor or usefulness is evaluated by other Digg users and they vote it up or down. (Digg has its own verbs for this: to “digg” is to vote up and to “bury” is to vote down).

If enough users vote the content up, it appears on the frontpage of the site. The amount of traffic Digg can send varies depending on the post topic and the difficulty of getting frontpaged is extremely high. If you can manage it though, the rewards are great!

5. Reddit

Reddit is a site very similar to Digg but with the added dimension of sub-Reddits. These are like mini sub-sites with niche focuses like “Apple,” “games,” “tech,” and so on. Getting traffic from a sub-Reddit is significantly easier than getting frontpaged on Digg or Reddit, making them a good place to start experimenting with social news marketing.

6. Niche Social News Sites

The more targeted the audience you promote your material to, the better. This is why social news sites that focus on a specific topic are so useful and why sub-Reddits are great. Such niche social news sites have the great potential to deliver smaller, but more focused traffic doses as compared to Digg or Reddit.

Some topic-specific social news sites include Sphinn for search engine news, Tipd for stock market posts, Showhype for entertainment, DesignMoo for web design, DZone for development, and Hacker News for entrepreneurship. Search around and you’ll find a variety of niche social news sites with great potential for delivering solid doses of traffic without, the difficulties of getting frontpaged that a site like Digg entails.

Social Media Etiquette

It’s really easy to annoy people in the world of social media. Because users have had to fend off the attacks of relentless self-professed marketers and scammers using dubious techniques for so long now, there’s a high level of

scrutiny and suspicion applied to just about everyone. Here are a few tips to keep yourself looking professional online:

- Don't have more promotional links than real status updates on Facebook or Twitter. Converse. The only exception applies to accounts that specifically state that they are link feeds.
- Promote other people as much as you promote yourself.
- Don't take it personally or become disheartened when someone unfriends or unfollows you. This is not so much a matter of etiquette as it is common sense.
- Don't send automatic email or direct messages. Use email and direct messages incredibly sparingly unless you have a friendly relationship with the recipient.
- When using Facebook and playing with those silly apps, avoid the button that'll spam the app to all of your friends.
- People are okay with Facebook pages posting links sparingly, but don't use your status updates to spam links all over your friends' news feeds. They'll get annoyed when they can't see what their friends have been up to lately.
- Add to the signal, reduce the noise. Determining what constitutes "signal" and what constitutes "noise" is a very subjective thing and most social media users aren't very good at it, but if you can master one technique that will help you make and keep friends, it's determining what noise is and not making any of it.

How to Approach Social Media Marketing

To compare the methods of online marketing to traditional marketing use the following comparison: social media is to public relations as buying traffic is to advertising.

You use social media to create relationships, with your contemporaries and peers, and with your audience. You don't use social media to advertise and spam.

Generating Traffic

Take an interest in the people who take an interest in you. If you actually care about them, then you can get somewhere with it. That's the nature of the strange world of social networking where the most anonymous of relationships can be very personal.

Guest Posts

Guest posting is one of the oldest and most effective ways to build a credible reputation and generate traffic for your blog in one fell swoop. Guest posting is the practice of writing an article to be posted on someone else's blog. If accepted by the other blogger, your work will be introduced to a new audience of people who may, if you're lucky, become part of your own audience.

Why Guest Post?

You build credibility because someone is endorsing your work. The more famous the blog is, the better this will work. However, even if the blog is relatively unknown, someone vouching for you *who is not you* is beneficial. If people can take the information in your post and act on it right away, that bolsters your position.

And of course the main thing is that you generate traffic, because you don't offer to guest post without the promise of some promotion for your site in return. Often the promotion will be a link to your blog in the author biography, and often you'll be able to link to your own posts throughout the piece.

Who to Approach

Some people say that you should start small and work your way up to the bigger blogs once you have a reputation that precedes you. I say send out your best work for the big blogs first.

While it can be nice to give content to peers who are also starting off fairly small, targeting the biggest movers and shakers in your niche puts you in front of the most eyeballs the quickest.

How to Approach Them

Be humble and polite. Be professional. Ensure that your email is written with flawless spelling and grammar because many bloggers and editors won't look at your attached piece if they find something about your email even remotely off-putting.

Don't be the rambling fan. Write your email from the perspective of an equal, one professional to another.

Treat the recipient like a human being. Although this attitude is finally starting to slip away, there was a time when less renowned bloggers viewed the heavyweight bloggers the way music fans look at their favorite artists. It was a little bit odd and some bloggers still have these cult followings.

If you can't get an email address for the blogger and need to use a contact form on their site, don't include the article in the body text. Simply ask if you can have their email address so you can send them your article for consideration.

Above all, don't contact someone about a guest post if you haven't actually written anything yet. Promising and then failing to deliver something will seriously damage your reputation.

Do You Ask for Payment?

If the blog generally pays contributing writers, and you're writing the post as a writer without much emphasis on promoting your site other than a link at the end of the post, then it's pretty fair to ask if there is pay for the guest post.

If you're heavily promoting your site, then don't ask for money. The time you spend writing is a marketing expense.

My suggestion is that if the blog owner normally pays people to write for them, think like a business owner, not a freelance writer, and offer to write the post for free if your site receives prominent exposure in the piece. A link at the bottom of a post and a bit of cash won't do much to generate traffic for your site.

How to Write a Guest Post

We've been over the planning and production of content, and a guest post is pretty much the same, though there are a few extra things to be aware of.

First of all, stick to writing about what you're awesome at. When you're writing for someone else's blog and audience, it's not the time to start experimenting – do that on your own site. Give them a good, solid piece on a good, solid topic that you know like the back of your hand. There's a good chance you would have written about the topic ten times before. Suck it up and do it again!

Be aware of how you link out. Unless you're told otherwise, the safest bet is to split the links you include in half: 50% link back to other posts on the blog you're writing for, while 50% link to your own blog. Some blog owners don't like it when guests start linking to all their friends' blogs and other random sites.

Don't give everything you know away! Leave the reader asking enough questions that they'll make the effort to check out your blog. It takes a lot for some users to be tempted to check out a new site, so you've really got to work to give them a reason to do so.

Finally, be sure to send your post along with a bio, at the end. If the blogger you're communicating with doesn't receive a bio they may just link your name to your site and fail to tell their audience anything else about who you are. Bios are hard to write for yourself, but it's something you'll need to use all the time in this industry, so spend some time on one you're happy to re-use.

After the Post is Published...

After the post is published on the other blog, link to it on your own blog. Tell your readers how much you enjoy the blog you've guested on. It's only fair.

Send out a tweet and get some friends to retweet it. Make an effort to show that you're a grateful person and appreciate your host for having you in front of their audience.

It's also customary and conducive to future relationship building that you send a thank-you email when you see the post go live. Let them know you appreciate the time they spent editing and formatting your piece and don't criticize them for removing a particular paragraph or word; it's the editor's job to improve on what the writer created, and the blog owner knows what their audience wants to see.

Content Aggregators

The term "content aggregators" covers a range of services that aggregate content from various places around the web, making it easier for users to find new sites that include content about topics they're interested in.

Some use a team of moderators to determine the good from the bad, and some use their user base to filter content for them. The two things about content aggregators that stay the same are:

- They refer people to content on other websites.
- They all have a mechanism for filtering content.

The challenge for you as a blog owner is getting your content past whatever filtering mechanism is in place. The only way to do that (at least in an ethical manner) is to create truly excellent content, and hope for the best.

What is the Benefit of Having My Content Included in an Aggregator?

More traffic. Depending on the size of the aggregator's readership and the rating that your content is given, aggregators can send a significant amount of traffic your way. As with most traffic generated from social media, content aggregators tend to send you a big spike of traffic on the day the content is listed, and as it tapers off, you'll receive a couple of visitors each day (probably because someone came across the old listing via a search engine).

Generating Traffic

Content aggregators don't generally do much for your reputation or credibility. They just send you the traffic. What you do with it from there is up to you.

How Do You Get Included?

There are generally two types of content aggregator.

One type is run by a team of editors and moderators who actively seek content to add to their listings, or moderate submissions and determine whether or not they'll make it onto the site. If the site has a ranking system or many sub-categories, moderators may determine the amount of exposure your content is given – does everyone who visits the homepage of the site for the next few hours see it, or is it just shown on the category listing?

The second type of content aggregator is run by its users. People submit content of their own or someone else's. Usually these sites are looking for users who curate content that they deem to be interesting as they surf the web, rather than people like us who are promoting our own businesses. That hasn't stopped us from making use of them, though; the main challenge is getting the user base to vote the content up.

The secret to that, of course, is to create excellent content and target it well (submit it to the right sites in the right categories).

Note that social news sites like Digg and Reddit, which we covered earlier, fall squarely into the second group.

What Are the Options?

Alltop is a popular content aggregator that collects a bunch of sites for each of the categories it has pages for. Unlike most aggregators where content is displayed on a post-by-post basis, once you get your site listed in Alltop, each post you publish will show up in the feed.

Sites that are included in Alltop are selected by moderators. You can submit your site at <http://alltop.com/submission/>. The service doesn't send a ton of traffic, but it's one more source to add to your referrers list.

Delicious is a social bookmarking service. It's basically a take on browser bookmarking with social aspects, and the convenience of not requiring you to back up your bookmarks to a file every time you switch computers. There's no direct moderation, and Delicious judges popularity based on how many people are bookmarking the same page. If a lot of people bookmark a post on your site you might make it to the Popular page and see a surge of traffic. Even if you don't make it there, just being in Delicious' archive will bring occasional visitors.

Diigo is also a social bookmarking service, with a focus on allowing users to annotate pages with notes that other Diigo users can see (unless the annotations are made private). It's a bit like Delicious on steroids, and various other pharmaceutical substances.

Digg is a site we discussed earlier, and while it doesn't generally fall under the social bookmarking category, it does constitute a social news site, which is one type of content aggregation. Digg offers varying levels of exposure, the most coveted of which is getting listed on the front page.

Sites like **Slashdot** are aggregators for a specific audience. Slashdot is a technology aggregator. There are too many to list here for the various niches of the world, so you'll need to do some research to find one suited to the content you create. Slashdot is a moderated aggregator, but there are many sites of each type when it comes to niche-specific aggregation.

Socialmarker is a site that allows you to submit your posts to 215 content aggregation services in under five minutes (assuming you've taken the time to sign up for them before your first submission session, and have had your browser remember the usernames and passwords).

If you want the best value for your time, select a bunch of the sites Socialmarker supports that are relevant to your field, and have an assistant make submissions using this service every time a post is published.

There are many other aggregating sites that are niche-specific. In the case studies at the end of this book, I'll show you how we used a set of tutorial aggregation sites to get some of the early traffic for Psdtuts+.

Buying Traffic

Usually, buying traffic means advertising. There are many ways to advertise online, and the process is much easier than that of offline advertising. We'll look at ads in a moment, but first let's examine the purest form of "traffic buying" on the net: StumbleUpon.

StumbleUpon

Advertising doesn't guarantee you click-throughs; it just puts your ad out there for more people to see, which can only guarantee that the ad will be seen, not necessarily clicked. That's not exactly buying traffic in the strictest sense. Some services, however, are built on the premise of sending people to random sites based on what they might be interested in, and by far the most popular of these services is StumbleUpon.

You can get a good laugh or two or a few interesting facts out of StumbleUpon, but one of the services they offer to businesses is the ability to purchase traffic directly.

In other words, when a user clicks on the "Stumble!" button, there's a chance they might end up on an advertiser's page, and a chance they may end up on a user-submitted page.

What makes StumbleUpon unique – and these are precisely the things they use to sell their unusual advertising service – is that you can target a very specific audience without requiring a click-through. The fact that you don't need to get the user to click on an ad before they get to your site is precisely why I've listed this service before the advertising options available to you. It's buying traffic in the purest sense.

Another cool thing about StumbleUpon advertising is that you get feedback on your campaign. StumbleUpon is built around the concept of giving a site a thumbs-up or thumbs-down before moving on, and is a bit of an ingrained habit in its users. There aren't many alternate and effective ways of getting your site out there, while receiving feedback about it in the process. But whether or not you find the feedback useful or actionable is up to you.

But is it worth it?

StumbleUpon users are known to be some of the most fickle, instant gratification-oriented users around, even in the somewhat attention span-deprived world of social media. The fact that most Stumblers move on to the next site in a matter of seconds is the biggest cause for concern in an otherwise excellent scheme.

Whether purchasing traffic from StumbleUpon will work for you or not depends on what you're publishing. If you can target your content precisely, and the content doesn't generally attract the fickle set of users, you may be in luck. There are many mixed reports. Buying StumbleUpon traffic has been very effective for some, and a hopeless flop for others. The solution? Give it a trial run. After all, it's not a terribly expensive service.

Contextual Advertising

Contextual advertising is a form of advertising where instead of purchasing ad space on a specific website, you add money to an account and set up some ads based on keywords, and the service attempts to place those ads on the most relevant sites who have agreed to publish with them.

Google AdWords is the dominant player in the contextual advertising market. They have the most advertisers, and the most reach amongst publishers. While it's always worth checking out the competition, AdWords is most likely going to be your best bet.

The danger with popular services is saturation, and it may be that too many advertisers are already going for the keywords you want to bid on, in which case another service may work better for you. It'll have less reach but at least you won't be paying a dollar or more per click. But, there are still plenty of affordable keywords with AdWords.

AdWords is the part of Google's business that deals with advertisers. Advertisers create ads and bid to have them show up near certain keywords through this service. AdSense is the arm that deals with publishers, allowing them to implement the code that dynamically displays the ad and keep up to date with how much they're earning.

Generating Traffic

The most important thing you can do is proper keyword, no matter which service you go with. But regardless of the keywords you use to rank in the search engines, which keywords have the right balance of low cost, high visibility, and limited competition?

There are so many variations on the keywords that can be used in just about any field, so keyword research can take a lot of time. Google offers a tool that makes the job easier at <https://adwords.google.com.au/select/KeywordToolExternal>.

Keyword Research

Google AdWord's keyword research tool is also useful when you're looking to start a profitable blog. It gives you an idea of how many people are searching for and advertising on sites relevant to the keywords you might like to capitalize on.

Simply enter a few keywords or phrases pertinent to your site's topic, and you'll be given a list of related keywords, the search volume they attracted through Google, and the amount of advertiser competition. Advertiser competition pushes up the cost to bid on the keywords, and it makes it harder to be seen at all. The lower the competition, the better. Search volume, essentially tells you how many people searched for a keyword in a specified time period. The higher this is, the better.

Buying Ads Directly

The easiest way to ensure that your ad money is spent on reputable sites that reach the audience you'd like to have is to purchase your ads directly.

Depending on the size of the site (and when it comes to advertising, the bigger the better), this method can get pretty pricy. A month of advertising ranges from hundreds to thousands of dollars, and rarely will you see a bargain in the two-digit range.

But it does provide you with some certainty that the ads aren't being shown on any old site, and better yet, it provides repetition. You see, while web surfers have become somewhat blind to ads, they still have a subconscious effect, and some estimates say it can take more than seven repetitions of

the image before they begin to feel familiar and comfortable with the brand being advertised.

That may lead them to click through the next time they see the ad, or they may find a reference to the brand somewhere else and that familiarity will lead them to take a closer look.

Downsides

There are two major downsides to buying your ads directly. The first is that where contextual advertising draws attention to your ad across a whole range of sites, the ads you buy directly stay on one site – they don't rotate. You have to weigh this up with the benefit of knowing that all your advertising dollars are keeping your ad on a reputable site that you know is well-targeted.

Secondly, you pay a flat rate even if nobody clicks on your ad. If it doesn't work, you cancel the deal and find somewhere else to run your ad. Contextual advertising only charges you when a user clicks on an ad and goes through to your site.

Ad Blindness

I touched on ad blindness earlier. You can't blame people for having to find ways to filter out the astounding amount of advertising they're subjected to each day.

But it does make life difficult for advertisers!

For instance, everyone knows what a Google AdSense block looks like, and their profitability for site owners – especially those running blogs for the tech-savvy – has gone down over the years (happily it's still okay to spend your money there as an advertiser, since you only get charged for each click-through).

As a finishing thought in this section on buying traffic, always try to experiment with your ads until you find something that works for you. Sometimes a subtle change in the copy of an ad can make a profound difference in click-throughs.

Giving Away Free Stuff

Giving things away can be a very effective way to generate traffic. It brings back visitors and customers who might have been slowly steering away. It also creates goodwill and happy users, and because everyone likes to link to a giveaway, it brings in new visitors as well.

There are two types of giveaways. The first, and most potent, is the type where you truly give something to every single user who stops by. This only works for digital downloadable goods because they cost nothing to distribute over and over; e-books, wallpapers, basic software, icon packs, and so on are all feasible options.

The second type of giveaway requires some sort of contest to sort out who gets the products and who doesn't. This can work for any type of item, whether physical or digital, because you have a limited number of winners. The simplest form of these giveaways is if you ask readers to leave a comment and you select randomly from them to determine the winners.

More Value Generates More Return

Naturally the more value you provide in a giveaway, the more interest you will generate from readers. This is why a complete giveaway of digital goods works so well because you are literally giving something for free to one and all. Consequently the value is high because everyone gets to participate.

Similarly, if the prize is large in a contest, or the number of items being given away is high, then there is more value in the giveaway.

When you provide more value, you get more return on it. An amazing giveaway is far more likely to generate response and links, than something that no one really wants.

Getting Prizes for Free

You don't always want to give away your own products. As publishers, we're in luck when it comes to giving things away. In fact if you have an audience,

it can be quite easy to get other people to give you things to give away. This is because other businesses will want to use your outlet as a way of promoting their products.

It's a fair deal. They get a form of advertising, you have a tool that helps generate traffic, and develop customer loyalty.

Most of the time, all you have to do to get some freebies to give away is to simply ask. That said, it's always good to have built up a relationship with someone before needing to ask them for something. In the world of the web, nine times out of ten, people only contact you because they want something. Ask yourself what you can do for someone now so that you can develop an acquaintance or business friendship of sorts.

The Costs of Contests

Even if you are giving away someone else's products, there is still a price to pay for running a contest type giveaway. That price is your time.

In particular picking winners, judging entries, contacting people, and organizing the delivery of prizes can be extremely time-consuming if you are not careful. If you've never run a giveaway before, it's always good to start simple.

Avoid giveaways that have an element of judging until you are more seasoned, as judging can be a very laborious process if you have a group of people who need to agree. Also avoid giveaways with too many winners or too many sponsors to liaise with. Start with just a couple of winners and a couple of sponsors so that you don't have too much communication to manage.

In addition, if you are running a contest to give away physical goods, then avoid these pitfalls:

- **Not Factoring in Postage**

If you've ever tried posting a heavy book to the other side of the world you'll know that the cost of posting physical goods can sometimes be more than the goods themselves.

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- **Not Checking International Availability/Price**

If you are giving away a major competition item such as an iPod, you should always consider that prices and availability vary around the world. If you have a reader in Mozambique win the prize, then you may have a lot more difficulties than you would if the winner was in New York.

- **Posting Takes Time**

Perhaps the most time-consuming task involved in giving away physical goods is going to a post office, wrapping and packing, finding the correct addresses, and actually posting off the prizes. If you have a lot of prizes to a lot of people, this can turn a small giveaway post into a large amount of work.

Getting Other Benefits from Giveaways

Giveaways are effective for bringing traffic, but if you truly want to get the most of your giveaway, then it's good to ask for something in return.

Perhaps the best example of getting your readers to do something, is to ask them to sign up to an email subscription in return. This is easy to do for the reader who simply agrees to get the odd promotional email from you, and leaves you with another asset: an email subscription list that might be good for, say, affiliate marketing.

The price the user pays is a fair one – a free product in exchange for the right to include them in your community.

If they unsubscribe the day after they receive the prize, that's fine – most people won't, and for each contest or giveaway you run, the number of people who sign up and stay signed up will exceed the number of people who do not.

If you are creating an email subscription list, a great affordable tool to use is **Aweber** (<http://aweber.com>), which allows you to set up auto-responders. This means that when the user signs up their email address, the first email they receive comes almost immediately. You can place the download link for your freebie in this email thereby ensuring that only people who subscribe get the freebie.

Affiliate marketers love to create email lists because they are great for maintaining an ongoing conversation with the subscriber. If for example you create an email list where readers get a free e-book on blogging, you then know that those people are interested in blogging. You could then, for example, start sending them occasional emails with special offers for blogging products. You can learn more about affiliate marketing in the next chapter.

Using Social Media to Spread the Word

If you are delivering great value in a giveaway you'll want to spread the word. Particularly if you are giving away free items to one and all, people will want to link out to your post, tweet about it, and share it with their friends.

Of course, social media won't suddenly spring into action all on its own. You have to do a few things first! Here's a checklist to follow:

- Tweet about it yourself. Make a Facebook update about it. This is the part where you say something about the giveaway in whatever format the social site in question allows you to.
- Ask those in your field who you have good relationships with to do the same.
- Ask your employees and contractors to do the same.
- Ask your grandmother to do the same.

There's an obvious pattern in this, and it exemplifies what I was saying about social media a few pages back. It's about communication and the propagation of ideas. Nurture your online relationships and this will work out for you.

Leveraging Your Existing Network and Assets

When it comes to generating traffic, leveraging your existing network and assets is a very useful practice. This means cross-pollinating between sites you own, telling people you know about the site, and generally leveraging the means at your disposal to drive more traffic.

There are two aspects to this, and we could call both “your network,” but for clarity I’ll separate and define those two aspects:

- **Your Network:** the network of contacts that you’ve built by taking the time to develop good relationships with people in your field, people in related fields, and even friends and family, *before you need their help*.
- **Your Assets:** web properties, email lists, or even offline businesses you’ve already built that already have their own following.

Your Network

There are various layers to your network, and various ways to go about leveraging their word-of-mouth. I’ve listed them in what I believe is the correct order of importance when it comes to helping you with your blogging endeavors, and how to go about getting assistance from each group.

The *top priority network* can be defined as your network of peers in the same or relevant fields, using social media and the web to propagate their message.

People who care about the topics you’re covering will have their own network of people who care about what you’re covering, and those people will again have their own network of people who care about what you’re covering. And their... okay, let’s not take this too far.

The goal is to achieve a ripple effect where your top-tier network announces your news to their top-tier network (your second-tier network), and as the news is passed down the line, these secondary, tertiary, and other networks join yours.

The easiest way to get their help is to ask them for it, assuming that you've spent some time getting to know them without wanting anything from them, and have done a few voluntary favors by spreading their news on to your own network.

Let them know you've got a site launching, or an important feature article being published, that it's important to you and you'd really appreciate if they'd let their Twitter followers or [name your social network here] followers know about it.

If you've bothered to reach out to them before you needed their help, you should have pretty good luck here.

Next, you want to make an announcement on *forums you've already built credibility in*. Do not publicize your site on a forum where you are new and un-established. The correct way to leverage this network is:

1. Build a reputation first as a useful and valuable member of the community.
2. Let people know about your new project in a post.

Don't change the order of these steps, as the etiquette of forums is established and unforgiving: the newbie who promotes their site is a spammer, and you will be treated like a spammer if you do this (that is, dropped off in the trash can). You may need to have been a regular on the forums for as long as six months or a year sometimes.

The third group is your *existing social media networks*. This is a mixture of friends, peers, bloggers, journalists, and general people you know who use social media.

These are the people who do not exist in the first group, but will receive your initial announcements about the site anyway. There is a small chance they will retweet the announcement, email their friends, blog about your blog, and so on. There's a good chance that by announcing your launch to the general group of people following your online output, someone will pass the news along in some way or another.

For really, really important events such as the launch of your site, you might also go to the fourth group, which is your friends and family. If your friends and family are not in one of the first three groups, they're probably not going

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to be very helpful in generating traffic. But, as you may have guessed, the general idea is that the more people who know about your launch, the better the chances are that it'll be passed on to someone who has considerable reach and the power to send you significant amounts of traffic.

Who knows, maybe grandma knows a professor at the local university who teaches a class on the topic you blog about. They may pass the link on to hundreds of young, tech-savvy students if they like what you're doing.

Your Assets

When you first start out you probably won't have much in the way of assets to draw on. But as you develop and launch sites, you will find that existing sites and email lists can be a great benefit to kicking off new sites, or even just promoting particular posts.

Leveraging your assets, means reaching out to the people who already have an interest in your products, such as existing blog subscribers, and getting them to head over to your latest site and subscribe there as well. This is a process termed by the multi-blog owning individuals of the world, "cross-pollinating."

At Envato, where I work, we have a fairly large network, so we've learned a thing or two about the process of cross-pollination. Here are the important things to remember:

1. Your Target Audience is Still a Consideration, Even Among Your Own Sites

If you're launching a site about the art of bonsai, you might blog about the launch on your coffee bean roasting blog, but not on your automotive mechanics blog. Even though bonsai and coffee bean roasting are quite unrelated, it is reasonably likely that those interested in either might be interested in the other.

On the other hand, while I'm sure there are people who are right into bonsai and fiddling under the bonnet of their car, I doubt there are very many. It may raise more ire than it will readers.

So an example from Envato is that we announced the launch of Mac.AppStorm on FreelanceSwitch because we know that freelancers are reasonably likely to be Mac users. But [Web.AppStorm](#) wasn't announced on AudioTuts+ because there's not a whole lot of crossover in the audience, and if there was, they would be readers of a few of the other sites in the Envato network where it was announced anyway.

2. Select the Right Time Zone

If you only have one other web property, post the news about the launch just before the time of day that analytics shows as being the most active. Tweet the news at the same time. For most sites, it's recommended that you make the announcement during a time when most Americans are still awake, simply because they form the bulk of English-speaking web users.

If you're running a blog that appeals to a specific nationality, perhaps a blog that helps Scotsmen become better at making haggis, launch it during their active web time!

3. Stagger the Time Zones

If you already have more than one web property, divide the number of hours in the day by the number of blogs you run. If you have two blogs, you'd assign a twelve-hour block to each blog, make the initial announcement on the most popular of the blogs during its most active time of day, and then make the post on the next blog exactly twelve hours later.

If you have more than two blogs, rank them in terms of readership, and try and mix it up so that you don't have all your most popular blogs coming up first in the list, and the less popular blogs at the end. You want an even distribution of popular and less popular blogs.

Then, set up a post on each blog, using your flagship blog to lead the way, and publishing the news on each of your blogs, based on the order of your list, at intervals determined by the calculation earlier. If you have six blogs, one of your sites would then publish the announcement every four hours, for example.

Generating Traffic

This ensures your news covers as many time zones as possible in a 24-hour window and gets the best coverage, *and* prevents the buzz from dying down too quickly. It sounds simple but it really is an effective practice.

4. Ongoing Cross-Pollination

Have your editors read each other's websites so they can post about relevant articles on the other blogs in your network. Cross-pollination is an ongoing effort and can be extremely effective.

A great example of cross pollination is when TechCrunch publishes the lead to a CrunchGear story that is particularly suited to the main TechCrunch audience. When you hit the "Read More" link, it actually takes you over to CrunchGear. This means that only readers who are genuinely interested will arrive at CrunchGear, where they can then be exposed to lots more content and will hopefully become regular readers.

Consistency and Momentum

The web and social media will forget you if you're not visible frequently enough. Building a brand that lasts doesn't happen when you disappear or slack off for any period of time. It's also important to remember that if all other things are equal, Google will rank a site that is more consistently updated higher, than one that's not updated often. So far, this chapter has covered various tactics for generating traffic on a more short-term basis. For the long-term, build your campaign around this: consistency and momentum build traffic and audience.

When the web was younger, one could put up a static website with information that went unchanged for years, and it would bring in plenty of traffic once it had a few decent inbound links and the popular search engine of the time indexed it (there was good old Altavista, and some of you may not know that Yahoo! was once more popular than Google). It didn't happen for everyone, but at the time the concept of building a site and letting it sit there attracting visitors without working too much on it was a reality.

The web has evolved to a point where the frequency of your output, and the prominence of your brand, are important factors in deciding how much traffic is piped through to your site from other sources. Because there's so much information going around the web now, much of it is outdated quickly, so the freshest sources of information are rewarded.

So be consistent. Set a frequency of posting and stick to it. Decide which social sites you'll use to build a following and stick to it until you've built a network that's easy to maintain before becoming active on even more sites. Find a writing style and approach that your readers like and stick to it. Consistency will do more to build your brand than anything else.

With consistency comes momentum. Keep up your posting frequency as one of the most common mistakes bloggers make, is to forget to post for a few weeks and think they can pick up where they left off once they get the time to push out another post.

Keep publishing content of the sort that your readers want to see. That doesn't mean more of the same – you need to become good at spotting trends in your readership. If you're consistent enough in the way you run your blog, momentum naturally follows.

Stop that momentum, and you'll have to start building your traffic and following all over again. That's simply how the world of blogging works. It's filled with short attention spans and too much information to fit in them.

Having consistency and momentum doesn't mean you shouldn't innovate. It just means you shouldn't stop innovating halfway along the road to success.

Linking Out to Generate and Keep Traffic

Linking out can generate traffic for you.

That may sound counter-intuitive, since linking to other sites may mean people click on a link and don't return. Truthfully, if a user clicks a link and

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doesn't return, they probably wouldn't have stuck around for long even if you hadn't linked out.

But if you recommend an excellent resource to them, they may come back and subscribe, because making good recommendations is one way to build credibility and respect. Specifically, it builds the reader's trust in you as a media gatekeeper: someone who filters the mass of information and presents only the useful material to their readership. Traditionally, this role was that of newspaper editors and news program producers. Despite the hurrah about the web ending the control of gatekeepers over what we read, we still tend to gravitate towards them in an ad-hoc way. There's just too much information to deal with otherwise.

Moreover, linking out can draw the attention of the person who wrote the piece that you're linking to, and can build goodwill with them. This helps you whether that person has a readership of one or one million.

One blogger I met said their blog had "made it" in terms of traffic after they linked to another prominent blogger. When the prominent blogger checked their recent backlinks, they were impressed with the post they were referenced in and linked back to them. The support of that popular blogger meant the new blogger got enough traffic and credibility to get a serious following going.

Be generous with linking out. It doesn't hurt you to do it, and it makes people feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Competition

Don't obsess over "the competition" beyond keeping an eye on what they are doing. In the blogging world, the name of the game is collaboration and cooperation. It's about sharing your audiences. This isn't because some sort of hippy-commune attitude is expected in the blogosphere, but because ultimately, if you share your audience with ten other bloggers in your field, you could grow your blog's readership by ten times if their readers like you.

It also builds your credibility when other bloggers, who a visitor may already trust, recommend your work. Something needs to occur that builds

credibility before the reader subscribes to your blog. Maybe they're really impressed with something you've said on your site, but most often, the best way to build credibility is to have someone else who is well-trusted give it to you.

If you want other people's audiences, don't compete with them. Cooperate with them.

Search Traffic

A massive amount of the Internet's traffic is filtered through search engines. Almost everyone – including, I'm sure, yourself – uses search engines many times every day. Firing up Google (or, for a small fraction of the web surfing population, one of its competitors) is simply the most practical way to find information on the Internet.

That's the number one reason why you should make the study and acquisition of search traffic a priority: search engines push more readers around than any other type of web service.

So how do you tap into this vast flood of traffic? The practice of designing your site so that it ranks well in search is called *search engine optimization* (SEO). It involves a broad spectrum of tactics, from designating specific heading tags to fulfill different SEO roles, to using the right anchor text when linking to your own site.

While for many blog owners SEO is something that is mostly for their web developer, it's still useful to have at least a broad understanding of how it works.

Search engine optimization is basically about setting up your site so it has a structure that search engines can understand. Crawlers use a few methods to determine which keywords have priority, including heading tags (the `<h1>` tag will give keywords more weight than `<h2>` or `<h3>`, and so on), keyword density, alt text on images, and a whole lot more.

The best SEO is about conforming to the best practices of well-structured websites, and choosing your audience and topic wisely. Many people get

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caught up in SEO as some sort of magical pill that'll make your site instantly popular.

As with any field, your best bet will be to use a professional, but because so many people want magical results, the unscrupulous and unethical scammer is a mainstay of the search engine optimization industry. It's important to be careful when hiring a specialist, or you may end up wasting money on a scammer or what's known as a "blackhat SEO" specialist: someone who will use exploits to get a better ranking quicker – exploits that will have you penalized if you're caught.

Do your research and hire someone reputable. A good place to go is **SEOMoz's Marketplace** (<http://seomoz.org/marketplace>).

Before we go through a primer on SEO (it's an involved topic that can't be covered in detail here), let me address two issues that are very important for those in the web publishing business.

Duplicate Content

The short version is: don't let others reprint articles that have been published on your site elsewhere on the Internet.

By all means you can resell the content for offline use – say, to a print magazine – but it's never a good idea to allow the original content on your site to be duplicated word-for-word on another site.

Google, and perhaps other search engines, may penalize you for hosting content that's been duplicated on the web if they can't determine that you were the first to post it. And penalties aside, it wouldn't be a happy ending for you if the other site managed to overtake your post in the search rankings just because it has a few more readers and backlinks.

Keep content unique and original when it comes to the web.

Your Readers are Human

Don't write for the search engines.

You can spot a site that's been written for the search engines very quickly, and I know that my own reaction is to leave immediately. I'm sure most people do the same thing.

Your readers are human. It's an obvious statement, but one that people forget all too frequently. Write for the humans while using the best practices that make your site accessible to search engine crawlers, and you'll do well in the long-run.

If you can fit some keywords into your post without affecting the quality of your title or post, great! Do it. But be careful to remember where the line is, and stay on the right side of it.

How Search Engines Find and Sort Information

Most search engines are complicated systems, using mysterious algorithms that nobody outside of the search companies have ever seen. The details of the algorithms aside, the way they find and sort information – at least from a bird's eye view – is quite simple:

- **Crawling**

Spiders are automated systems that search engines use to “crawl” the web, checking each link they come across and finding new sites for the search engine to list.

- **Indexing**

After the spider has crawled a page, that page becomes part of the Google index and the content of the page is analyzed for the purposes of ranking.

- **Ranking**

The way search engines use algorithms to rank content is the aforementioned complicated and mysterious part of the system. The

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words on the page, the structure of the site, the number of links referring to the site, and many more factors all come into play to determine which keyword searches will return the page as a result, and how high up in the results the site will be.

When we optimize our sites, we seek to improve our chances of ranking higher for the keywords we think our target audience will be using.

A Basic Guide to SEO

I'm not an SEO expert but here are some of the generally accepted rules of optimizing your site for search. If you want to get into more depth, there are plenty of books and resources on the topic. If you don't want to deal with the technicalities of this area, it's really worth hiring a professional (one with an excellent reputation), or ask your web developer about it.

Link Building

The most critical components of SEO are links coming in to your site. Modern search engines place a lot of emphasis on links to pages on your site, the text of the links, and the authority of the site they are coming from.

So if a site that is highly ranked by Google sends a link your way, that counts for a lot. If you created a brand new site yourself and linked back to your first site, that link wouldn't count for much at all because the site it's coming from is itself not an important site.

In essence, every link to your site is treated as a vote for how important your site is. If the link comes from an important site, then that's a real vote of confidence, and the search engine will rate it higher.

With this in mind, one of the big keys to search optimization is to build links back to your site. Of course as a blogger, that's your main goal anyway! So rather than dwell on this aspect of SEO, I'll just say that as you produce more and more great content, the amount of links directed your way will increase, and your search ranking will follow suit.

Site Structure

Consider the structure of your site carefully, and design it so that there is an appropriate segmentation and encapsulation of different types of information.

Think of site structure like this: your site's name is the broadest category. The blogger then adds categories on the site based on what they think they'll be writing about. Unfortunately, they rarely consider how to best categorize. You want a structure that, instead of getting broader on a horizontal level, uses a vertical structure to get narrower.

Let's take a fictional example like PetCareInstructions.com. The site provides pet owners and prospective owners with all sorts of information, from nutritional information to how to best select a new dog from the breeder's litter. A flat, broad structure looks like this:

Dog Nutrition – Dog Care – Cat Nutrition – Buying a Dog – Bird Care

It's a very sloppy system with lots of redundancy and clutter. It also makes it harder for users and search engines to put relevant content items in groups.

Here's a better site structure:

Pet Care:

Dog Care

Cat Care

Bird Care

Pet Nutrition:

Dog Nutrition

Cat Nutrition

Bird Nutrition

Pet Purchases:

Purchasing a Dog

Purchasing a Cat

Purchasing a Bird

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Or, alternatively:

Dogs:

Dog Care
Dog Nutrition
Purchasing a Dog

Cats:

Cat Care
Cat Nutrition
Purchasing a Cat

Birds:

Bird Care
Bird Nutrition
Purchasing a Bird

I would most likely go with the first scheme, because the second scheme would make it more difficult to cover other species of animal later on. Both however, will work much better than the first ragtag bunch of categories I showed you, for humans and spiders alike.

Titles

The following advice applies to both the heading on an article page (the title tags that will be displayed in the search engines), and the bar at the top of your browser, and to a certain extent, the sub-headings within articles themselves.

Remember, the title tags will be the first thing people see when your site shows up in the search engine. Don't go into marketing mode. Just focus on making the title informative and explicitly descriptive of the page contents, while employing the right keywords (in a way that looks natural), and by remaining both concise and compelling.

When it comes to the title tags, they should also brand the site, and it's acceptable to use some category information to provide context. Don't do either of these things on the actual heading on your site, of course.

Maybe that sounds like a tall order, but it's not all that difficult. Compare:

"Dog Walking"

With:

*"How to Walk Your Dog – Dog Exercise and
Health – Pet Care Instructions"*

If the inclusion of contextual categories isn't to your taste, the following would be acceptable:

"How to Walk Your Dog – Pet Care Instructions"

That's what you want your title tags to look like. The article heading on the site itself should simply be *"How to Walk Your Dog."* Be consistent and use the same title in the heading and the tags (the tags just allow for a little embellishment to help branding and ranking in the search engines).

Content

Make the search terms or phrase you want to be ranked more prominent in the content. Don't go overboard with it. Use it so that the user doesn't detect that you've tried to make it more prominent – it shouldn't ruin the natural feel of the content. It just needs to be in there. Keyword density does not matter. Just use the phrase that you want people to use to find your site. It's common sense really).

Believe it or not, search engines have algorithms that try to determine how good the quality of the language used on your site is. The better your writers are, the better your rankings will be. Don't hire a mediocre writer just because they're cheaper. Hire someone who is a good wordsmith.

Use descriptive headings. Heading tags have a higher priority than paragraph text when the search engine is trying to analyze the site and determine which keywords it should rank well for. Don't overuse them, as you'll dilute the quality of the content and the value of the keywords. In other words, use headings in SEO the same way you'd use them to guide the reader through the document.

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Finally, and this may seem obvious to many readers, search engines cannot read all text. They can't read text in an image, nor often in a Flash file or any client-side scripting that does not end up rendered as HTML. If you have to log in or submit your email address to see certain content, the spider will not see it. If you want it ranked, put it in HTML text, and put it where the spider can get to it.

Images

One popular source of search traffic that many people forget about is Google Image Search.

Most people don't use alt and title tags on their images, and when they do, they're not thinking about how to get the most out of them. But if you put some effort in and describe the image from the perspective of someone looking for what your page is about, you may actually get some traffic this way.

Google Image Search traffic won't be as sticky as standard search engine traffic because a number of them are just looking for free pictures, but it does help a site's growth, particularly if someone is after a diagram or graph on a topic they're interested in, or if you're running a celebrity, car, or gadget site. Those image searchers may just stick around for the content.

Linking and URL Structures

Links and URLs are both important page elements that need to be considered from an SEO perspective.

Many people don't care about the SEO ramifications of links on their pages because they don't care whether the link will benefit the owner of the content that is being linked. When you make the effort, it is noticed, and it builds goodwill, which is good for your business.

But it's also important because the links you use in your articles to other articles on your site, or even your homepage, actually do matter to the search engines.

The spider is depending on you to create a useful structure that enables users to get around your site easily, and this is where anchor text comes in.

Anchor text refers to the words the link is attached to. If there's a link on a page in the body text and it says "scuba diving gear," the anchor text is scuba diving gear and the URL is wherever you're taken when you click on the anchor text. These two elements make up a link.

Search engines often use the anchor text on inbound links as part of the ranking process, cross-referencing with the text on the page as well as inbound links from other sites. If many people are linking to the content using the same keywords that the article is using, the site receives a boost.

This is why it's considered bad form to use "*click here*" as anchor text. Next time you're linking, whether to someone else's content, or to content on your own site, keep this in mind and take a few seconds to produce good anchor text.

URLs are also important. Search engines do pay attention to the structure and content of the address, not just the content it leads a user to read. The URL should be readable by a human, so use the keywords that you're targeting and do not misrepresent the content on the page. Try to keep things as consistent as possible. Let's look at some examples:

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThJmz88gsWA&feature=related>
2. <http://groups.google.com/group/coworking>

The first example is an example of what not to do. The second link is a user-friendly link.

Both sites are owned by Google and both feature user-generated content. Only one seems to practice what Google preaches. It's understandable as Google didn't build YouTube, but it's a good case in point. The first link is useless from a usability and SEO perspective – imagine if YouTube didn't have the credibility derived from millions of inbound links, or the ranking boost I'm sure it gets as a result of belonging to Google?

A Final Note on SEO

There are too many sites on the web that put more emphasis on writing for search engines and keyword density than on human readability. There's an old myth that this will somehow yield better results than simply creating awesome content.

In the interests of dispelling this myth, flick through the advice presented in this section and consider that every single bit of it also points you to create a better experience for your users.

Google and the other search engines have one goal: to index the web and direct users to the sites that are most useful to them. It's not in their interests to cater to site owners who use tactics like blasting keyword density sky-high. All of the tactics I've given you should fall under the strategy of creating a great site that real, flesh-and-blood people will love.

Moreover, as you grow your site so that it's well-respected, well-reputed, and full of lots and lots of great content, the search benefits that follow will also translate better into readers who stick around!



MONETIZATION TIPS

A business isn't much of a business without revenue, so undoubtedly one of your major focuses in running a blog is going to be monetizing the site.

Before we discuss how to create revenue, it is critical to understand that a focus on monetization should only come after you have created a site that delivers value and has thereby gained a decent sized readership. In other words, first you need a great product, then you make money out of it.

If you have a great blog, with persistence, revenue will happen in time one way or another. If your product isn't right though, and people don't actually want to read or visit, then no matter how much focus and energy you put into making money, it's just not going to happen.

In this chapter we'll assume you've put together a great blog with great content that is well managed and run, and has already begun attracting an audience. Under this assumption, we'll focus on both common, and not-so-common ways to make money, what the risks are, what the rewards are, and how to work out what is appropriate for your site.

General Tips on Monetization

No matter how you approach blogging, you should be prepared for a certain amount of losses early on. If you are doing *all* the work yourself in the early days these losses will simply be manifested as your time, energy, and lost earnings from doing other types of work.

If you are investing in staff and development, then naturally you should look at your blog as a business. This entails a plan for getting some revenue as well as capital, to sustain the early losses on your path breaking even by month-on-month, and ultimately leading to complete profitability.

While any truly successful blog should be able to turn a profit on its blogging costs, getting a blog to succeed is a difficult road and can take time, during which you will be burning cash.

The most useful advice I can give on monetizing a blog is to experiment and research. Look at as many options as you can, don't be afraid to try things out, and study the results closely.

It's a good idea to keep detailed records of strategies you are trying, the results they are creating, and how the different income sources are stacking up. This is the best way to determine what is going to work for your particular circumstances. Often a combination of strategies is best. For example, you might run advertising, occasionally make use of affiliate programs, sell a product such as a book tie-in, and maybe offer freelance services via the blog.

Making money with blogs is certainly possible, and if you're lucky it can even feel easy. But for most of us, it takes a lot of hard work, trial and error, and perhaps most of all, time. What might begin as a trickle can slowly grow in size, so it's good to stick with it. I often take the philosophy that something is better than nothing, so it's best to get *something* happening, until you can find a more optimal approach.

Iterating through monetization strategies means you have the opportunity to refine your ideas, do more of what works, and replace what doesn't. If

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your blog is popular, you will eventually find a way to turn the popularity into revenue – it just might not be as easy, or as fast, as you initially hope!

Anecdotal evidence from bloggers online sharing their revenue, suggests that typically, revenue numbers follow an S-curve. That is, it takes a while to get started, then ramps up and finally plateaus as a blog's audience and traffic steadies off. You can view three real case studies showing actual revenue numbers and income streams at the end of this book.

Advertising

The most obvious way to make money with a blog is through advertising, and as you might imagine, there is a very wide range of options, from text ads to banners, ad networks to private sales, video ads to audio ads; you name it, and someone has tried it as an ad system. But before you get too enthusiastic, you should know that making money from advertising is not easy.

Ad rates on the web tend to be quite low, particularly as there is so much ad space out there. With the explosion of websites and programs like Google's AdSense, which allow just about anyone to start running adverts, there is a ton of choice for advertisers looking for somewhere to show their brand. That's not to say that you can't make money with advertising and in fact most of the biggest blogs use ads as their primary income source, however, it's important to recognize that it's not without its challenges.

The first hurdle you will need to overcome is volume. Advertising only really works at reasonably high volume. Let's say an advertiser is willing to pay \$2 for every thousand times their ad is shown (a decent rate); then you will need to serve up 500,000 pageviews a month to bring in \$1000 for that ad spot. Google AdSense blocks typically deliver fractions of a dollar per thousand impressions, so you can imagine you'd need an even greater volume of traffic to produce a meaningful income stream.

The second hurdle is having an audience that advertisers want to reach. For some blog niches, even Google AdSense can deliver reasonably high returns, while others are simply too broad, or too unappealing for advertisers. A great example that shows no one is immune to these issues,

is the problem YouTube has in generating ad revenue across its very wide range of content. While popular videos are easily monetized, the site has had consistent problems generating revenue from its eclectic and at times rather bizarre range of videos.

If you can find either a very targeted audience that is attractive to advertisers, or a very high volume of traffic, or preferably both, then you can profit very well from advertising. As with all monetization strategies, it's best to do a lot of research, and then experiment extensively.

Advertising Terminology

Some common terms used in advertising are:

1. **CPC** – “Cost per click” ads pay every time a viewer clicks the advert. So, if you show an ad to a million people, but only five people click on it, then you'd get paid five times the CPC rate. So if an ad pays \$0.25 CPC, then you'd need to have 4,000 people click on the ad to hit \$1,000. And no, don't try clicking it yourself, there are ways to detect if the clicks are unique!
2. **CPM** – “Cost per thousand” impressions (the “M” in CPM stands for mille, which is Latin for thousand) is one of the most common methods of pricing advertisements. If an ad pays \$2 CPM, then you will need to show 500,000 impressions to receive \$1,000.
3. **CPA** – “Cost per action” is typically used in affiliate programs (see next section) and refers to payments being tied to the user taking a specific action, such as signing up, or making a purchase.
4. **eCPM** – “effective CPM” is a term used particularly on Google's AdSense, but useful for publishers in general. It is a way of comparing earnings from different ad units, particularly if they haven't been shown for over a thousand impressions, or are using different payment models. So an ad unit shown 500 times, and having earned \$1 through a Cost per Click (CPC) system, has an eCPM of \$2, because if you extend it out you're going to end up with 1,000 impressions presumably earning \$2 all together.

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5. **IAB Ad Sizes** – The Internet Advertising Bureau has created a set of standard sizes that most ad networks and buyers will be looking for. Common sizes include the “Leaderboard” size, which is 728px wide and 90px high and the “Large Rectangle,” which is 336px wide x 280px high. You can find the full banner specs at the **IAB** site: http://www.iab.net/iab_products_and_industry_services/1421/1443/1452.

Advertising Solutions

There are several ways to sell advertising, including different networks and formats. Here are some solutions you will want to investigate:

1. Google Adsense/DoubleClick.

Adsense is in a class of its own and has supported many bloggers and startups in their quest for revenues. The pluses are that you can set up instantly and begin earning literally within minutes. You can choose to show text ads only, image ads only, or a combination of both. The negatives are that not only does Adsense not earn much in general, it can also make a site feel cheap thanks to negative perception of text ads and a general low quality to the image ads. It's not a bad place to start and you will likely end up using Adsense for spaces you don't know what to do with, but it's unlikely to make up your entire long-term advertising strategy.

More recently Google has been integrating DoubleClick's Ad Exchange into Adsense. DoubleClick was a purely display ad company that Google acquired in 2008. The integration promises to lift the quality of banner ads through Adsense, so this may be good news for publishers.

2. Display Ad Networks

There are a huge number of display ad networks around. These usually take applications to join and will have requirements on how much traffic and what spots you are selling. Famous networks include Casale, Burst, TechnoratiMedia, and TribalFusion. Speak to a rep to find out what sort of returns you can expect. Anecdotal evidence in blog comments suggests you can expect around \$1 CPM, but that even this can take time to build up to.

Display ad networks also vary wildly in the quality of ads they show. You can often switch on and off certain campaigns from the back-end though and this can help ensure you don't dilute your product with ads that are downright awful.

3. Niche Ad Networks

Specialty ad networks often yield better results than the more generalized ones due to their niche targeting; however, they are also harder to get into. Examples of such ad networks include **Glam** (<http://glam.com>), which specializes in female-oriented sites, **TheDeck** (<http://decknetwork.net>), and **FusionAds** (<http://fusionads.net>) for web/tech sites and **FederatedMedia** (<http://federatedmedia.net>) with a bias towards new media. Rates on some niche networks can be relatively high; FederatedMedia for example charges \$10–\$30 CPM for most ads, however keep in mind that publishers only receive half of this as earnings and it's hard to know how many of these ads actually sell, so the eCPM will be much lower.

Researching your own niche and asking bloggers in the same area is the best way to find out who might be appropriate for your blog. Also recently the **Adify** (<http://adify.com>) platform has been used to build a lot of niche ad networks and browsing their site can be a good way to locate networks that relate to your site.

4. Direct Sales

Selling direct to advertisers has the benefit of cutting out the middleman. Given that networks charge anywhere from 10% to 50% of the ad sale, this can be a major saving. However, it also entails a lot more hassle in managing the ads yourself and unless you are out selling your own ads, you will really be relying on advertisers finding you, though that may be the case with some ad networks as well!

If you're taking this route you will want to take a look at **OpenX** (<http://openx.org>), which provides free ad server software that you can use to manage those direct ad sales. This allows you to give advertisers statistics as well, track ad expiries, and generally manage the ins and outs of swapping ads and setting their timelines.

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5. Self-Serve Ad Marketplaces

A variety of self-serve ad marketplaces exist where you can list your site and have the ad buying process automated. These sites will take a cut of the ad revenue, but because they are a bit more passive the cut tends to be smaller. Examples of self-serve ad marketplaces include **AdBrite** (<http://adbrite.com>), which offers a variety of formats varying from text ads to interstitial ads, **AdEngage** (<http://adengage.com>), which does a lot of CPC ads, **BlogAds** (<http://blogads.com>), which specializes in serving ads for blogs in general, and **BuySellAds** (<http://buysellads.com>), which mostly caters to the creative/tech niche.

Note that Microsoft, Yahoo, and Google (mentioned above) are also basically offering self-serve ad marketplaces, but given their size they are really a different category.

6. Advertising on Screencasts

Many of the big video sites like **Blip.tv** (<http://blip.tv>) and **YouTube** (<http://youtube.com>) offer their own advertising services that you can apply for. Alternately you can also join independent video advertising networks like **BrightRoll** (<http://brightroll.com>) and **AdBrite** (<http://adbrite.com>). Video advertising tends to come in many forms including text ad overlays, pre-, mid-, and even post-roll ads (referring to what point of video the ad appears at).

7. Inline Text Adverts

Kontera (<http://kontera.com>) and **Linkworth** (<http://linkworth.com>) both offer inline text ad services that turn ordinary words in a post into rollover ads. These types of ads are generally considered extremely spammy and off-putting for readers, so it's probably best to stay well away unless you are sure you know what you are doing.

8. Rich Media Adverts

VideoEgg (<http://videoegg.com>) is a company specializing in Rich Media advertising, which includes Flash/video-based ads that begin playing on rollover. For what they are, the ads look relatively unobtrusive and can provide a decent return when there is inventory.

9. Advertising on Images

A slightly novel, and not necessarily effective, idea is to place advertising on images. The best known service in this area is AdBrite's **BritePic** (<http://britepic.com>) service. This service might be useful if you were running a blog which was very much about the images.

10. Advertising on RSS Feeds

Since Google purchased **Feedburner** (<http://feedburner.google.com>) some years ago, publishers have had access to publishing Adsense ads on their RSS feeds. Unfortunately, conversions tend to be pretty low so unless you have a large readership, this is unlikely to contribute any really significant earnings and risks cheapening your feeds if you generally avoid Adsense on your site anyway.

An alternative is to sell your own ads on your RSS feed, though like all direct sales this has its own sales management issues. You can implement RSS ads on a WordPress blog using the **Feed Footer** plugin (<http://www.blogclout.com/blog/goodies/feed-footer-plugin>).

11. SEO-Optimized Text Link Ads

Once very popular, services like **Text-Link-Ads** (<http://text-link-ads.com>) and **LinkWorth** (<http://linkworth.com>) provide a different type of text ad to Adsense and its ilk. These text ads are delivered in a hard-coded PHP/HTML way so that they help advertisers rank on search engines. Unfortunately, a couple of years ago Google started cracking down and penalizing sites that sold text link ads and since then the networks have been much less extensively used. You should only use this type of ad with caution as it may end up shooting you in the foot if you lose out on vital search traffic.

12. Social Ads

A new company putting together a social/interactive twist on advertising is **SocialMedia.com** (<http://socialmedia.com>). The ads they serve are small interactive areas where users can participate in some sort of way. This concept is still in its infancy, but it could be a developing area in the future.

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13. Podcast Advertising

If your blog publishes podcasts you should be able to find an ad network to help monetize the podcasts. The best known appears to be **PodTrac** (<http://podtrac.com>).

14. Product Ads

Product ad networks showcase a variety of products in a single ad spot or widget. CPMs for these types of ads can be quite good, particularly on blog topics that relate to the products where the ads are extremely well targeted. Well known companies in this space include **Shopzilla** (<http://shopzilla.com>), **Widgetbucks** (<http://widgetbucks.com>), and **Chitika** (<http://chitika.com>).

... And many more options!

As you've no doubt noticed there are a lot of options for selling ads online and it's a bit of a maze figuring out what's going to work. As mentioned previously the best approach to take is to experiment and research as many as you can. Blogs for bloggers such as **Problogger** (<http://problogger.net>) are a great source of reports and reviews from other bloggers about different services and can help work out what is going to work for a particular site in a particular niche.

Affiliate Sales

Affiliate programs allow bloggers and marketers to refer people to buy a product and in exchange receive a percentage cut of the sale (if it takes place). Affiliate, or *referral* programs, as they are sometimes called, are usually open to anyone though sometimes they require an application. They typically pay anywhere from 5–50% and can be lucrative if used well.

Many companies operate affiliate programs online and you can check directly with companies in your niche either by searching their website or simply by contacting them. There are also more general affiliate marketplaces and sites like Amazon that can be applicable to virtually any niche.

When you sign up to an affiliate program you are usually given an affiliate code and special affiliate links for products. When you use those affiliate links in place of a plain uncoded link, a small tracking code, called a cookie, is placed on the user's computer. If they then go on to make a purchase, the sale is associated with your account and you receive a cut. The cookies have an expiration date on them, and if the user has already visited the product site of their own volition or through another affiliate link prior to clicking your link, then the referral usually won't count.

Most affiliate systems have specific terms of use that you should read and follow. Typically the terms prohibit certain uses including spam emails and practices like registering domain misspellings of the product and using URL forwards. In other words, you should only be sending referrals in a sensible, honest way!

Most affiliate programs are what's known as single-tier, meaning that you refer someone and then you receive a commission. Multi-tier affiliate programs take into account users that you refer who go on to become affiliates themselves and refer a second tier of customers. Multi-tier programs usually pay a lower percentage but offer the additional benefit of a greater number of commissions and the potential of bagging a first-tier referral who goes on to become a big affiliate.

If you are referring customers to purchase a subscription service, you should also check if the commission percentage is paid on the first month or on all months. Programs paying ongoing commissions can start small but really build up into a steady and reliable income stream.

How to Use Affiliate Programs

Using an affiliate program can take many forms. The simplest is to grab the affiliate link and a banner ad and place the banner on your site much like an advertisement. In fact, if you are having trouble selling your ad spots this can be a good interim measure to fill the space. While this can prove effective, it is generally not the best way to create affiliate income.

A second method for using affiliate links is simply to replace any link to a product with an appropriate affiliate link. For example, if you happen

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to mention a book in passing, you could link up that book to its Amazon sales page, complete with your Amazon affiliate code and anyone following the link would potentially earn you some cash. This can be a much more effective method of earning affiliate cash as it's far more transparent and relies on readers clicking links they are interested in. It's particularly effective on product-oriented sites such as a blog about iPods where users are not only interested in the products but likely to make purchases.

By far the most effective way to earn affiliate income, however, is through personal recommendation. For example, a blog post about a new service where you test out the product, point out its merits and failings, and substitute in affiliate links is likely to be the most effective way of sending traffic that converts. This is of course mostly the case when the product or service is good and you truly endorse it.

Recommendation relies largely on your reputation and objectivity. If readers feel your recommendation holds weight, they are likely to convert based on your opinion. This can have great effects in income but is a double-edged sword as you are effectively staking your reputation on every recommendation you make.

Building up a strong reputation can take a while, but once achieved effectively makes you both an expert and a celebrity, at least amongst your readership. Just as ad companies have long used celebrities to endorse their products, you too can lend your personal weight and receive financial benefits for doing so.

Affiliate Marketing Sites

Some important sites for affiliate marketers are:

1. **Amazon Associates** (<http://amazon.com/associates>)

Amazon's affiliate program is important because it's not only open to anyone with an Amazon account, but its enormous range of products makes it applicable to virtually every niche. Users clicking on an Amazon link have 24 hours to make a purchase for it to count towards your account. One important fact to note, however, is that the purchase they make need not be from the product or page you referred them to. This

makes the Amazon Associates program quite powerful as users you refer to a \$10 book may end up buying a \$500 television.

2. CommissionJunction (<http://cj.com>)

CommissionJunction is a marketplace for affiliate programs. Signing up to a single CJ account gets you access to browse through thousands of affiliate programs from a very wide range of companies. If you are unsure what types of products you could sell from your blog, then it's worthwhile signing up and taking a look through.

3. AzoogLeads (<http://azoogLeads.com>)

AzoogLeads is a CPA-based ad network that is a sort of cross between advertising and affiliate marketing in that users only convert on taking a specific action, which is in essence what affiliate programs also measure on. They are quite large and are a valuable service to check out if you are looking at affiliate marketing.

4. ClickBank (<http://clickback.com>)

ClickBank is a huge digital retailer offering mostly e-books. Bloggers can search their database of products to find a book they are comfortable promoting and then grab the referral code to begin marketing.

In addition to these sites, many retailers and sites will offer their own direct affiliate programs. So make sure you check out products and services related to your niche, to see if they have a link anywhere on their site for affiliates. Even if one isn't evident, you can try contacting the company to see if they have a quiet affiliate program you can join.

Premium Content

If something is popular when it's free, you can almost always count on a certain small percentage of people to be willing to pay for extra. In software this model is called "*freemium*", because the majority of users sign up for a free subscription or free trial, and then a small percentage – often on the order of 0.5% to 2% – will upgrade to pay for extra premium features.

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In the case of free content, if your audience is large enough and the interest is high then there will sometimes be a market for extra higher quality and related content for a premium fee. This can be done even with news-type content, the most famous example being the **Wall Street Journal** (<http://wsj.com>), which has a paid subscription model.

But premium content works at its best on sites where there is some sort of learning involved. People looking for knowledge are often willing to pay for it, particularly if it's specialized, hard to find otherwise, and being taught by an expert!

One approach to premium content is to sell e-books, however we'll cover this particular instance in the next section on products for sale. For now, we'll look at subscription-based systems that give the user access to extra content for a recurring monthly or yearly fee. If your blog is providing the free content, then this paid content effectively means that this is a "freemium" system.

Types of Premium Content

In a premium content model you should be selling access to some sort of content that is related to the regular blog. This is a logical connection and ensures that your audience is going to convert as smoothly as possible.

You can offer all sorts of content behind the paid wall including video, audio, text, or even related downloads of tools and resources.

For example, a site about self improvement could have a premium section that offers extra video interviews with self improvement gurus, a downloadable calendar for planning improvement strategies, and some meditation music tracks.

You can also package in services into a premium content model. For example, one-on-one mentoring, group webinars, moderated forums, or personalized email help with the content.

Another strategy you can take with premium content is to have a progressive unveiling system. So when the user signs up, they initially get access to a certain amount of extra content and then this gradually increases over time.

This might work in the form of a course that gets harder and more advanced as you go along, or simply as a “coming soon” sort of promissory system to keep users hooked. Either way, the most important thing is to deliver on the promise and fulfill your obligations to users. So if you are using a progressive unveiling system as a means to produce content as you go, be careful that you don’t promise more than you can create.

Essentially your premium content section is a product you are selling, so you should research and plan it as such. Work out how you can add as much value as possible for your readers. The more value you can add, the more likely the subscriptions will sell.

Premium Content Considerations

Like any business model, the freemium business has its own unique strategies and issues that you should be thinking about. You can read about a real life case study of a blog creating a premium content model to great effect at the end of this book.

Here are a few key considerations:

1. Choosing Price Points

Pricing is one of the most challenging aspects of any business. You should consider what similar products are selling for, whether you are going for volume or only a small number of very high paying customers, and how you want the product to be perceived. There is no magic formula for selecting a price and you should pay close attention to how the price is received and look at testing out tweaks through promotions and discounts.

2. Sales Funnels

An important consideration when selling any sort of product is to consider how you bring users from casual readers into converted premium members. You should be looking at the process as a funnel that takes all your visitors: some become readers, then some show interest in the product by perhaps reading the sales page, then some initiate the process of signing up, and finally some users actually go through and become members.

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If you are using Google Analytics you can set up the Goals function to track how visitors fare in converting by setting Goal points on key pages like the sales page, signup, payment, and completion. You can then use this information to analyze how people drop off during the process and what you can do to improve conversion rates.

9. Money Back Guarantees

Money back guarantees and information on how users can unsubscribe easily are important when creating subscription programs. People are naturally wary of committing to a long-term contract or obligation that forces them to keep paying when they want to get out. Offering a full refund policy in the first month can dramatically improve your conversion rates and, provided you genuinely have a good product, often doesn't result in a lot of refunds.

12. Affiliate Programs

As described earlier, an affiliate program lets other bloggers and marketers help you sell your product. Creating an affiliate program with a reasonable commission plan can help you market the premium content system beyond your own blog's readership.

If you create an affiliate program, be sure to let other bloggers know about it when you are launching the premium content product. Launch dates are the ideal time for other bloggers looking to generate revenue from affiliate marketing through interviews, reviews, or simply news posts.

Support

Whenever you add products or subscription programs you will inevitably need to deal with support. On a small scale you might be able to get away with email, but for serious support check out these apps:

TenderApp -
<http://tenderapp.com>

Kayako eSupport -
<http://kayako.com>

ZenDesk -
<http://zendesk.com>

The Mechanics of Creating Premium Content

While getting a blog up and running is pretty easy thanks to WordPress and its like, creating a premium content subscription membership is a bit trickier

and if you aren't tech savvy you will probably want to hire a web developer. There are some off-the-shelf systems that you might be able to manage even without much web knowledge, but it certainly doesn't qualify as a walk in the park!

Here are some ways you can build a membership system to house your premium content:

1. **aMember Membership Software**

aMember is an off-the-shelf product that is relatively easy to use and quite popular for producing membership applications. It's quite stable and has extra plugins to make it work with WordPress and other CMS products; that way the premium content can be handled in exactly the same way as you create normal content. Note, however, that if you are hosting downloadable files then you will need to protect them somehow as otherwise users can simply copy the URL of the file and distribute it outside your system.

It also has a suite of payment system plugins to work with PayPal, Authorize.net, and other payment processors. The software costs a couple hundred dollars and the support team from aMember can install it and help you get set up. Unfortunately, they aren't native English speakers and the documentation and support responses reflect this.

aMember has some handy features right out of the box including the ability to send emails to members and paying members separately, to run an affiliate program, to create voucher codes and to run multiple different subscriptions and memberships.

2. **WordPress Membership Plugins**

There are some premium WordPress membership plugins cropping up recently including **Wishlist Member** (<http://member.wishlistproducts.com>), **MemberWing** (<http://memberwing.com>), and **WP-Member** (<http://wp-member.com>) that you can use to turn WordPress's regular user system into a membership system.

3. **Custom System with Third-Party Subscription Management Tools**

If you want complete control and customization, then you can contract a web developer to build a system from scratch to house your premium

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content. This can often result in the most seamless implementations, but it's neither cheap nor fast.

One cost- and time-saving idea is to use a third-party subscription management tool to handle the payments side of the app. This is quite specialized work and often represents the most significant development cost. The other advantage to using a third-party tool is that they usually come packaged with lots of clever reporting features that you will grow into.

Some famous subscription management tools include **Chargify** (<http://chargify.com>), **CheddarGetter** (<http://cheddargetter.com>), and **Zuora** (<http://www.zuora.com>).

Selling Products

The great thing about blogging is that in building a successful blog brand, you will have created a very effective vehicle to sell related products. Earlier in this book when we discussed branding we looked at how TechCrunch has used its brand to extend out into a multitude of products and services. It's so effective because readers and fans see products coming from your blog as bearing the same mark of quality and standard.

Types of Products

If you can think of a product that is somehow related to your blog, then you can probably sell it online! Here are a few typical product types that blogs choose to distribute:

1. Books

Blogs have proven very effective launching pads for books, including the New York Times best-selling *4 Hour Workweek* by Timothy Ferriss (<http://fourhourworkweek.com>). When you build an audience who enjoys your writing and subject matter and has grown to trust your opinions, then a book on the same or a closely related subject is a very good bet for success. From **LifeHacker** (<http://lifehacker.com>) to **ZenHabits**

(<http://zenhabits.net>), **HuffingtonPost** (<http://huffingtonpost.com>) to **FreelanceSwitch** (<http://freelanceswitch.com>), you'll find books and e-books to be a staple product for generating revenue from blogs.

You can either approach a publisher with an idea, showing how it ties in to your ready-made audience, or you can simply go it alone using the tools listed below to produce and sell your book online and in printed form.

2. Reports, Guides and Short E-books

Related to books are other forms of written products including reports, guides, surveys, and other short e-books. For example, a blog about stocks might produce a short guide each year to its stock picks for the year. Or a blog for professional writers might run a survey of how writers earn their money and sell the survey results.

3. Merchandise

Merchandise can range from simple T-shirts and branded paraphernalia through to special custom products. In my experience, merchandise is not a big seller for most blogs unless they are doing something unusual. Certainly simply putting your logo on a **CafePress** (<http://cafepress.com>) T-shirt is no guarantee of big earnings. Some blogs do produce highly customized products to great effect however, so it can be done. A good example of a blog doing this is **CuteOverload** (<http://cuteoverload.com>), which puts together an annual calendar of cuteness to add to their regular advertising income.

4. Digital Goods

Digital goods are products that are purely in digital form. Examples include music tracks, e-books, videos, stock creative goods, sheet music, documents such as legal kits, and software. These sorts of products suit blogs for the simple reason that they involve no physical delivery or warehousing and can be duplicated (and sold) over and over again.

Although these four categories represent the most common types of products sold in association with blogs, they certainly aren't the full gamut.

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One great example of a blog that has gone really far with selling products is the blog/e-newsletter for photography enthusiasts, **PhotoJojo** (<http://photojojo.com>). In their digital store, Photojojo sells everything from frames and stickers through special camera lenses and cameras! The products really are quite spectacular and you can see them at <http://photojojo.com/store>.

Resources for Selling Products

There are numerous resources online to make selling products easier, some useful sites are:

1. PayPal (<http://paypal.com>)

Although it's mostly a payment mechanism, PayPal can be useful if you want to take a low volume, low-fi approach to selling. Setting up a PayPal account to receive money is simple and you can receive emails when a payment is made, after which you can deliver either physically or via email whatever it is that has just been sold. This approach takes next to no investment and though it won't get you far in the long term, it can be a quick way to get started selling.

2. Lulu (<http://lulu.com>)

Lulu allows anyone to sell printed books using a print-on-demand service that is of a decent quality. Lulu's product range includes not just regular books, but photo books, calendars, DVDs, and a variety of other goods. Your customers simply order through Lulu, make their payments, and receive the items – with no work whatsoever on your part!

If you are selling books via Lulu you can also have them distributed through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and other major retailers using the Lulu distribution network.

3. E-Junkie (<http://e-junkie.com>)

E-Junkie is a simple service that works on a subscription basis and handles the sale of digital goods. You simply create an account with a payment service such as PayPal, give e-Junkie the details, and upload your products. Payments go straight into your account and products are delivered to the purchaser. E-junkie makes its money from your monthly subscription. Other services similar to E-junkie include the unfortunately

named **Payloadz** (<http://payloadz.com>) and **Tradebit** (<http://tradebit.com>).

4. **CafePress/Zazzle** (<http://cafepress.com> and <http://zazzle.com>)

Several print-on-demand services exist for merchandise and they can put your logo, phrases, or other imagery on almost anything you might think of including badges, clothing, calendars, posters, and more.

These are extremely easy to set up but generally the products aren't spectacular quality and unless you are doing something very impressive, sales probably won't be high.

Ad Services

A popular way to monetize blogs in recent years has been by creating job boards. They work well because job boards open up a site to a whole new type of advertiser (companies looking for new staff), don't use up any of the existing ad real estate, and are perceived as a value-added feature by users.

Similar advertising services that you might consider are a classifieds board or a resource directory. Each service suits a different type of blog. For example, classifieds would probably work well for a highly localized blog or for a blog catering to a particular niche hobby where people would be interested in trading their collectables. Similarly, job boards work for blogs that have particular user groups suitable for finding candidates. Examples might include tech, business, and creative blogs.

Directories work in niches where there are many small companies looking for a way to connect to an audience of potential buyers. For example a site catering to web developers might work well to host a directory of web hosting solutions. There are many hosting companies vying for contracts so many of them might be willing to pay a small fee to list in a directory that can generate traffic.

Note that you can also marry directories with affiliate marketing to host a directory of products that you have affiliate links for, thus generating revenue off any leads that are sent through.

Building Ad Services

Advertising services can require custom builds if you have specific features you are looking for. As usual you will need to find a developer and consult with them on how to best go about creating the app.

There are also many off-the-shelf products and services you can use to quickly get up and running. Some useful sites include:

1. Jobamatic (<http://jobamatic.com>)

Jobamatic is a service from SimplyHired that allows anyone to set up a job board for free. If you don't have many jobs on your board, Jobamatic can pipe some extras in from their massive database. The service makes its money by taking a cut of some of the revenue made from job listings. The service powers job boards on blogs like GigaOm and Venturebeat.

2. PersonForce (<http://www.personforce.com>)

PersonForce is another service for creating job boards where it's free to set up, but the company takes a cut out of job ads sold on your behalf. The service powers job boards on blogs like TechCrunch and Venturebeat.

3. WordPress Themes for Job Boards, Classifieds and Directories

Another option is to set up a WordPress installation to power a job board. This is essentially repurposing WordPress's content management system. There are several themes around that can achieve a decent result including **JobPress** (<http://www.dailywp.com/jobpress-wordpress-theme>) and **Templatic's** Job Board (<http://templatic.com/cms-themes/job-board>).

Similarly **ClassiPress** (<http://wpclassipress.com>) turns WordPress into a classifieds listing and **DirectoryPress** (<http://www.directorypress.net>) turns the site into a link directory.

4. WordPress Job Board Plugin (<http://wpjobboard.net>)

Using WPJobBoard, you can add a job board to an existing WordPress blog without too much hassle at all. It's a plugin so you don't need to set up a separate installation to theme as you do if you use the themes mentioned above.

5. Oodle Marketplace for Classifieds (<http://www.oodle.com/info/marketplace>)

Oodle is a popular classifieds service that offers publishers a way to create a branded classifieds system they can add to their own site. It works on a revenue-sharing model.

6. Open Source Job Boards (<http://Joobsbox.com> and <http://Jobberbase.com>)

Thanks to the magic of open source, you can also use two free codebases for building job boards from Joobsbox and Jobberbase. Joobsbox even has themes and plugins available for it to help you customize it to your needs.

Getting an Ad Service Going

Advertising services can seem like licenses to print money; after all you can virtually sell a never-ending supply of ads for an almost arbitrary amount of money. However, there is a catch: they are notoriously hard to get going.

Advertisers will generally only advertise if there is a large number of users using the service, and users will only use the service if there is a large number of advertisers in the service. So it's a bit of a catch-22 situation.

Once you build up a reputation with both advertisers and users, then these can be fantastic earners. For example, a job board that is famous in a particular niche as the place to find jobs, can attract anywhere from \$50 to \$300 per job listing with dozens of listings a month.

Some strategies for getting a service going are to:

1. Offer Cross Promotion of Advertisers on the Blog

Since you have a blog with an audience that these advertisers want to reach, you can offer weekly or monthly posts that feature advertisers from the service. Example post headlines are "This week on the job board" or "Best services from the directory." If done well they can help get the ad service going while still producing a post that users will, if not find useful, at least not find too annoying.

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2. Offer Limited Free Advertising

Getting advertisers when you are charging for listings is difficult, but finding them when the service is free is pretty easy. Consider running the service for free for the first six months until it gets a reputation and then switch over to the paid model. You'll have some chafing from advertisers, but hopefully if you made it clear that the free period would not last forever, then it shouldn't be too bad.

3. Advertise the Service Yourself

Like any product you are selling, ad services can benefit from a bit of promotion. Create some adverts to appeal to job posters, companies that would list in the directory, or people who'd list in the classifieds, and pay to advertise in places those people might visit. It might not be cheap, but it can buy some momentum for your service.

4. Create an Affiliate Program

Affiliate programs tend to work best if the service is already working well, so these might not get much momentum early on, but they might be worth investigating, especially if the ad service software you are using offers an affiliate module that you can switch on easily.

5. Try to Find Ways to Seed the Service

Ultimately your task in launching an ad service is to seed the service to make it useful. Discount listings, special offers, promotion on the blog, networking with advertisers, and anything else you can do to get some content on there is worth pursuing.

Selling Your Expertise

A successful blog generates clout with its readers as they come to know and trust your site's voice and opinions. If the site is particularly successful, this reputation can extend out to become industry-known, so that you and your staff come to be seen as experts in the field.

A reputation for expertise can be traded on to sell a variety of services. While this is usually done by a single blogger, it can be used by a company of consultants as well. A great example is **SEOMoz** (<http://seomoz.org>),

a company that specialize in search optimization services. For a long time their blog was one of the main draws to sell consultative services, establishing them as trusted experts in the SEO niche. Their SEO consulting services, which were priced at up to \$1,000 an hour, were then handled by a team of SEO experts who in many cases were the same people who write for the blog. Today SEOMoz has moved on from consultative services into selling a web app package, which we'll discuss in the next section.

Some of the ways you can monetize a reputation for expertise include:

1. Consultative Services

For blogs that dispense advice of one sort or another, establishing a consultative service to give more personalized assistance can work really well. One of the ways people choose a service provider is to look for signs that they are an expert in their field. Seeing a blog giving advice on the subject to thousands of readers is a clear sign that you and your team know what you are talking about.

2. Selling Related Services

In a similar vein to selling consulting services, blogs with expertise in one subject can sell services in a related area. For example, a web design blog could set up a web-hosting service banking on their reputation for understanding the needs of web designers, expertise with the web, and clout as a trusted blog in the niche.

In selling related services you need to look for services that are useful to your readership. So understanding what audience group is reading the blog and what their needs are is essential.

3. Speaking Engagements

Being an industry expert presents some unusual ways to make money, one of which is to sell face time in the form of speaking engagements. Generally speaking, however, this doesn't really scale beyond a single, well-known blogger.

4. Training Seminars

A better version of speaking engagements is to conduct training seminars on topics from your blog. This strategy is much more scalable

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as the trainer isn't banking on their own reputation as much as the overall blog and company brand.

Training seminars can be conducted either entirely online as webinars, or in physical locations if you can coordinate enough people in a given place. Seminars can be quite lucrative, particularly if you are in a specialized niche where people are prepared to pay well to learn from experts.

Training seminars can also be expanded to have trainers and speakers from other blogs and companies in the same area. This positions your brand as a leader in expertise, networks your company with other key influencers, and leverages the marketing and promotional abilities of the speakers you bring in.

5. Paid Reviews

Offering a service where you charge to review products can leave a bit of a bad taste, so approach this option with caution. Services like **ReviewMe** (<http://reviewme.com>) and **PayPerPost** (<http://payperpost.com>) made the idea of paid posts popular for a time as they were seen to be an easy way to quickly monetize blogs. The services are still around, though most big name sites steer clear of the practice as it can give your readers the impression that you are a corporate shill.

If you take the paid review route, make sure you are up-front about the service, possibly with a disclaimer in the review. You should also always take the reviews seriously and put together objective reviews. One approach that might work is to conduct reviews on a regular basis regardless of whether you have a paying customer, and then treat the payments as a priority fee to have their review put to the front of the queue. Rephrasing the paid review concept might help take some of the sting out.

Creating and Selling Web Apps

Selling Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) has become extremely popular in recent years. The idea of a hosted web app that customers pay a subscription to access and use is a great business model because it makes life easy for the customers. There's no upgrading, there's no installation and they can usually increase or decrease their commitment over time by changing plans to more featured and expensive plans.

The original SaaS provider, **SalesForce** (<http://salesforce.com>), is now a billion-dollar listed company on the NYSE. But the great thing about the model is that it extends to much smaller outfits and apps, which is where your blog can come in.

A good example of a blog using this model comes again from SEOMoz, the site mentioned earlier for selling expert consulting services for up to \$1,000 an hour. As a way to build links to their site (one of the primary SEO tactics that they specialize in), the company decided to build some clever tools that users could access via the web. Examples included a tool to check a site's ranking for certain keywords or give an analysis of a site's optimization for search engines.

As the portfolio of web tools grew, SEOMoz decided to wrap the tools up into a subscription bundle offered to readers for a relatively low monthly fee. As customers have increased, the company has continued releasing more web apps and tools into the package to make it more value-packed. Eventually the web app side of their business was so successful that SEOMoz shut down the consultative services division and now focuses purely on providing apps.

Another company using a blog to promote web apps is the very famous SaaS company **37Signals** (<http://37signals.com>). Their products include project management tool Basecamp and customer relationship management tool Highrise. They cater to small-to-medium businesses looking for simple tools online. The 37Signals blog is called Signal vs. Noise (<http://37signals>).

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[com/svn](#)) and has over 100,000 subscribers. The blog runs a single ad spot and is primarily a marketing vehicle for the web apps the company makes.

Whether you create a blog and then later come up with a web app to service those readers, or have a web app that you promote with a blog, the end result is effectively the same. In both cases, the blog is essentially the marketing and reputation building machine for the business, where revenue is generated by the app.

Other Strategies

Some other strategies for monetization include:

1. Running Events

Previously, we discussed running training seminars and how you can trade on expertise to create industry-known and recognized events. Another type of event that you can run is a conference.

Due to their scale, conferences are a lot harder to organize. You will need a fairly big brand and reach, a lot of cashflow to pay for all the big up-front expenses, as well as experience in planning and putting on large-scale events.

Between corporate sponsorship and ticket prices, conferences can pay off. A number of big blogs put on annual conferences including Carsonified's Future of the Web series (<http://carsonified.com>), AListApart's EventApart conferences (<http://aneventapart.com>), and TechCrunch's TechCrunch50 (<http://www.techcrunch50.com>).

2. Getting Complete Sponsorship

Previously we looked at attracting advertisers, however a different sponsorship route is to get a company to truly sponsor a blog. This can sometimes mean effectively locking out all other types of advertisers, and often even renaming the site.

3. Asking for Donations

Some blogs with great audience reputation have a practice of asking for donations from their readership. Theoretically this is possible on a

large scale, as proved by Wikipedia, but in reality it's one of the worst monetization routes, and if you can pull it off, you could probably pull off many of the other strategies far more effectively. This is a strategy you should only employ if you have ethical reasons for shunning other monetization routes.

Blending, Iterating and Experimenting

The important thing to keep in mind when searching for a way to generate revenues is to find a strategy that works with your particular blog, readership, and niche.

Often you will find a blend of strategies work. If you visit many of the top blogs you will notice they are pursuing a number of strategies, for example **LifeHacker** (<http://lifehacker.com>) sells books and guides while also taking advertising money. **Probblogger** (<http://probblogger.net>) uses speaking engagements, a book, advertising, and affiliate revenue to great effect. The small but well-known design site **DesignisKinky** (<http://designiskinky.net>) hosts annual events, publishes a periodic magazine, and sells merchandise.

Make Money Resources

Looking for more information about making money? Check out these sites:

1. **Probblogger's "Make Money Blogging" page** (<http://www.probblogger.net/make-money-blogging/>)

This great roundup from Probblogger goes over some of the key ways his sites earn their money, including links and mini reviews of different services.

2. **Entrepreneur's Journey** (<http://entrepreneurs-journey.com>)

If you're interested in affiliate marketing, then be sure to check out this site run by entrepreneur Yaro Starak, which discusses a variety of ways you can make money blogging, in particular through affiliate programs.

3. **Teaching Sells** (<http://teachingsells.com>)

This course on how to build membership sites to house educational content is very well put together and full of useful content to get you going.

Monetization Tips

Moreover, you should not necessarily expect to hit on the optimum combination of strategies immediately. Unless you have prior experience or a very strong instinct, you should aim to experiment and iterate your strategy, refining as you go. Sometimes certain plans will only really work once you have achieved a certain momentum. Or they only work for blogs in particular niches. Other times you will find that a blog in your niche has already worked a particular strategy into the ground, leaving little room for a new entrant.

If you expect monetization to be hard and take time, then you will be prepared for the worst: a long period of losses. Sustaining losses on the path to profitability is to be expected for any business. If you are ready for them then you will be positioned to take advantage of any good fortune that brings you to profitability earlier.

8

LONG TERM STRATEGIES

So you've built a great blog, attracted an audience, created a revenue stream, and successfully created a blogging business. What next?

In this chapter we'll discuss long-term strategies and approaches to take for your blog. Even if you have barely started, it's not a bad idea to begin thinking about these issues so that you can slowly nudge your business in the right direction.

Whether your aim is to cash out through a sale, expand from one blog to many, grow other businesses off the back of the blog, or simply run a successful blog operation, one thing is for sure: having a strategy makes a big difference in ensuring you end up at the right destination.

Building a Long Term Business

Creating a business that stands the test of time is a worthy pursuit. If you enjoy managing and operating a great blog, then you should invest time and effort into making sure your site continues on for the long term.

Because blogging is such a new phenomenon, there isn't much experience in long-term blogging. Nonetheless, here are some important considerations:

1. Be Adaptable

In a fast-paced environment like the internet, the most important thing is not to be able to predict the future, but rather to be able to adapt to it when it happens. Every year brings new innovations in how blogs are funded, how they are designed and built, how they are promoted, and a myriad other changes that sometimes develop into either long-term trends, or simply passing fads.

As a long-term blog owner, it's important to be thinking about where the market is going and to stay on top of trends. Don't be afraid to experiment with new ideas and adapt your blog to them.

2. Invest in the Future

If you are taking a long-term approach to blogging, then it's important to invest in the future. Build a great team of people, invest in products that can keep delivering revenue in the long term, and look at creating partnerships with other companies in the niche.

3. Consider Diversification

If you want to survive in the long term, then you should think about hedging your bets. This means looking out for opportunities to diversify. For example, adding new content types such as screencasts, expanding your topic area in case the broad niche declines in popularity, publishing content through new mediums, and so on. In essence, you want to ensure you don't have all your eggs in one basket.

From One Blog to Many

Once you've come to grips with building a profitable and popular blog, chances are you'll be able to replicate that success. In fact, many of the most popular blogs are now small networks of blogs in one form or another.

The Benefits of Operating Multiple Blogs

As the operator of a successful blog, you will have a variety of advantages in starting successive sites:

1. The Ability to Seed New Sites Quickly

When you start your first blog it's very difficult to find those early readers. Successive blogs however, can be seeded with readers from the first site. All this takes is a blog post or two on the original popular blog to let readers know about the new site. Readers who enjoy your first site are likely to migrate over, helping to get the new site off the ground. More tips on launching with multiple blogs can be found in Chapter 6 on generating traffic.

2. Reputation and Weight with Advertisers

Multiple blogs bring advantages in dealing with advertisers. For example, you can organize discounts on multi-site advertising, leverage your existing site's reputation to sell ads on new sites, and provide free trials for new sites to existing advertisers.

3. Extending an Existing Business

By creating new blogs under the same business umbrella, you stand to gain through economies of scale associated with things like your accounting, management, development, and design. Instead of starting all these things from scratch, you can port over entirely or partly from your current sites. You'll also have the experience and relationships to carry through your hard-won lessons to the new sites, and get them going much faster.

4. Cross-Pollination

Because blogs naturally attract their own audiences, combining multiple blogs can help expose one blog to another blog's unique audience.

In many ways this is an extension of the idea of seeding a new blog's audience. Cross-pollination can be done through posts about the other sites, a blog network badge or drop-down that lists all the sites in the network, or by cross-posting between sites.

Of all these techniques, on-target cross-posting is the most effective. It involves selecting a post on one blog that would be of interest to the audience from another blog, then posting an extract on the second blog with a link for users interested in reading the rest. Cross-posting relies on being able to find a natural overlap between two sites, and if it's on-target, it can be extremely effective because it puts the second blog right in front of the audience. More tips on cross-pollinating can be found in Chapter 6 on generating traffic.

Horizontal vs Vertical Networks

There are two options for extending your blog out to become a network of blogs. Horizontal networks are groups of blogs in different topic areas, while vertical networks are clusters of blogs around the same related topic area.

The **Business Insider** network (<http://businessinsider.com>) is a good example of a vertical network. They have systematically added new blogs covering different types of business news from tech business to listed company news. On the other hand, **Gawker Media** (<http://gawker.com>) is an example of a horizontal network, where the blogs range in topic area from New York gossip to Sports to Tech. They aim to be a publishing group that uses its blog expertise to hit many different demographics.

Creating vertical networks holds more advantages than creating horizontal networks. While horizontal networks create some benefits, verticals deliver those benefits and more, including much greater audience sharing, existing reputation and knowledge of a niche, and better propositioning for advertisers.

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Other examples of vertical networks include the **TechCrunch** (<http://techcrunch.com>) family of blogs, the **Tuts+** network of educational blogs (<http://tutsplus.com>), and the **GigaOm** group (<http://gigaom.com>). Other examples of horizontal networks include **b5Media** (<http://b5media.com>) and **SplashPress** (<http://splashpress.com>).

How to Launch and Manage Multiple Blogs

Here are some tips on launching and managing multiple blogs:

Blog Management Systems

While you can simply run multiple installations of a blog platform such as WordPress, a better solution is to use a system that supports multiple blogs. The upcoming WordPress 3.0 will offer this support, as does WordPress Multiuser, Expression Engine, and MovableType. Of course, a custom blog management system would theoretically also work!

Replicating a Concept

If you hit on a successful formula for a blog, it can often work well to duplicate the same formula into different topic areas. This can mean duplicating everything from staff structures to design, as well as generally sub-branding a single overarching brand. By creating a successful formula and then duplicating it out over and over again, you have the benefit of building on a successful system and with each successive blog you build the brand to become bigger and stronger.

Moving Between Sites

As mentioned above, it's good to think about how your sites will cross-pollinate each other. One important aspect of this is how users switch between sites. This might be through a list of the available sites in your sidebar, a network drop-down menu, or a tabbed structure. The more prominent and clear it is that they are multiple sites that are part of a single network, the more likely you'll get cross-overs.

Deciding When to Grow

An important decision in building new blogs is deciding when it is a good time to grow. If you have a large store of capital, this decision is much more flexible. However, if you are bootstrapping, it's important not to overextend

yourself. Therefore it's a good idea to make the first site profitable first, and then use the revenues to build successive sites. This ensures the business and sites remain sustainable.

Managing Larger Teams

The bigger your organization gets, the more management you will need. As your staff grows, things like manuals and style guides will become vital. Also important is having a structure to manage the various site editors and in turn their writers. This can involve large amounts of writer invoices to process, password management, and a variety of other issues. All of these are good reasons not to expand too quickly. By growing one site at a time, you can grow the capacity of your administration system at the same pace, without extending your costs beyond your income.

Building Networks with Other Bloggers

Some bloggers begin networks with other bloggers in order to share audiences, build credibility with advertisers, build brand, and sometimes share content. Creating a network in conjunction with other bloggers can be successful in meeting these goals. An example of a popular blog network is the Smashing Network started in 2009 by major web design blog **SmashingMagazine** (<http://smashingmagazine.com>).

The Smashing Network offers members increased traffic from the enormous amount of traffic that SmashingMagazine has. In return, posts from member sites are listed in aggregated form on the SmashingMagazine homepage. This in turn helps the site grow and offer content at an exponential rate. In the future, the network could then also offer advertising partnerships to its members, or leverage the group to promote its job board and services.

Another example of a network collaboration between different bloggers is the **LifeRemix** (<http://liferemix.com>) network started by Glen Stansberry from **LifeDev** (<http://lifedev.net>) and Brett Kelly of **Cranking Widgets** (<http://blog.crankingwidgets.com>). This network includes the Top 100 site **ZenHabits** (<http://zenhabits.net>), as well as a number of other high profile blogs. The network mostly exists to share traffic and to help bloggers use

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the power of their group to get book deals, find advertisers, and look for monetization opportunities.

Creating a blog network with other bloggers relies on either having great social contacts at other blogs as is the case with the LifeDev network, or having a lot of weight in a niche as SmashingMagazine does.

Using a Blog to Build Other Businesses

Blogging can be a good way to grow into other businesses. In Chapter 7 on monetization, we discussed SEOMoz, the search optimization company that first used their blog to sell consultative services and later made the leap to selling a package of web apps. While the blog is still going, it's fair to say that the blog itself is just one part of the larger business.

SEOMoz is an example of how a blog can be used to build other businesses. This is particularly the case for entrepreneurs with limited experience or capital. In these cases, a blog can be an affordable way to get started building up audiences and cashflow. Then as you develop monetization methods like products and web apps, you can gradually make the shift so that the emphasis of your business is the products, and the blog becomes a marketing tool on steroids.

A blog can also make a great launch pad for a startup idea. In the case of the very popular question and answer site **StackOverflow** (<http://stackoverflow.com>), the site was the product of two very popular coding blogs: **CodingHorror** (<http://codinghorror.com>) run by Jeff Atwood and the now-defunct Joel Spolsky blog **JoelonSoftware** (<http://www.joelonsoftware.com>). In many ways these two blogs provided the marketing capital necessary to give StackOverflow a massive head-start that other startups can only dream of.

The best approach to take in using a blog business to launch another business, is to develop products and services related to the same audience

that visits your blog. In both StackOverflow and SEOMoz's case, the audiences were a perfect fit for the businesses they were developing. Consequently both new businesses took off and are businesses in their own right, far beyond the blogs that helped start them.

Valuing and Selling a Blog

In Chapter 7 we discussed a variety of monetization methods. There is, of course, one final way that you can profit from starting and running a blog, and that is to sell it! While this is more of an exit strategy than a monetization method, it's worth discussing for bloggers thinking about their long-term plans.

Some considerations for selling a blog:

- **Make Sure Your Accounts are Up to Scratch**

If a business has little in the way of accounts, or has missing documentation, poor reporting or a variety of other bad accounting practices, these are clear warning signal for buyers to stay away. They can hide a multitude of sins and alter the calculations made to value a business dramatically. If your plan is to sell your blog, it is even more vital than ever to make sure you have complete and accurate financial records for the business.

- **Keep it Separate From Other Businesses and Interests**

Selling a business when it is intermingled with other interests is difficult. If you can, keep your staff, assets, accounts, and business generally separate from any other business concerns you might own. And of course you should always keep your business separate from any personal accounts and interests you may have.

In many ways, separation is related to the previous point as mixing and mingling accounts and assets makes it difficult for buyers to see the business you are selling as a single, clear entity. The more mixed up things are, the easier it is for things to be hidden, and nobody likes surprises, especially when money is involved!

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- **Build so it Can Operate Without You**

If you plan to sell, you should be building a business that isn't reliant on you being there. The new owner is going to want to be able to pick up where you leave off and keep the business intact, and not have its brand equity drain away as soon as you leave the site. So plan ahead and make sure that the site can be managed without you, and isn't reliant on your personal brand for viability.

Some Considerations for Valuing a Blog

It's important to state that the price you sell a site for is incredibly variable, and based on a number of factors:

- **Who Approached Whom?**

Selling a business is a negotiation, and like any negotiation, there are many factors that determine who has the upper hand, which in turn determines the final price. In particular, it makes a big difference how you connect with potential buyers. If you put a site up for sale, unless you receive many interested parties, you are going to have the lower hand in any negotiation because buyers know that you want to sell, that you might even have a time limit, and that if your site is on the market for a long time, they might be able to buy it for less. Vice versa if a buyer approaches you; come in with the upper hand and can play hard-to-get to drive the price up.

- **How Much Value Will the Blog Bring the Buyer?**

You can maximize your sale price if you can find a buyer who can increase the value of the blog by mixing it with other businesses or products they already own. So for example, when Treehugger.com sold to the Discovery Network in 2007 for \$10 million, it no doubt achieved a high premium because Discovery Network knew they could bring new readers to the site from their network and vice versa, as well as to increase the revenue of the blog by marrying Discovery advertisers with the new acquisition.

Comparatively, if the site had sold to a buyer with no existing investments or products in the same market, there would be no value

added, and the sale price would be purely based on the other factors listed below.

- **How Much Revenue is the Blog Generating?**

Arguably one of the two most important factors in determining a price, particularly for high-growth areas like the Internet, is revenue. Although costs are a critical component of the equation, for larger sites buyers will be assuming they know how to handle costs. So for example, an experienced operator looking to purchase a blog may feel they can leverage existing resources such as publishing and editing staff and have a good idea of what such costs would be for a particular size publication. In these cases, they will be much more interested in your overall revenue because it is the main unknown factor in determining whether the operation is viable.

- **How Much Does the Blog Cost to Operate?**

The flip side of revenue is costs, and these certainly impact a sale, particularly for smaller buyers looking to maintain the same operation rather than merge it in with their existing businesses. In these cases, your costs will largely determine how profitable the acquisition will be for the buyer.

- **How Fast is the Blog Growing?**

Perhaps the most important factor in pricing a business is its growth. High growth can overshadow pretty much every other factor, holding the promise of higher revenues in the future (if revenues are low), economies of scale (if costs are high), cancelling out general market trends (if they are negative and the blog is still growing), and generally showing a potential that in turn drives the price up.

Growth is the reason behind high valuations for web services with small revenues but large audiences, most famously Twitter. And it's a good reason to sell while things are on the up, even if it's not exactly the right moment according to your plans.

- **What is the State of Web and Advertising Markets?**

It is always important to keep an eye on how the markets are faring generally. In bad economic times when ad spending is falling, it's natural

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that buyers will be less likely to pay a premium. Timing is important when selling!

- **What are the Assets of the Business?**

Finally when you sell, consider all the assets you are selling including any intellectual property, content, physical assets, and code assets. Everything contributes to the total worth of the business from brand trademarks to the website's design, special code you've had developed, and the sheer volume of articles you might have.

While numerical valuations are useful for quickly quantifying what a site might be worth, keep in mind that they are only guides. Ultimately a site is worth what someone is willing to pay for it. Still in terms of numerical valuations, all sorts of equations are possible including:

1. **10-15x Monthly Revenue for Small Sites on Auctions**

This rough pricing guide is often used on auction sites like **Flippa** (<http://flippa.com>). The multiple is quite low, which is usual for smaller sites. It's also based on monthly revenue because revenue figures for blogs change so quickly, and because it's not uncommon to find sites for sale that haven't even existed for a year.

Using a revenue rate extrapolated out from recent weekly or monthly figures is also sometimes called the run rate. It's important when negotiating to check that everyone is using the same revenue numbers to calculate on.

2. **Anywhere from 1-10x Annual Revenue**

For high-growth sites, taking a huge multiple on annual revenue is not unheard of. These valuations are very much based on projections of growth and differ around industries.

Unless you have a business that is showing amazing viral growth, you should probably assume the multiple will be down at the lower end.

3. **Anywhere from 2-20x Operating Profit**

Operating profit is your revenue minus your costs, but before deductions like taxes are made. It's also referred to as EBITDA, which stands for

Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation, and Amortization, or EBIT, or Operating Income.

If you are measuring value according to operating profits, then you can expect the multiples to be much higher. In traditional business, valuations are more likely to use operating profit because those industries have a much longer track record and buyers know exactly what to expect. For those types of businesses, you often hear about 3-5x profit valuations. Online there is much more speculation, growth, and opportunity, meaning in turn that the potential multipliers can go much higher.

Again, the reality is that a business is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it, and online buyers are often willing to pay more, particularly in good economic times. Don't expect to find any real hard and fast rules and always negotiate hard.

Tech Target and Internet Brands

TechTarget (<http://www.techtarget.com>) and **Internet Brands** (<http://www.internetbrands.com/ib>) are two large publicly traded companies in the web publishing space. At times in 2009 they traded at:

- **Tech Target** – Approx 1x revenue and 3.1x EBITDA
- **Internet Brands** – Approx 2.7x revenue and 7.2x EBITDA

These are useful statistics to compare, though of course they are much larger, and potentially very different businesses to a single blog that you might be valuing!

How to Start Selling

There are a few different routes that you can take to sell a site:

1. Auction Sites for Smaller Businesses

One of the most common ways you hear about sites selling is on services such as Flippa.com. These services host auctions for sites and businesses, and typically work well for small transactions (less than

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\$100,000) as they are quick to list on and expose the sale to a large number of buyers.

However, there is one very large drawback to this style of sale. In an open auction the process is open to manipulation. For example, Flippa runs a comments section where buyers can discuss the auction, potentially pointing out problems and issues to try to keep the price down. Additionally everyone knows what is (or isn't) being bid for a site, taking a lot of the negotiation out of the equation. Finally, putting a site up for sale and having it not sell doesn't really leave you in a good bargaining position for future sales.

That said, I sold my first blog (NorthxEast.com) on an auction site and the sale went quite well. At the time I knew little about valuing a blog, and managed to achieve a premium of \$10,000 for a site with just a few hundred dollars of revenue. The sale price was really based on the potential of the site.

Flippa.com is the most well-known auction site, however eBay also provides a place to sell under the category "Businesses and Websites for Sale," and you can also try sites like **DigitalPoint** (<http://bit.ly/3z3iAn>) and **BuySellWebsite** (<http://buysellwebsite.com>).

2. Listing a "For Sale" Notice

There are numerous sites where you can list a business for sale to attract leads. Some listing sites include **GlobalBX** (<http://globalbx.com>), **BusinessesForSale** (<http://us.businessesforsale.com>), and **BizQuest** (<http://bizquest.com>).

Alternatively, you can announce on your own blog that you're looking at selling and if anyone is interested, they can contact you for more details.

3. Getting a Business Broker

Business brokers are agents who help shop around a site. These companies typically help find buyers, help set prices, and help with the negotiation process. Of course, they also take a cut of the sale! Ask your accountant about finding local business brokers who have online experience.

4. Shopping Privately for Buyers

Perhaps the most common way to find a buyer is to privately shop around for buyers. This might simply be done through some strategic emails sent out to companies you think might be interested to ask for offers and interest.

5. Preparing Information for Prospective Buyers.

If you are planning on selling a blog, you should make sure you have a set of information you're ready to distribute when a prospective buyer enquires. This can either be vague, in order to get interest for more serious discussion, or for smaller sites, you may lay out all the cards transparently from the get go. You might include information such as:

1. Traffic and specifics such as search traffic.
2. Revenue, costs, and profit.
3. Assets for sale.
4. Growth.
5. Detail of how the site could grow.

Spend some time looking through listings on sites like Flippa.com to see what information sellers present, and decide how much detail you wish to give.

6. Using Escrow Services

Whatever route you take in finding a buyer, it's always important to use an escrow service such as **Escrow.com** (<http://escrow.com>) when making the transfer. These services provide a trusted third party to make sure the buyer receives the website and assets, and the seller receives the money. The escrow fee is typically a percentage of the transaction and can be shared between buyer and seller.

CASE STUDIES

The following chapters are case studies from Envato, the startup I cofounded in 2006. At Envato we have a mix of different businesses we run, fueled in some part by my love of serial entrepreneurship! Initially blogs were nowhere in our business plan, but over the years we've developed a few different blog brands into traffic powerhouses, and it's from these that I wanted to share examples.

These case studies each aim to illustrate some aspect of creating a successful blogging business using real-world stories and examples from my own experience.

Wherever I could find accurate records, I've tried to include real-world numbers for revenue and costs as well as traffic and growth so you can see how things might go for a blogging business. I've added particular detail to the FreelanceSwitch case study, as it was the first of our blogging businesses and hence the most useful for new blog entrepreneurs to study.

I hope you find these case studies useful. The blogs themselves are all online today, so you can go and check them out before you read through.

They are:

- **Case Study 1:** FreelanceSwitch (<http://freelanceswitch.com>)
- **Case Study 2:** Tuts+ (<http://psd.tutsplus.com>, <http://net.tutsplus.com>, and so on)
- **Case Study 3:** AppStorm (<http://mac.appstorm.net>, <http://web.appstorm.net>, and so on)

CASE STUDY 1: FREELANCESWITCH

Our first case study looks at one of the earliest blogs I worked on called **FreelanceSwitch** (<http://freelanceswitch.com>). As the name suggests, the blog publishes articles and advice on freelancing. Today the site also includes a job board, resource directory, forums, and directory of freelancers.

Launched in April 2007, the site was the first major blog dedicated to freelancing. Within five weeks we had accumulated 7,000 RSS readers and in the years since the site has grown to be a consistent performer with a readership standing at over 50,000. It has helped legions of freelancers with advice and support, it is completely profitable, and has generated enough additional revenue to start the blogs featured in the other two case studies in this book. And for me personally it was the steepest learning curve on blogging.

In this case study we'll look at how we landed on the blog topic, how we monetized the site, how long it took to reach month-on-month profitability, and what other lessons can be learned from the FreelanceSwitch experience.

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

Hitting On a Topic

Although FreelanceSwitch was the first *major* blog I worked on, it was not in fact the first blog I created. About two months earlier I had started a blog (that I later sold) called NorthxEast where I wrote about online business. It was my very first blog and the place that I learned all those basics of blogging, like how to use WordPress, what RSS was, and how to write posts that people enjoyed.

As I've mentioned throughout this book, it's a really good idea to get some blogging experience before you get serious about investing in a blog business. For me, NorthxEast was my proving ground, and as it turned out, a lot more too.

A couple of months after starting NorthxEast and working ferociously hard on it, I had accumulated about 300 RSS readers. It had one advertiser who lasted only a month at \$80, and some regular readers and commenters who were largely the result of my constant networking on other blogs and sites. In short, things were going relatively well for a newbie like me and I was very happy!

Now, prior to working and blogging online, I had worked as a freelance graphic and web designer for a couple of years. During that time I had learned a lot about the ins and outs of freelancing and I decided to compile some of those lessons into a long post called "A Comprehensive Guide to Starting Your Freelance Career," which you can still find online at: <http://freelanceswitch.com/start/a-comprehensive-guide-to-starting-your-freelance-career>

The post took me a whole day to write, and looking back, wasn't actually particularly comprehensive at all! But it had a lot of insight gained from trial and error, and it turned out to be really useful for people.

At that time, the site **ProBlogger** (<http://prologger.net>) used to run periodic "Speed Linking" posts where the author Darren Rowse would link to a few worthy articles. I had sent in a few of mine in the past, and this particular time Darren published a link to the freelance post.

From that link the article made it to Delicious.com's Popular bookmarks of the day. Sadly this was enough to crash my server at the time, and I spent half the day frantically trying to get it all working again. It was a lesson in how important it is to have caching plugins set up on WordPress installations!

Since this was far and away the most successful post I had written on my fledgling blog, it seemed patently obvious that the topic of freelancing was much more popular than the rest of my posts. It happened that I also knew more about freelancing than I did about my regular subject matter of online business. This was no coincidence. I believe that knowing your subject matter is extremely important if you want to produce good quality content on that topic.

Deciding to strike while the iron was hot, I sat down that weekend and designed and built a WordPress theme for a new site. I picked out a domain that was memorable and catchy, and by the following Friday we launched the site. While I'd never made a WordPress theme before, it's important to remember I was a web designer already with a fair bit of experience doing things like registering domain names and designing and building sites. So while not everyone may be able to launch a site in less than a week, it does show that this is nowhere near as complex as say, opening a shop.

Before we started FreelanceSwitch, I can remember thinking that there were no untapped niches left anymore and lamenting how I wished I'd gotten into blogging years earlier when it was all wide open. When the opportunity to start a blog on freelancing appeared, I suddenly had to rethink my earlier belief.

In fact, I no longer think my original worries about untapped niches are true at all. There are *a/ways* new niches to explore and new ways to approach existing niches. In fact, the second case study in this book is about how we approached a crowded niche, and the third is about how we lucked out again and discovered another mostly untapped niche two years later.

Still, it remains that there was a lot of luck involved in finding such a great topic, which I happened to know lots about, and which also didn't seem to have many blogs writing about.

But most of all, this sequence of events illustrates how important it is to jump in and get your feet wet with blogging. Luck has a tendency of happening to

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

the most persistent people. That is, for people who keep trying long enough that pure odds dictate that sooner or later they hit on some success.

When I began NorthxEast I was pretty sure that writing about online business would be a runaway hit. It turned out that it wasn't at all, particularly for me at the time, but instead something completely different turned up.

Capitalizing on a Good Idea

To say that FreelanceSwitch was a success purely because we chose the right niche however, is to sell our early efforts short. In fact, once the site got started, I discovered there were a couple of sites around who'd written on the subject of freelancing, but they'd been patchy at best, and not necessarily well-written or focused.

What worked at FreelanceSwitch was a combination of things:

1. We Started With a Really Great Brand

As a designer I am sorry to say that I have perpetrated some fairly bad websites on the world in my time. But when it came to designing FreelanceSwitch, the stars aligned and I managed to come up with a very fresh-looking site that came across as both professional and approachable. I found a funny-looking mascot at the site **iStockPhoto** (<http://istockphoto.com>) that became the FreelanceSwitch guy, and used a bright spacious look to make the content stand out and feel inviting.

The design of the site won a lot of credibility for a site that was in fact a total nobody. It made first-time visitors immediately assume that this was a professional outfit, even though in fact it was just me and my wife, Cyan, writing. In fact one of the early "writers" on the site "Jack Knight" (<http://freelanceswitch.com/author/jack>) was just me under a pseudonym attempting to make it look like we had a bigger writing staff than we really did!

2. We Seeded Our Readership from Existing Sites

Getting your first readers is *really* tough. When you are an absolute, complete unknown entering the great big world of the internet it can feel pretty daunting. When starting NorthxEast it took me months of hard work to build up a readership of just 300 people. I posted twice a day, I constantly networked with other bloggers to try to get them to link to me and to build contacts and friends. I tried all sorts of early tactics to bring readers, often resulting in just 2 or 3 click-throughs.

When it came to launching FreelanceSwitch though, I had the NorthxEast base to work off! All of a sudden that hard work paid off because I could use one site to get another started. This was done by moving the original freelancing article over from NxE to the new site using a 301 redirect (a type of redirect that preserves search traffic) and a post telling my readers about the new site. Since I'd gained a good dose of people interested in freelancing when I wrote that first big post, there were plenty of people interested in the new site.

In fact, the links and redirect from NorthxEast helped get FreelanceSwitch up to about 400 RSS readers in the first two days! This again illustrates how important it is to get started early. The sooner you begin, the sooner you can begin acquiring not just knowledge, but a base of resources and readers to build on.

3. Writing Evergreen Articles

As we discussed in Chapter 5, not all content is equal. And while short-form blog posts are great for day-to-day reading, they generally don't bring traffic and bookmarks. For that you need longer, high-quality articles that provide a wealth of information and value to readers. These types of posts are pillars that you can build a blog on as they attract readers, links and bookmarks.

The original post I'd written for NorthxEast was this type of content, but we'd already used that article idea up. So I started coming up with other big articles. At the time big "101..." lists were just starting to get popular and I wrote "*101 Essential Freelancing Resources*" (<http://freelanceswitch.com/general/101-essential-freelancing-resources>), which was actually a pretty simple list of services but was big enough,

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

and well-chosen enough, that readers found it useful and it made its way onto Digg's homepage.

List style posts are great, but they certainly aren't unique (even back then) so we really needed some posts to give us a voice. For this I tried my hand at humorous takes on freelancing under my pseudonym of Jack Knight. First there was the *"12 Breeds of Client and How to Work With Them"* (<http://freelanceswitch.com/clients/12-breeds-of-client-and-how-to-work-with-them>) for which I drew some crude cartoon illustrations and then later my attempt at Late Night TV style Top Ten lists with the *"Top Ten Signs You May Be Charging Too Little"* (<http://freelanceswitch.com/humour/top-ten-signs-you-may-be-charging-too-little>). Both of these also made it to Digg and brought us a wealth of traffic.

For each one of these "hit" posts, there were a number of posts that weren't so popular. Each of them took anywhere from 4 to 24 hours to put together, particularly the "12 Breeds of Client" post, which was epic! And the hard work went for the ones that didn't produce great results as well. But the good news is – generally when you put in a lot of work – it shows, and the not-so-amazing posts were still good content.

In between the epic posts, we wrote lots of good filler and tried out a variety of different techniques including polls, posts that asked for user stories, posts that built on other bloggers writing, and a lot of other techniques. You can learn about short, filler-style posts in Chapter 5 on planning content.

It was a lot of hard work getting a strong voice for the blog. This was particularly true in those early days when we didn't have enough money to hire other writers, and both Cyan and myself had other jobs to do. Nonetheless we persisted, often working in all hours of the day and night and the results were overall very rewarding.

4. Trying Everything to See What Works

Perhaps the biggest reason for FreelanceSwitch's success was the attitude that we took to the site. Looking back I remember being willing to try anything to get FreelanceSwitch to work, both in terms of traffic, and in terms of monetization.

Many of the things we spent hours, days, even whole weeks on, proved not to be particularly effective. For example, regarding monetization, we tried affiliate programs for all sorts of companies in all sorts of ways. We tried mentions in posts and custom-made banner ads, from reviews of products to different types of text links, and for some reason none of it worked. Eventually I gave up, having learned a lot about affiliate marketing on a blog, but also having little to show for it.

I would also spend massive amounts of effort trying to get posts on Digg. I would join groups of bloggers, market links I had for Digg, make friends and network on the site, investigate different times of day to submit to Digg, try to build my account up to be a “top digger,” and even managed to get myself kicked off the site when my strategies veered into the not-so-clever. There were times it paid off and the site appeared on Digg, and I was able to network with lots of other bloggers, which had dividends as well. But for the most part it was pretty frustrating to watch stories either go nowhere or almost get homepaged, and then at the last moment end up buried.

We also tried starting a podcast, launching forums, building a long-running interview series, and a short-lived paid review service. We tried partnering with other bloggers, we tried joining blog carnivals, and we tried submitting links to prominent blogs. We tried any and every social media service that came along.

Individually many of our initiatives weren’t successful, but as a whole, they built a lot of momentum and in the long run the site profited from it.

I think it’s important that when you’re getting started and you’re a bit of an underdog, to try absolutely everything and anything, provided you’re mostly expending your time and effort, rather than large amounts of capital. At the end of the day, if you waste a lot of time working hard on different ideas, you will always walk away with the learned experiences, and in the early days of blogging these are invaluable.

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

The Road to Profitability

Early on at FreelanceSwitch we set about trying to make money, and this began with selling advertising on the site from the very first week. Because we had made such a big impact early on with our posts appearing on Digg, we actually had a number of advertisers approach us in the first weeks. We set the ad price high at \$1000 per month for an ad spot, and amazingly we sold a couple based on our initial traffic surges.

While we had this extremely auspicious start to our monetization strategy, unfortunately it was not all so straightforward. In fact it took us nine months to reach month-on-month profitability. It turned out that our early ad sales were more lucky than sustainable, and while we tried out other monetization plans including affiliate programs, paid reviews, and eventually a book, it wasn't until we hit on a subscription-based job board that we finally hit pay dirt.

In the following tables and graphs, you can see the actual numbers from our first year of operation, including what we spent and what we earned. There are two major costs that are really just estimates: my time and Cyan's time. Like most business owners we put in whatever hours were necessary, didn't pay ourselves, and took it all as part of the investment.

Furthermore, because these numbers were mostly compiled after the fact, there is also the blurring of time which means I had to estimate some of the costs. Still, the overall trends are fairly accurate.

Income

Shown in this graph is FreelanceSwitch's income for the first 2 years of operation. Some important things to note:

- "Advertising" income includes direct ad sales, affiliate earnings, text-link-ads, Adsense, paid reviews, and a lot of miscellaneous revenue experiments. The bulk however comes from direct ad sales, particularly after November 2007.
- The advertising income varies and is quite inconsistent. Some months it gets very high, some months it drops by as much as half. Overall with

hindsight it's clear that neither ad income highs nor lows last, however at the time, watching the numbers half in one month was very scary indeed!

- Job board income grows very consistently and by the end of this graph starts plateauing. We'll discuss the job board in a bit more detail shortly.

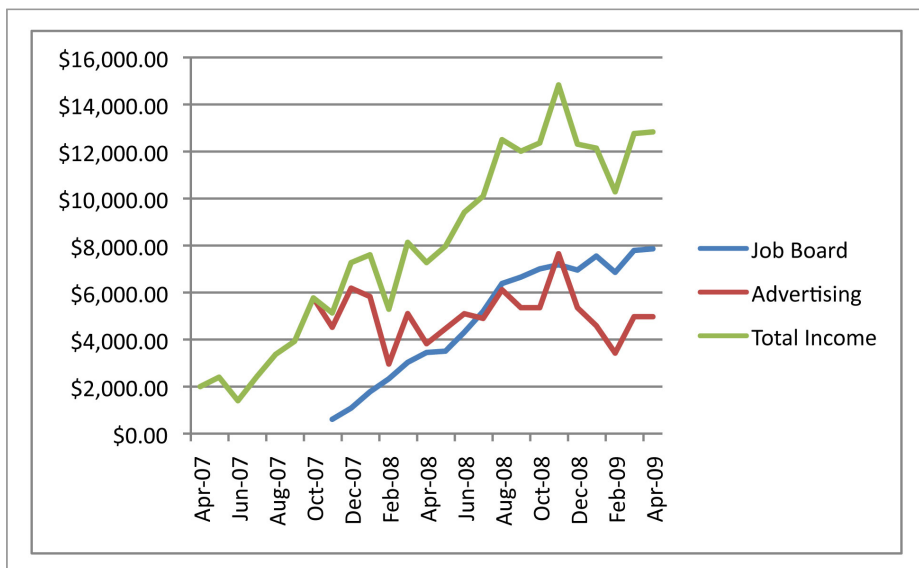


Fig 9-1: Job board versus advertising income.

Costs

The graph below shows costs for the first two years for FreelanceSwitch. Some important notes:

- “Misc Management” is complete guesswork and is my approximation of what the cost of my and Cyan’s time were, as well as general management such as accounting. I would guess that in reality this figure is a really low-ball estimate, particularly as time went on and the business was growing.
- Initially the costs of writing and editing were fairly low (or nonexistent) because this work was being done by Cyan and myself. Then over time

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

this number grew until we found ways of making it more efficient. It has continued to this day at around \$3,000–\$4,000 per month.

- Contractor costs, which include the design and development of the site, are incredibly variable. They are also missing one big cost, which is my time for design (something I'm very bad at estimating). Nonetheless, the costs of building the job board (November 2007), upgrading the job board (June 2008), and most recently redesigning and upgrading the entire site (January–March 2009) created some significant cost jumps.
- These types of contractor highs can be avoided, but really are part of reinvesting back into the business. So for example, the job board costs were expensive, but the job board income ended up paying for itself and creating a very consistent revenue source.

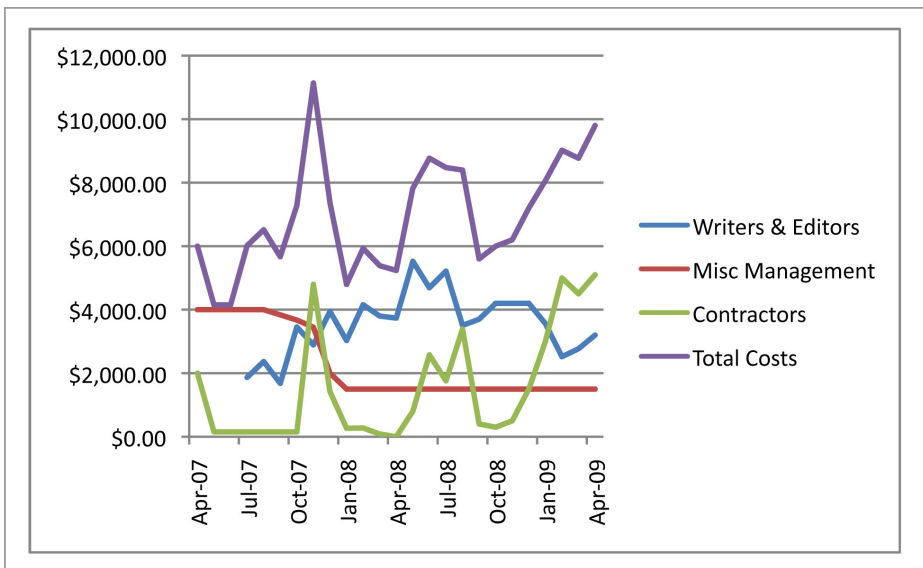


Fig 9-2: The many costs of FreelanceSwitch.

Profits (and Losses!)

This graph shows an approximation of profit and loss. Note that this doesn't include things like taxes, equipment, office costs, business set-up, and so on. It's purely the product of the two graphs just shown.

As you can see from December 2007, the profits start, and while they fluctuate a lot, they are fairly consistent. These profits are negated somewhat by the costs just mentioned, but nonetheless have helped fund the sites in the next two case studies!

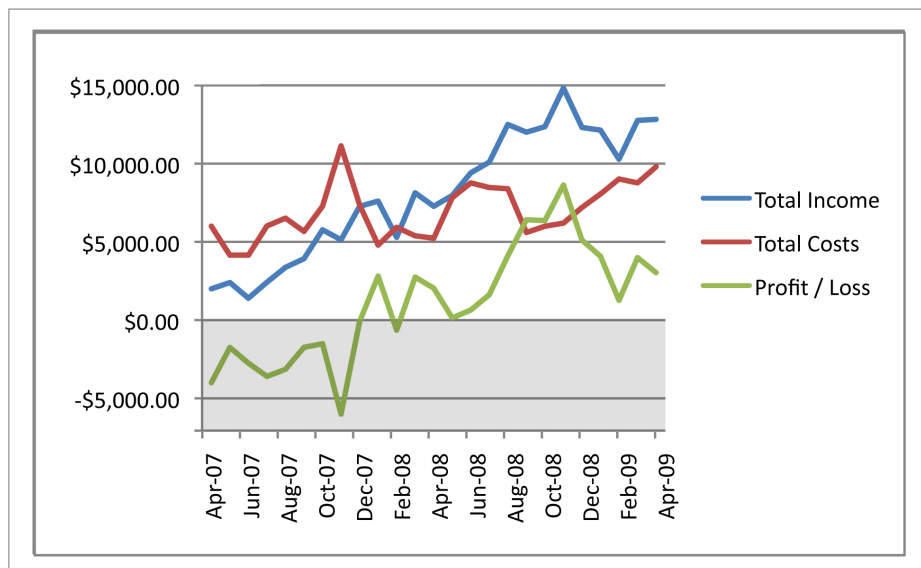


Fig 9-3: Income, costs, and profit/loss for FreelanceSwitch.

Book Income

Finally, I have kept this graph separate as it distorts the others if they are combined. It's a graph of earnings from the book *How to Be a Rockstar Freelancer* that we launched as the official FreelanceSwitch book in January 2008.

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

As you can see, the income begins very high and quickly tails off into a consistent monthly revenue source.

It's important to keep in mind that the cost of producing a book is significant. Cyan and I wrote and edited the book together and it took many months to get it all done. If you can manage it though, the rewards are great!

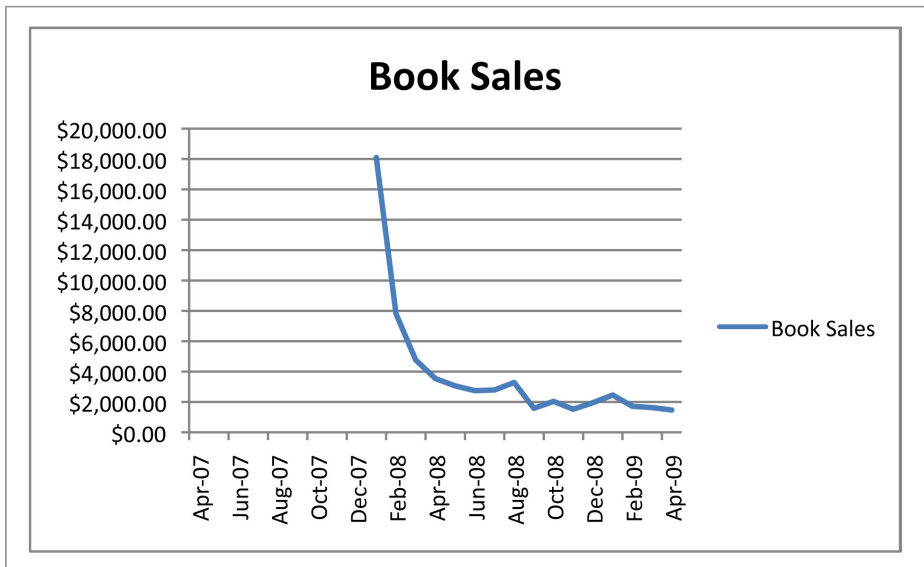


Fig 9-4: Sales of *How to Be a Rockstar Freelancer*.

Trial and Error

Our monetization plan for FreelanceSwitch's early days can really be summed up as: try everything and see what works. We began with privately sold (via email) banner ads, tried other ad programs like Google AdSense and AdBrite.com text ads, tried affiliate programs, sold Text-Link-Ads (which these days will get you an SEO penalty), wrote a book and sold it, sold ads on our RSS feed, tried ads on the podcast, tried many variations of all the above, and eventually created a subscription-based job board.

Some strategies were relatively successful. Text-link-ads yielded a solid, dependable income stream for a long time, until eventually we removed

them for fear that Google was penalizing us. The book did well and we spun that off as a book business called Rockable Press (which is where you got this book). And of course banner ads have made up the staple of our revenue for most of the site's life.

Some strategies were less successful and one was a downright disaster. Among the many affiliate programs we tried, one was for a template site called **TemplateMonster** (<http://templatemonster.com>). While it was a very successful service, it turned out that our audience hated the company. When we added a “templates” section to the site, which was a library of third-party templates for sale, the reaction in our comments was extremely negative. Though it immediately started yielding revenue, we axed it days later. After all, our site was about making freelancers happy, not peddling third-party products that they mostly despised!

While banner ads remain to this day a great earner, they have always been by nature variable. We get good return for the traffic we serve, but we're dependent on a handful of advertisers who come and go and result in some great months of revenue, and some not so great.

The Subscription Job Board Model

From the very beginning, FreelanceSwitch was meant to have a job board. On launch day I created a placeholder page that just said “jobs coming soon!” Later we contracted a developer to build a completely free job board that had someone approving jobs (to prevent spam) and it flourished, though being free didn't exactly have a great return on investment!

When it came time to monetize the job board, the standard model would be to charge advertisers for posting a job. This is how most job boards work and it's great for full-time jobs because the advertiser is looking to pay a large salary over many years, so what's a hundred dollars or so for a listing fee in comparison?

But in the case of freelance jobs, we found that many of the projects being outsourced were rather small in size. Imagine if you paid \$100 to advertise a project that only paid out \$250 to the freelancer! The economics for small jobs just don't make sense.

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

Conversely, while full-time job boards rely on job seekers who are looking for only one job every couple of years, freelance job boards rely on a base of freelancers who are repeatedly looking for work.

So with this in mind, we created a job board where posting an ad was completely free, and viewing jobs was free, but to apply for a job you had to have a paid subscription of \$7 a month.

It was a bit controversial to say the least and we caught a lot of flak for charging our own community instead of the employers. Nonetheless, it seemed to make sense and we persisted. Thankfully a growing group of freelancers subscribed.

On the business side of things, we also pursued this model because a large group of low-paying customers usually results in a much steadier income stream than a small group of high-paying customers. This was a lesson I had learned from trying to sell advertising and the resulting fluctuations in our monthly income, that came about from advertisers unexpectedly withdrawing their ads.

As the charts above indicate, the subscription model has flourished and grown into a very dependable income source for the site, far more steady than advertising has been. As you can also see, it's an income source that has reached a plateau, and while we've made efforts to grow it beyond this point (including adding a freelancer directory), it seems that for the time being this is about where that income stream is going to stay.

Growing Costs

While advertising was growing and revenue on the whole was looking positive, in the early days our costs were also escalating. These costs resulted from two main areas:

1. Replacing Ourselves with Staff

The number one cost growth was from hiring people to replace my and Cyan's work. This began with hiring writers and paying casual contributors, and later replacing Cyan as an editor. We found writers mostly through our contribution form, which was open to anyone,

and for which we paid \$60 per published contribution. These casuals often kept turning out content and became regular writers. We also occasionally advertised for writers or asked writers we admired to post. One such writer was Leo Babauta, whose own blog ZenHabits went on to become a massively popular Top 100 blog!

For other types of freelancers, we simply placed a job ad on our own job board. This is how we found the fabulously talented N.C. Winters, the comic strip artist who has graced many of our blogs with signature comic strips. His work includes FreelanceSwitch's Freelance Freedom, which has over a hundred and fifty editions published and counting.

2. The Cost of Experimentation

Trying out ideas like forums, podcasts, resource directories, job boards, redesigns, and other concepts for growing the site were not without their costs. The most significant of these was the job board development costs and general blog redesigns and upgrades. Luckily as a company that specializes in web development, we could keep these costs reasonably low, and in the long run, the cost of the job board in particular, paid for itself.

Other experiments did not always pay for themselves, but nonetheless were worthwhile. After all, nobody hits a home run the first time. You have to swing and miss a few times before you connect with something great!

One of the best examples of a cost that really blew out was when we had the idea to have a survey of freelancers to find trends and interesting statistics. While it sounded easy enough, it turned out that polling 3,700 freelancers and then tabulating and graphing the results takes rather a lot of effort! The resulting PDF (The Freelance Statistics Report) eventually made its way to RockablePress, and after a good year and a half finally paid for itself, but it certainly wasn't the profitable and easy exercise that I first thought it was going to be!

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

Breakeven!

The month-on-month breakeven point finally occurred for FreelanceSwitch in December 2007 after seven months of hard work. It was a lot longer before we repaid all the many months of losses from the early days, but even that eventually happened.

The best thing has been that since we hit breakeven, FreelanceSwitch has continued to be profitable in a very steady, consistent fashion. The reliable income that the site has provided in turn paved the way for a variety of new ventures, two of which are the subjects of our next pair of case studies.

Traffic

Below are various graphs from Google Analytics showing traffic trends for FreelanceSwitch from April 2007 to April 2009:

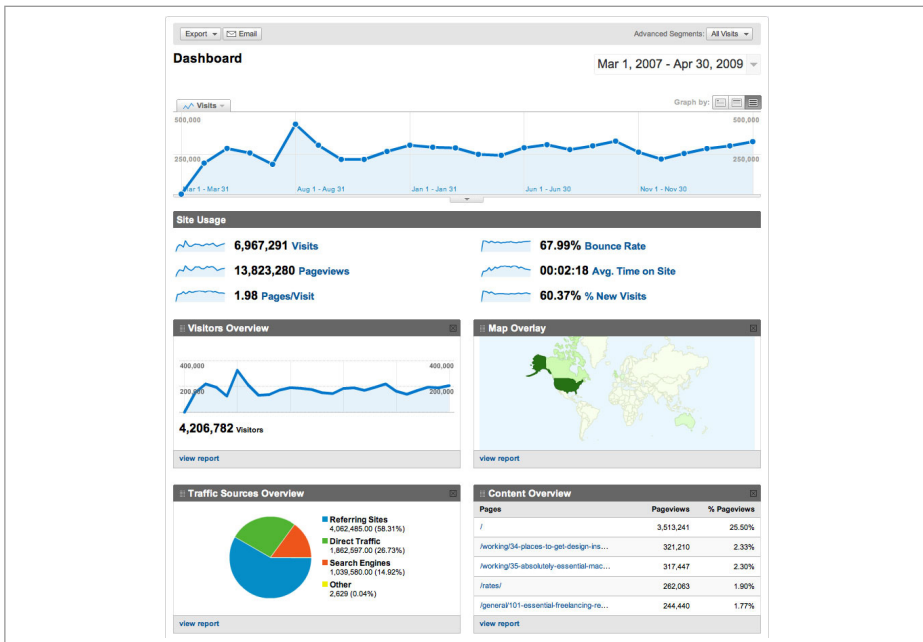


Fig 9-5: Traffic to FreelanceSwitch.

As you can see, the traffic at FreelanceSwitch is somewhat unusual in that we had very high volumes of traffic virtually from Day One. This is due to the large amounts of social media attention we had in the early days, particularly from Digg. This is apparent when you look at the following graphs.

Search Traffic

In this graph you can see traffic only from search engines. As you'll notice it's been building steadily month after month. This is why optimizing your site for search is so incredibly important, as this type of traffic is very sustainable.

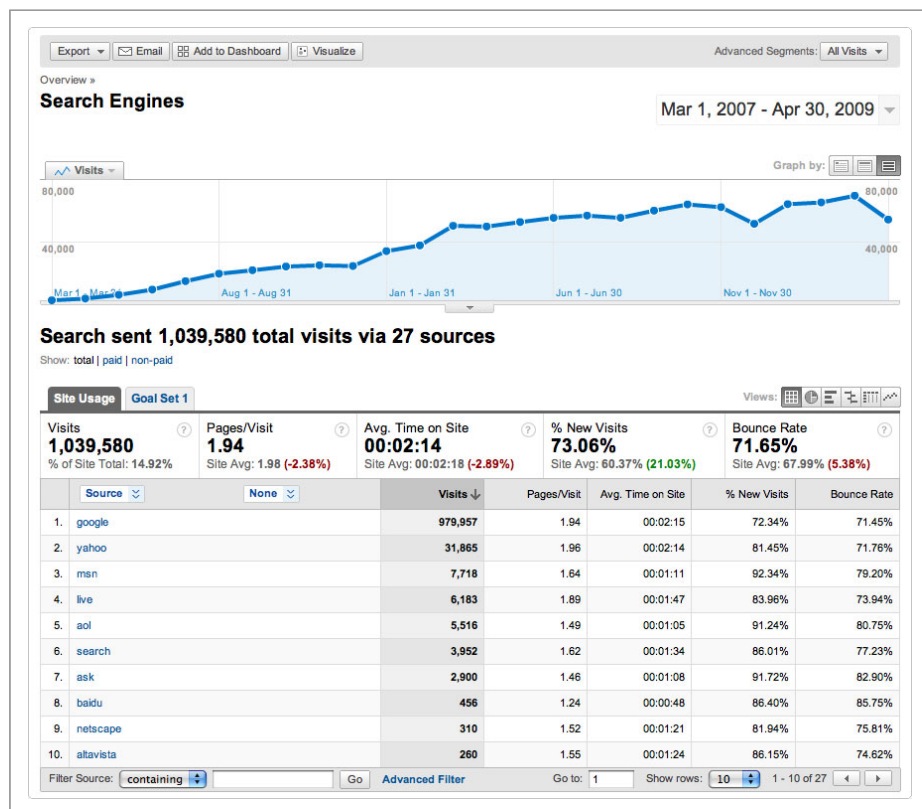


Fig 9-6: Search traffic to FreelanceSwitch.

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

If you are new to operating websites, you may also find it interesting to note that Google accounts for the vast majority of search traffic, with Yahoo coming in a very distant second.

Direct Traffic

The following graph shows traffic from users who have come directly to the site, usually by typing in “FreelanceSwitch.com” into their browser address bar, or by following a bookmark. This graph also shows a steady increase in direct traffic, meaning that every month a greater and greater number of people are converting into loyal, returning readers.

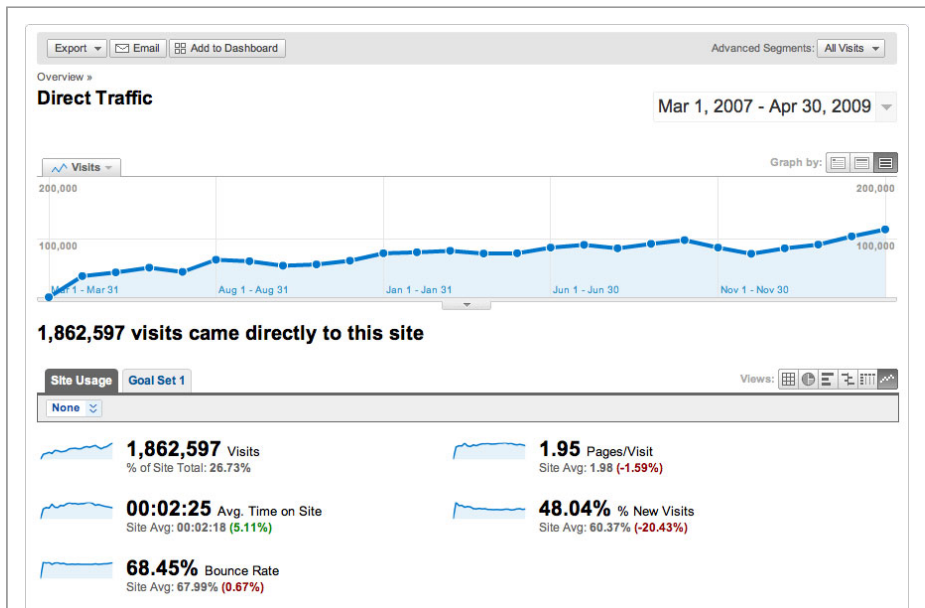


Fig 9-7: Direct traffic to FreelanceSwitch.

Referred Traffic

While direct and search traffic show nice steadily increasing numbers, the real oddities in the overall numbers come from referring sites. These are users who click links on other sites, such as Digg or StumbleUpon.

This graph shows that referring traffic has been much more inconsistent with some early, enormous peaks when FreelanceSwitch appeared on Digg.

Also of interest is the fact that StumbleUpon and Digg account for the vast majority of traffic. Google.com shown here refers to Google's Feed Reader. These days Google Analytics has become increasingly sophisticated with how it displays traffic from RSS readers. Today our graphs have started showing "Feedburner" as a single item, however in the graph shown here, Netvibes (at #10) is also traffic from the RSS feed and comes up separately, similarly further down the list would be even more RSS sources.

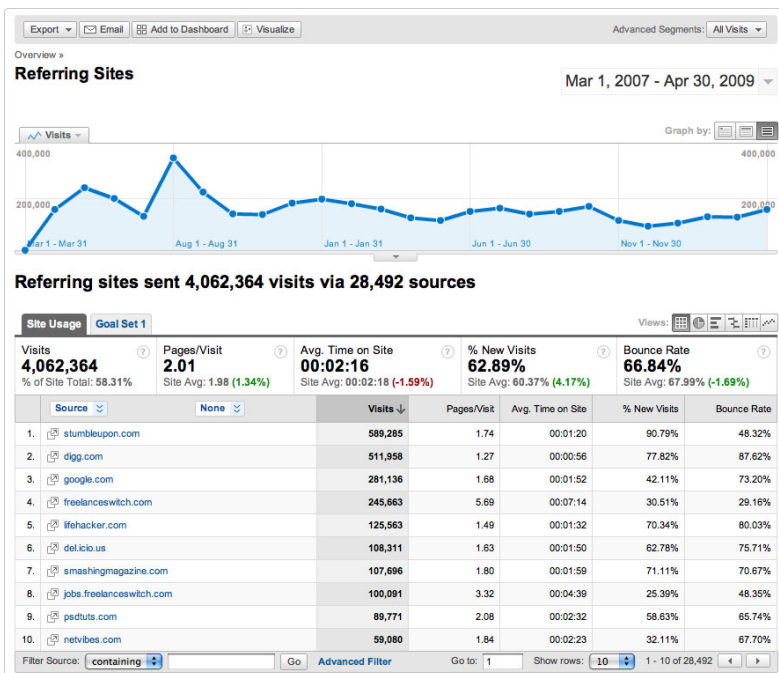


Fig 9-8: Traffic from sites linking to FreelanceSwitch.

Case Study 1: FreelanceSwitch

Building Sustainable Traffic

One interesting conclusion you can draw from these graphs is that social media traffic (such as the traffic from Digg and StumbleUpon), while great for sending large amounts of people, is very inconsistent and ultimately not what you want to build a blog on.

Search traffic and direct traffic, on the other hand, grow consistently and can become the backbone of your site's traffic.

Looking at the overall traffic again, you will now see that although the traffic hasn't moved that much from beginning to end, the type of traffic has changed. In the beginning we spent a lot of time and effort acquiring social media traffic, while later in FreelanceSwitch's life the traffic has become far more sustainable.

Lessons Learned

The two most important lessons I learned from FreelanceSwitch were:

1. It's Important to Get Your Feet Wet as Early as Possible

With the low cost of starting a blog, there is no reason not to give it a try immediately. Planning is fantastic, but experience often yields results you hadn't planned for. In my case, blogging at NorthxEast yielded an idea that formed a great and profitable blog.

4. It's Important to Experiment

Monetizing FreelanceSwitch was difficult and took a long time. It's hard when a venture is burning cash to stay calm and keep trying new things, but when you are in a new business, it's critical that you keep options open and iterate until you find something that works.

CASE STUDY 2: PSDTUTS+

Our second case study examines how a site that began almost by accident succeeded in a very crowded niche. This is a look at how Psdtuts+ (<http://psd.tutsplus.com>) and the Tuts+ network (<http://tutsplus.com>) got started.

Psdtuts+ launched in August 2007, four months after FreelanceSwitch, and very quickly grew to be the largest Photoshop blog online. Thanks to advertising and a subscription system, Psdtuts+ built enough revenue to grow into a network of educational sites called Tuts+ that is enormously popular. The network publishes daily tutorials on subjects ranging from audio production to photography and ranks in the Top 1000 sites in the world, according to web traffic reporter Alexa.com.

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

In the Beginning...

While the official launch of Psdtuts+ was in August 2007, the real beginnings of the site date back to late February. At that time I was fascinated to learn that there were entrepreneurs out there who bought websites, gave them a makeover, and resold them for a profit. This practice, known as “flipping,” was particularly common on a site called the Sitepoint Marketplace (which has since been rebranded as **Flippa**, <http://flippa.com>).

So I decided to try this out for myself, and began searching through the marketplace for a good site to purchase. Because I knew a lot about Photoshop and had written a few tutorials some years prior, I was very excited to find a listing for a basic Photoshop tutorial site called Psdtuts+. It had some very average tutorials on it, was plastered with ads, and was selling for the grand sum of \$1,200. While this may not sound like a lot of money, it sure was for me back then. Money was very tight and we were meant to be focusing on our nascent startup Envato, and not buying websites to do up. Still, in a moment of wild abandon, I bought the site anyway!

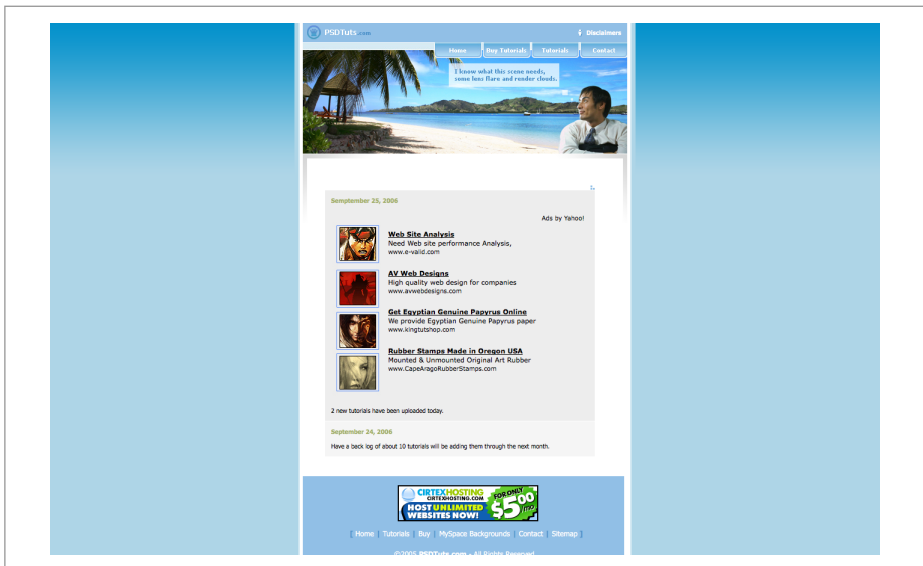


Fig 10-1: The original Psdtuts.com site that I bought.

When I told my wife Cyan about the purchase, she was horrified. It must be said, the site really was not much to look at, and though the listing claimed it made a good amount of money from text ads, it turned out those numbers had been inflated. In fact during the following three months, the site earned less than \$100, and even those monthly returns were steadily declining!

It also turned out that I wasn't very good at giving sites a once-over. I tried with a quick and dirty design overhaul, but the result was just another not-worth-visiting tutorial site, and the statistics showed. They didn't go anywhere, in fact they continued to slide downhill.

This incident taught me a valuable lesson in web entrepreneurship. You have to really add value if you want to get anywhere. There's no such thing as a quick buck, at least not for me!

At this point I had pretty much given up on Psdtuts+, months had passed, and I'd learned my lesson. Cyan also politely requested that I stay well away from buying any more domain names with money we could use for rent!

While Psdtuts+ continued its existence as a mediocre tutorial site, I kept thinking that if I found some time, I'd try putting up some tutorials. I wanted to do this, not to try to recoup that initial investment, but more just for my own diversion. After all, I rather liked writing Photoshop tutorials and had written a bunch some years earlier when I was learning design.

An Oversaturated Niche

Back in 2007 there were already lots and lots of Photoshop sites around. After all, the flagship of Adobe's range of creative software has always had a huge following. In fact there were so many tutorial sites around that there were meta-tutorial sites that aggregated tutorials from all the smaller sites so people could find them all. The best known of these were **Good-Tutorials** (<http://good-tutorials.com>) and **Pixel2Life** (<http://pixel2life.com>), both sites that are still successfully operating today.

Some of the tutorial sites themselves were relatively large and well-trafficked, though the quality of tutorials was very variable. There were the

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

odd brilliant tutorials, but for the most part, Photoshop sites at the time were often a bit amateur with the tutorials written by inexperienced users rather than professionals. They were still useful, and certainly when I had been starting out I'd read many of those sites myself!

But overall it must be said that while Photoshop tutorials was a saturated niche, it wasn't saturated with quality.

I wish I could say that I observed this all and made the conscious decision to pursue a quality strategy with Psdtuts+, but in reality I simply stumbled onto that plan. One day I finally decided I was going to clean up the domain, put a very simple HTML site in, and upload a couple of tutorials that I could be proud of. The site would still not be much, but at least I wouldn't be embarrassed if people found out I owned it.

So I dug up an old tutorial I'd written in 2004 about making a Mac-like wallpaper. I then set about writing two more tutorials (because you can't have a site with just one tutorial) and I designed a site that was a little bit strange-looking and featured a large spoon graphic that I'd bought and always meant to use somewhere.

And so I launched the all-new Psdtuts+ without a proper blog back-end, and absolutely no fanfare or announcements anywhere. All it had was a basic HTML site and three tutorials, one of which was pretty decent and two of which were just filler really. This is the original Mac-like wallpaper tutorial: <http://psd.tutsplus.com/tutorials/tutorials-effects/creating-a-mac-type-background-in-photoshop/>.

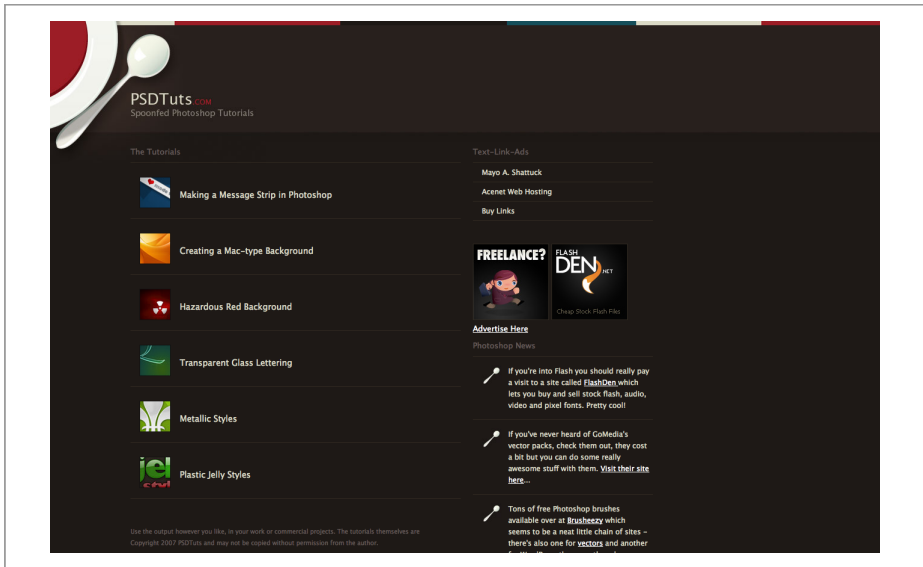


Fig 10-2: Psdtuts early on with just 6 tutorials and 2 ads (for other sites of ours).

Ever the entrepreneur, I interspersed my tutorials with Google Adsense blocks (one every six or seven steps). After all, I figured I might make a few dollars to go towards paying back that \$1,200 that Cyan still sometimes made fun of me for!

After submitting the three tutorials to the two tutorial aggregators Good-Tutorials and Pixel2Life, I forgot about the site for a couple of days.

It wasn't until I logged into Google Analytics some days later that I discovered an unexpectedly large amount of traffic on the site. It turns out both the original tutorial and one of the quick tutorials had made their way onto the Digg homepage. Not only that, the one about Mac wallpapers appeared on the enormously popular **Lifehacker** (<http://lifehacker.com>) site. And to boot, all the traffic had earned about a hundred dollars in Adsense money!

I was pretty thrilled to say the least, though it didn't actually dawn on me yet that there was a potential business here. Instead I just thought: "wow something I wrote made it to Digg without me having to actually do anything!"

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

So I decided to write another couple of tutorials and though they didn't make it to Digg, the traffic did continue in strong, steady fashion with StumbleUpon contributing, and the tutorial aggregators sending plenty of focused Photoshop fans who bookmarked the site and got it onto Delicious.com's Popular page.

Content is King (and Quality Content Most of All)

It seems that I had inadvertently stumbled on another untapped niche. This time it was in the most unlikely of places, the middle of an over-saturated niche. While there was a lot of Photoshop content online, there wasn't much consistently high-quality content.

The tutorials I originally wrote probably wouldn't pass muster these days, but at the time they were far longer and far more detailed than the average tutorial and they produced pretty neat effects too. Because there was so much average content out there, it meant that a site producing consistently high-grade content stood out almost as much as if there had been no content on the subject.

In many ways, having a lot of average content is worse than having none because it creates a lot of noise. Finding the good stuff then requires a lot of effort and searching. Readers like to have great content handed to them on a plate, and Psdtuts+, mostly by accident, was doing just that.

Recognizing the Opportunity

At this point, we got serious about the site and realized that maintaining a HTML site was not really a viable option. So we decided to switch over to WordPress. I designed up a site and had it built by some external contractors called **PSD2HTML** (<http://psd2html.com>). I decided to use contractors as I still wasn't that comfortable with building WordPress sites and the results were not too bad. And so about three weeks after the site first launched, it became a proper commercial operation.

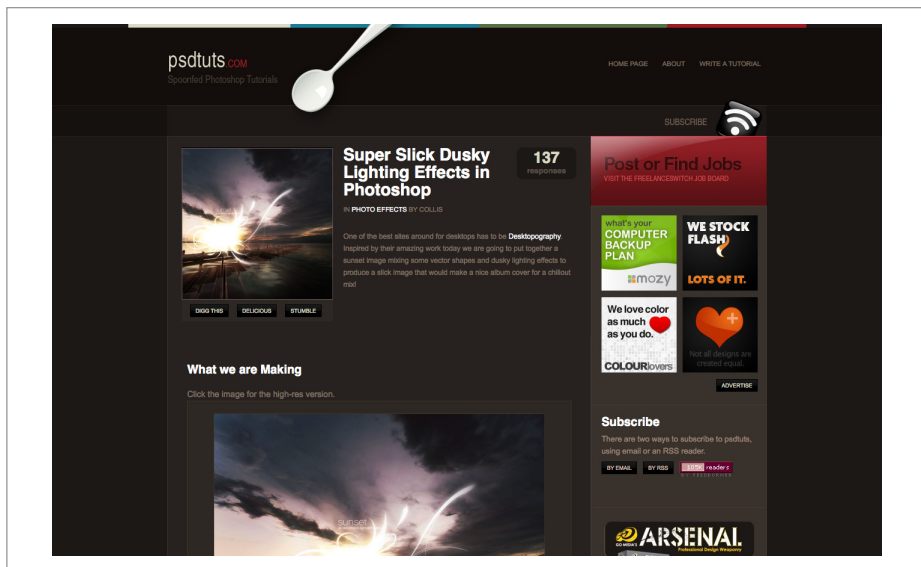


Fig 10-3: Psdtuts in its first WordPress incarnation.

In the beginning, the content was all generated by me, and because of the nature of the tutorials, it was only one or two posts a week. Nonetheless, the traffic poured in and we managed to sell a couple of ads, continued making money from AdSense, and by working an affiliate program for some illustration materials into a couple of popular tutorials, managed to generate some affiliate income.

The most pressing need at this point was to get some help with the content. We decided to invest some of the money from FreelanceSwitch (which was inching towards profitability) into hiring writers.

The first thing I did was to add a “Write a Tutorial” link which offered \$75 for any tutorial we published. I set the price at \$75 mostly because that was the maximum we could afford. This got a couple of responses, one of which we did publish by a young, talented Photoshopper who was not yet out of high school named Arik. The tutorial got onto Digg’s homepage and brought another flurry of traffic. But great content from the contribution link was mostly few and far between.

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

At this point it occurred to me that to find a writer capable of making it to Digg, I should look in Digg's archives. And that's how I found a small site called **Abduzeedo** (<http://abduzeedo.com>) where a really talented designer named Fabio Sasso had published a couple of simply beautiful tutorials. While I really didn't think he would respond, I wrote to Fabio to ask if he'd write for Psdtuts+ and to my great astonishment and good fortune, he wrote back!

I can't say how lucky we were that Fabio wrote for Psdtuts+ in those early days. If you're into design you'll probably know that Abduzeedo is now one of the largest graphic sites online, a testament to Fabio's talent.

Encouraged by Fabio, I wrote to a number of other potential writers, but unfortunately none of them wrote back. Still all the effort was worth it for the one reply from Fabio.

In the meantime, it was clear that \$75 really wasn't proper recompense for these long and involved tutorials because very few people were taking up the offer, so the reward went up to \$125 and then, a little later, \$150 per published tutorial and the content coming in also increased.

At this point we were still publishing two tutorials a week, one by me, and one by either Fabio or a guest writer. The content was slow but steady and the income fairly small, but the traffic was growing really quickly. I asked Cyan to take over editing so I could manage to produce tutorials and we concentrated on just keeping the site alive.

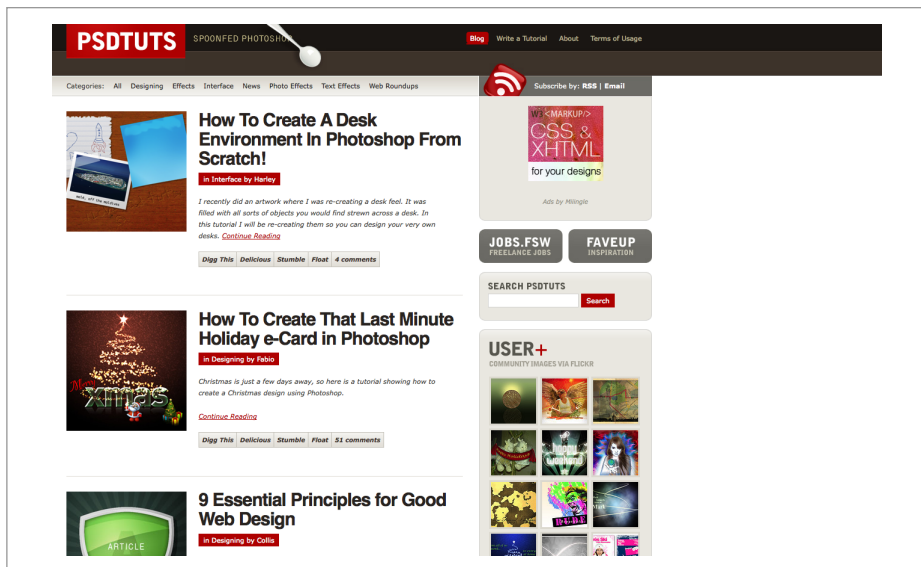


Fig 10-4: Psdtuts in its second WordPress design with one of Fabio's Christmas tutorials showing.

The Path to Monetization

Creating revenue is always difficult, and once again we found ourselves experimenting with ideas. Adsense, while initially having some success, was a pretty limited source of income. Worse, however, was the fact that it made the site feel really cheap. Every time we made it to Digg's frontpage the comments invariably described the site as "made for Adsense" or "plastered" with ads. So Adsense had to go!

Affiliate programs, while initially successful thanks to a couple of judiciously placed links in tutorials, had tapered off and it felt forced putting them into more tutorials. Text-link-ads were on the site and producing a limited amount of revenue, which helped.

Banner ads were doing a bit better and revenue was coming in slowly, but steadily. When the **BuySellAds** (<http://buysellads.com>) service launched, we switched over for both Psdtuts+ and FreelanceSwitch and this helped tremendously by eliminating much of the administration and labor involved

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

in selling ads. Where previously we had to calendar dates for advertising changeovers, liaise with advertisers, respond to enquiries, manually update banners for advertisers and generally do a lot of leg work, all of a sudden it was now all automated!

When we first started selling banner ads our traffic was high enough that I chose \$1,500 per month as the price point for our 125px x 125px ads. To be honest I wasn't wildly confident about selling them, but miraculously it worked and we sold two ads within a month!

This was good news because not only were content costs mounting up, so were an unexpected cost source: bandwidth!

Psdtuts+ was so wildly popular that we quickly found ourselves delivering a terabyte of bandwidth each month. Luckily we were early users of Amazon's S3 service to host and serve our images and this helped tremendously. Nonetheless even on S3, bandwidth costs were getting more and more significant.

Selling PSD Files

It's always good to experiment with ideas to monetize a site, and an interesting idea we had was to sell the source Photoshop PSD files for the tutorials. This way, readers could choose if they wished to pay an extra, say \$2, and be able to follow along from the final file in Photoshop.

While it sounded like a great idea in theory, it turned out not many people actually ponied up the cash. Luckily, implementation was easy as we used a service called **e-Junkie** (<http://e-junkie.com>), which cost next to nothing to set up.

Despite the low returns, there was just enough interest in the source files that a better idea came along. What if instead of selling individual files, we could increase the value by providing a premium subscription that offered access to all the files? We could even increase the value by adding a couple of bonus tutorials to make it more attractive. And we'd make the subscription \$9 a month, which is a reasonable amount of money, but not so much as to be a major purchasing decision for most people.

Premium Subscriptions

When the premium subscription first launched it had a couple dozen source files and just one bonus tutorial (that I'd specially made for the launch). There was quite a bit of resistance to the idea with many readers worrying that from now on all the quality content would be behind a paid curtain, something that was not the intention at all!

Happily a few people signed up, and overall the subscription plan immediately generated more money than the paid PSD files. Once regular readers realized we would continue delivering the usual quality of free content, everyone settled down contentedly.

The great thing about the subscription plan was the value in the membership continued to increase over time. The more time passed, the more content became available, and the more useful the subscription became.

We offered a 100% money back guarantee to lower the barriers to entry and while a few people asked for their money back, the vast majority either continued happily or simply unsubscribed after a month.

The system was built using some off-the-shelf software called **aMember** (<http://amember.com>), which I purchased for a couple hundred dollars, attempted to install myself unsuccessfully, and then got aMember support to install for me!

As with FreelanceSwitch, the subscription system would be the platform that we would build off. With the stability of a subscription base, we could now afford to plough more money into content, which in turn made the subscription more valuable, which helped grow subscribers, and so we had a sort of virtuous cycle!

Expanding on a Winning Formula

Nine months after launching Psdtuts+, it was time to expand out the clearly successful formula to other types of tutorials. Beginning with web development and **NetTuts+** (<http://net.tutsplus.com>), we launched over the course of two years a total of seven more sites. Each one applies the same overall editorial concept into a different niche, with a different editor and different writers.

The plus side of this is that the Tuts+ franchise as a whole has now grown far beyond just Photoshop tutorials. The downside is that whenever our revenue looked like it was going to pass costs, we would launch a new site driving our costs up again.

Managing a suite of blogs also introduces an additional layer of complexity as you now need a business capable of:

- Managing a team of editors, each with a team of writers.
- Hiring, training, and occasionally replacing editors.
- Handling hundreds of invoices from writers and freelance staff every month.
- Managing servers, installations, and themes.

These requirements meant we brought on a Tuts+ manager by the name of Skellie, who was a former editor of FreelanceSwitch. Then we hired a WordPress developer named Derek to build and manage the themes on all the blogs. And we hired a freelance (and later a full-time) PHP developer to manage the servers, optimize performance, and handle emergencies.

Because Tuts+ is run as part of a larger startup, we have had the benefit of piggy-backing accounting, management, and legal costs from our parent business Envato. For an independent blog business, however, these are significant costs not to be discounted.

Increasing Costs

As the network grew it also became apparent that we needed to pay our writers and contributors more if we wanted to attract the best talent. It was important to get great writers because great content was the foundation of our success. While the base submission payment is still \$150, the payments for regular writers and special one-off contributors has increased so that we now pay a range of \$200–\$800 per tutorial depending on the experience and fame of the author and the depth, length, and quality of the content.

Similarly the additional burden of managing the growing enterprise also led to greater and greater costs as we hired more staff, more management overhead, and of course the ever-present hosting costs.

In fact, by late 2009 our monthly bandwidth had passed 40 Terabytes of data per month, leading to hosting costs in the many thousands of dollars.

Consolidating the Plus Membership

Faced with these mounting costs, the subscription revenue was no longer really cutting it. As we launched new Tuts+ sites, we tried adding more and more premium subscriptions, one for each site. However, aside from Psdtuts+, none of them really produced major results and we found ourselves ticking along with one profitable site and an increasing portfolio of cost centers.

Fortunately in early 2009, our Tuts+ manager Skellie had the simple but brilliant idea to consolidate our premium subscriptions into one super subscription at the same old price of \$9 a month.

While we lost some revenue from members who had been subscribed to multiple memberships, this was more than made up for by the additional members who now found the membership valuable enough to join.

The consolidation of our subscriptions showed that delivering value is the most important thing you can do in business. The subscription system has since become the backbone of the Tuts+ operation and is helping us now expand even further. As was the case with FreelanceSwitch, subscriptions

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

offer a very consistent revenue stream as opposed to advertising, which can be strong but also can be prone to quite major variations.

Some Statistics

To get a better idea of how the Tuts+ growth occurred, I've compiled some graphs of traffic, revenue, and costs. As with FreelanceSwitch, they are very approximate as our records from the early days were quite sketchy and often neglected to include details of costs like hosting, accounting, and so on.

Income and Costs

In this graph you can see a plot of our income versus costs over the first two years.

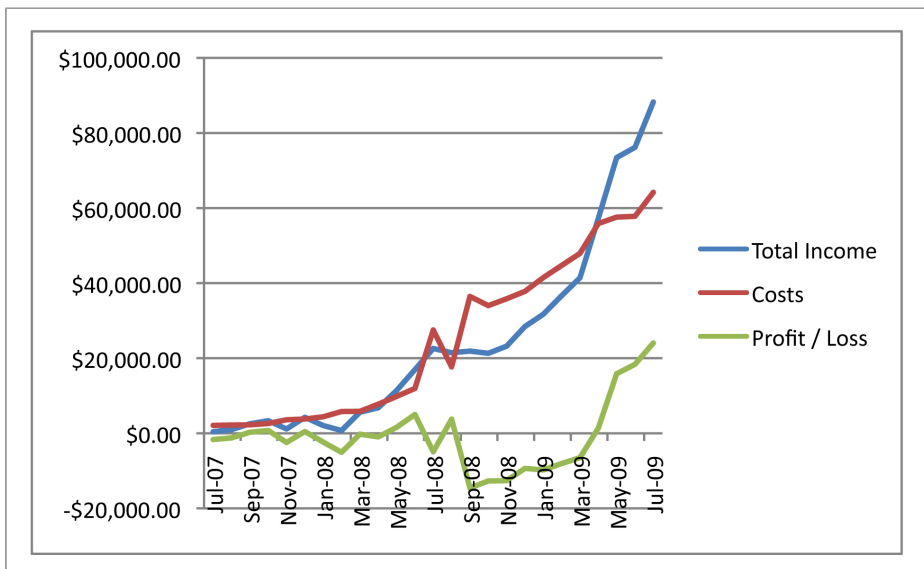


Fig 10-5: Income, costs, and profit/loss for Tuts+.

Some important points to note about the graph:

- You can see that it wasn't until more than 19 months had passed that we finally started having months of profit! This is largely due to the constant increases in costs as we pushed to expand the sites more and more.
- In March 2008, we hired a Psdtuts+ editor and began expanding the number of sites from one to four over the next four months. This is responsible for the sharp rise in costs leading to the heavy losses we sustained in 2008.
- In February 2009, we merged the subscriptions into a single subscription, and this is where the income finally begins to beat costs.

Another interesting graph is to look at how subscription and advertising revenues compare. You can see this below.

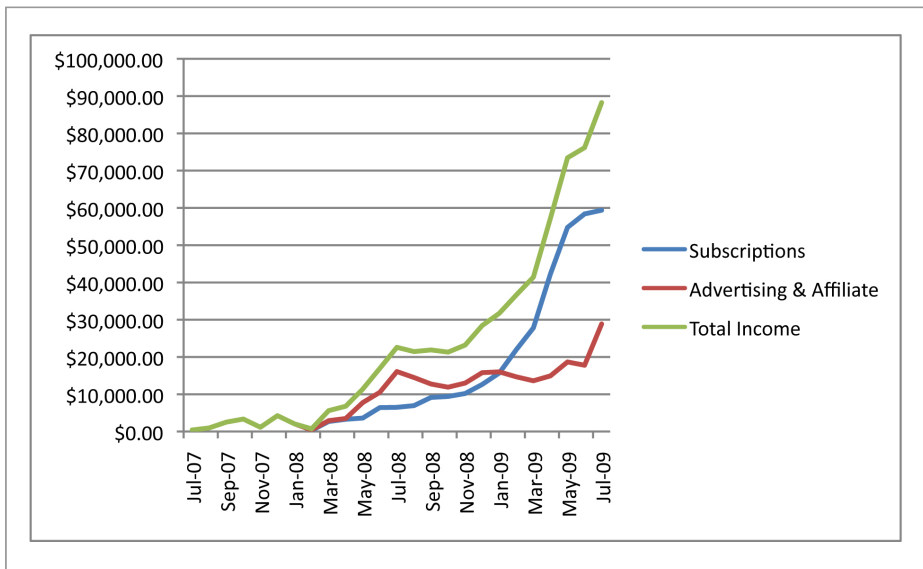


Fig 10-6: Income from subscriptions versus advertising and affiliate earnings.

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

Here you can see how much more consistent the subscriptions line is when compared to advertising. In the first two years, the subscription monthly income never goes backwards; it is a constant grower. Advertising, on the other hand, had a lot more movement and in the early days before subscriptions were introduced it led to a very bumpy beginning.

Traffic

The gain for all these increases in costs of course was traffic. This is shown in the following graph where you can see the steady growth in traffic as individual sites have grown and the number of sites has increased.

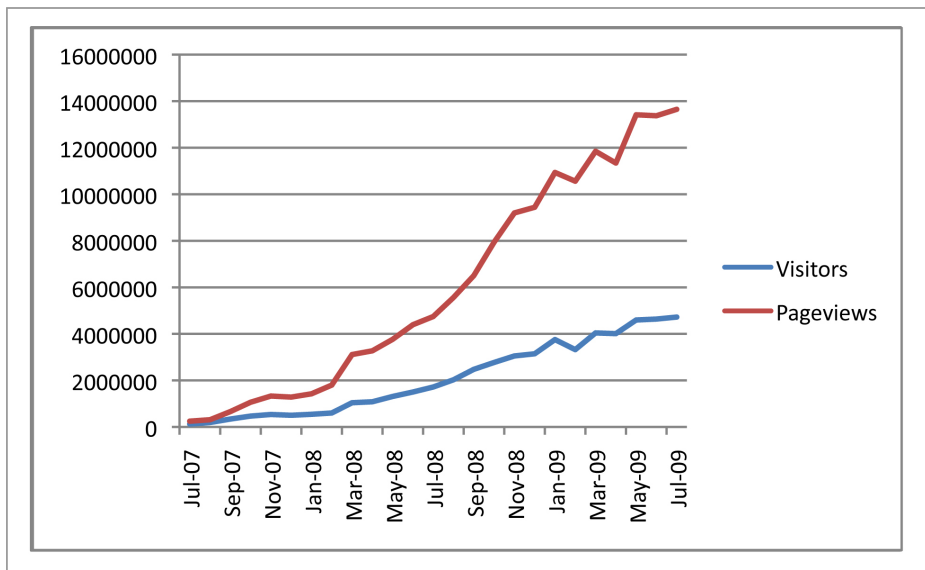


Fig 10-7: Traffic across the Tuts+ network.

Tuts+ Today

Today Tuts+ continues to grow, though not at quite the same rate as those earlier days. Happily, the months of profit have helped repay the many months of losses and we are now in a position to once again begin expanding aggressively.

Our vision for Tuts+ is to create educational content in a self-sustaining way for a range of subjects from our traditional strengths of creative skills all the way out to language learning. By building a business vehicle that brings in sizable revenues, we have created an engine to power the creation of much greater quantities of educational content, 90% of which we can then distribute freely, saving only a small portion to keep it self-sustaining.

Our next step of expansion is to graduate from our WordPress blogging roots into a social content platform for education where tutorials are still the core, but user interaction is added. It's an expensive step and requires much development, and for those reasons would not have been possible for us to begin with.

In many ways Tuts+ is a great example of how building a blogging business can create a much larger enterprise. Through iteration and expansion, you can take what might today be simply a WordPress-powered blog and turn it into a network of sites that rival even some much better funded startups!

Lessons Learned

The most important lessons I've learned from Psdtuts+ and Tuts+ are:

1. You Can Succeed Even in a Saturated Niche

Don't assume that because a niche has a lot of competitors, it's all sewn up. Finding a way to differentiate is the key to competing against entrenched sites.

2. When Something Good Happens, Roll With It

Opportunity is only half the equation. When it strikes, you need to push hard to take advantage of that opportunity. When traffic started

Case Study 2: Psdtuts+

materializing on Psdtuts+, it took months of hard work writing tutorials to capitalize on it. Only then were we at the point where we could hire serious help.

Later when Psdtuts+ was running successfully, it was risky to try to propagate the same idea out and franchise it into a number of other sites. But ultimately we managed to capitalize on the idea and grow our reach much larger.

3. Delivering Value is Critical

The most important event in the Tuts+ franchise has been the consolidation of the subscriptions into a single membership. When the value-to-price ratio was out of whack, the membership numbers never really accumulated. It took a dramatic increase in value, while holding the price steady, to make it into the business-building revenue source that it is now.

CASE STUDY 3: APPSTORM

The first two case studies in this book have been about sites that are financially successful. This last case study concerns a set of blogs, called AppStorm, that have not yet reached profitability. By some measures the sites are healthy, particularly in traffic, but as an entrepreneur it is revenue that determines a site's ultimate success.

At the time of writing this, the AppStorm sites are at a crucial stage in their growth. We have traffic, we have growth, and we even have some revenue. But financially the sites are still burning through cash month after month. And while they will hopefully still end up profitable, they make for an instructive case study to show that like any business, blogging can be risky.

The AppStorm network began in February of 2009 with a single blog dedicated solely to Mac Apps, residing at **Mac.AppStorm** (<http://mac.appstorm.net>). Today in traffic and RSS subscribers, this is the largest blog focusing solely on apps for Apple's desktop systems. From that one site we've since franchised out the idea to two sister sites: **Web.AppStorm** (<http://web.appstorm.net>) and **iPhone.AppStorm** (<http://iphone.appstorm.net>) about web and iPhone apps respectively. Traffic growth for the sites has been steady and because apps are a rapidly growing area, they have much potential.

In this case study, we'll discuss how we came to find the idea for the sites, how they have been managed and grown, and the difficult path to monetization.

The Importance of Analysis

A central theme throughout these case studies is to be on the lookout for telltale signs that there is a successful blog niche to exploit. The idea for FreelanceSwitch came about through a hit article about freelancing on an older blog on a different topic. The opportunity for Psdtuts+ presented itself when a few experimental tutorials generated a lot of traffic. In the case of AppStorm, the idea arose from a simple search ranking on Google.

One of the early posts on FreelanceSwitch was by the writer Ivan Brezak Brkan who penned “35 Absolutely Essential Mac Apps” (<http://freelanceswitch.com/working/35-absolutely-essential-mac-apps/>) for the site. It was an article about Mac apps for freelancers that experienced success on both Digg and Delicious. It was a classic evergreen article that attracted lots of traffic and was a big success. However, a month or so after the post was published, I pretty much ceased to think much about it.

Two years later when browsing through Google Analytics I happened to notice that one of the top keywords that FreelanceSwitch ranked for on Google was “Mac Apps.” A bit of research revealed that in fact the one article by Ivan had been consistently sending high amounts of search traffic month after month.

If you Googled “Mac Apps” or even related keywords like “Buy Mac Apps,” up would pop FreelanceSwitch nestled in amongst a bunch of dedicated Mac blogs. The traffic these search rankings sent made that single article one of the top 5 posts on the site virtually every single month.

Being a Mac user myself and knowing how much Mac users love their independent apps, it crossed my mind that a blog about great Mac apps would surely be popular. After all, Apple-related topics have historically always done well on social media sites such as Digg.

A bit of research on Google revealed that there was only one specifically focused Mac app blog around, a site called **MacApper** (<http://macapper.com>). While relatively established, MacApper was not so big as to be

unassailable. Of course the big Mac sites regularly publish articles and features about Mac apps, but for completely app-focused coverage, there was really only MacApper, revealing potentially an open sub-niche.

And so with a search ranking and the knowledge that there was only one major competitor to contend with, we set about launching a dedicated Mac app blog!

Assembling a Blog

Most of our projects begin with a search for a domain name. For me personally, having a name makes things feel a lot more real. Unfortunately finding a good domain name that is still available is hard work!

Fortunately this time I managed to persuade my younger brother to think up and check names for me! From a huge list of 50 or so available combinations of “App” and something, we chose AppStorm. We were only able to acquire the .net name but it was memorable, short, and immediately suggested a nice little logo design with a lightning bolt!

Almost a year later using the domain brokerage service Sedo.com, we did finally manage to acquire the .com at a price of \$3,000. This was quite a lot to pay for a domain name, particularly for a fledgling brand, but we decided to invest the money to protect the site’s long-term brand.

It’s always best to have the .com domain as so much traffic goes there despite however much effort you put into marketing alternate endings. Hopefully one day finding a good domain name will get a little easier, but for now it seems we’re stuck with spending a lot of creativity and occasionally having to pay large sums for names that someone is sitting on.

Planning a Content Roster

With the domain name located, we set about creating a provisional plan for content. Since the site was about Mac apps, it definitely needed reviews as its staple fare. I knew that lists in the style of the original “35 Essential

Case Study 3: AppStorm

Mac Apps” post were great traffic draws, so we made “Roundups” one the top categories. Finally, for Mac users looking to get more out of existing software, we added the category of “Howto” for guides and tutorials on using great apps.

I also contacted the comic strip artist NC Winters who illustrates for FreelanceSwitch to ask him to put together a weekly cartoon strip. I’ve found that these comic strips give a site some character and help them stand out from the crowd. While not every blog needs a comic strip, I do think it’s always important to have an individual voice and style.

Finding an Editor/Writer

My experiences with FreelanceSwitch and Psdtuts+ had taught me that the most important person to hire for a new blog is the editor. In this case I was hoping to find an editor/writer to produce content initially and then slowly bring in other writers to supplement their own contributions.

After posting a job ad on our own FreelanceSwitch job board, an extremely talented young man named David Appleyard applied. As one of the content editors at the well-known Mac site, **TheAppleBlog** (<http://theappleblog.com>) and a web entrepreneur himself, David was a perfect fit.

Since David lived in England and I was based in Australia, everything happened through email.

I wrote out a detailed brief for David explaining the rough content roster I thought would work, how we might organize the site, what expectations were for him, and so on. David sent his suggestions back and we made a few adjustments. Notably David introduced the idea of adding “how to” content.

While David compiled the first couple of weeks of content ahead of time, I busied myself getting a site organized. I put together a design and had it built into a WordPress theme. Having had lots of experience in setting up blogs by this point, the process of rolling together a new site was relatively painless, and soon enough launch day came around and we had everything set up and ready to go!

Launch and Initial Growth

While FreelanceSwitch grew with very little in the way of resources, and Psdtuts+ grew almost by accident, Mac.AppStorm grew on the back of our other properties.

By this time our company Envato had grown to encompass a large number of blogs and sites and a simple announcement on the different sites in the network was enough to send a large dose of traffic: 35,000 visitors in two weeks. In many ways this gave us a sort of blog jumpstart in both traffic and immediate brand recognition.

Still even with an initial surge of traffic, it takes great content to grow a blog and so David set about publishing high-quality content day-in, day-out to build on those initial visitors and to create a loyal reader base to grow from.

We also tried a number of different ideas to help spur the site on:

1. We set up a 301 redirect on the initial FreelanceSwitch article so that old search traffic and visitors started coming to the new site. This was achieved with a simple WordPress plugin found online. A similar plugin can be found at <http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/redirection/>.
2. David wrote a special *“12 Mac Apps for Running a Freelance Business”* (<http://mac.appstorm.net/roundups/business/12-mac-apps-for-running-a-freelance-business/>) post. We then placed an intro post on FreelanceSwitch that quoted a bit of the article and then followed up with “Continue reading at AppStorm.” This is a great technique for seeding one site with another. I discovered this technique from the massively popular TechCrunch, which regularly seeds its sister site CrunchGear in the same manner.
3. While we didn’t seem to get any traction on Digg for the new site, I discovered that submitting roundups to the “Apple” subreddit (<http://reddit.com/r/apple>) on social media site Reddit.com was a great way to get a few hundred visitors with little effort. Looking for specific social media sites and communities that work for a new blog is a fantastic way to find early traffic.

Case Study 3: AppStorm

4. David set up a weekly app giveaway, which resulted in great relationships with app makers and freebies for readers. The initiative proved a great success and is now part of the AppStorm formula.

Evergreen Content and Search

The most successful initiative we pursued in the early days of AppStorm was to publish a series of posts around related Mac subjects like screensavers, icons, and wallpapers. Most notably we published these three posts:

- **“50 Mac Desktops for Maximum Visual Goodness.”**
<http://mac.appstorm.net/roundups/graphics-roundups/50-mac-desktops-for-maximum-visual-goodness/>
- **“50 Unusually Awesome Icon Sets for Mac.”**
<http://mac.appstorm.net/roundups/graphics-roundups/50-unusually-awesome-icon-sets-for-mac/>
- **“34 Stunning and Free Mac Screensavers for Mac OSX.”**
<http://mac.appstorm.net/roundups/graphics-roundups/free-mac-screensavers/>

These three posts were strategically written to appeal to readers looking for useful resources and to include keywords that rank well on Google. The payoff has been enormous as the three posts have led to Mac.AppStorm ranking in the top results for “Mac Desktops,” “Mac Icons,” and “Mac Screensavers.”

As an example of how these types of articles can perform, here is the traffic for the Mac Icons post:

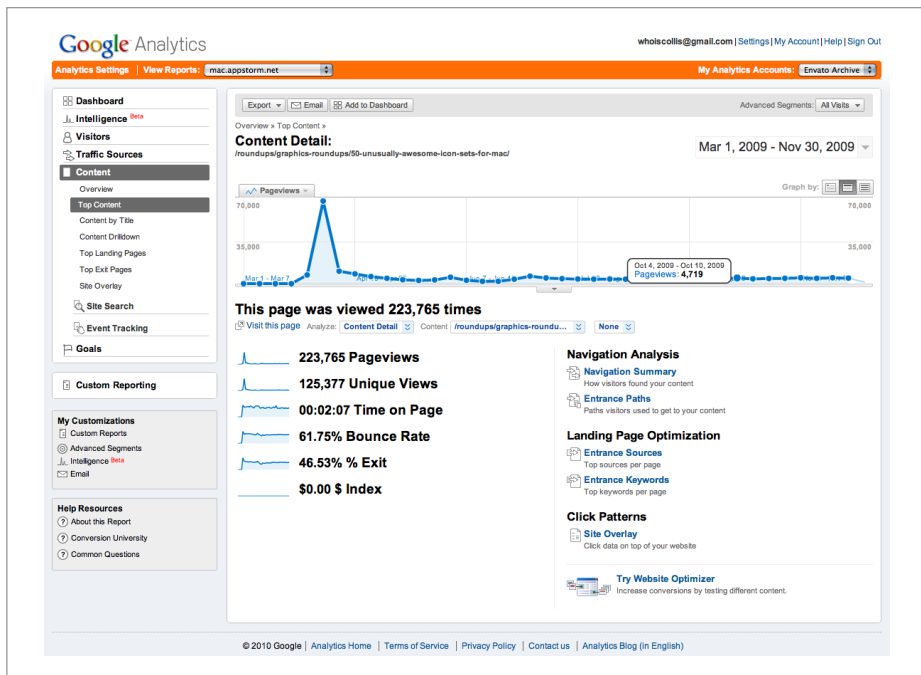


Fig 11-1: Traffic to a post about “Mac Icons” in the first 10 months.

The post had huge early success through links from blogs like LifeHacker, DownloadSquad, and MacWorld. This then translated to a consistent stream of 4,000–5,000 visitors every single month since.

In fact those numbers have even been climbing as the page has risen in the ranks of Google terms. In the month of March 2010, the same post about Mac Icons received a whopping 18,970 pageviews:

Case Study 3: AppStorm

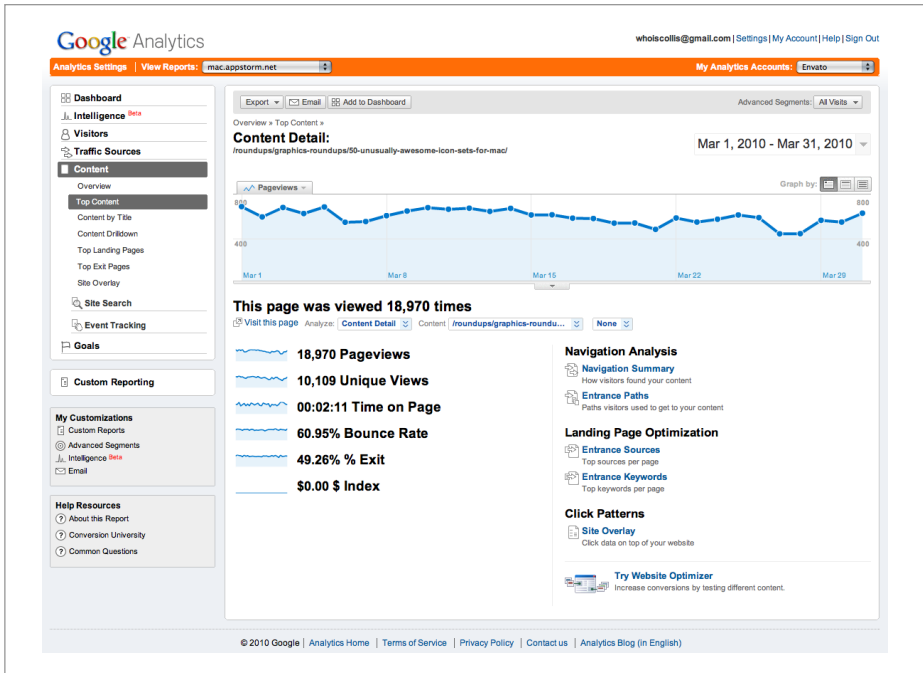


Fig 11-2: Traffic to the same “Mac Icons” for the most recent month (March 2010).

It’s not hard to see how a handful of evergreen posts like these can form the backbone of a site. Moreover, it was by introducing these posts early that we created the traffic and search rankings we would need in the coming months.

Growth and Expansion

Growth on Mac.AppStorm was looking very strong right from the beginning. While there were some flat months, overall the trends have looked (and mostly continue to look) very positive. You can see a graph of traffic for Mac.AppStorm below:

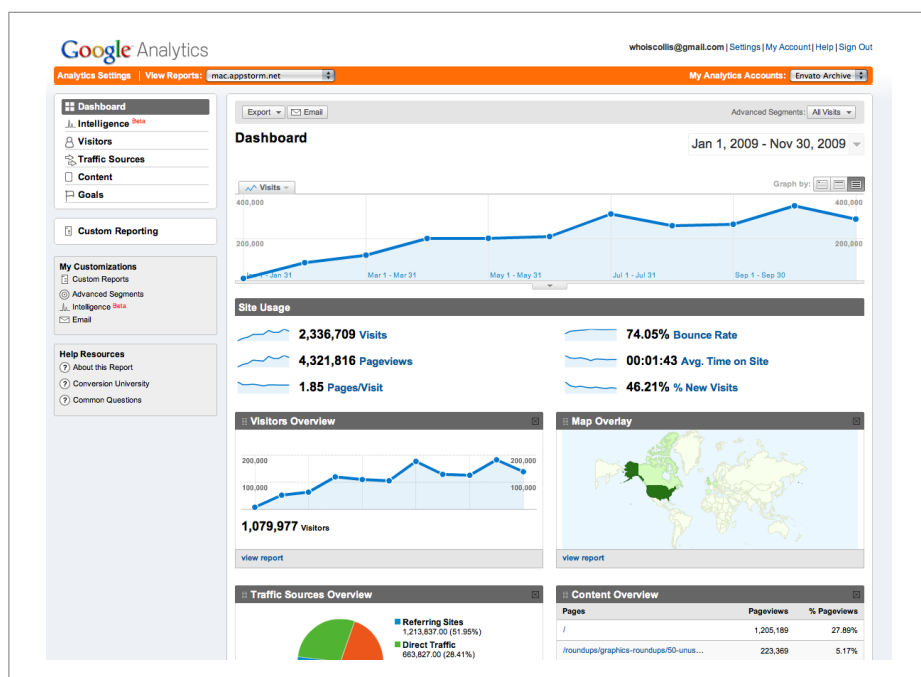


Fig 11-3: Mac.AppStorm traffic for the first 10 months.

Perhaps more importantly, in RSS numbers we watched as Mac.AppStorm very steadily caught up to and then passed our original competitor MacApper. Here is a graph comparing the RSS subscribers of the two sites:

Case Study 3: AppStorm

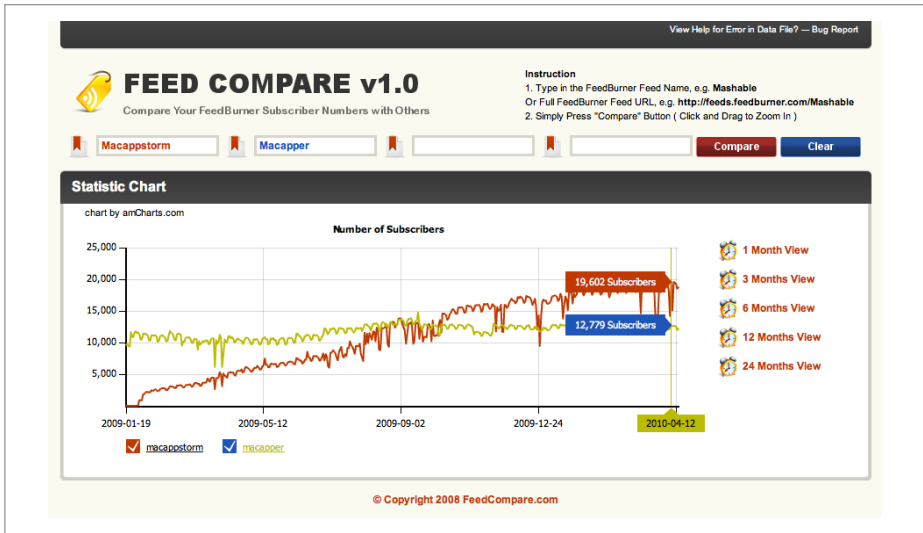


Fig 11-4: RSS readers for Mac.AppStorm vs. MacApper.com.

With such positive results, I decided to expand from a single site into a blog network. This had always been the plan, but this move came a little earlier than I'd originally planned. As we'll discuss shortly, our revenue was not yet up to scratch, but with such positive growth I was rather optimistic about how things would progress.

In August we launched Web.AppStorm and 3 months later we launched iPhone.AppStorm. Both sites continued the same approach, the same content formula, and the same site design into new app niches.

The growth of each of the new sites contributed to AppStorm as a whole reaching close to one million pageviews per month at the time of this writing. This is a great achievement in traffic, and the potential to roll out the same formula-driven sites into other app niches in the future is great.

Monetization

While Mac.AppStorm got off to a great start in traffic, revenue was not as forthcoming in the early months. For the first month or so we

made no attempt to run any advertising, instead opting to just focus on building traffic.

When it did come time to place some advertising we began with a modest Adsense block at the end of posts. The income was just a handful of dollars so we tried switching over to a service called VideoEgg that shows rich media adverts. The brands were high-end and the CPM rates reasonable, but ads only appeared occasionally, presumably when the company could fill inventory.

A few months in, David suggested adding **BuySellAds** (<http://buysellads.com>) spots and that he would try contacting a few app providers to see if they were interested. This turned out very well and we immediately started selling \$100 ad blocks of 125px x 125px each. As traffic continued to grow in the following few months, I kept upping the prices until they peaked at about \$350. At this price level, however, fewer advertisers were interested and in fact our ad revenue started declining!

This was an important lesson for me as I found that while it's important to experiment with pricing and it's also good to try to maximize your earnings, sometimes it's better to have a consistent set of ad incomes even though it's not the absolute most anyone would pay for the spots.

In recent months we've also been testing Adsense blocks on older archive posts only. This technique ensures that regular readers who are keeping up with the site don't see so many ads, while we still monetize search traffic and less regular readership. The resulting income isn't a huge dose, but every bit helps!

Quick Look – Thinking Outside the Box

While banner and text advertising have been the primary income sources to date, it's become clear that we need to look for other income to supplement or even replace this stream if we are to be successful.

This realization actually came when I sat down to write this case study you are now reading! When I was looking through the stats and laying out how our income was going, I realized that we weren't heading anywhere good, and that the months of losses had no clear end in sight.

Case Study 3: AppStorm

So a few weeks ago, an email exchange with David to brainstorm ideas for monetization resulted in our first strategy: Quick Look.

Quick Look posts are a type of paid posting that we have begun trialing. They allow app developers to pay a small fee (\$49 at the time of this writing) and submit some details about their app. We then compile a short post that includes a couple of screenshots, some app details, and a poll. The poll lets readers vote on whether they'd like to see the app reviewed properly, and notices at the top and bottom of the post ensure that readers know the post is sponsored.

Here is an example of a Quick Look post: <http://mac.appstorm.net/quick-look/music-quick-look/quick-look-radium-internet-radio/>

While sponsored posts are nothing new, we believe our approach makes them transparent enough and useful enough to be successful. Comments from readers so far have been extremely positive as well, mostly just discussing the apps themselves. This is a great sign that they are finding the posts useful, and encouraging for advertisers who want their apps to be seen by potential buyers.

It's only been two weeks since we launched the service, but so far the signs are good and it looks like our first month will earn \$200–\$300. This isn't a huge amount of money, but it's something we can build on over time, and can also roll out to Web.AppStorm and iPhone.AppStorm.

Trialing an Idea Quickly

Whether Quick Look is ultimately successful remains to be seen. Regardless, it is a good example of another principle that I have found to be extremely important in running a small operation. Namely, it's important to trial things in the simplest, cheapest way possible when the outcome is uncertain.

In the case of Quick Look we put together a very fast, very cheap solution in the following way:

We began by running a poll using the **PollDaddy** (<http://poldaddy.com>) service to ask readers how they would feel about a sponsored post service

to showcase apps. We spread the word using Twitter to quickly get a couple hundred responses. They were overwhelmingly positive, assuming the service was done unobtrusively and the apps were relevant. This was a good sign and so we decided to proceed.

Creating a payment system is expensive and time-consuming. So instead we created a form using **Formstack** (<http://formstack.com>) and used their PayPal integration service to add a payment component. We set up the form to ask for all relevant information and then email David the results. This service can be set up for free, though if you are processing any reasonable number of submissions you'd want one of their subscription plans, which range from \$14 to \$160 per month.

From the form results, David then copies and pastes the results into WordPress where we have a few specific styles and bits of text prearranged to make the process quick. He grabs a poll from PollDaddy and applies a quick skin we created so the poll matches the site and then the post is ready!

If we were to experience a heavy volume of submissions, this process wouldn't prove very efficient, particularly in the copying and pasting. In an ideal solution, we would build a specialized WordPress plugin to handle the forms and payments and generate the posts directly in WordPress as drafts for David to log in and publish.

Of course building a system like that costs money, and until the service is successful there is no point investing in it. Instead we've developed something quickly and cheaply. If it generates income, we can reinvest that income in making the whole thing into a seamless revenue machine!

Expanding Too Early

In retrospect the biggest mistake I made with AppStorm was expanding too early. When it came time to write up this case study, I had a chance to really look back and try to isolate the mistakes that have prevented AppStorm from reaching its full potential to date, and expansion stands out clearly.

When we launched Web.AppStorm, the signs for Mac.AppStorm were

Case Study 3: AppStorm

extremely positive with a long track record of month-on-month growth in both traffic and in ad sales. At the time, revenue wasn't enough to cover costs, but all the signs seemed to indicate that it would keep growing.

Thanks to many previous successes, I decided to take a chance and organized a sister site to Mac.AppStorm, and so we launched [Web.AppStorm](#). Shortly after, for whatever reason, traffic growth slowed down on the original, and due to my continual experimentation with ad placements, revenue also dropped off.

On top of this, the Web Apps niche is not nearly as nicely defined as Mac Apps, and so the site's growth has been much slower and steadier than the quick jumps at Mac.AppStorm. This is a clear sign that instead of responding to an open niche, we were carving out a new niche. While this is doable, it's always more expensive and more of a long, hard slog than discovering an open topic.

A few months later, after seeing somewhat sluggish growth and a bit of a downturn in revenue, I had the somewhat bizarre response of deciding that the best defense was an offense, and so I asked David to start up a *third* blog with iPhone.AppStorm.

The iPhone apps niche is a logical one to go into because iPhone apps are so wildly popular, and initial signs looked very promising for this niche, much as they did for Mac.AppStorm a year ago. Nonetheless, starting a third site added tremendous weight to our costs.

At the moment the costs of running three sites are large, but income is as yet relatively meager in comparison. If we wanted to minimize our losses, then we expanded too early, and in retrospect should have given Mac.AppStorm more time to settle and become profitable. Then we could have used Mac.AppStorm as more of a base to create the other sites. As it is, we are using our own pockets to fund all three sites and the losses are only really sustainable because AppStorm is part of a larger business.

Today, thankfully, our revenue has been picking up and thanks to the hard work of our editors David Appleyard and Jarel Remick, the traffic has been growing. With some initiatives like Quick Look, we may yet wrestle AppStorm into profitability and ultimately success.

Lessons Learned

The most important lessons I've learned from AppStorm are:

1. Study Traffic

We use Google Analytics on all our sites and it holds an absolute wealth of information. I make it a daily practice to check in and hunt through the statistics for trends and data that I might not know about. Sometimes this doesn't seem like the best use of my time, but every now and then I find a nugget of information that is incredibly useful. The realization that we were ranking for the term "Mac Apps" was one such gem!

Similarly, by paying a lot of attention to Analytics, we discovered that posts about topics like Mac Icons and Mac Desktops were a gold mine for search and long-term traffic. This realization has led us to create more of these evergreen posts, and to create similar core traffic posts for additional AppStorm blogs.

2. Find a Great Editor

Success in business depends on the people you hire and the team you build. Nothing great is built by one person, and never was this clearer than with Mac.AppStorm, where a combination of David's creativity and energy and my experiences from previous sites led to a successful blog. Without a great editor, not only would the site not have run as well, we also wouldn't have our weekly giveaways, most of our advertisers and revenue, or a sustainable plan for the future!

Since then we've had two other editors work on AppStorm and a host of great writers have contributed one-off and regular columns. It is only through this set of talented people that we have had the traffic growth on the AppStorm network.

3. Build Traffic on Previous Successes

Success in blogging, like many things in life, builds on previous successes. When I started my very first blog I started literally from scratch, cobbling together readers from anywhere and everywhere. FreelanceSwitch in turn had a small boost from that early blog, and then

Case Study 3: AppStorm

Psdtuts+ came and again was helped along in both capital and readers by FreelanceSwitch. By the time AppStorm launched, the other blogs made launching the smoothest and simplest it has ever been!

If you look at AppStorm out of context, it's tempting to think, "well of course it has lots of traffic, it had the rest of the Envato network to support it," but it's important to see that you have to build resources step by step, reader by reader, site by site.

4. First Profitability, Then Expansion

It's very tempting to try "growth" as a strategy to combat losses. It's counterintuitive but appealing to the entrepreneurial mindset, after all it's entrepreneurs who coined the phrase "You have to spend money to make money!" But the AppStorm experience really brought home for me that it's important to build strong, stable foundations before you start building on top of them.

When I expanded from Mac.AppStorm, it wasn't yet steady or profitable, and growing two new sites was a very costly and risky thing to do. It may yet turn out okay, but even if it does, this will have more to do with our capacity to bear losses than anything else. For new entrepreneurs, that capacity is more likely to be limited, and the principle of profitability-then-expansion will be even more critical.

5. Sometimes it's Good to Take a Hard Look at Things

Oddly enough, one of the best things to happen to AppStorm was me having to write this case study. While I think we all knew that the sites needed attention, spending time to write out this analysis and discussion really focused my team's attention on solving our problems.

It's too early to tell whether those steps will result in success, but being the optimist that I am, and knowing the great team we have, I think we'll get there! Hopefully in the updated edition to this book, I will be able to share many new lessons and success stories from AppStorm!

Final Word

We live in a time when the world of publishing is a very exciting place to be. In the last few years we've seen traditional publishing falling into turmoil thanks to declining advertising and audiences, mobile devices coming of age, e-Readers and tablet computers beginning to proliferate and promising new ways of consuming content, blogs growing ever more popular, and the internet continuing to be a source of disruption to traditional businesses.

In fact there is so much going on that sometimes it feels like things never stay still. In this world of change, it's important to stick to a few fundamental principles:

1. Be Determined to Succeed

In the book *Good to Great*, author Jim Collins describes how companies that achieve greatness often encounter lots of problems along the way. One of their defining attributes, however, are that they meet their issues with an absolute belief that they will eventually succeed, while at the same time not being afraid to confront the exacting details of their everyday worries.

I believe it's very important that as entrepreneurs we stay optimistic about how things will turn out, but not at the expense of confronting the realities of how our businesses are faring. We all hit walls, we all have product and even business failures. These, however, are just road blocks and while they are important in that you have to navigate through them, they are not the end of the road. There is almost always a path to success; sometimes it's just a much more difficult path than we may ideally like!

2. Stay on Top of Trends

Every industry has trends that you have to keep up with, but none move as fast as the online world where new products, ideas, markets, apps, services, and opportunities are created daily. It's a fantastic and exciting place to be, but it can also be bewildering and it's important to find ways to keep up.

The key to staying on top of trends is to subscribe, visit, and read other blogs. Choose sites not just from your niche but from around the web

and stay up to date with them. Pick industry-leading sites and pay attention to what they are doing on their sites. Look at what services, techniques, design, content, and features they offer. Look for ideas that you can take and implement in your own business.

3. Continuously Improve

It's all too easy for a blog, even a fast growing one, to stall in its growth. A plateau in traffic, in revenue, in subscribers, or in any other metric generally only has one true antidote, and it comes in the form of a philosophy of continuous improvement.

If you are constantly searching for ways to improve, to expand, to update, to move with the times, and to be better than you have ever been before, then it will show through in the results you see.

When you are committed to continuous improvement you will find yourself experimenting with new ideas, trying out new systems and approaches, and by simple probability, sooner or later you will hit on winning ideas.

4. Hire Well and Manage Well

The key to a great business is the team that works there. Coming to appreciate just how critical a team can be has been one of the most important lessons I've learned as an entrepreneur. No great business is built alone, so it's imperative that you get the right people and you keep them.

To build the best team possible, you need to treat hiring as a deliberate and important part of your business. Spend the time to hire well: interviewing, reviewing, looking at multiple candidates, and offering a fair and attractive job proposition. Build momentum by encouraging good people to find other good people.

And when you've got a great team, make sure you spend the time looking after their needs so that you keep them. Read up on management related articles and books, make sure you talk your staff through what's important to them. Make keeping good people as big a priority as hiring them was.

5. Stay on Top of Your Accounts

Running a business without good accounts is like driving blind: you might get where you're going, but you're infinitely more likely to hit a tree! Accounts enable you to know what's coming, to understand your cash flow, to plan for growth, and to know when you have to make changes – before it's too late.

As a new entrepreneur, I always understood that money was important but nonetheless did my best to only do the bare minimum of account keeping. Looking back, I realize I was lucky to scrape through some narrow moments only on the back of overall growth. I don't want to think about how things could have turned out if perhaps our business growth had stalled at the wrong moment. Certainly today I take a much greater interest in the business accounts and cash flow!

6. Never Stop Learning

When I was young I thought that learning was something you did in school and then in university and maybe in the first years of your work. After that I assumed you attained a magical complete understanding of whatever it was you did and that was that. Today I believe nothing could be further from the truth! Learning never stops and thank goodness it doesn't because learning creates opportunities.

When you learn about new things, even if they have nothing in common with your business, you open up new horizons for yourself. Broadening your depth of experience naturally allows you to spot new and interesting possibilities and opportunities. So while one aspect of learning is staying on top of trends, another is simply learning about anything that seems interesting to you and then looking at how it can apply to your work.

When I first encountered blogging I was mostly just looking at it as a way to express myself online and to tell anyone who would listen about my ideas on business. But by learning about blogging, I quickly realized that there were all sorts of implications for the rest of my work as well.

7. Make It About More Than Just Money

If you do something you are passionate about it, will generally show through. While money is something everyone is passionate about on

Final Word

some level, it will usually only get you so far. Make sure you build a business that you love working in for more than just the paycheck it brings.

Taking this approach will not only lead to a happier working life, but it's also a safeguard in bad times. If things do ever take a turn for the worse and money is tight, you will still have a reason to enjoy work and to struggle through. Happily, tough times never last forever, and sooner or later you'll push through!

I hope this book helps you on your own path to blogging and business success. Congratulations on choosing such an exciting field to be a part of, and good luck in all your projects! I look forward to subscribing to your sites!

Collis Ta'eed

APPENDIX: A BLOG BASICS CRASH COURSE

If you've picked up this book, chances are you already know what a blog is, probably read quite a few, and very likely have already tried your hand at blogging. This appendix is for readers who may not be quite so familiar with the basics of blogging. Here we will race through some of the basics of what blogging is, how it works, and how you can get started blogging today.

The rest of the book assumes that you have blogged before in some shape or form and are reasonably familiar with fundamental concepts like what a post is, what a pageview is, and so on. If that sounds like mumbo jumbo, then read on for a crash course in blogging basics!

Appendix: A Blog Basics Crash Course

What is a Blog?

A blog is a website that periodically updates with dated content called blog posts. A blog post can be text, images, video, audio, or any combination thereof. People blog about personal thoughts, opinions, news, stuff they like, stuff they don't, information they've collected, how-to guides on how to do things, ...in short you can blog about pretty much anything!

Over time, blogging has evolved into a sort of online news/magazine medium, so that bloggers can be anything from hobbyists to professionals to media outlets. This means that blogs now also appear in a variety of forms. Some still look like the online journals they originated as, while others resemble newspapers and online portals.

Elite blogs attract thousands of readers and visitors a day, many bringing in enough revenue to support one or more people working on them. In fact some have grown into large businesses spawning conferences, job boards, and even social networks.

Of course, how you measure your success as a blogger is up to you. Whether it is having a small, devoted following, bringing in a side income, or being linked to and talked about by other bloggers you look up to, every blogger has different goals. This book is about blogging as a serious hobby, profession, and ultimately as a business.

Day-to-day Blogging

So what does a blogger actually do? The quintessential task of any blogger, of course, is the production of content for the blog. But serious blogging isn't just posting, in fact a typical blogger's day might include:

- **Researching, Reading and Planning Content**

Keeping a consistent stream of quality content generally requires bloggers to stay on top of the latest news, trends, and discussions. That means typical bloggers spend a lot of time reading, researching stories, looking for news to break, and generally planning out posts.

- **Producing Content**

Producing content – that is, writing posts, recording podcasts and videos, finding images, and compiling links – takes up a fair amount of any blogger’s time.

- **Marketing the Blog**

Finding readers for a new blog is a challenging task all on its own, and marketing both the blog and individual blog posts can take a lot of time.

- **Analyzing Blog Statistics**

There are many ways to measure a blog’s success, from traffic to revenue to community participation. These statistics merit a lot of analysis to determine how a blog can be more effective and successful.

- **Managing the Business**

For bloggers who use their blogs as a business or income stream, there is usually a good amount of work to do on the business itself, including tasks like finding advertisers, managing income, and paying freelance writers.

Every blogger’s workload differs and depends on how you approach blogging. In some instances you may find a blog almost markets itself, while others need a lot of attention to get the word out. Some bloggers prefer not to spend too much time on statistics, while others pore over every number and graph.

In this book, we generally view all these tasks as being broken into individual jobs that you can hire staff for. In this appendix, however, it’s important to understand that for the vast majority of solo bloggers, these are all daily tasks that the blogger must handle personally.

Setting Up a Blog

Blogs consist of two parts: the front-end where readers see blog posts, and the back-end where the blogger writes and manages the blog. The back-end or administration area usually includes tools and settings to change how the blog looks on the front-end, to approve and moderate comments, and of course to write and edit blog posts.

Appendix: A Blog Basics Crash Course

To set up a blog you will need two things: blogging software and somewhere to host the blog. Depending on what blogging software you use, you may need to set up your own web hosting, or have it part of the package. Below you'll find basic explanations of how hosting works, what blogging software packages are available, and recommendations on what you should choose. In the main part of the book you will find more detailed and advanced explanations and descriptions of some of these technical facets of blogging.

Web Hosting and Servers

To get a site online, you need to have it stored on a computer that is permanently connected to the Internet and set up for serving up websites. This computer is called a server and you can rent space on a server, or even rent an entire server from companies called web hosts.

Once you sign up to a hosting account, you'll get access to a set of tools to manage your server, upload files, and install software. Typically, hosting accounts are charged on a monthly or yearly basis, and these days prices are pretty low. For example, the popular host **Dreamhost** (<http://dreamhost.com>) offers monthly packages for less than \$10 per month.

You also need a domain name, which you can usually purchase from the same web host for as little as \$10 per year. This domain name then gets mapped to the web hosting account so that whenever someone types in that URL, the files on your website that are hosted on that web host, appear on the person's screen.

To make matters more complicated, some web hosts won't support certain types of software depending on how they are set up. When choosing a web host, it's a good idea to ask their support or sales staff about using the account with the blogging platform you've chosen.

Blogging Software

There are a variety of types of blogging software available, and they fall into two general camps: hosted and self-hosted. Hosted software means you don't need to worry about the web hosting part at all; it's taken care of for

you. You'll usually need to pay a subscription fee, or put up with some sort of advertising – that's how the company makes their money. Many hosted packages will still allow you to purchase a domain name and then map it to the hosted package. If you don't wish to buy a domain name though, they will give you a website address to use instead, but expect it to be longer and less personal.

Self-hosted blogging software comes as a set of files that you download and then install on your own web host. You often need to create a database on your host, which means you'll need to know a bit about what you are doing, or be good at following technical instructions.

Fortunately, some web hosts offer self-installing versions of some of the more popular blogging packages. In particular, One-Click WordPress Installs are common, and this makes life a lot easier if you aren't very comfortable with hosting set-ups.

The most common blogging platforms are:

1. **Blogger:** Hosted, Free account via <http://blogger.com>.
2. **WordPress.com:** Hosted, Free account via <http://wordpress.com>.
3. **WordPress:** Self-Hosted, Download from <http://wordpress.org>.
4. **Movable Type:** Self-Hosted, Free for Individuals, \$400–\$1500 for businesses, at <http://movabletype.org>.

There are plenty of other options, free and paid, hosted and self-hosted, including: TypePad, TextPattern, LiveJournal, ExpressionEngine, Serendipity, SquareSpace, and Mephisto to name just a few. You can read more about choosing a platform and hiring a web developer to organize your blogging software in Chapter 4.

What Software Should You Choose?

Choosing a platform can be a bit bewildering when you first start out. It's important to do a bit of thinking and research as changing platforms down

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the track can be difficult and you can lose readers along the way if you aren't careful.

Experimental or Hobby Blogging: Try WordPress.com or Blogger

Both of these options are very fast to get started with, but limited down the road when it comes to customization and features. Consequently both are good for getting your feet wet, seeing how blogs work, and for use on blogs you are certain will only ever be a hobby.

If you use either Blogger or WordPress.com and think it is remotely possible that you may want to get more serious in the future, then I highly recommend that you set up a custom domain name. Getting your own domain name will ensure that if you need to move to a more complete software package such as the two listed below, that you will be able to keep most of your existing traffic and search engine ranking during the changeover. Both services offer tools to map a domain name back to your blog.

Serious Blogging: WordPress Self-Hosted

Both WordPress and Movable Type are very robust, scalable, and professional platforms for running your blog. Out of the two, WordPress is the more popular, however both have their benefits.

WordPress is completely free no matter what use you put it to. It has literally thousands of themes available, some free and some that need to be paid for, as well as plugins to do just about anything you can think of. Because it's the most common blogging platform, you'll find buckets of advice and articles on using WordPress, and lots of designers and developers who specialize in custom builds.

Customizing a Blog Installation

Bloggers will typically spend a lot of time customizing their blog installation with plugins and extensions, design modifications, and so on. In this book we won't dwell on the technical aspects of blog customization in too much detail as blog platforms differ vastly. Chapters 3 and 4 have some information on development and design choices, but beyond this you can find a range of helpful advice online.

Basic Blogging Concepts

When you first start blogging, there are a lot of new concepts, terms, and skills to get your head around. Listed below are some of the more important topics and a short explanation of each. The list is by no means exhaustive, so you will want to do some reading via the resources provided at the end of this appendix.

Traffic

Every day, visitors will arrive at your website to read and browse the pages there. These visitors are collectively called “traffic,” and they are the lifeblood of a site. A common misconception for new bloggers is that traffic will mysteriously appear on a new site. In reality, a site needs to be known and found somehow, hence a large portion of this book is dedicated to generating traffic to a site.

Common Terms:

- **Visitors:** A person who has navigated to a page on a website.
- **Uniques:** Refers to unique visitors in a given period, so that means counting each person only once and not once for each time they have visited. If you have a blog with a large number of repeat visitors each month, you may find your visitors per month and uniques per month are two quite different numbers. Advertisers will sometimes ask about uniques as it lets them know how many actual people are visiting.
- **Hits:** Hits generally means the number of times a server processes requests from a visitor's browser. So if a visitor looks at a page that has three images, the server will register a hit for each of those images as well as more for the page itself. Unfortunately, the word hits is sometimes misused to mean visitors or visits. Consequently it's good to clarify the term before you assume its meaning.
- **Pageviews:** Each visitor to a site will browse one or more pages. Each page that is displayed registers as a pageview. Typically blogs average 1–5 pageviews per visitor depending on how old they are and

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how frequently they are posted to. Certain other types of sites, for example social networks like Facebook, will have much higher average pageviews per visitor because a typical visit involves more activity. Pageviews are extremely important because they will determine how many times an advert will be displayed on the page.

- **Analytics and Stats Packages:** To measure and analyze a site's traffic, you need to install some sort of analytics package. The most common is the freely available **Google Analytics** (<http://google.com/analytics>), which is installed using a small bit of code that gets placed on every page. Google Analytics has a huge range of functionality and detail, and will let you measure everything from where people click on a page, to what sites they arrived from. You can read more about Analytics in Chapter 6.

Another common type of statistics package is the log analyzer. Log analyzers are installed on the server itself and have typically less features and functionality. Given the choice, you are probably better off using Analytics or a similar package.

Subscribers

There are two ways to read a blog: the first is to visit it in a browser, and the second is to subscribe to the site's updates via an RSS feed. Every blog platform can be set to produce an RSS feed for the site. Visitors then grab the URL for the feed and add it to their feed reader where they get notified of updates. It's also possible to have the feed send updates via emails for readers not familiar with RSS.

Subscriber numbers are important as they provide a rough gauge of how large a blog's audience is. It is also possible to serve up adverts on a site's feed, thus providing another source of revenue.

Common Terms:

- **RSS Feed:** RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and is a format for a file that your blog software keeps updated with the latest blog posts. Feed readers then check in with the file to pull in updates. In fact, there are other types of web feeds besides RSS, including notably Atom

Feeds, but most people simply say “RSS” or “Feed” and use it to mean any type of feed.

- **Feed Reader:** A feed reader, or feed aggregator as they are sometimes called, is a website or program that lets the user subscribe to multiple feeds. There are a variety of feed readers around, ranging from customizable homepages like iGoogle and Netvibes, to online readers like Google Reader, to desktop applications like Newsfire, to regular browsers like Safari and Internet Explorer.
- **Feedburner:** The most common service for measuring, analyzing, and serving adverts on feeds. A blogger will typically set up a regular feed on their site, then “burn” the feed through a Feedburner account, which really just means repackaging it with a Feedburner URL that can measure subscribers and other statistics. Then the blogger publicizes the Feedburner URL in the place of the original feed URL on the blog.

Social Media

“Social media” refers to websites where users interact in different ways. Social media includes social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, social bookmarking sites like Delicious and Magnolia, social news sites like Digg and Reddit, as well as a variety of other sites like StumbleUpon (a hybrid social news and bookmarking site), Twitter (a social chat and microblogging site), and many, many others.

Social media is important to blogging as it is a major source of traffic for many blogs. Sites like Digg and Reddit can provide a flood of traffic if a particular blog post hits the front page, while sites like StumbleUpon, Delicious and Facebook provide a way for users to share blog posts they like with their friends and the world. You can learn a lot more about social media and traffic generation in Chapter 6.

Common Terms:

- **Submitting:** Sites like Digg and Reddit require a blog post to be initially submitted as a story or link. Submission creates the entry on the site where users can then vote for or against, as well as comment and

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discuss. On Digg, it makes a big difference who submits a story, since so-called top diggers have legions of followers who pay attention to what stories they are submitting.

- **Voting:** Social news sites like Digg and Reddit rely on users voting for stories to determine which are the most newsworthy. The more votes a story gets, the higher the story is ranked and the higher the resulting traffic will be. On Digg, stories need to hit a certain threshold of votes before they get front-paged, at which point the resulting traffic can be enough to push many servers into overload, commonly known as the Digg-effect.
- **Bookmarking:** Social bookmarking sites require users to save or share a URL on their account. Often there is a “Popular” page, where other users can see what URLs are currently getting a lot of attention, and they in turn may save or visit the site themselves.

Discussion

Arguably one of the cornerstones of blogs is the ability for readers to discuss the content being posted. This discussion occurs in the form of comments on the page itself, and blog posts by other bloggers linking back to the original post, known as trackbacks. Comments can be switched off or require an account, and while a few famous blogs are set up that way, in most cases commenting is open to anyone and everyone. This also allows spammers to fill the web with comment spam, in much the same way as they do with email spam. Any good blog software package will have some form of spam filter, and it’s a good idea to install one of these early on to save yourself time moderating comments endlessly to get rid of the rubbish!

Common Terms:

- **Moderating Comments:** Most blogs are set up so that the blogger must approve, reject, or mark a comment as spam, known as moderating. To make life easier, the blogger can set a rule that once a particular commenter has had one comment approved, they no longer need to have comments moderated.

- **Trackbacks, Pingbacks, Linkbacks:** All three of these terms mean the same thing. They are links back from another blog to a specific post on your blog.

Monetization

One of the biggest topics in blogging is monetization, which as the word suggests, means finding ways to make money out of a blog. Monetization methods include advertising and sponsorship, sales of products and services, and even selling the blog itself! This subject is discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Common Terms:

- **Affiliate or Referral Program:** Many companies offer affiliate programs whereby a blogger can sign up to help sell the company's product or service, in return for a commission or affiliate payment. Usually signing up to an affiliate program, or referral program as they are sometimes called, will mean getting a special affiliate link and banner adverts to use to promote the product or service.
- **CPM:** When selling advertising space on a site, there are a few different ways to price the placement. CPM stands for Cost Per Thousand (M is the Roman Numeral for 1,000) and means the cost for an advert to be shown a thousand times. For example, a site that serves up 2,000 pageviews a month and that is selling advertising at \$5 CPM, would cost \$10 to advertise on for one month (2 lots of \$5).
- **CPC:** CPC stands for Cost Per Click, and is used when the cost is measured not for the number of times an advert is shown, but for the number of times an advert is actually clicked on. CPC is used largely in search advertising like Google Adwords, where the advertiser is only interested in actual click-throughs.

Appendix: A Blog Basics Crash Course

Web Design, Development and Formatting

Although you can get away with not knowing anything about web design and development, it most certainly helps. In particular, when formatting blog posts, or tinkering with your blog, a bit of knowledge can go a long way. There are four primary coding and layout languages that are used in blogging, each is explained below.

Common Terms:

- **HTML:** HTML (hypertext markup language) is the basic layout language of the web. It's a very easy-to-understand language that uses "tags" to designate how to format and layout text and content. A simple example is the bold tag ``. Applying this tag to text like so:

``This text is bold``, this text is not.

Will tell the browser to make everything in between bold, giving this output:

This text is bold, this text is not.

There are HTML tags to do all sorts of things, including more complex ones for laying out pages with graphics. Knowing basic tags for adding images, formatting, and arranging things on a page is a very helpful skill for a blogger. An excellent site to learn basic HTML is **W3Schools** (<http://www.w3schools.com/html>).

- **CSS:** CSS (cascading style sheets) is a language used to further define how things should look in HTML using files called style sheets. These are created once, and then applied to many pages. This makes life easier as styles can be defined in one place and then used many times. Styles can also be mixed into the HTML itself. You can easily get by without knowing CSS as a blogger, but if you are interested in learning more, again **W3Schools** (<http://www.w3schools.com/css>) offers a good set of basic tutorials.

- **Javascript:** Javascript (or JS) is a programming language used to actually *do stuff*, as opposed to HTML and CSS, which are just for *displaying* text and pages. Javascript is used for things like monitoring statistics for programs like Google Analytics, adding little applications to a page like a calculator, and generally making a website a bit more clever. As a blogger you don't need to know how to write Javascript at all; however, there may be times where you will need to copy and paste lines of JS code for widgets and applications that you wish to add to your blog.
- **PHP:** Like Javascript, PHP (hypertext preprocessor) is a programming language for adding functionality to a site. It differs in that it is generally used to power more complex stuff. For example, most blogging software is written in PHP. Because Javascript runs in a person's browser, they can switch it on and off, thereby disabling and enabling the stuff you are using it for. PHP on the other hand runs on the actual server where your website is hosted. This means it is more secure and can do things like accessing the database.

It's unlikely you will ever need to have much to do with PHP unless you really start working on your blog's design and development. But because so many blogs are written in PHP, in particular WordPress, it's likely you will come across this acronym occasionally when reading about blogs.

Search Engines

As you know, search engines like Google and Yahoo are used to find things on the web. In particular they can be used to find your site! This makes them very important to bloggers as they can grow to be responsible for a very large portion of a site's traffic. This has led to a whole industry around optimizing websites to garner more search traffic. In Chapter 6 we discuss search engine traffic and optimization in more detail.

Common Terms:

- **SEO:** SEO (search engine optimization) is the process of changing a blog's structure and content to result in more search engine traffic.

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Common SEO techniques include using popular keywords in post titles, editing the site's design to be search engine friendly, and finding ways to get more links back to different pages. SEO is an ever-evolving field, and there are professionals who charge a lot of money for the service.

- **Ranking:** When you search for a certain term in a search engine, you get a list of pages of results. Where a particular site sits in the results is referred to as its ranking. So when you optimize your site, you are trying to rank better for certain search terms in order to receive more search traffic.

More Terms Explained

There are many terms, acronyms, and phrases associated with blogging that you will encounter. You can find a great list of definitions and explanations on **QuickOnlineTips'** Giant Blogging Glossary at <http://www.quickonlinetips.com/archives/2006/06/the-giant-blogging-terms-glossary/>.

What Can You Expect?

When you're brand new to something like blogging it's easy to make some assumptions that aren't necessarily true. Here are a few basic facts about blogging that are worth knowing:

1. It Can Be Hard to Get Noticed

There are many, many thousands of bloggers out there, some professional, some hobbyists, some just personal bloggers. The "blogosphere" is vast and noisy, so it can be difficult to get noticed as a brand new voice. Over time, with application and great content, you will be heard and get known, but you must not expect it to be handed to you. Getting noticed takes effort.

2. You Can Make a Lot of Money, But It Takes a Lot of Work

There are bloggers making considerable amounts of money, and in fact two of the case studies in this book record how two blogs have worked their way into five and six-figures per month in revenue. However, like most things in life, it takes a lot of work.

In 2008 Technorati released the results of a global survey of bloggers that revealed that the majority of bloggers surveyed carried some form of advertising on their blogs. The mean (or average) annual revenue was \$6,000, but this is heavily weighted by the top 1% of bloggers who generate over \$200,000 per year, meaning the majority of bloggers don't earn very much. You can see more of the survey results for both 2008 and successive years at: <http://www.technorati.com/blogging/state-of-the-blogsphere/>.

3. You Get Started Easily and Quickly

Some pursuits take a lot of time to get into; blogging, on the other hand, is something you can literally start doing today. It may take a long time to become successful, but actually getting started is as simple as grabbing an account at a hosted blog provider like Blogger or WordPress.com, or signing up to a hosting package and publishing your first post. In the next section we'll discuss how you can start blogging today yourself.

4. Getting Comments, Readers and Traffic is Addictive

Perhaps the best thing about blogging is that once you begin finding readers, having them comment on your posts, and seeing traffic begin to trickle in, the feeling is fantastic! If you love discussing ideas, sharing findings, teaching skills, and generally opening up to the world, then you'll love blogging.

5. Blogging is a Marathon.

A common and sage piece of advice about blogging is to think of it as a marathon rather than a sprint. Blogging is about consistent posting, marketing, and effort, and in the long run, just sticking at it will outpace many of your early rivals. Sometimes you may get disheartened, and sometimes you may get sick of posting, but if you keep at it, keep experimenting and evolving, the odds get better and better so that your blog will be more and more successful over time.

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Diving in...Today

The best way to learn about blogging is to get involved, and that is something you can do today! Here are three things you can begin doing immediately:

Start Reading Other Blogs

Reading blogs as a budding blogger means looking at how they are set up, what content works and why it does, how often they are posting, what kinds of posts generate the most discussion, and so on. Reading popular blogs is a great way to get in the thick of things, and if you read blogs in the niche that you intend to blog yourself, you'll also get a good idea of the landscape and where your new blog will fit in.

The best way to find blogs to read is simply to start surfing. Google Blog Search and Technorati are two great places to begin your browsing, and more often than not, you'll find posts linking to more posts and before you know it, you'll be inundated!

You may also wish to grab an account with a feed reader site like Google Reader and begin subscribing to the better blogs you come across. This is a good habit to get into as you enter into the world of blogging, as you'll find there are a lot of sites to keep track of.

In Chapter 2 we discuss how you should research a new niche before opening your main blog enterprise, and much of the discussion centers around investigating competing blogs in and around that topic. So this is a great habit to get into as you embark on your blogging journeys.

Start Reading Blogs About Blogging

Naturally there are some great blogs about blogging out there, and they offer a constant stream of advice and opinions on the subject. While this book gives a solid overview of blogging as a business, sites written specifically on the subject of blogging will often go into minute detail on niche topics, as

well as mix in blogging news and opinions. You can find a selection of great blogs on blogging listed in the resources at the end of this chapter.

Start a Blog

Of course the best way to get involved in blogging is to start doing it. The two easiest sites to open a blog to experiment with are Blogger.com and WordPress.com, where you can literally be up and running in a few minutes. If you've already got an idea you're serious about, you may want to go the whole way and grab a web hosting account with WordPress, Movable Type, or some other blog choice, in which case check the resources at the end of this chapter.

In any case, starting a blog and habitually posting to it at some regular interval is the best way to find out if blogging is something you really want to get into. Jumping straight in will also give you more perspective as you go through the rest of this book. So feel free to start a blog right now, about anything you like!

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Additional Resources

Blogs about Blogging

- ProBlogger (<http://problogger.net>)
- DailyBlogTips (<http://dailyblogtips.com>)
- BlogHerald (<http://blogherald.com>)

Books about Blogging

- ProBlogger: Secrets for Blogging Your Way to a Six-Figure Income by Darren Rowse
- Blogging For Dummies
- WordPress for Dummies

Web Hosts that Offer Easy WordPress Installs

- DreamHost (<http://dreamhost.com>)
- MediaTemple (<http://mediatemple.net>)



“ If you’re serious about blogging as a real business then you need to get this now. ”

CHRIS GARRETT - CHRISG.COM

“ Written by someone who has walked the walk several times. ”

YARO STARAK - ENTREPRENEURS-JOURNEY.COM

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DANIEL SCOCCO - DAILYBLOGTIPS.COM

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Collis is the creator and co-founder of Envato and Tuts+, producing blogs and sites that serve over fifty million pageviews a month.

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