

Startup Marketing Fundamentals

Landing Page Optimization Tips

Launching a New Website

On Communities and Content

How I Pitched TechCrunch

And more...



HACKERMONTHLY

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Why You Should Start Marketing the Day You Start Coding

By ROB WALLING

I'VE GONE ON and on about the subject of pre-launch marketing on my podcast, made mention of it in my book, went into detail on TechZing, and again on a recent Micropreneur Academy conference call.

And after talking about this subject at length, I found myself again evangelizing it last week at the Business of Software conference. That's when I realized I needed to sit down and create a permanent written resource for the topic. Then you don't have to listen to me tell you about it — you can just ask for the URL.

So the intention of this post is to lay out the key details of why you should start marketing your startup (or product, or book, or anything else you will launch) months before launch day.

This may sound obvious, but given the number of times I've been asked about it (and the number of times I've seen people do it poorly), it's apparent it needs further examination.

Objections

The two most common objections I've heard about pre-launch marketing are that:

1. Someone might steal your idea.
2. You're too busy writing code to spend time marketing.

Let me address the fear of someone stealing your idea with the following: Wake the hell up! No one cares about your idea. Not even your mom (I know she said she does, but she was just being nice).

Anyone with the skill to clone your idea and the motivation to actually make it happen is way too busy with the 37 ideas they have everyday to bother taking yours. And if someone does steal it before you launch, consider it a favor.

Having your idea stolen sooner saves you the hassle of building it, only to have someone steal it then. If it's that easy to steal it's going to happen one way or another.

Remember, ideas are worth nothing on their own. And these days with how easy it is to build an application, your code isn't worth much either. This hurts me as much as anyone since I'm a developer.

But myself and another developer could get together and clone almost any popular web application in a month. Or for that matter, we could simply buy a clone script. Twitter, Facebook, eBay, Groupon, Digg, and about 50 others are available for around \$100 each.

No, these days even technical execution is mostly trivial (with a few exceptions for apps built around unique algorithms). Far more important is marketing execution. If you can out-market someone, you can make your Git repository public and still kick the crap out of anyone.

Ideas (and in many cases the code itself) are not worth as much as we think. It's marketing that most often makes the difference between a successful and a failed startup.

Whew...now where was I?

Oh yes, the thought that someone might steal your idea is even more preposterous today than it was ten years ago.

For the other objection: you're too busy writing code to spend time marketing.

Ummm...yeah, I suppose you're also too busy to spend time compiling, using source control, or saving files to your hard drive.

If all you're doing is building a hobby project then no marketing needed. You're fine to just post it to your blog (30 uniques per month, baby!) and let it languish in obscurity.

But if you have any desire to sell your software, consider marketing a fundamental building block of the process. Without marketing, your product is nothing more than a project (something you build for fun, not money).

If you plan to sell your product, marketing is an absolute requirement, and as critical to the process as saving code to your hard drive. Skip it and you're doomed.

“Don’t underestimate the impact that fear and uncertainty can have on your chances of success.”

Reasons to Start Marketing Before Your Launch

Now let’s look at four reasons why you should start marketing the day you decide to move forward with your idea.

To give you a bit of background (that I’ll expand on later), the goal of pre-launch marketing is not just to build buzz, but to get permission to contact people who are interested in your product. This is best achieved by building a launch notification email list, which is something fairly commonly implemented these days.

We’ll go into more specifics later on in this post.

Reason #1: Idea Validation

The day you decide to move forward with an idea there’s a lot of uncertainty. If you’ve ever made the commitment to invest 400+ hours, you know how mentally taxing this can be. Especially if you’ve made the decision based on a hunch with little data to support your decision.

This uncertainty makes the six-month slog that much more challenging. It’s hard enough to give up your nights and weekends for six months. It’s even harder when you’re not sure anyone’s going to care once you launch.

In 2–4 hours you can setup a landing page and begin collecting emails. This

simple act, coupled with a small amount of marketing, can make the difference between having the confidence that you’re building something people want and having no clue if you’re pouring several person-months of effort down the drain.

Don’t underestimate the impact that fear and uncertainty can have on your chances of success.

Imagine yourself three months into building your product. You have three months left. You’re tired because you work every night until 1 am. Your wife tolerates it, but she’s not happy about all the time you spend sitting in front of your computer with no money to show for it. And you haven’t seen your friends in months.

It sucks.

In the above situation, assume you have 650 targeted email addresses you’ve compiled through some small marketing efforts and a landing page. Suddenly things don’t look so bleak. You have some sales waiting for you once you push the bits to your server.

And vice versa, if you’re three months in and you’ve received several thousand uniques to your landing page but only 6 sign-ups, you have a problem. Either your landing page stinks or your idea is a lead balloon.

Either way, you need to put coding on hold and figure out the problem.

Reason #2: Instant Beta List

I’m not a fan of open betas, but whether you’re going to release your app to 5 or 500 beta testers, you have to find those people. And this is a lot harder than it sounds.

Gathering interested prospects over time allows you the flexibility to instantly email 5 people — even months before launch — and ask their opinion about a feature, design choice, or any decision better made by a potential customer than by a vote between you and your mom.

And once you’re ready for beta testing, it’s a slam dunk. It reduces your time to find testers from a few days to a few hours.

As an aside: unless there is a compelling reason, opt for a small beta (5–20 people) and offer a heavily discounted or free version to participants if they contribute opinions and bug reports.

If you decide to go with a large beta (and you’d better have a good reason for this), don’t give your software away to everyone who participates. This first group of prospects is a critical source of early sales.

Reason #3: Launch Day

If you've ever launched a product without a mailing list, you know it's painful.

After hundreds of hours of development, your big day arrives. You email everyone you know, flex your networking muscles, issue a press release, and end the day with three sales at \$20 each.

60 bucks. Wow...how will you ever deal with such a massive influx of capital?

If you haven't started marketing, your launch day is your halfway point to having a successful product. Building it was the easy part.

Contrast that with a mailing list of 650 interested people who visited your landing page and decided your offer was compelling enough to provide their email address. You've been greasing the marketing wheels for months to get here.

You send an email letting them know you'll be launching in a week or so, then an email with a nice discount that expires after a few days. Your conversion rate should land between 5% and 40% depending on how long you've been collecting emails, the interest level of the prospects, and how compelling you make your offer.

At 5%, you'll sell 32 copies. At 40%, it's 260.

I assure you: selling 260 copies of your app (or garnering 260 sign-ups for your SaaS app) on launch day will do wonders for your morale.

Reason #4: Building Links Over Time

The final advantage is the ability to build links over time. Nothing fancy here—it's common knowledge that search engines look more favorably on a website with a "natural" link profile, part of which involves receiving links organically over time rather than receiving a zillion of them in a single day.

While Google won't penalize you for receiving a stack of links at launch, you will tend to rank higher for longer if you gather those links over time.

Execution

Ok, I said this would be a "why" article, but I hate talking so much theory without giving actionable advice. So let's take a quick look at the details of getting setup to start pre-launch marketing. There are many variations, but here's the simplest approach:

1. Buy a domain name and point it to your web host.
2. Setup a landing page. Keep your copy really short (and punchy). You need to pique interest, not convince them to buy.
3. Collect emails on that landing page.

Using GoDaddy for step 1, one of the approaches I'll mention below for step 2, and MailChimp for step 3, this should take no more than 2-4 hours from start to finish.

Once this is setup the major task is driving traffic, which is beyond the scope of this article (but I wrote about it in my book and I'll be blogging more about it in the future).

So let's look at the best approaches for setting up a landing page:

Approach #1: WordPress with LaunchPad

This is my approach of choice. Install WordPress and install the LaunchPad theme. Edit the copy and add your subscribe form. Bam—you're done.

Elapsed time: 2 hours.

My most recent use of this approach for my book yielded a unique visitor-to-email conversion rate of just under 50%.

Here's a screen shot of the landing page:



This is all the text that appeared on the page. It's just enough to pique your interest.

Approach #2: Static HTML

I know you can hack HTML, but please don't design a landing page yourself unless you are a designer. A crappy landing page (like something I would hack myself) will have a visitor-to-email conversion rate of around 5%-10%. A well-designed page with good copy and targeted visitors should do 30%-50%.

A few landing page examples from which to borrow inspiration:

- Design Book [hn.my/designbook]
- AppIgnite [appignite.com/]
- 55 Creative Coming Soon Pages [hn.my/55coming]

Approach #3: Unbounce

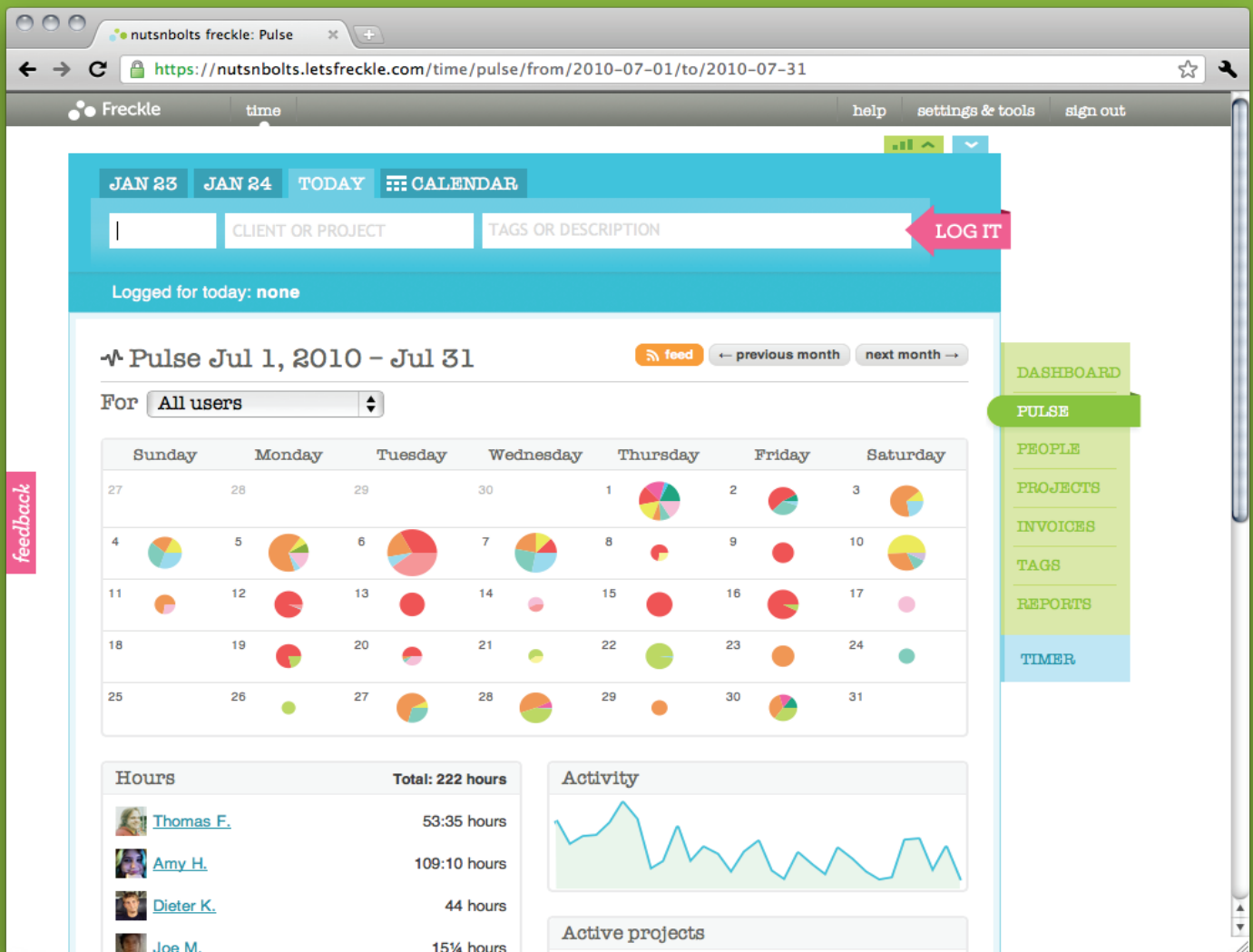
I haven't used Unbounce, but they're a SaaS solution to this landing page issue. At \$25/month for the cheapest plan, it's a bit pricey for a developer who can use one of the options above for little or no cost.

And although I like their selection of landing page layouts, I wish they had more look-and-feel choices (they launched a few months ago, so I imagine they are working on this).

With that said, Unbounce is a good choice if you're not a developer or don't have any time to tackle one of the other options I've listed. ■

Rob Walling is the author of *Start Small, Stay Small: A Developer's Guide to Launching a Startup*. Rob is a solo founder with no employees and he owns a number of profitable software products and web applications. His blog, SoftwareByRob.com, is consistently ranked in the top 20 startup blogs.

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Startup Marketing Fundamentals

Lessons Learned From Helping Over 150 Startups with Marketing

By ILYA LICHTENSTEIN

Photo: Pebble Art, www.flickr.com/photos/pshan427/2382209408/

ABOUT A WEEK ago, I made a post on Hacker News offering free online marketing advice to any startup that asked for it. I had over 150 startups emailing me, selling everything from enterprise software to scheduling tools to pet food, and I tried to answer every single one with specific, actionable insights they could put to use right away. This took a lot of time, but not as much as I expected because I would frequently find myself giving the same advice over and over again.

I'm going to collect the most useful and common advice I've given into a three part "lessons learned" series. In this post, I'll focus on broader marketing strategies which are critically important if your startup is to succeed. Next week, I'll delve into driving traffic and specific tactics startups can use to immediately begin growing their customer base.

These suggestions may seem basic or common sense to some of you, but you would be surprised at how few startups are actually executing these. I'll write about more specific tactics and methods for driving traffic and customer acquisition in my next post, but all of those will be useless unless you get these fundamentals right. By the way, if you're an affiliate and you don't think these apply to the landing pages you're building, you're doing something wrong.

Articulate a Clear, Specific, Compelling Value Proposition

For many of the startups I looked at, I had to kind of scratch my head and think for a few minutes as I tried to figure out exactly what benefit they offered consumers. The value of your product or service — your unique competitive advantage — should be clear within 5 seconds of visiting your site. I'm sure you've heard the old copywriting mantra

of "list benefits, not features." Take that to the next level. Take the single most important benefit of using your service and make that your headline.

If you could only have one feature in your app, what would it be? Your "killer app" can lead to your biggest benefit and that's how you need to introduce yourself to customers. I could write volumes about writing headlines, but a simple statement like this is a good place to start. If you're selling a B2B service, as many of you are, you need to make the immediate benefit or ROI of using your service crystal clear. If you're building a B2B app to manage payroll, "Cloud hosted SaaS payroll for your business" is not a good headline. "Spend less time worrying about payroll" is a better one. "Cut payroll management costs by 37% instantly" is even better.

Find Your Target Market and Segment the Hell out of It

Another issue I ran across rather frequently is a distinct lack of marketing focus. When asked who their target market was, many people responded “small businesses” or, worse, “anyone.” Alright, fine, you sell your SaaS products to small business in the US. But what kind of small business owner converts the best for you? Which customers are most likely to be profitable customers? Who is most excited about your product? You have been tracking these things, haven’t you?

You don’t have the budget to target all small businesses, so start with a specific niche or industry you think your product has particularly strong appeal for. Selling time tracking software? Start positioning it as time tracking software for accountants or dentists or landscapers. How about targeting a specific task or feature and finding people looking for that feature only? Or what about people who already use a particular competitor’s software? I’ll go into competitor bidding at a later time, but it’s a fantastic way to get motivated early users.

Build super niche landing pages or, even better, microsites targeting each specific market segment you want to go after, emphasizing the specific benefits of your product to that group only. Not only is this a very strong SEO play, but it will increase your quality score and relevance in AdWords as well as greatly increase conversions.

If you have a landing page targeted to doctors, test putting a stock photo of a smiling doctor using your software on your landing page. It’s cheesy, but there’s a reason companies use it—it works. Similarity is a very powerful principle of persuasion. Tech people respond well to screenshots of software. Local small business owners may not.

By the way, this applies to ecommerce startups as well. If you’re a clothing company, build pages like “Top products for new moms” or “T-shirts for fans of __,” and they will do very well.

Optimize Aggressively for CLV

If you’re running a subscription service of any kind, customer lifetime value (CLV) is by far the most important metric you need to be thinking about. More than conversion rates, burn rate, SEO, or anything else, CLV will determine whether your startup lives or dies. Try to determine this number or at least an average for your entire customer base as soon as possible.

There are so many ways to increase CLV that fall outside the scope of this post, but just remember that effective monetization of the backend is where many online businesses live or die. Effectively up-selling or cross-selling once you’ve acquired a customer could mean the difference between outbidding your competitors, capturing more market share, or falling behind.

You don’t have to be spammy or annoying to up-sell well. This can be as simple as showing a notification when your customer is close to reaching a usage limit, urging him to upgrade to the next tier of service, or emailing your most loyal customers with special discounts.

Start measuring engagement, churn rate and attrition, visit frequency, loyalty, and so on. If you’re selling a \$20 a month service but you know that you will net \$400 over the lifetime of an average customer, suddenly you have a lot more options for marketing, and not to mention some great metrics to show investors.

Start Marketing Early and Validate Your Idea ASAP

You don’t need a product to start marketing. Let me say that again. You don’t need anything to start marketing. All you need is a vague idea and a landing page where you can collect email addresses from prospective customers. It’s called dry testing and it works, at least for gauging initial interest to see if an idea is worth pushing further.

It pains me to see so many startups emailing me who have already spent months or even years building a product without thinking about promotion or validating their idea at all before

launching. “Launch first, then figure out marketing” is a recipe for disaster. You need to be able to answer at least these questions as soon as possible, ideally before you write a single line of code:

1. Is there a target market for my product and how big is it?
2. Who are the current players in the market? Is it controlled by a few big players or dominated by many smaller companies?
3. How much market share can I realistically expect to capture and how well can I monetize them?

Remember this: A startup is a business. And any business requires basic market research. If you were thinking of opening a coffee shop, would you jump right in and start building it? Or would you first see if there are any other coffee shops nearby, how many customers they have, how much they charge for coffee, etc?

Marketing isn’t just emailing bloggers and driving traffic. It’s everything — product, price, placement, and promotion. Start thinking about these things before you launch, learn from them, and iterate quickly before wasting a lot of time and money. ■

After spending three years running a successful affiliate marketing business and spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on every online advertising platform available, Ilya Lichtenstein is entering the startup world. He is currently building *insight.io*, an automated advertising intelligence tool that makes it easy to find high-converting, inexpensive traffic sources online.

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Launching a New Website

18 Steps to Successful Metrics & Marketing

By RAND FISHKIN

A dramatic photograph of a space shuttle launching. The shuttle is positioned vertically in the center, with a massive, bright orange and yellow plume of fire and white smoke trailing behind it. The smoke billows out to the right, creating a large, dark, cloud-like shape. The background is a deep black, making the bright launch stand out.

T

HE PROCESS OF launching a new website is, for many entrepreneurs, bloggers and business owners, an uncertain and scary prospect. This is often due to both unanswered questions and incomplete knowledge of which questions to ask. In this post, I'll give my best recommendations for launching a new site from a marketing and metrics setup perspective. This won't just help with SEO, but on traffic generation, accessibility, and your ability to measure and improve everything about your site.

Photo: Explored, www.flickr.com/photos/shanelin/4344198946/

Step 1. Install Visitor Analytics

Nothing can be improved that is not tracked. Keeping these immortal words of wisdom in mind, get your pages firing analytics code before your first visitor. Google Analytics is the obvious choice, and customization options abound. For most sites more advanced than a basic blog, I'd highly recommend at least using first-touch attribution.

Google Analytics (GA), or any other package (see some alternatives here), needs to be placed on every page of your site and verified. Do yourself a favor and install it in a template file you can be sure is on every page (e.g. footer.php). GA's instructions will indicate that placing the code at the top of the page is key, but I'm generally in favor of leaving it at the bottom to help page load time for visitors (though the new asynchronous GA code is pretty fast).

Step 2. Set Up Google & Bing Webmaster Tools Accounts

Both Google & Bing have webmaster tools programs that monitor data about your site and message it back to you through online interfaces. This is the heartbeat of your site from the search engine's perspective and for that reason it's wise to stay on top of the data they share.

That said, the numbers inside these tools are not always perfect and often have serious flaws. The referring keywords and traffic data are, in my experience, far off what analytics tools will report (and in those cases, trust your analytics, not the engine's tools). Likewise, crawl, spidering and indexation data isn't always solid, either. Nonetheless, new features and greater accuracy continue to roll out (more of the former than the latter unfortunately) and it's worth having these both set up.

Step 3. Run a Crawl Simulation of Your Site

No matter how perfect you or your developers are, there are always problems at launch — broken links, improper redirects, missing titles, pages lacking rel=canonical tags, files blocked by robots.txt, etc.

By running a crawl test with a free tool like Xenu or GSite-Crawler, or leveraging a paid tool like Custom Crawl from Labs or the Crawl Service in the Web App, you can check your site's accessibility and ensure that visitors and search engines can reach pages successfully in the ways you want. If you launch first, you'll often find that critical errors are left to rot because the priority list fills up so quickly with other demands on development time. Crawl tests are also a great way to verify contractor or outsourced development work.

Step 4. Test Your Design with Browser Emulators

In addition to testing for search engine and visitor accessibility, you'll want to make sure the gorgeous graphics and layout you've carefully prepared checks out in a variety of browsers. My rule is to test anything that has higher than 2% market share, which currently means (according to Royal Pingdom): Internet Explorer, Firefox, Chrome, Safari and Opera.

There's a great list of browser testing options from Freelance-Folder here [hn.my/browsertesting], so I'll just add that in-person testing on your own PCs & Macs is also a highly recommended use of an hour.

Step 5. Set Up RSS Feed Analytics

Virtually every site will have some form of structured data being pushed out through an RSS feed. And, just like visitor analytics, you'll need to leverage data if you want to improve the reach and quality of the feed.

Feedburner is the de facto software of choice, and it's very solid, though good alternatives do exist. Getting your feed and the analytics to track and measure it is typically a very easy process because there's nothing to verify — you can create and promote any feed you want with just a few button clicks.

One important recommendation — don't initially use the counter "chicklet" like:

Your Chicklet:  0 readers
BY FEEDBURNER

It has a bad psychological impact to see that no one has subscribed to your new RSS feed. Instead, just provide a standard link or graphic and after you've amassed a few hundred or thousand readers, use the numeric readout to provide additional social proof.

Step 6. Tag the Actions that Matter

No matter what your site is, there are actions you're hoping visitors will take from tweeting a link to your post to leaving a comment to buying a product or subscribing to an email list. Whatever those actions might be, you need to record the visits that make them through your analytics tool.

Once action tracking is in place, you can segment traffic sources and visit paths by the actions that were taken to learn more about what predicts a visitor is going to be valuable. If you're pouring hours each day into Twitter but seeing no actions, you might try a different channel, even if the traffic volume is high.

Step 7. Conduct an Online Usability/Branding Test

Before a formal launch, it can be extremely helpful to get a sense of what users see, experience and remember when they browse through your site for a few seconds or try to take an action. There's some fantastic new software to help with this including Clue App [clueapp.com].

Last week, I set up a Clue App test for SEOmoz's homepage in 30 seconds and tweeted a single link to it, which garnered 158 kind responses with words and concepts people remembered from the visit. This type of raw testing isn't perfect, but it can give you a great look into the minds of your visitors. If the messages being taken away aren't the ones you intended, tweaking may be critical.

In addition to Clue, dozens of other easy usability and user-testing apps are now on the market. Conversion Rate Experts has a good list here [hn.my/usertest1] and Craig Tomlin's got another excellent one here [hn.my/usertest2].

Step 8. Establish a KPI Dashboard

No matter what your website does, you live and die by some key metrics. If you're starting out as a blogger, your RSS subscribers, unique visits, pageviews and key social stats (tweets, links, Facebook shares, etc) are your lifeblood. If you're in e-commerce, it's all about the above plus the number of customers, sales, sales volume, returning vs. new buyers, etc.

Whatever your particular key metrics might be, you need a single place — often just a basic spreadsheet — where these important numbers are tracked on a daily or weekly basis. Setting this up before you launch will save you a ton of pain later on and give you consistent statistics to work back from and identify trends within the future.

Step 9. Build an Email List of Friends & Business Contacts for Launch

This may seem non-obvious, but it's shocking how a friendly email blast to just a few dozen of your close contacts can help set the stage for a much more successful launch. Start by building a list of the people who owe you favors, have helped out and who you can always rely on. If you're feeling a bit more aggressive in your marketing, you can go one circle beyond that to casual business partners and acquaintances.

Once you have the list, you'll need to craft an email. I highly recommend being transparent, requesting feedback and offering to return the favor. You should also use BCC and make yourself the recipient. No one wants to be on a huge, visible email list to folks they may not know (and get the resulting reply-all messages).

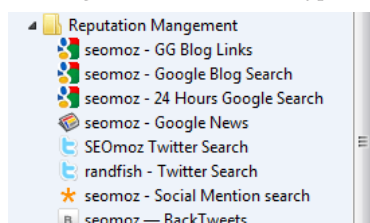
Step 10. Create Your Google Alerts

The Alerts Service from Google certainly isn't perfect, but it's free, ubiquitous, and can give you the heads up on some of the sites and pages that mention your brand or link to you in a timely fashion.

Unfortunately, the service sends through a lot of false positives — spam, scraper sites and low quality junk. It also tends to miss a lot of good, relevant mentions and links, which is the reason for the next recommendations on the list.

Step 11. Bookmark Brand Tracking Queries

In order to keep track of your progress and identify the sites and pages that mention or link to your new site, you'll want to set up a series of queries that can run on a regular basis (or automated if you've got a good system for grabbing the data and putting it into a tracking application). These include a number of searches at Google, Twitter and Backtype:



The queries should use your brand name in combination with specific searches.

You can add more to this list if you find them valuable/worthwhile, but these basics should take you most of the way on knowing where your site has been mentioned or referenced on the web.

Step 12. Make Email Signup/Subscription Available

Capturing the email addresses of your potential customers/audience can be a huge win for the influence you're able to wield later to promote new content, products or offerings. Before you launch, you'll want to carefully consider how and where you can offer something in exchange for permission to build an email list.

One of the most common ways to build good lists is to offer whitepaper, e-book, video or other exclusive content piece for download/access to those who enter an email address. You can also collect emails from comment registration (which tend to be lower overall quality), through an email newsletter subscription offering (which tend to be very high quality) or via a straight RSS subscription (but you'll need to self-manage if you want to have full access to those emails). Services like MailChimp, ExactTarget, Constant Contact and iContact are all options for this type of list building and management.

Step 13. Create Your Site/Brand's Social Accounts

Social media has become popular and powerful enough that any new site should be taking advantage of it. At a minimum, I'd recommend creating accounts on the following networks:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Google Profiles
- YouTube (if you have or will have any video content)
- Flickr (if you have any graphics or images content)

And if you have more time or energy to devote, I'd also invest in these:

- Quora
- Slideshare (if you have any presentations)
- Scribd (if you have any document content)
- StumbleUpon
- Reddit
- Any industry specific social portals (e.g. in software this might include places like StackOverflow, Github and Hacker News)

Setting up these accounts diligently is important, but don't just re-use the same short bio or snippet over and over. Spend the time to flesh out the profiles with comprehensive information and interact/network with peers and those with similar interests to help build up reputation on the site. The effort is worth the reward — empty, unloved social accounts do virtually nothing, but active ones can drive traffic, citations, awareness and value.

By the way, depending on the size and structure of your site, you may also want to consider creating a Facebook Fan Page, a LinkedIn Company Page and profiles on company tracking sites like Crunchbase, BusinessWeek and the Google Local Business Center.

Step 14. Connect Your Social Accounts

If you've just set up your social account, you've likely added your new site as a reference point already, but if not, you should take the time to visit your various social profiles and make sure they link back to the site you're launching.

Not all of these links will provide direct SEO value (as many of them are "nofollowed"), but the references and clicks you earn from those investigating your profiles based on your participation may prove invaluable. It's also a great way to leverage your existing branding and participation to help the traffic of your new site.

Step 15. Form a List of Target Press, Blogger and Industry People for Outreach

Depending on your niche, you may have traditional media outlets, bloggers, industry luminaries, academics, Twitter personalities, powerful offline sources or others that could provide your new site with visibility and value. Don't just hope that these folks find you – create a targeted list of the sites, accounts and individuals you want to connect with and form a strategy to reach the low hanging fruit first.

The list should include as much contact information as you can gather about each target – including Twitter account name, email (if you can find it), and even a physical mailing address. You can leverage all of these to reach out to these folks at launch (or have your PR company do it if you have one). If you tell the right story and have a compelling site, chances are good you'll get at least a few of your targets to help promote, or at the least visit, and be aware of you.

Step 16. Build a List of Keywords to Target in Search Engines

This is SEO basics 101, but every new site should keep in mind that search engines get lots of queries for virtually everything under the sun. If there are keywords and phrases you know you want to rank for, these should be in a list that you can measure and work toward. Chances are that at launch, you won't even be targeting many of these searches with specific pages, but if you build the list now, you'll have the goal to create these pages and work on ranking for those terms.

As you're doing this, don't just choose the highest traffic keywords possible – go for those that are balanced; moderate to high in volume, highly relevant in terms of what the searcher wants vs. what your page/site offers and relatively low in difficulty.

Step 17. Set Targets for the Next 12 Months

Without goals and targets, there's no way to know whether you're meeting, beating or failing expectations. Every endeavor, from running a marathon to cooking a meal to building a company or just launching a personal blog, will fail if there aren't clear expectations set at the start. If you're relatively small and just starting out, I'd set goals for the following metrics:

- Average weekly visits (via analytics)
- Average page views (via analytics)
- Number of new posts/pages/content pieces produced per month
- Number of target contacts (from item #15) that you've reached
- Social media metrics (depending on your heaviest use platform, e.g. number of Twitter followers if you're a heavy Tweeter)
- Any of the key items from #8 on this list (your KPI dashboard)

And each of these should have 3, 6 and 12 month targets. Don't be too aggressive as you'll find yourself discouraged or, worse, not taking your own targets seriously. Likewise, don't cut yourself short by setting goals that you can easily achieve – stretch at least a little.

Every 3-6 months, you should re-evaluate these and create new goals, possibly adding new metrics if you've taken new paths (RSS subscribers, views of your videos, emails collected, etc.)

Step 18. Plug in the SEOmoz Web App

I know this one's a bit self-serving, but I'd like to think I'd add it here even if it wasn't my company (I recently set up my own personal blog and found the crawling, rank tracking and new GA integration features pretty awesome for monitoring the growth of a new site).

The SEOmoz Web App has a number of cool tracking and monitoring features as well as recommendations for optimizing pages targeting keywords that make it valuable for new sites that are launching. The crawl system can serve to help with #3 on this list at the outset, but ongoing, it continues to crawl pages and show you your site's growth, any errors or missed opportunities. Tracking rankings can let you follow progress against item #16, even if that progress is moving from ranking in the 40s to the 20s (where very little search traffic will be coming in, even if you're making progress). And the new GA integration features show the quantity of pages, keywords and visits from search engines to track progress from an SEO standpoint.

Using this list, you should be able to set up a new site for launch and feel confident that your marketing and metrics priorities are in place. ■

Rand Fishkin is the CEO & Co-Founder of SEOmoz, a leader in the field of SEO software. He co-authored the *Art of SEO* from O'Reilly Media and was named on the 40 Under 40 List and 30 Best Young Tech Entrepreneurs Under 30. Rand has been written about in *The Seattle Times*, *Newsweek* and the *NY Times*, among others, as well as keynoted conferences on search around the world. He's particularly passionate about the SEOmoz blog, read by tens of thousands of search professionals each day.

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How I Pitched TechCrunch

And 13 Ways To Get Press When You Launch Your Startup

By JASON L. BAPTISTE

A LOT OF ENTREPRENEURS ask me how I got on TechCrunch with PadPressed, so I included the exact email I used to pitch at the end of the article with some notes.

Tell A Story

The goal of a journalist and blogger is to engage readers and get more views/subscribers. Something boring certainly won't entertain the readers, so why would they write about it? Journalists are also in a position of power. They have hundreds of startups pitching them everyday and vying for attention, so you need to stand out of the crowd. The best way to do this is to tell a story that will transfer from (a) your mouth to (b) the journalist's keyboard to (c) the reader's eyes. If you can tell a story that intrigues and grabs people, journalists are far more likely to write about you, as it will drive adoption of their product.

Be Prepared Technically

Things spread fast in this day and age. Even if you're not actively pitching, once you're out in the wild, anything can happen. Articles can't be re-written and you only have one shot at first, so make sure your app can leave a good impression. Around the time of launch, allocate more resources than normal in terms of hardware. This is so much easier to do now vs. five years ago due to Rackspace and Amazon. Also be prepared the second you give the story to someone as embargoes will most likely be broken in this day and age. You don't want major press coverage to give a negative impact to users.

Segment Your List

You need to segment your press list depending on the exact angle and topic of the publication. For example, with PadPressed, we're approaching all the following segments of publications:

- Traditional tech blogs.
- Well known bloggers who could use the tech.
- WordPress publications/blogs.
- Apple/iPad focused blogs.
- Media/publishing trade specific.
- Traditional media looking for iPad stories.

You also need to adapt the story you tell and the pitch according to the outlet you're pursuing. A WordPress blog should be approached much differently than a traditional media publication, like the Miami Herald or San Jose Mercury News. It's the same way pitching different companies and departments on a sale vary.

Give A Taste Of The Future

So when we pitched TechCrunch, we didn't pitch it as a WordPress plugin company. That's just not big news and though it's a very cool, it doesn't provide excitement. We gave a taste of the future of being available to All CMS's, a hosted platform, and helping pave the way for the future of media via tablet publishing. Don't talk too much about the future since you're not there yet, but give a glimpse into it. It also makes setting up future stories a whole lot easier. Once you reach those milestones, it gives the journalist something to refer back to and segue into the next article.

Be Brief

Keep your pitches short and make sure the basics are visible at a first glance of a Gmail subject line. Bloggers get way too many pitches on a daily basis and they need to get the gist of what you're trying to do almost immediately. If they can't get it in a few sentences, how are their readers ever going to understand what the product does?

Give All Links To Detailed Resources

Not being contradictory here, but complimentary. Keep the actual pitch email very short and to the point with a call to action. For more detailed information, provide a link inside the email and make it apparent. i.e. not thrown as a random obscure link.

Founders > PR Firm

It's always better to have founders pitch a product than a PR firm. Yes, at some point, you may have a corporate communication department, but for the most part, you are a small company whether or not you have a track record. Journalists also get a bit of an ego stroke when they deal directly with a founder (in a good way). It means a lot to them when an actual founder reaches out and takes the time to answer questions and deliver a pitch.

Give Direct Contact Info And Be Quick

Most stories will go from pitch to print fairly fast in online media. Traditional print takes a bit longer, but even then, it can happen fast. When a journalist is on a deadline, they need to get the story done on time. If you can't deliver fast enough, then you're cut out. Give your direct contact info and during the launch period, make sure you are always around to answer questions. You should also give priority to whatever they need to get the article out – screenshots, giveaways, further facts, etc.

Ride A Wave

The best way to get press attention is to ride the wave of an already big trend being talked about. In some cases, you get an article solely featuring you or you may be part of a larger article on the topic. This often happens with iPad and iPhone apps or the trend of cloud computing. When I launched my first project to the press, we specifically aimed it at eBay raising their fees. The Associated Press picked up on it, resulting in coverage in USA Today.

Try To Make A Connection Beforehand

If you're in the tech sector, especially in Silicon Valley, odds are you spend a good amount of time at events and conferences. Bloggers/journalists get paid to go to these events and are often there as well. Don't go into a full on pitch, since you're probably not ready for press coverage. Do try to make a personal connection beforehand just so the intro is warm when you are finally making a pitch.

Exclusives Can Help But Are Tricky

TechCrunch and other blogs often like to get exclusives, but it also hurts your chances with other blogs. Certain launches have certain goals. Is it to reach a specific audience? Is it to have the widest distribution and buzz? Is it to cause potential partners/acquirers to jump? Exclusives are like the super power up that you can only use once per level in a video game to kill a specific boss or opponent. Make sure you use it for the right purpose and at the right time.

Don't Copy/Paste

For the love of God, do not mail/merge or copy/paste a pitch to a journalist. Yes, you can re-use some parts of the pitch such as what you do, but keep things at a personal level. You may have to type 100 emails, 50% of which don't even get a response. That's called having to hustle. You would think it's hard to tell if something is copy/paste, but a good journalist can see right through it. No personalization, vague statements, etc.

Follow Up

First off, don't pester journalists if they don't want to cover you. It's nothing personal and everyone makes bad judgment calls. There's just not enough time to properly cover all the startups. If they do show interest, make sure you're on top of the ball. If they forget to follow up, make sure you get them the info they need and get the article to press. Getting a piece of press coverage is a lot like making a sale. Not following up on a warm sales lead is foolish and so is the same with a journalist.

Offer Something To Readers

If you look at many of the successful launches on TechCrunch, they often offer some non-monetary giveaway, usually in the form of early invites to the service or a limited number of free premium accounts. This isn't bribing – this is adding utility to the readers of the publication. One goal of a writer is to provide utility to their readers. By offering access to an app that is hard to come by elsewhere, the story certainly provides utility.

Stunts Can Be The Firestarter

Stunts aren't a sustainable way to do press, but they can certainly get the momentum going for a company. One of the most famous examples to this day is Half.com renaming Halfway, Oregon to Half.com. Airbnb happened to do the same thing by selling cereal during the presidential elections of 2008 (Obama O's and Cap'n McCains). You need to find a way to rise above the crowd and be a proverbial Purple Cow. Once you have the spotlight on you with massive attention it makes it a lot easier to get attention in the future for more mundane things such as product launches.

Leverage Your Contacts

Odds are someone you know, knows someone at a press outlet and can give you an endorsement. Being backed by the right angel or VC can be insanely useful as well. Y Combinator companies are able to get tons of press due to the sheer network and validation of being part of Y Combinator. Doing partnerships with other companies is also another way to leverage your contacts and network. By doing a partnership with an already recognizable brand, you increase the likelihood that a press outlet will take a liking to your pitch.

Example PR Pitch Email To TechCrunch

This is the exact email I sent to TechCrunch when we launched. Nothing was omitted, including my personal info. Feel free to say hi :)

Subject: Exclusive for TC: Launching Padpressed- make any blog feel like a native iPad app

Hey Mike,

Launching PadPressed tomorrow at noon EST and TC gets free reign on an exclusive before then. PadPressed makes any blog look and behave like a native iPad app. We're talking accelerometer aware column resizing, swipe to advance articles, touch navigation, home screen icon support, and more. We've built some pretty cool tech to make this happen smoothly, and it works with your existing layout (iPad layout only activated when the blog is accessed from an iPad). Okay, I'll shut up now and you can check out the demo links/feature pages below, which are much more interesting than my pitch.

PS- Would also be happy to do giveaways to TC readers. Thanks again and feel free to reach out if you have anymore questions (skype, phone, etc. listed below).

Video Demo: <http://vimeo.com/13487300>

Live demo site (if you're on an iPad): jasonlbaptiste.com

Feature overviews: <http://padpressed.com/features>

My contact info: j@jasonlbaptiste.com , Phone: 772.801.1058,

Twitter: @jasonlbaptiste, Skype: jasonlbaptiste

-jlb

772.801.1058

You Should Check Out JasonLBaptiste.com

Some notes:

- Gave TC the exclusive due to the goal of getting a large reach and seeing if there was enough demand to further the project.
- Highlighted what it did in one sentence with key features following thereafter.
- Highlighted the tech behind it so it seemed special.
- Added in giveaways.
- Most important part: direct links to the exact resources they would need, including my phone number. Mike emailed back soon thereafter and Alexia called an hour after. The article went from pitch to being live in < 5 hours.
- Update: I added in the subject I used. I literally spent close to an hour on it, email testing it. I would send myself emails using the subject line to see how it would appear.

All of the above are important, but the one that will carry over to other aspects of your startup happens to be – “Tell A Story.” If your startup can tell a story, then you are far ahead of the curve. ■

Jason L. Baptiste is the CEO/Co-Founder of OnSwipe, a venture-backed startup, which provides a platform for insanely easy publishing on touch enabled devices. He is also the author of a forthcoming book from the Portfolio imprint of Penguin publishing and the co-author of OnStartups.com, a popular blog and community for entrepreneurship with over 200,000 monthly unique readers. In his spare time Jason is an advisor of startups and an avid runner.

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On Communities and Content

By DES TRAYNOR

COMMUNITY DRIVEN WEB applications are easy to build, but very hard to grow. I know this because I've worked on many over the years. Countless times, an RFP or email has arrived from a prospective client looking to build an application that's "just like Facebook, but for..." You know the type.

It can be anything from cricket fans to stamp collectors. A social network that serves people with a shared interest barely counts as a startup idea at this stage. Naïvely, a designer or developer starts one of these projects by gathering a feature set. How will our users communicate with each other? Will there be private communication too? Can they share details? What services will they want to integrate with? How can we get them connected as quickly as possible? Should they follow some users by default? Will we use OAuth to find their Twitter friends? The list goes on.

Silent Assumptions

There are too many silent assumptions in those questions and this is usually why the application or startup struggles. By starting, say, a social network for train-spotters, you're assuming the following:

- You have a clear way to attract a significant percentage of the target market (more significant than, say, a few Twitter followers).
- Train-spotters actually want to talk to each other.
- They don't already do so or that you can provide a better experience than their current solution (forums, Ning group, Facebook page, Google group, email, weekly meetings in person, etc).

Even when these assumptions are true, you still face the biggest challenge. Many people consume content. Only a minority actually produce it. I heard this referred to as the 90-9-1 rule lately, though it's been true for many years. Here are some quick examples:

- Only 6% of Amazon users have written one or more reviews.
- Just 5% of Twitter users account for more than 75% of Twitter activity.
- .0032% of Youtube page views result in a user adding content of any sort (comment, vote, or even a rating).

What these stats tell you is that you'll need a large crowd before you get worthwhile content from them. You know what they call a content driven site without any good content? A load of bollox. So, you need great content from the start.

“Make me rich, make me laugh, pique my interest or get me laid. Then maybe I’ll tell you which books I read.”

Starting With Content

Sticking with the theme of “Just Getting Started,” a trainspotting network wouldn’t start with user profiles because let’s face it, there are no users. It wouldn’t start with messaging, photos, videos, galleries, or even a “forgot your password” feature. There are no passwords, there are no people. It could start as a simple blog or flickr group. Step one would be “Attract a large number of potential users.” Without doubt the best way to do this is with good content. Content precedes design.

Only when you have a good audience should you start thinking about how best to serve it and turn it into a community. Unfortunately it’s very rare that we get emails saying, “Guys I’ve got over 2,000 people hitting my cricket site every week, commenting, emailing me, and I’d like to build a network to support this.”

No one joins an empty network just for the hell of it. UX designers might sign up to see if you’ve done any clever progress bar tricks. Graphic designers might take a look to see what textures are hot this year. Unfortunately, they’re not usually your audience. There may have been a time when people loved completing their website profile to make them sound quirky. My favorite film? Oh, it has to be *Lost in Translation*! I’ve been to Japan, ya know? Those days are gone.

If you have nothing to offer users other than blank input boxes and the promise that they too can have a row in your database, then you’re in trouble. You see, I don’t want to tell you which Michael Connolly books I’ve read because I already know. I don’t want to upload, crop, tilt and tint a profile photo; I’ve already got a mirror.

It comes down to this. Make me rich, make me laugh, pique my interest or get me laid. Then maybe I’ll tell you which books I read. ■

Des Traynor is the User Experience Lead at Contrast. In this role he works primarily with startups helping them define a product strategy, identify their customers and design solutions to attract and delight them. Des regularly writes his thoughts about experience design and the business of web applications on the Contrast blog [www.contrast.ie/blog] and can be found on twitter as @destraynor.

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Everything You Already Know About SEO

By DAVID KADAVY

THE BASICS OF SEO are stupidly simple; and it seems like everyone knows — or at least pretends to know — those basics. Still, I get asked about SEO pretty often. I don't consider myself an expert, but I'll share what I know and hopefully it will help some people.

I'll be talking Google-centrally because Google will likely account for the vast majority of your inbound search traffic. Additionally, if you rank high on Google, you will probably do pretty well on other search engines anyway.

I've been writing with SEO in mind and using best practices as best as I can on kadavy.net for over 6 years now, and my search traffic has steadily increased.

Why SEO is Important?

SEO is the “location, location, location” of doing business on the web. If you have a bicycle shop on a busy street, you're going to sell some bikes. It doesn't matter how high your prices are or how rude your employees are — you are going to sell some bikes. Likewise, if you rank high on Google for “bicycles,” you are going to sell a lot of bikes because a lot of people search for “bicycles.” That is your foot traffic.

I don't want to make the mistake of assuming that everyone knows just what it means to rank high on a keyphrase. If you are selling a product or service, ranking high on keyphrases related to that product or service is essentially free money. If you rank first on Google for “bicycles,” (which is darn near impossible, by the way) you will get a huge number of visitors on your site looking for bicycles and it will cost you nothing. This is called “organic” traffic and it's what SEO builds for you.

But some businesses pay big bucks for such traffic by buying Google's AdWords. In doing so, their site shows up next to Google's organic search results and they pay whenever someone clicks through to their site. For “bicycles,” those businesses pay an average of 71 cents per click. For “cambria bicycle” they pay an average of \$12.55.

Paying for traffic like this can be profitable if the campaigns — and conversion within your site — are managed carefully; but obviously free traffic is ideal and translates to big sales. This is why SEO is important.

Choosing the Right Keywords

Before you make sure you're using SEO best practices, it's helpful to have some idea of what keywords, or keyphrases, you would like to rank high for. However, just because you pick a descriptive keyphrase, it doesn't mean people will find you. It has to be a keyphrase they are actually searching for. I kick ass on “lump in mouth” because that's what people search for when they have a mucocele. Most people don't search for “mucocele” because they don't even know what one is — until they get a lump in their mouth and search for it.

Ideally, each page on your site should compete well on a couple of keyphrases that are descriptive of the content on your site, have reasonable search volume, and on which you stand some chance of competing.

You can find out the volume of keyphrases by using the Google Keyword Tool. If you're just starting a site where you sell bicycles, it would be nice to compete well on the keyword “bicycles,” which has a monthly search volume of over 7 million searches per month — but you don't stand a chance as a new site. If your site is for a bicycle shop in Chicago, then you'd probably have better luck competing on “bike shop in chicago,”

“The truth is — nobody except little robots at Google know just how a site ranks higher than another.”

which has a measly 390 searches. Once you dominate that keyphrase, then you can start trying to compete on “chicago bicycle shop,” which has 1,300 searches.

A good place to start to find keyword opportunities from your site is your existing data. If you don’t already have a stats package set up on your site, you should. Google Analytics is great and it’s free. If you happen to already have Google Analytics installed, you can find the keywords that visitors are using to get to your site under Traffic Sources > Keywords. Here you can see what keywords are bringing in the most traffic, and if you’ve set up e-commerce or marketing (such as lead-generation) goals, you can see what keywords are actually converting into business. You are likely to find a few keywords you rank pretty highly in that you didn’t expect. It’s a good idea to aim to build upon this success by targeting these keywords further or targeting related keyphrases. Look for synonyms that you may not already be using (bump ~ lump, mouth ~ lip), and update your content accordingly.

Ranking Highly for Your Target Keywords/Keyphrases

There are endless complex theories on just how a site ranks high on search engines. Some of those theories have no basis at all. The truth is — nobody except little robots at Google know just how a site ranks higher than another. What we do know is that 1) the content of a page, and how it is coded, and 2) the authority of other pages that link to a page — especially for the topic in question — are the most powerful dictators of how well a page ranks on search engines.

Content and Coding

The content of a page — meaning the words within that page — have a huge impact on how well a page ranks for given keywords. If your target keywords don’t appear on your page, you will have a hard time getting high ranking for that keyword. It’s not impossible, but I’ll get to that later. Relevant content has to be within your page — as code (meaning not as an image) — for search engines’ crawlers (the robots that read your pages) to read that content, and rank you for the appropriate keywords. This is a strong reason why Flash websites do poorly on search engines, and former print designers that just slice up a design

on a WYSIWYG program make poorly-performing websites: the real content gets locked away, where crawlers can’t access it.

It’s also essential to use good coding practices in building your pages. There are standards for writing HTML content and they help rank chunks of content within a page in order of importance. This helps search engines know the difference between the important as well as less important information on a page, and thus rank that page for various keywords.

Following is a run-down of important content-based factors that dictate how your pages rank on search engines.

1 URL

Before a search engines’ robot can read the HTML on your page, it will read the URL at which that page resides. The content of this URL has pretty heavy influence on how that page ranks on search engines. So, if my bike shop is at *bikeshopinchicago.com*, it will rank very high on “bike shop in chicago.” If I have a page for Cambria Bicycles, I may want to put it at *bikeshopinchicago.com/cambria-bicycles*. Note that you shouldn’t automatically pick your top keyphrase to be the domain that you purchase because branding and planning for the

future expansion of your business are both important. You should have search engine (and human) friendly URLs that are in plain English instead of *example.com/?p=34*.

② Title Tag

The Title Tag of a web page is the strongest piece of information indicating what a page is about. Many businesses make the mistake of naming this page “Home Page” or ignoring it altogether (this is why there are so many pages on the web called “Welcome to Adobe GoLive...”). For any given page on your site, your Title Tag should contain the exact keyphrases that you want to rank high for. If it is the home page — or if your business name contains your target keyphrases — you could then follow that with your site’s name. So, if you’re business is David’s Bike Shop, your title should be “Bike Shop in Chicago — David’s Bike Shop.”

③ Meta Tags

The meta tags also contain some information that search engines give strong authority to when evaluating a page. There are several different meta tags, but the one that you should concern yourself with is the “description” meta tag. This is a very short (around 200 characters) description of what the page contains, and search engines not only use its content to evaluate what a page is about, but also to display to users when your page is listed in search results.

④ Headers

Headers within your HTML document are ranked in order of importance: H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6. There should only be one H1 and this should probably be used for the actual title of your page (which may or may not be the same as your title tag). Some people like to use the H1 for their logo and link to their home page — it depends on how narrow of a focus your site has. So, if you have a long document, full of text, it’s a good idea to break it up a bit by inserting some useful headers that also happen to contain some of your target keywords.

⑤ Content — EM, STRONG, IMG

Finally, you have the actual content of your page, which is hopefully helpful, interesting, and — incidentally — contains your target keyphrases. In addition to your target keywords, your content will probably bring in visitors on a number of “long tail” keyphrases that just happen to show up naturally within your great content.

Within your content, you will hopefully have some images, since they are useful for users. Much like the URL of your page is important to search engines, the file name of your images is also important and should be descriptive. So, if you have a JPEG of a mountain bike, your image should be called *mountain-bike.jpg* — or, even better — include the color and brand: *mountain-bike-schwinn-blue.jpg*. The “alt” attribute of your IMG tag should also be descriptive, so “blue schwinn mountain bike” would do. Don’t forget, you can end up with a large amount of traffic from Google Image Search if you use descriptive alt attributes.

The italic and bold HTML tags (EM, and STRONG, respectively) also hold higher authority in an HTML document than your plain content (which sits inside of P tags). When you italicize or bold words within your content, it lets search engine crawlers know that those words are important and relevant to the point of the page in question, so it’s a good idea to do a little of this — provided it supports the experience for your human users.

⑥ Authority of Linking Pages

Ranking high on Google is ultimately all about the authority of your page or site on the keywords in question. This concept of authority also applies generally to your site just being an authoritative site. Google uses a ranking called “PageRank” to measure how much authority a given page has on a scale of 1-10. There is a complex algorithm behind PageRank that you shouldn’t concern yourself with, but Google does provide a Firefox plugin called Google Toolbar, which shows what the PageRank of a page supposedly is. 7 is considered a very high PageRank. NYT.com, for instance, is a PR 9. Kadavy.net’s home page is a 4, which is considered to be decent for a personal blog.

There are a number of factors that go into determining a given page’s PageRank. While the actual algorithm is an ever-changing secret, here are a few factors that are widely accepted to be a part of the algorithm:

- **Age of domain:** how long has the domain been registered?
- **Authority (or PageRank) of pages that link to the page from other domains.**
- **Date of expiration of domain:** is the domain expiring soon, or has the owner registered it a couple years into the future? This is in one of Google’s patent filings.

⑦ Content of Linking Pages and Anchor Text of Link

To put it very simply, when other pages on a given topic link to your page of a related topic, search engines generally will rank you higher on that topic. If the PageRank of the page linking to your page is particularly high, Google will rank you higher for that.

Also important is the actual “anchor text” — or the content between A tags — of the link that links to your page. So, a link that says “Bike Shop in Chicago” will do more to rank “David’s Bike Shop” higher for searches for “bike shop in chicago” than if the anchor text says “David’s Bike Shop.” I’d be remiss to not mention that people once did this on a mass scale before (known as a Google bomb), such that the top hit on Google for “miserable failure” was once the Wikipedia page for George W. Bush. Such a Google bomb was implemented by tons of people doing this: miserable failure.

The A tag also has a couple of attributes, such as the “title” attribute, which can have descriptive text applied to it. I haven’t seen anything to make me think that using this title attribute helps with SEO, but it certainly wouldn’t hurt. The rel attribute can have a value of “nofollow,” which tells Google’s crawlers not to follow the link, and therefore do not give the page any extra authority based on the link. Most blogs give all links in comments a rel=“nofollow” attribute to discourage SEO-minded spammers from exploiting the comment functionality.

8 Everything in Moderation

So, if you took all of this knowledge literally, you might stuff all of your pages full of keywords to the point that they didn't make any sense, and contact site owners all over the web to purchase links and stuff all of your pages full of links — full of your keywords — to other pages. You may even obscure these links by making them the same color as your background or hiding them with CSS.

Using some of these tactics in extreme moderation may even help you a little bit, but anything more than that will be heavily frowned upon by Google. They supposedly take very sophisticated measures to detect use of these tactics and will downgrade a site for doing so, which is something you do not want to experience (think immediate loss of tons of business). There are tons of shady tactics for getting links. As a general rule of thumb: if it feels like its deceiving someone, Google probably has some way to detect it, and won't like it.

9 Getting the Content / Getting the Links

Having a site full of relevant keywords, and being linked to by sites with relevant keywords, is a means to an end, not an end itself. You achieve this by using good coding practices, generating content, and generating useful and compelling content that others want to link to.

Here are a few legit ways — that Google doesn't frown upon — to get content and links to your site:

- **Have a blog.** To rank high on keywords, it's pretty much a must to have useful content rich with your target keywords that is updated on a regular basis. A blog is the best way to have these attributes. Unfortunately, Google still ranks some pretty shitty content really high, so I'd say that having some not-so-well-written content is better than having none at all. Hopefully this will change when they improve or someone gets around to building a better search engine.
- **Directories.** DMOZ is the highest authority directory, and is free — but it's nearly impossible to get into. There are plenty of paid directories out there, but the only ones I know of that are definitely high-authority are Yahoo! Directory and Business.com. Be wary of other directories or consult a professional. Then, still be wary.
- **Write guest posts on other sites.** Find a high-authority site that your target audience reads and pitch a guest post to the author. They'll get great content and you'll get links along with exposure to their audience. Ramit wrote a fantastic article on writing and pitching guest posts.
- **Write link bait.** The best way to get lots of links is to write content that other people will link to, share, and talk about. A really thorough, information-rich how-to (like this post) is a good example, but writing posts that are very controversial works well, too (unfortunately). Such posts then get shared on social news sites such as Digg.com, and on Facebook and Twitter. Do lots of research and make some pretty graphs and your chances of getting lots of links increases again.
- **Find your audience.** When you've written really great, useful, and interesting content, get as many people in your target audience to see it as you can. Submit to a social news site in a category where those people hang out or buy traffic in your target category on Stumbleupon (5 cents per visit, with a chance of unlimited free traffic). Another good tactic is to find an already popular post on your target topic, find other sites that have linked to it, and pitch to the authors of those sites.

See?

You already knew all of this stuff about SEO, but applying this knowledge is all you need to be well on your way to having high search engine ranking and money streaming into your business. There are probably some very reputable SEO firms out there who are great at applying this knowledge, and more. However, be wary because there is so much mystery behind SEO; the field is rife with consultants that overcharge and use tactics that will either only work in the short-term or will get your site downgraded. ■

David Kadavy is a freelance Designer, and President of Kadavy, Inc. Though based in Chicago, his clients include the stars of Silicon Valley, such as oDesk, UserVoice, and PBworks.

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If You Build It, They Won't Come, Unless...

By JASON COHEN

ASK A TECHNICAL founder about his startup and he'll proudly describe his stunning software — simple, compelling, useful, fun. Then he'll describe his cutting-edge platform — cloud-based, scalable, distributed version control, continuous integration, one-click deploy. Maybe you'll even get a wobbly demo.

"Great," I always exclaim, sharing the thrill of modern software development, "so how will people find out about this brilliant website?"

Four uncomfortable seconds later, a smile breaks across the founder's face.

Here it comes, I think, there is a strategy after all!

Except the "strategy" is a tirade of drivel I've heard so many times I can lip-sync as the words spew out the founder's mouth:

- "We're going to A/B-test AdWords campaigns until we discover our hook."
- "We're going to A/B-test our landing pages until the right message appears."
- "We're better than everyone else at SEO."
- "A friend of mine knows how to get popular on Twitter."

- "We're going to get reviews on blogs."
- "We're going to start with our own network and grow it from there."
- "We're going to use an affiliate program so our customers sell it for us."
- "We're putting a 'Retweet' button inside the product to encourage viral growth."

The obvious problem is that every new startup on Earth says exactly these things. Nowadays the "strategy" above sounds the same as:

- "We'll have a website so people can read about us."
- "We'll have an email address so people can communicate with us without picking up the phone."

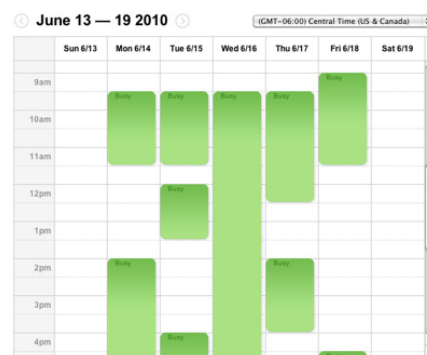
Yes, you're going to do those things, but since millions of other people are doing that too, you're still invisible. Visibility-fail. Anyone-gives-a-crap-fail.

OK, so what can you do to rise above the cacophony that is the Internet? Here come a few ideas.

Infection built-in, not bolt-on

WhenBusy [whenbusy.com] is a bootstrapped startup that lets people schedule meetings with you in currently-available time-slots without you having to share

your calendar (disclosure: I'm an advisor). For example, here's what the founder's (Josh Baer) availability looks like:



Instead of trading emails with lists of available time-slots, Josh just sends the link to this page and the other person uses the product to schedule a meeting. This is the viral step: Having trialed the tool, the stranger might use it herself, then more people find out about it and so forth.

Note that at no point did I say "a button lets people 'like' this on Facebook." I know of no companies who have "gone viral" because of buttons. Buttons are good — why not use them? — but they don't make your product intrinsically viral like WhenBusy.

“The number one mistake founders make when trying to generate press is talking about what the company does rather than telling a compelling story.”

Which is OK — not all products need to be viral! But if it's not viral you still need a killer method of finding customers, and if it is supposed to be viral it better be encoded in the DNA of the application — not bolted on as an afterthought.

Frightening honesty

Balsamiq Mockups [balsamiq.com] is a ludicrously popular wire-framing tool. The software is good — don't get me wrong — but what sets Peldi (the founder) apart isn't prescient feature selection or bug-free releases, but instead his startling transparency. He published revenue figures even when they were still pathetic, he pledged loudly and eagerly to give away lots of free copies to non-profits, and he revealed all his (remarkably effective) marketing strategies even though it meant competitors would learn them too.

He didn't just have an “authentic voice;” he made public promises. That's compelling.

He didn't just “tell it like it is;” he gave up his marketing secrets and opened his company books. That's newsworthy.

This isn't merely “being human” and all that claptrap; it's almost too much

honesty, like when you ask someone how it's going and they tell you about a weird pustule on their middle toe that's been oozing since last Wednesday.

In a world where everyone and their brother is “joining the conversation” (oops, I use that phrase constantly!), you have to truly bare your soul if you want to compete on the transparency front. It's not for everyone and I'm not suggesting it ought to be, but there's no sense in half-assing it.

Making Oprah cry

The number one mistake founders make when trying to generate press is talking about what the company does rather than telling a compelling story.

Does Twitter get press when it helps Iranians fight an illegitimate government or when it creates a new internal IT process to increase up-time? Does Apple win the hearts (yes, hearts) of millions because of their obsession with design or because of their development APIs? Does 37signals have over three million users because their software is “better” than the competition or is it because they motivate designers and entrepreneurs through their writing and philosophy?

Without a powerful narrative, your chances of getting big press and enthusiastic users who spread the word for you approach zero as a limit.

It took me years to figure this out at Smart Bear. At first when someone asked what the Smart Bear tool suite was, I would say:

Smart Bear makes data-mining tools for version control systems.

It's a description so esoteric that, although accurate, not even a hardcore geek would have any idea what it is, much less why it's useful.

Years later, when it was clear that code review software became our sole focus, I got better at describing it:

You know how Word has “track changes” where you can make modifications and comments and show them to someone else? We do that for software developers, integrating with their tools instead of Word and working within their standard practices.

Better, yes, and for a while I thought I nailed it, but still no press. Eventually (thanks to helpful journalists) I realized that I was still just describing what it is rather than why anyone cares. I left it up to the reader to figure out why she should get excited.

Eventually, I developed stories like the following, each tuned to a certain category of listener. Here's the one for the journalists:

It's always fun to tell a journalist like you that we enable software developers to review each other's code because your reaction is always: "Wait a minute, you're seriously telling me they don't do this already?" The idea of editing and review is so embedded in your industry you can't imagine life without it, and you're right! You know better than anyone how another set of eyeballs finds important problems.

Of course two heads are better than one, but developers traditionally work in isolation, mainly because there's a dearth of tools which help teams bridge the social gap of an ocean and integrate with incumbent tools while being lightweight enough to still be fun and relevant.

That's what we do: Bring the benefits of peer review to software development.

Now the reason for excitement is clear: We're transforming how software is created by applying the age-old techniques of peer review to an industry that needs it but where it's traditionally too hard to do. That's a story.

It took me five years to figure out (a) I needed a story and (b) what the story was. It's hard. But one story beats a pile of AdWords A/B tests.

Advertising → [transmogrification] → Revenue

Yeah, yeah, nowadays marketing is about "relationships" and "authority" and other things which cost time but not money. It's all I hear about anymore.

But don't be so quick to throw out the idea of spending money to make money. Advertising isn't dead; you can still buy eyeballs. I'm not talking about "triage" strategies like buying AdWords linking to a page of ads. I'm just pointing out that most companies on Earth don't depend on "joining the conversation" to acquire customers.

It sounds simple: The average cost of acquiring a customer is $\$C$ (advertising, sales, support, doing demos) and the lifetime revenue you get from that customer is $\$R$, so if $C < R$ you have a business. C can be driven down with cheaper ads, better lead quality, a more efficient conversion rate, and straightforward trials with minimal tech support.

Of course it's not that simple and many business plans I've seen (unintentionally) omit many of the true costs of acquisition. Read this great interview with Sean Ellis at VentureHacks for a great discussion of how to seek a repeatable, profitable model [hn.my/ellis1] where $C < R$, and then optimize and grow [hn.my/ellis2]. It's a little heavy on the "huge VC-style company" strategy for my style, but you'll come away with a strong perspective on how to build a machine that turns advertising dollars into (a greater number of) revenue dollars.

Celebrity Championship

I already beat you to death about how celebrity endorsement can serve as an untouchable competitive advantage and it's also an answer to how to burst out of the dull roar of Internet marketing.

Take me, for example. I'm no Seth Godin, but consider what I could do if I were a co-founder in a new software development tool company:

- I have personal relationships with the CEOs and other influencers at hundreds of software development companies. During ideation, they would brainstorm. During beta-testing, they would be guinea pigs. After release of v3.0 some would be ready to become paying customers.
- I have relationships with editors of nearly all software development publications (on-line and off); I've already published articles with them. Some would help vet our stories and some would publish our articles.
- I've bought ads in every major (and quite a few minor) software development websites, magazines, newsletters, conferences, and webinars. So when it's time to advertise, we'll come in with the right message for the audience and probably cut a deal.
- If you read this blog you're probably a software developer, so even just a few mentions here might be more powerful than \$10,000 in A/B tested Google AdWords.
- If we were trying to raise money, my previous success would not only get us the initial meetings but would be a significant bump in our chance of raising it.

While everyone else is mucking about with a new blog, blasting their LinkedIn network with pleading emails, and paying out the nose to test AdWord variants, we're years ahead in the marketing war. ■

Jason is the founder of three companies, all profitable and two exits. He blogs on startups and marketing at blog.ASmartBear.com.

“It condenses my Hacker News addiction into 40 pages.”

Matthew Butson
UI Designer, Simply Dope Design



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Landing Page Optimization Tips

Analysis of 50+ Sites to Find Out What Increases Sales and Conversions

By PARAS CHOPRA

LAST WEEK I offered free conversion rate optimization advice on a popular forum (known as Hacker News). Within a single day I got 50+ requests for help. It was definitely an enriching experience analyzing and dissecting all those websites and landing pages. As I was replying and providing my feedback to those 50+ sites, I started sensing a few common issues that affected conversion rates of all those pages. Without naming any specific URL or site, in this post I will detail where those sites lacked and what you can learn from my analysis to fix your homepage or landing page.

Four common issues with landing pages

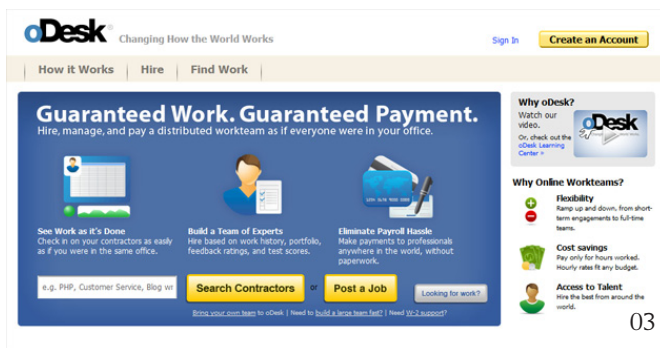
According to my analysis, one of these four issues (if not all) were the most common causes of poor conversion rates. As you go through the list of issues below, try to relate them to your landing page (or homepage). Here are the four most common issues that affect conversion rate and sales:

- Too much text (without any apparent order and layout).
- Headline that doesn't tell what your product or service does (or, in other words, tangential headline).
- Lack of a single prominent call-to-action (either there is none or there are too many).
- Lack of social proof or ROI proof (who uses the service and what are the benefits).

Let's analyze the issues one by one.



01



03

1. Example of a homepage with too much text.
2. Example of a balanced webpage (text + images).
3. Example of confusing headline: "Changing How the World Works".
4. Example of good headline: "Hire Online Workers to get the Job Done".

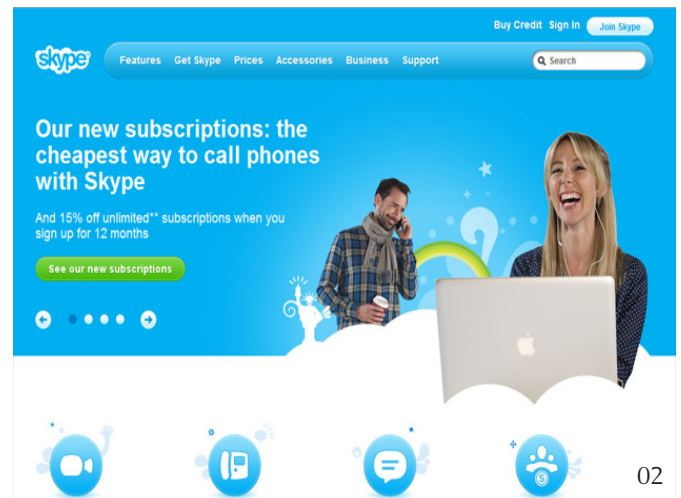
Issue #1: Too much text

I won't be surprised about lack of sales and conversions if your page announces "Welcome to..." followed by a bunch of paragraphs describing what the site is about. Nobody on the web has patience to read paragraph after paragraph about what you are offering.

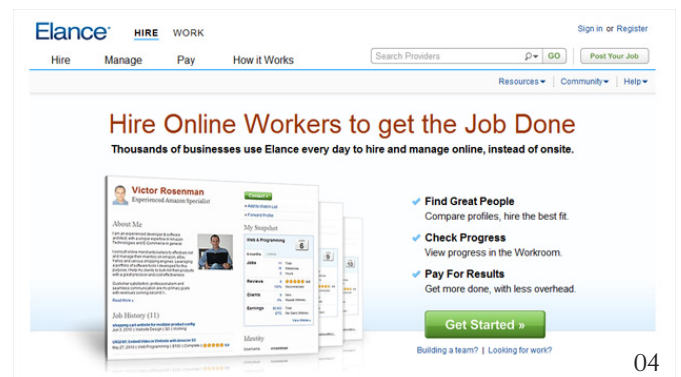
On the web, people scan for elements that catch their eye. And you get only the first few seconds to answer two most important questions: a) what you are offering and b) why they may need it.

So, what you need is a proper balance between graphics and text. Some examples of how you can improve your landing page (by replacing some text):

- Instead of extensive "How this works" (consisting of heaps of text), make a simple graphic detailing the process.
- Instead of writing "We make some of the best shoes in UK" followed by descriptions of different kinds of shoes you make, show pictures of shoes you make.
- Instead of trying to stuff every piece of information from your site on one page, concentrate on a single objective (and replace most of the text by images, graphics, etc. – all neatly arranged).



02

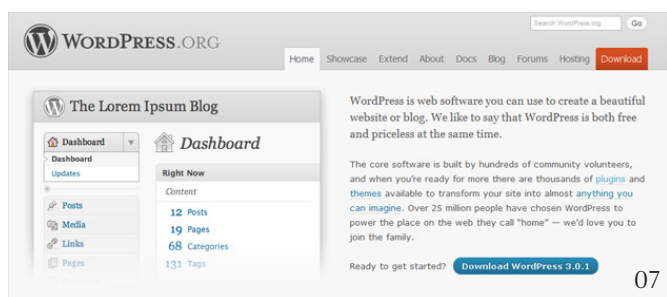


04

Hiring a professional web designer will certainly help if you lack design skills. On a similar note, visually appealing pages are always seen as more credible than crudely designed pages. So, an investment in a good design will go a long way in helping your sales and conversions.

Issue #2: Lack of a descriptive headline

As I hinted in the section above, visitors on your page are impatient. Within the first 5 seconds, they want to know what your service does or you have lost a chance with him. As someone wise said: "Browser back button is your biggest enemy" (if you find the source of this quotation, please leave a comment). Never think that a visitor is going to spend minutes reading through all the text on your page and then make his best guess of what you are offering. Instead, you should make the job easy for him. Have a big, bold descriptive headline as the first thing he should see.



5. Example of too many calls-to-action: Paradox of choice on a landing page. Out of three call-to-action buttons, which option is best to choose?
6. Example of no social proof: Why should I bother with twhirl?
7. Example of single, prominent call-to-action: "Download WordPress".
8. Example of social proof: we know Facebook, LA Times, etc. use Hootsuite. So it must be good, right?

A descriptive headline also serves another important purpose: it sticks in the visitor's brain as long as he stays on your website. Contrast this to the scenario where there is no helpful headline, which a visitor can fall back on if your page gets too confusing (usually happens because we want to write about every feature our site offers). Moreover, your visitor is usually distracted. Imagine a busy-beaver visitor chatting with friends on IM, doing a status update on Facebook/Twitter and on a call with his boss, all at once. Now imagine he stumbles on your website. Do you expect him to really understand what your site does without having a descriptive headline?

My advice is to avoid the following kinds of headlines:

- **No-headline:** no matter how bad it is, you should definitely have a headline of some kind.
- **Visionary headline:** avoid headlines such as "Welcome to the future of social media marketing." Such headlines are usually vague and convey no information at all. And if you think it may excite visitors, read the last section of this article about social proof.
- **All focus on benefits:** in the first version of Visual Website Optimizer homepage, we had a headline "Magical tool to convert visitors into customers." While that headline tells about the benefits of the tool, it doesn't talk about what the tool really is. So, we changed the headline to "World's easiest A/B testing tool" and believe it is much better. (Can you come up with an even better one?)

In a nutshell, headlines should be short, concise and descriptive.

Issue #3: Lack of a single prominent call-to-action

Call-to-action is a button or link that asks visitor to take a specific action. It may be a link to your signup form, plans and pricing page or the feature tour page. There are two specific issues related to call-to-action: a) either some sites don't have any call to action button or b) some sites have too many call-to-action buttons. Once the visitor arrives on your page, thinks that you are credible (from your design), reads the descriptive headline and is finally convinced to spend some time on your site, what's the next page you want him to see? That decision should not be left up to the visitor because only you know (and not him) which is the most relevant page that the visitor should be viewing next.

If you don't have a single call-to-action or have far too many calls-to-action, the visitor is likely to get confused on what to do next (since all links from your landing page/homepage seem to be of equal importance). Even if you have two prominent buttons (e.g. one for Learn More and another for the signup), try reducing it to one button. There is even a book titled: "Don't make me think!" and that's precisely the point I'm trying to make here. Don't force your visitor to make a choice. By placing relevant call-to-action buttons on different pages of your site, you should gently guide him to the final goal (be it a signup, purchase, download, etc.).

Issue #4: Lack of social proof or ROI proof

So you make bold claims on your site. Of course, you think you are the "Best Twitter client ever." Unfortunately, making claims is easy. Any site can claim to be the "best" or "revolutionary" because those words are abstract. You may think your product is the best, but if you are the only one in this world with that viewpoint, you are not going to convince anyone to try it out.

Humans crave for social proof. They want to know who else is using this thing and how beneficial it was for them. Even if you design the most beautiful landing page but fail to include any social proof, your sales and conversions are going to suffer. Social proof can be shown in terms of testimonials, company logos, customer photos or case studies.

It is understandable that if your site is just getting started, it may be hard to get any social proof because you may not have any customers. In that case, you need to have a convincing ROI proof on your site. I'm not just talking about justifying investment of money, but you also need to convince a visitor to invest time trying out your service or product. People crave for statistics and validation. You can perhaps do a small study or research on the Internet to come up with metrics of some kind highlighting the usefulness of your service. For example, if you have a new social media monitoring service: 95% of business are talked about on the Internet, use MyShinyNewTool to talk to those invisible customers.

Another key point with regards to social proof is human emotions. People respond to concrete representations (say, a customer video testimonial) in a much engaging way as compared to an abstract fact (say, 50+ companies from Life Sciences and Biotechnology industry use our software). This is not to say that facts in your social proof don't work. They do. But you can always augment them with stories of individual customers and what your service did for them. Case studies, for instance, are a great way to do that).

Conclusion

To re-iterate, if you want to increase sales and conversions on your landing page or homepage, you need to concentrate on fixing or avoiding the following issues:

- Too-much text (without any apparent order and layout).
- Headline that doesn't tell what your product or service does (or, in other words, tangential headline).
- Lack of a single prominent call-to-action (either there is none or there are too many).
- Lack of social proof or ROI proof (who uses the service and what are the benefits). ■

Paras Chopra, based out of Delhi, India, is the founder of Visual Website Optimizer, an A/B testing tool to help increase website sales and conversions. You can follow him on twitter @paraschopra.

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