Tim Frick

Return on Engagement

Content, Strategy and Design Techniques for Digital Marketing

Focal Press

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A General Introduction

> *Too many companies separate design, development, copy-writing, support, and marketing into different silos. While specialization has its advantages, it also creates a situation where staffers see their own little world instead of the entire context*
>
> **—37 Signals, from their book *Getting Real***

Lines between the different disciplines mentioned in the above quote have blurred significantly over the past decade or so. Thanks to the rise of social media, web 2.0, blogs, wikis, forums, web apps, mobile apps, and about a thousand other creative and technical advancements, tools to collaborate, optimize, connect, communicate, market, and yes, engage are available to more people than ever.

So how can designers and developers think more like marketers to adapt to this changing environment? How can marketers expand their technical knowledge so everyone can speak the same language? How can businesses and customers build more meaningful relationships that will foster long-term, mutually beneficial relationships rather than dull, one-way, advertising-based broadcasting?

Authors and web designers Lance Loveday and Sandra Niehaus made a great statement on an industry in flux in their book *Web Design for ROI:* "Web designers are in a unique position to play the role of user advocate, but to do so credibly requires designers to understand business language and inform themselves about goals, strategy, and metrics."

Designers have been doing this in some way or other for years. After all, graphic design is *commercial art* at its very core and as such implies a certain level of business acumen. The past half-dozen years or so, however, have imparted countless new challenges that blur the lines between business goals, design standards, marketing objectives, and technology requirements.

I think the reverse is true as well. Although business strategists and marketers may not need to know how to create an iPhone app from scratch, they do need to understand emerging tools and technologies that will help them communicate better, reach more people, and build communities around their brand.

This book helps bridge that gap by offering a tangible set of guidelines, tools, and techniques to build relationships with the potential to drive targeted site traffic, build customer communities, and ultimately exceed business goals.

What's Included

This book is categorized into four sections:

1. *Strategy.* What to do before jumping in the pool.
2. *On-site techniques.* Increasing your site's marketing mojo.
3. *Off-site techniques.* Driving traffic from external sources.
4. *The Return.* Measuring results of your efforts.

Each section provides a comprehensive breakdown of available tools, techniques with which to use them, and contextual descriptions that answer the important questions of how, when, where, and, perhaps most important, *why* you might want to implement some of these things into your own production and marketing mix.

Real-world case studies profiling people and companies who have had measurable success implementing various tools and techniques showcased herein are peppered throughout the book as well.

There is also a companion website that features regularly updated content and allows users to share comments, thoughts, ideas, and other information relevant to the information found in these pages. Plus, if you register (for free) with the site and create a profile, you can download a free bonus e-chapter (www.return-onengagement.net).

What You Will Learn

A lot of approaches are outlined in this book. Some of them, such as integrating a content management system with your site, are development intensive and could take weeks or months to implement. Others are as simple as filling out a form, checking a box, or installing a plug-in and can be done in minutes. The common thread they all share is that they help others find you online and, if implemented properly, can help you make friends, build community, get customers, and ultimately help your bottom line.

Here are some of the things we will cover:

Your Website

Your website is the hub of your online personal or business communications, and social networking is a great way to get people to it. For all this to work most effectively, however, there are some key factors to keep in mind:

- Regularly updated keyword-rich written content that is easy to understand drives search engine traffic and increases user retention.
- Credibility-based design that is intuitive, attractive, and maintains brand guidelines will keep users on your site once there.
- Action-based user experiences increase customer conversion rates.

- Optimized standards-based code that works across as many browsers as possible makes for a faster and more consistent user experience.
- Successful viral videos can do more for your site traffic than all the direct mail efforts in the world.
- Frequently updated social networking profiles drive traffic and can increase your page rank in the search engines.

A successful online presence takes all of these factors into consideration so that each element works as part of the bigger picture. The "off-site" efforts (social media, shared viral videos, and so on) work in tandem with the "on-site" efforts to provide a consistent experience to Facebook friends, RSS subscribers, Twitter followers and so on.

There is a fly in this digital marketing ointment, however, and that's the fact that if no one wants to hear what you have to say, then all the efforts in the world won't drive more traffic or convert visitors to customers. You've got to be *real,* you've got to have something to offer, and you have got to be *interesting*. But more on that in a bit.

On-Site versus Off-Site

Put simply, anything in this book referred to as *on-site* concerns your website and the things you do to it. Likewise, the *off-site* techniques outlined herein include the marketing-related efforts you make on other sites to drive traffic back to your site and build relationships. These elements work in tandem because there's no sense sending someone to your site if it's not doing its job as a marketing tool. And it doesn't make much sense to share your content via social media profiles and video-sharing sites if that content dissuades potential visitors rather than engaging them. The entire experience should be a cohesive one that doesn't just paint a picture of the person or company as professional and well rounded but actually shows that the person or company *is* just that.

Achieving this monumental task involves the intricate choreography of all writing, design, code, video, and marketing efforts into a uniform and steady in-step routine, an endeavor that could impose significant logistical challenges. And it involves a bit of psychology as well.

Also, most production and design techniques in the book are offered in a sort of high-level, bird's-eye-view context, and usually related to a specific marketing goal. If you need to learn the specifics of tweaking alpha channels in Photoshop or adjusting audio levels in Final Cut Pro, there are plenty of books for that. This is not one of them. If you want to know how Photoshop and Final Cut Pro factor into web video projects that will get you great online marketing results, this is the book for you. Although there

are occasional code snippets dropped here and there throughout the book, they are usually specific to particular techniques that will help search engines better understand your site (and subsequently send more traffic there). The book assumes that you either already have a modicum of design and production knowledge or will work directly with someone who does.

Digital Marketing Technologies

So what are these technologies we're talking about? Here is a list of some of the technologies we will cover:

- RSS
- Blogs and microblogging
- Content management systems (CMS)
- Metrics and analytics
- Social media in its many shapes and forms
- Web video
- Mobile content, iPhone apps, and so on

All of the topics listed, as well as numerous others, are covered in the two sections on off-site and on-site techniques. Analytics and measurement are covered in detail in Section 4, The Return. Many are given their own chapters with accompanying case studies.

A Solid Strategy

Because of the logistical challenges inherent in getting all your online endeavors in sync, it makes sense to create and adopt a strategy that will support and nurture growth and development for the long term. This includes content benchmarks, editorial guidelines, budget and resource assessment, and, of course, assessing analytics tools that will help you make sense of these efforts. A good strategy will also help you stay on track. According to a *New York Times* article, "Blogs Falling in an Empty Forest" by Douglas Quenqua (June 2009), "95 percent of blogs [are] being essentially abandoned." It is my hope that with the help of this book, yours won't be one of them.

The benefits of these efforts don't typically happen overnight, which is why many people abandon their blogs or stop updating their site or LinkedIn profiles. Rather, these benefits tend to occur in fits and starts with a gradual building of traffic and communication over time. Sure, a well-done viral video can catapult you to Internet superstardom overnight, but those cases are rare. In most situations, success comes from tenacity and longevity.

Integrating Your Approach

With an integrated approach as is outlined in this book, you essentially become your own publisher and your content resides

in many places. Just as magazines have editorial calendars that outline their content efforts for a year out or more, so should you have a plan for keeping your site and social media profiles fresh and ever changing. Even if you don't know what topics you will cover over a year, you can establish a general goal for what these efforts are to accomplish for you and then work outward from that as a starting point.

The reality is that regular content updates in any form, on domain or off domain, drive web traffic and help build your online presence. Updates to your site attract search engine crawls, which in turn tend to get you higher in results. Updates to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn get your content in front of friends, connections, or those following you and, if links are included in those updates, drive traffic back to your site as well. Comments on other people's blogs work the same way.

However, if you are driving traffic to a site that has a cryptic interface or impedes in any way a user's ability to get the information he or she needs quickly and easily, then all your efforts are for naught, as users will find what they need elsewhere.

As you can see, this can quickly become a vicious circle, which is why a long-term strategy that addresses content, technology, and marketing goals makes sense.

What's Not Included

I opted not to include information on pay-per-click (PPC) services such as Google AdWords/AdSense, Yahoo! Search Marketing, Microsoft AdCenter, or any of the other PPC options available, but rather focus on organic SEO techniques that don't involve opening your wallet every time someone clicks on a link. Sure, web design costs money, and the time it takes to keep social media profiles updated does as well, but in my opinion, pay-per-click models fall more under the category of advertising and, as such, don't fit the scope of this book.

Practice What You Preach

My company, Mightybytes, a small design firm located in Chicago, started down this road by adding a content management system to our site in 2006 and including new content as often as we could. At first it was just an install of Movable Type to manage the news section, but we quickly outgrew that and put a CMS on the entire site (we opted for Expression Engine). Shortly thereafter, I finally began using the LinkedIn account that had been sitting dormant online for several years and over time got accounts with YouTube, Facebook, Plaxo, Spoke, Xing, FriendFeed, Twitter, and

a slew of others. I started submitting stories to Digg and adding bookmarks on Del.icio.us. I got a Flickr account. We began blogging, sending out email newsletters, and optimizing our site every chance we got. We tweaked and re-tweaked the design to make it as simple and user-friendly as we could. We added contact forms, "Tell-a-Friend" and "ShareThis" features, and started aggregating our content via RSS feeds. We optimized the tags on our site to be more easily interpreted by the search engines. Integrating Google Analytics gave us more data about our site traffic than we could possibly put to good use. We got Technorati and Google Alerts accounts to see what people were saying about us.

In effect, we made up the rules as we went along. The tools of the trade were being born and evolved as we honed our techniques. We learned from our mistakes (and there were many) and each day brought about new challenges to overcome. What started out as a series of small, nonbillable extracurricular activities quickly became *The Marketing Monster That Ate Mightybytes.* It didn't take long before these endeavors became overwhelming, taking up significant amounts of not one but several staff members' time and eating into hours that would normally be spent on paying-client work.

What we needed was a plan, which is *precisely* why the first section of this book is devoted to outlining an effective strategy for your digital marketing endeavors.

Even with our hodge-podge approach, however, we saw results. Over time, traffic to our site increased significantly, we made more and more connections through social sites, and the phone started ringing more often. People made more inquiries about potential projects through our site. And the business grew.

Now we have a flexible framework for making content updates, sending out email newsletters, updating social media profiles, and so on. The operative word here is *flexible*. Benchmarks and goals exist, but the timing with which they are implemented is on a sliding scale. Mightybytes is intentionally a small company, and as such we are often resource-constrained. So if the newsletter goes out a week or two late, we don't flog ourselves. If we don't have a chance to tweet for a week, we figure the Twitterverse will survive. We have integrated these tactics into our daily business routines and have seen success in doing so. Hopefully, by poring through the contents of the book, you can do the same.

Freedom of Choice

Though there are commercial products featured in this book, wherever possible I made sure to include free and open-source tools as well. Though the open source movement is not without

its issues, it also has a great many strengths to its credit as well. Hans-Peter Brødmo noted on the Clickz blog, "People and organizations want freedom of choice. Open source is a reaction to proprietary solutions, especially if proprietary means consumers are on the receiving end of a monologue. Open source says yes to access and transparency, no to control and closed solutions."

We are as a species heuristic and autonomous. We like to figure things out for ourselves and guide our own destinies (also tenets of the open-source movement). Daniel H. Pink noted in *Drive*, his excellent book on the sources of what motivates us, "The opposite of autonomy is control. And since they sit at different poles of the behavioral compass, they point us toward different destinations. Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement."

And this book is all about engagement. So with that in mind, let's get started, shall we?

Acknowledgments

I am continually amazed at how much effort it takes to bring a book to market. Writing the body copy is one thing, but a book like *Return on Engagement*—with sidebars, software reviews, tutorials, case study interviews, and a handful of other features—requires so much more collaborative effort than just an author sitting at a café with a laptop (though there was plenty of that as well).

My first book, *Managing Interactive Media Projects*, took about a year and a half to write with the help of a couple people. This book was banged out in about half that time but with the efforts of twice as many people. The biggest shout out and gesture of *extreme* gratitude goes to the incredible people I get to collaborate with every day. Stacy Jones Sutton, Travis Chandler, and Joy Burke took time from their already busy work schedules to help me mold and form both the written and visual aspects of this book, while James Johnston, Alesia Tyree, Steve Persch, and Tai Palmgren helped hold down the fort in our absence. I consider myself very lucky to work with such a great team of talented and committed individuals every day.

I also very much appreciate those individuals and companies who let me peek into their daily business processes and offer valuable insights regarding best practices for a variety of digital marketing and content techniques:

Tim Jahn, Beyond the Pedway

Sarah Best, Explore Chicago

Dan Kurani, Kurani Interactive

Mike Volpe, Hubspot

Deanna Shoss, Intercultural Talk

Elizabeth Handlin, Ultimate Resumes

Paul Temme and Anais Wheeler at Focal Press were critical in helping me get this book done on time and in an organized manner. Both offered very much appreciated tips, suggestions, and candid advice every step of the way.

This book also wouldn't have seen the light of day without the support of friends, family, my parents, fellow writers, and, of course, my partner Jeff who keeps me sane, focused, and out of trouble.

Tim Frick

February 2010

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STRATEGY

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THE GRAND PLAN

I ended the book preface with a story of how my company, Mightybytes, could have really benefited from implementing a solid strategy for web content and social media when we first started, so it stands to reason that I start this chapter with a story of someone who did it right from the get-go.

The Arts Engagement Exchange (AEE) is a not-for-profit organization in Chicago. Established in 2006 with a grant from the Chicago Community Trust in partnership with the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, its mission is to support the arts and cultural affairs community by fostering audience engagement. The staff at AEE asked Mightybytes to work strategically with them in building this online resource to offer knowledge sharing, networking, expert advice, sales information, marketing tips, and other audience engagement resources. The site had the following requirements:

Figure 1.1 The AEE logo.

- Easily updatable via content management system
- Professional design that would appeal to the arts community
- Detailed community profiles
- Many avenues for collaboration: forums, blog, and the like

Pre-planning and regular user feedback made a world of difference in both how the project came together and how it evolved over time. We started with a detailed focus group that included numerous arts organizations varying in size from small music performance groups to large theater companies like Steppenwolf.

The goal for AEE was a robust, user-friendly website with a content management system for maintaining a constant stream of relevant up-to-date information and where users of the site could easily interact. The site launched successfully, with keyword-rich content we developed with AEE to gain search engine rankings the company needed for arts organizations to find it. The site features a blog, member directory, comment and discussion areas, easily downloadable information from past presentations, and more. Having the experience and input of who the target audience is, what they needed, and a team of experts to supply content, we could collaborate to create a strategically designed site that met business and digital marketing needs. The AEE team continues to maintain fresh site content and

regularly uses social networking channels to build audiences and strong relationships with arts organizations around Chicago. Much of their long-term success can be attributed to building an effective strategy in the project's early stages. Visit the site at www.artsengagementexchange.org.

As for Mightybytes, we now have the resources and a good system in place to generate content and engage in conversations across scores of social sites, allowing us to build our network, make new friends, exchange ideas, increase our presence, and—at the end of the day—get new customers. We use our website and blog as a communications hub feeding content via RSS to numerous social sites while simultaneously adding to conversations on Twitter, Facebook, Plaxo, LinkedIn, FriendFeed, and several dozen others. It's a system that works, but we tweak the details on a pretty regular basis to account for our own internal resources, industry developments, new social media tools, analytics data, and any number of elements that could affect how we come off to our constituents. Like the web itself, our online strategy has become an ever-changing, ever-evolving entity.

Get Connected

In their book *Trust Agents*, authors Chris Brogan and Julien Smith stated that "etiquette and human understanding are the cornerstones of any meaningful life." One of their many points in the book is that this sort of thinking applies online as well, and I couldn't agree more.

Thanks to the rise of social media, smart mobile devices, faster web connections, and lower-cost technology, we are all now connected in more ways than ever. Connecting to other people with similar interests has never been easier. The tools are at your disposal with a browser or mobile device and just a few clicks. Most of them don't cost a dime to use, but they all take time to create and maintain. With the ease and immediacy of these connections come myriad challenges for staying connected and building relationships that actually matter. In other words, it is more important than ever to monitor your online presence and engage with others through your website, through social media tools, and through the act of creating great, compelling content that attracts both people and search engines.

But doing that takes work—a lot of it.

Figure 1.2 People are connected in more ways than ever.

Assessing the specifics of how you will implement and deliver your message is just as important as assessing the message itself. It's time to adopt and maintain long-term content, design, and technology strategies that meet marketing objectives and are flexible enough to meet changing organizational and technology needs over time as well. This approach is applicable not only to your own website (which we'll cover in the next chapter), but also to your presence on social media sites (which we'll cover in Chapter 3).

Many elements go into creating and managing an online presence, but your success in this arena will likely depend on three key factors:

- *Your content.* Is it compelling enough to attract a community?
- *Your approach.* Are you keeping it real or just using sales-speak?
- *Your consistency.* Do you have long-term staying power?

Create Great Content

Compelling content is at the heart of any online strategy. Your passions—whatever they may be—should drive your message. If you are only moderately interested in what you write, shoot, or record, it will show, and the response to your content will be lackluster—on a good day.

If, on the other hand, your content is driven by your conviction for its message, you update it regularly, and you connect with others who share the same conviction, it won't be long before your content becomes the cornerstone on which a thriving online community is built. In this community you can share ideas, debate, bond, and build relationships that are personal, business-related, or both.

Context Is King

Good content should be at the heart of your strategy, but it is equally important to keep the display context of that content in mind as well. These days your content could show up on an array of network-enabled devices, from mobile phones and web browsers to kiosks, email programs, and digital signage. Know where your content will be experienced, and build it for that experience.

When developing your strategy, take some time to decipher delivery specs for whatever platform your content will be deployed on. It will make a huge difference to your users. Trying to read your long-winded magnum opus on an iPhone can be an exercise in futility if you haven't formatted it for that delivery platform. That goes doubly so for improperly

formatted content on large LCD displays, kiosks, or video walls. Write once, deploy anywhere is a cute idea, but the reality is rarely that easy. There are few better ways to alienate an audience than with content out of context, and once you have lost them there's a good chance that you have lost them for good. Chapters 4 and 5 get into more detail of on-site content and design.
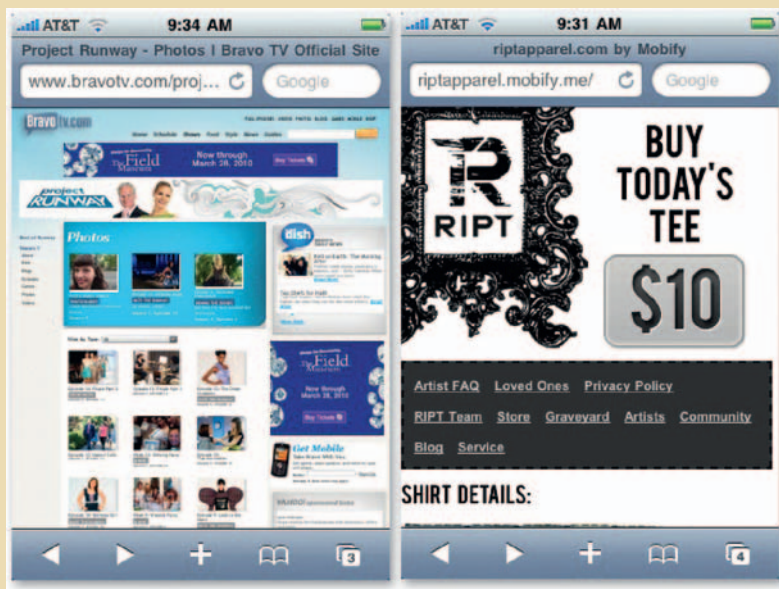

Figure 1.3 Create content that works in context with how visitors will interact with it. The site on the left is difficult to read on a mobile device while the one on the right offers a more satisfying (and legible) experience.

Know Your Community

Figure out what they want, then give it to them. Sounds simple, right? Creating and nurturing an online community requires significant efforts on the part of those who wish to build it. And there's no single way to build it either. You can design a website, start a blog, create a YouTube channel, establish a Ning site, join Facebook or LinkedIn groups, and so on. The list goes on and on. At the end of the day you want to foster an environment that facilitates online collaboration and provides compelling enough content that community members will not only want to experience the content but trust the entity providing it enough to join and actively participate in the community. That's no small feat.

If answering the question of who your community is and what they want proves to be a challenge, just ask. Groups on social networking sites are a great place to start. Find a LinkedIn or Facebook group that caters to your particular area of subject matter expertise, introduce yourself, connect with a few fellow members, and pose one very important question: "How can I help?"

If you don't receive an answer right away, don't fret. Instead, try answering questions other people have posed and starting conversations with them. Eventually, you will find out what they need. This same practice can work with blogs as well. Gradually, a trend should start to appear regarding the kinds of information people want, and it should become clear what you can provide.

Listen

Let's face it, we're more likely to trust those who listen to us and respond in kind than we are those who flood our in-boxes with one-way, blindly distributed marketing messages. By listening to others on social networks and ascertaining their needs, you will be able to devise a strategy of your own for engaging people in mutually beneficial conversations. I'm not suggesting you merely put on the *face* of listening. No, *actually* listen to them. Find out what they need. Discover what their interests are. See how they might be in line with your own. How can you offer solutions if you don't know what the problem is? Building relationships starts by listening to your constituents.

Figure 1.4 Listen and pay attention to what people say about you, good or bad.

In addition to listening to what others are saying about their needs, find out what others are saying about you or your organization as well. Not knowing or, worse yet, *ignoring* what others are saying about you can be problematic to your online reputation and even cost you money, lost customers, and so on. It's harder to join the conversation with any kind of credibility if your integrity has already been compromised by angry customers, disgruntled bloggers, and their ilk.

Here are some tools that can help:

Get a Giga Alerts (formerly Google Alerts) account to track keywords and phrases.

Also try social aggregation tools like Streamy, Social Seek by Sensidea, Yahoo!'s MyBlogLog, or Facebook's FriendFeed.

These tools and techniques are covered in more detail in subsequent chapters, but they will provide you with a good jumping-off point to start listening to and knowing your community.

Make It Real, Keep It Real

Consider this unfortunately all too common scenario. Someone you don't know very well adds you as a friend on Facebook, MySpace, Plaxo, or (insert your favorite social media site here). Despite some initial trepidation, you accept their request. Shortly thereafter your in-box is inundated with one "special offer" after another. Invitations to events you have no interest in attending show up hand over fist. Product ads flood your wall. It's not very long before you remove that person from your friends list, is it?

Tip

Here are some other good online listening practices:

Run keyword searches on Twitter and find out who's talking about what.

Scour the blogosphere with tools like Technorati and BlogCatalog.

Check Google Trends to find trending topics.

Google social sites that are based on your specific interests.

Search groups on LinkedIn, Facebook, and other social networks.

Subscribe to blogs of known experts or people you respect.

If you listen enough, patterns will start to emerge and you will begin to formulate ideas on what you have to offer. These should form the basis of your strategy.

Don't be that person. It's social media suicide.

One of the great things about being online (versus more passive media forms like television or radio) is that we have choices: we can skip ads, we can opt-out, we can subscribe or unsubscribe. And we can remove people from our friends list. We can "unfollow" them. In a place where customers have this power, doesn't it make sense to do whatever you can to earn their trust?
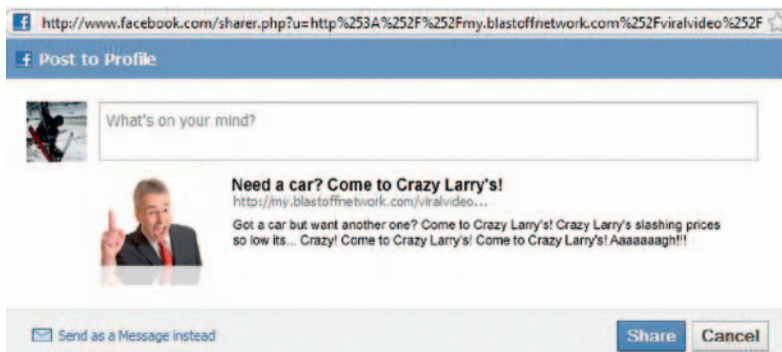

Figure 1.5 Treat others online as you would want to be treated.

This may sound like lip service, but it isn't. Because if you actually earn that trust and then you belie it with banner ads and other blatant selling techniques, then you have turned a potential advocate into an adversary. That scorned customer can post ruinous comments on Yelp, Merchant Circle, Going, Facebook, or any other social site just as easily as they can post accolades. Wouldn't you rather they praise you than condemn you?

Transparency is the operative digital marketing buzzword here, but whatever you call it, just make sure that you're consistent, passionate, honest, and trustworthy in your online posts. The Internet has a funny way of calling *shenanigans* on anything that reeks of insincerity or fabrication, and once it is discovered that you are not a reputable source you will be effectively blacklisted by any kind of community you wish to be a part of, and you may have tarnished your brand.

Sure, this is a book on digital marketing in its many incarnations and at the end of the day you want to sell products, but a fundamental shift has occurred in what is considered acceptable behavior online. By becoming a valued and trusted source of information, the natural progression of that trust is that your community will happily buy your products. In fact, they'll not only buy your products but they will tell their friends about your products as well and then you're in the world of the viral expansion loop. (We'll cover this in detail in Chapter 11.)

There is no universally agreed upon formula for how often you should offer free helpful content versus straight-ahead marketing

messages. Some pundits say you can offer a marketing message one out of every four times you post some content online. Others say it's one out of every ten. I think it should happen more organically than that. Consider these two quotes:

Let my company Mightybytes design your website.

—Tim Frick, owner, Mightybytes.

Our project could not have been completed without Mightybytes' dedicated and talented staff.

— Lauren Gentile, Chicago Office of Tourism

It's pretty obvious which of these statements holds more clout, isn't it? Testimonials by friends, happy customers, and community members occur thousands of times across social networks every day. Customer advocacy is one of the most powerful factors in online purchasing decisions around. In fact,

74% of consumers agree or strongly agree that they choose a product based on information they found online; specifically, customer service anecdotes.

— http://www.eMarketer.com

That advocacy only happens with people who are passionate about your ideas and loyal to your brand. Loyalty is based on trust. Trust is something you earn.

At the end of the day you want to sell products (or services), but why not try earning trust first?

Stay Consistent

One of the biggest challenges of maintaining success in your online social endeavors is staying "on message" for the long haul.
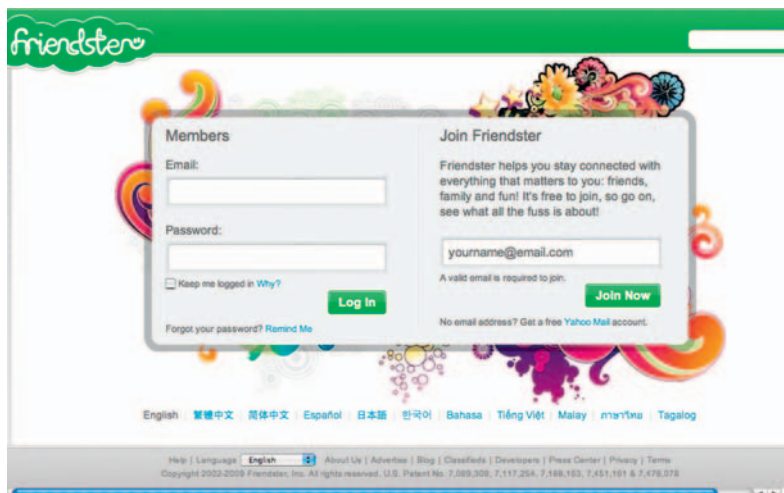

Figure 1.6 Was it something we said? Once people stop going to your site, it will be hard to get them back.

Sure, it's easy to write an effective blog post right out of the gate, but how do you maintain that consistency over time? Everyday life and work challenges tend to get in the way, you can't think of anything to write or post videos about, and before you know it you're losing traction. Rest assured, once people stop going to your site, it's next to impossible to get them back. Just ask Friendster, or any number of social sites who were usurped by the "next big thing" in social networking.

Developing Your Strategy

Developing a good strategy is helpful for a number of reasons. As mentioned in the preface, it's very easy to get caught up in the excitement of increased site traffic, connections, and potential business opportunities that exist online, and before you know it, you're in over your head. Conversely, it's just as easy to get caught up in the daily rigmarole of business and neglect your online endeavors to the point where your site becomes a digital ghost town. A good strategy keeps you on track, on time, on budget, and, most important, on point. This doesn't have to be rocket science. Make your strategy as simple or as complex as you deem necessary to work for your organization.

Strategy Elements

Any solid strategy requires a number of elements working in tandem. Whether you are a single person or part of a team, compiling strategy elements takes time but offers a great opportunity for organization and collaboration.

Goals

Write down specifically what it is you wish to accomplish. Aspirations for more site traffic are nice and all, but try to get a bit more granular in your goals. Also, of course, the goal for many companies is to increase sales online, but there are steps in building up to that goal that you need to accomplish as part of the process.

Try to be reasonable but specific: "I want to increase site traffic by 45%, build a community of at least 500 to 1,000 around my particular area of expertise, decrease my site bounce rate to under 40%, and generate customer conversions in at least 20% of site traffic." That's a good start.

You may only reach 10% of your goals or you may blow them out of the water, but the fact is that having specific goals to shoot for gives you a frame of reference as you expand your efforts and incorporate these techniques into your day-to-day routines.

Tip

Here's why an effective strategy makes sense:

It gives your organization the infrastructure to support online efforts.

It helps you figure out timelines, budgets, and the like.

It defines roles and content experts.

It positions your organization as a resource or expert.

It allows everyone in the organization to buy into your online message.

It gives you the freedom to ebb and flow as resources/time allow.

It serves as a reference point when you need content ideas.

Approach

It's also a good idea to figure out the details of exactly how you will approach these online endeavors before diving into them. How many social media accounts will you get? How often will you update them? Will social bookmarking play a role? How often will you update your site or blog? How many video sharing sites will you distribute your content to? What niche social sites will you target?

Figure 1.7 Consider your approach.

Competitive Analysis

You probably already have a good idea of what your competitors are doing. But to differentiate yourself from them, you need to know specifics:

- How many competitors do you have?
- What are their market shares?
- What sort of brand loyalty do they have?
- What kinds of content do they provide?
- What kind of social media presence do they have?
- What is their customer service reputation?
- How can you differentiate your products, services, and so on from theirs?

Putting together a thorough competitive analysis will help you figure out how high the bar must be raised in order to meet your goals.
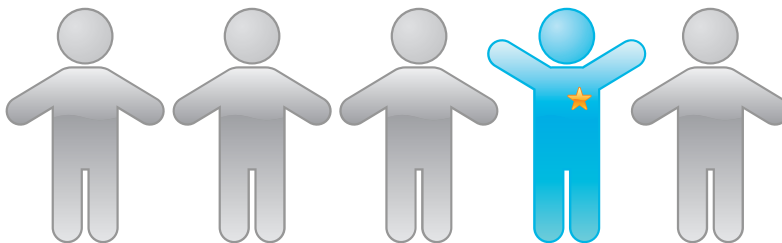

Figure 1.8 Will being blue with a star on your pocket differentiate you enough from your competition?

Content

What type of content will you provide? Remember, compelling content creates results, so think through the details of how you will create and distribute content that compels. Answer the following questions:

- What kind of community do you want to build?
- What content do members of that community want?
- How will you provide that content to your community?
- What content types will you support: text, images, video, PDF, Flash, and so on.

Email Marketing

Does email marketing play a role in your strategy? It often gets a bad rap because of the sheer number of spammers out there, but if you have an already engaged community, providing them with links to content they have expressed an interest in can get good results. Start with these questions:

- How often do your email constituents want your emails?
- How much content will be in each email?
- How educational is that content?
- Will you include any sales messages? How?
- What email system will you use?
- How will you track results?
- What is your plan to incorporate results?

Figure 1.9 To spam or not to spam?

Resources

Resource management is probably one of the biggest challenges in creating and building an online community. Even if you start small as we did, time will usually dictate that you expand efforts with more content, more social media engagement, and so on. These efforts could require any number of writers, editors, video creators, subject matter experts, proofreaders, content reviewers, or other specialists.

Remember to build in some room for flexibility so your resources can expand (or contract) as your needs change. Think long term. You have to maintain this commitment over time to see results, so building longevity into the plan right up front will help you effectively manage resources over time. Consider the following:

- How many authors do you need now? In one year? In two?
- Who will research items for content development?
- Will you require an editor to maintain consistency of voice, grammar, and so on?
- Is there a subject matter review process? If so, what is it?

- Who will be in charge of actually posting content online, creating links, adding images, and embedding videos?
- Do you need a designer as well? A video editor? A webmaster?
- Do you need an analytics expert to track content performance?

The Editorial Calendar

Figure 1.10 Consider creating an editorial calendar to help manage your content schedule.

Magazines do it all the time. Maybe you should think about creating an editorial calendar as well. If you're lucky enough to be one of those people who never has writer's block or always, without fail, has something to say, you may not need one. The rest of us, however, can benefit from some broad-stroke guidelines for maintaining content consistency over time.

An editorial calendar can be especially helpful if you need to manage multiple content resources, cover events that occur with any regularity, or stay on track with industry developments. By posting your calendar to a wiki or other centrally located place, it can become a resource for idea collaboration as well.

If you want to start simple, write out a list of topics to cover every month for the next year, an editorial to-do list, if you will. Include things like industry-changing events, topics relevant to seasons, holidays, anniversaries, technical developments, productivity tips, and so forth. The goal is to create a set of topic guidelines to help you (and your team) stay on message and maintain content consistency over time.

You may not need to refer to it. You might use it once or twice. Or you might find that your editorial calendar becomes the driving force that keeps your content on track. At the very least, it can serve as a helpful guide to tame the dark beast of writer's block.

Budget

Expert resources cost money. There's no getting around that. Hiring an intern to update your blog content, website, and social media accounts may sound like a cost-effective option, but understand that you run the risk of quickly losing authenticity, integrity, consistency of message, and so on, which could ultimately cost you more in the long run. You are much better off either hiring experts or, better yet, becoming one yourself.

That said, business owners don't want to become web developers. Some of the tools outlined in later chapters require the help of web designers and developers for proper setup and configuration. Be sure to include some sort of budget line item that ensures your brand will communicate professional, credibility-based

Figure 1.11 The best things in life may be free, but everything else costs money.

design and your website will have the tools necessary for you to communicate with your constituents at a moment's notice. Include what you can afford, and with a little creative digging you should be able to find the resources to accomplish your goals within the budget you have allotted. Conversely, don't forget that you get what you pay for.

The Free Myth

I have often heard the virtues of social media and blogging extolled as free. That statement couldn't be further from the truth. If you want to see any sort of significant return on your efforts, you must put a lot of time into generating online content and engaging in online communities as a leader or at the very least an active participant. And time is, of course, money. The silver lining is that while social media engagement costs time and money, most of the tools used to facilitate that engagement are indeed free or have only minimal costs associated with them.

Thus, you can get out what you put in without risking a significant investment. A small two-person theater company will have a finite amount of money and resources to put into its online presence. A thousand-person tire manufacturer will no doubt have a proportionally larger amount it can dedicate. Both can take advantage of the opportunities these tools offer, and if the theater company's content is compelling enough for the community in which it exists, it can far outshine the tire company's efforts.

The fact is that you reap what you sow when it comes to creating online content and engaging in social networking communities. Most likely, you won't be chastised because your Facebook status hasn't been updated in a week. The blog police won't hunt you down if you can't afford to create daily posts. Compelling content, however, will have a much longer shelf life than one-way marketing messages any day. Invest your finances in content that serves a specific community's needs, and you will undoubtedly reap the benefits.

Creating a budget for your online presence doesn't have to be rocket science. Put simply: figure out what you can afford, outline the resources needed to accomplish your goals, and stick as closely to your plan as possible.

Technology

Overhauling your website so that it supports the technology necessary to facilitate regular content updates and the ability to share those updates with your community can seem like a daunting task. Make sure you have some sort of technology requirements built into the strategy documents for both your website and social media

endeavors. Detailed descriptions of each are included in the next two chapters. In the meantime, here are some sample questions to ask:

- What sort of hosting requirements do you have?
- What content management system will you use?
- Will your site pull data from your social media accounts?
- Will your site feed data to your social media accounts?
- How will you migrate legacy data?
- What sort of analytics applications will be used?
- Will you support mobile devices? If so, which ones?

Remember, build some flexibility into your technology needs. Technologies change rapidly, and it is important for your organization to maintain adaptability. Technical specifications for website strategy are covered in Chapter 2. Social media strategies are covered in Chapter 3.

Analytics

Though considering an analytics package would arguably fall under the technology umbrella in any solid strategy, I have given analytics its own subheading here for one very good reason: analytics and metrics data will serve as the first line in measuring how your content performs and how you should revise your approach to ensure it performs better over time.

There are many analytics packages available—Google Analytics, Compete, WebTrends, and Woopra are just a few. Some are free, some are subscription-based. All give you a varying degree of traffic analysis that offers insights into where users are coming from, what pages they are visiting, how long they stayed, and so on. When considering an analytics package, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What traffic patterns do you need to track?
- Do you need analytics integration with an email marketing system?
- What keywords are being used to find your site?
- Which search engines drive the most traffic?
- How much organic traffic is coming to your site?
- How many pages do users visit? How long do they stay?
- Do they purchase anything? Fill out a form?
- What is the traffic bounce rate?
- What are the most common user entry and exit pages?
- What sort of budget do you have?

Figure 1.12 The future is now! Find technology that you can grow into.

Deadlines

After you have outlined all the elements listed, give yourself some tangible deadlines for implementation. Be realistic, and take your resources into consideration. A web team of five can accomplish much more in a short time than a team of one can.

Keep that in mind. If you have created some sort of editorial calendar, that might be a good place to start. It doesn't have to be set in stone, but it should provide a general framework around which you build a content development schedule. Apply concrete deadlines to specific content items and get cracking.

Documentation

This may seem like obvious advice, but *write it all down*. If you're an individual trying to devise a plan, your document will serve as an effective set of personal guidelines. If you're a company trying to make better use of social media and online communities, documenting and sharing your strategies will help get enterprise-wide buy-in for your efforts, offer an opportunity for feedback, and help divvy up tasks between coworkers.

Figure 1.13 Write it out!

Wiki Power

As mentioned previously, putting all these data into a wiki offers a great opportunity for collaboration. Anyone can add or edit content as necessary, and the result will be more support from those involved since they were active participants in its creation.

If you felt like going one step further, consider opening the wiki (or parts of it) to your community as well, allowing them to comment on content ideas, offer feedback on timelines, and give general suggestions on your approach. If you have a passionate enough community, they would relish the opportunity to be a part of this effort.

Figure 1.14 Wikis are incredibly useful tools for group collaboration.

User-Generated Content

Having a solid strategy for your own content is one thing, but what if you have created a community that regularly contributes content as well? User-generated content brings about its own set of challenges. Some things to consider when devising a general strategy include the following:

- What are your terms of use?
- How will you address issues of privacy?
- How will you address issues of profanity?
- What about slander or other illegal behavior?
- Who owns the content?
- How will you address scalability?
- How will you maintain transparency as a moderator?

We will cover this in more detail in Chapter 3, but it warrants consideration when planning your overall online strategy as well.

Figure 1.15 How will you manage user-generated content?

The Return

Although tools like Woopra, TubeMogul, Technorati, and Google Analytics offer detailed views of user behaviors, traffic patterns, keyword relevancy, and so on, at the end of the day, they are software packages tracking mouse clicks. Creating a strategy that allows you to measure some sort of return means getting your hands dirty. Figure out just what your audience needs and put extensive efforts into providing it. Ask questions and give answers. Make friends and build personal connections. Regardless of how effective granular data from an analytics package can be, it's *people* we trust, not software algorithms, and engaging as a person will bring an infinitely better return on your efforts than tracking tools will.
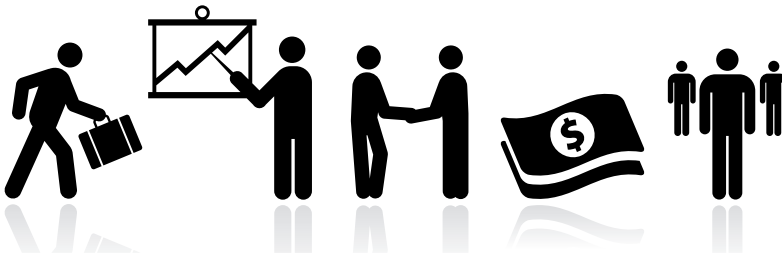
Figure 1.16 Returns come in many forms.

There are many returns that can come from these efforts, but trust and community are two big ones, and unfortunately they can be very difficult to measure. However, if you start with a strategy that allows you to foster these traits over time in your online relationships, it only stands to reason that customer advocacy and brand evangelism will follow. In the meantime, if it's numbers your boss needs, a monthly analytics report on the performance of your site or blog may do the trick.

In this chapter, we've covered the basic elements of what a general strategy for web and social media should entail. We've discussed philosophies, touched on techniques, and offered a potential list of best practices for an effective content strategy to build your online presence. In the next chapter, we will focus specifically on how these concepts apply to creating your own website, blog, or branded community.

ON-SITE STRATEGY

It goes without saying that your website is likely the most important professional tool you have. Whether you are an artist or a doctor, a small café or a company of thousands, in most cases your site is the first experience any potential customer, donor, employee, or vendor will have with your brand, especially if the content on it spans across social media, mobile devices, and other network-enabled media. Creating an experience that resonates with those who visit your site is essential to your online survival, so it stands to reason that a website becomes a natural extension of your day-to-day business life. It's important that you have the tools to update it, manage it, edit it, and administer it on a moment's notice.

Your Website Is Never Done—Ever

It's a simple lesson to learn, one that you probably figured out a while ago. If you haven't updated your content in several weeks or, worse yet, months, you're not only doing a disservice to any users or potential customers who may drop by to be engaged by your app or site content, but you're missing out on a valuable opportunity to drive search engine traffic as well. In web years this is an ancient concept, but one that bears repeating. As mentioned in the preface, *regular content updates drive traffic,* so why not put the tools and strategy in place to facilitate that?

We covered a lot of general strategy concepts in the previous chapter. Here, we'll focus specifically on building a website strategy that serves as the hub of your marketing and communications efforts.

Your Home, Your Castle

Scores of resources are available to help drive web traffic to your site. Some cost the proverbial arm and leg, some are free. There's really no sense in using those tools to drive traffic to a

site that sucks, however. If the goal is to attract both people and search engines to your content and then engage them, you should have a site that supports that effort. The strategy for building or updating that site so it attracts, engages, and even helps build community starts by breaking down its individual components. Where applicable, I kept the focus of these components to those that directly affect engagement.

Figure 2.1 Your website is your castle. Don't let it suck.

Website Components

Technology, content, design, and architecture should come together on your site to form a seamless user experience that is engaging, easy to understand, and puts any information within a click or two. A core of optimized, standards-based code should be invisible to the front end user but built so that search engines can easily index a site's content. On the back end, an easy-to-use administrative interface should help expedite quick updates and alert any relevant sites or subscribers that new content is available automatically. If applicable, it should provide users with easy tools for sharing data, interacting with your brand, and communicating with other users. This is true for both the simplest of content-managed sites and the most complex web apps (providing, of course, that driving traffic plays a role in the app's specifications).

How will you create a strategy to enable all this? Let's take a look at some of the components that make up any solid site and discuss a strategic approach for each.

Technology Strategy

Server specifications can make or break any web project. Some of the most common development hiccups have arisen from incompatible server platforms, outdated software, choosing a content management system that doesn't fit project needs, unsupported frameworks, and so on. It's important to give careful consideration to your site's technical elements right up front so you can eliminate as many potential glitches as possible. Typically, this will go hand in hand with initial discussions with the development team.

Content management systems and the details surrounding them are covered in Chapter 6.

Here are some questions to consider:

What server platform will the site be hosted on?

What are the hardware/software specs for that server?

Do you have root-level access to install software?

Are there existing tools that you can build on top of to save time/money?

Will you pull/share data from other sources using an API?

Which content management system (CMS) will you use (or will you build one)?

What language is the CMS written in? Does your server support it?

What are the technology requirements for the chosen CMS?

What administrative tools does your host offer to help manage your domain?

Will you have a staging server and a production server?

If so, how will you manage that process? What tools will you use?

Do you need any additional tools for production management and testing?

How will any of the answers to these questions affect user engagement?

Figure 2.2 There are many content management systems out there. Choose wisely.

User Strategy

Before you define (or revise) the site's content, define who its users are. This could be an exercise that takes as little as five seconds or as long as five days. Give the site's users the time they deserve to best define their specific needs. It may be that you knew exactly who they were from day one, or it may take some time and effort to discern exactly who they are and what they want. In other words, are you building a site for mothers, or a site for single white mothers age 20 to 25 who are shopping for bicycles? Be specific.

You may want to consider polling a target sample of your audience to help answer some of the following questions:

Who (again, specifically) does your site serve?

How old are the visitors to your site?

What is their age, race, socioeconomic background, and so on?

What is their reading level?

How technically proficient are they?

How familiar are they with social tools, blogs, web apps, and the like?

What specifically are they looking for from your site?

How much are they willing to spend (if applicable)?

Will they visit once or repeatedly?

What are their preferences for interacting with your brand?

Content Strategy and Architecture

Facilitating a successful information architecture and usability plan often involves extensive discussions with content authors, site administrators, designers, and developers to ensure that everyone's objectives will be met. This will help everyone define how much content the site has, how it's organized, how often it's updated, and so on.
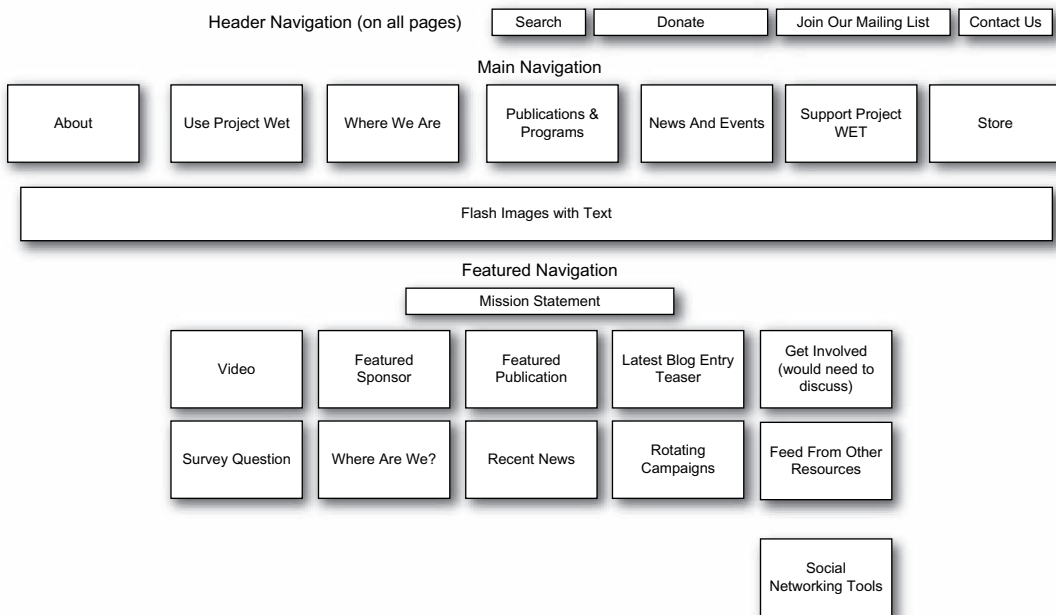
Figure 2.3 Good information architecture can help ensure that everyone's objectives are met.

The level of detail and amount of resources it will take to build depends on the scope of your site and number of people involved in building/revamping it. Nonetheless, creating a good information architecture (I/A) plan is an important step for building a solid foundation on which your site will exist and one that should be planned for as you devise site strategies.

Successful I/A usually involves several iterations of navigational flowcharts and outlining a user's experience in great detail. Plan for enough time to answer any and all pertinent questions in great detail.

Details on building effective information architecture for site content are covered in Chapter 4.

Usability Strategy: Beyond the Conversion Path

Good usability is essential if you have any expectations for building rewarding experiences and ultimately business relationships with those who frequent your site. Every section of your site should be analyzed and reanalyzed with regard to clarity, design, and the ease with which visitors can interact to meet their needs. This not only includes the primary and secondary navigation schemes but also the blog, shopping cart checkout process, contact and support forms, social media integration, and any other potential areas where content and the successful dissemination of site information could get in the way of seamless user experiences. These are extremely important considerations when devising effective site strategies, so give them the time and energy they deserve.

Many marketers have devolved the notion of great, easy-to-use site experiences into something cold and clinical by bandying about terms like *conversion funnel* and *customer segmentation*. For example, Wikipedia defines a conversion path this way:

> *A type of landing page that segments respondents to online advertising and search campaigns. Conversion paths utilize user-directed segmentation, where a respondent is offered segmentation choices to make that act in their self-interest. After self-segmenting, users land on pages that deliver more tailored content and pitch. Unlike a single landing page, a conversion path does not ask for a desired action, or a conversion, until a respondent has self-segmented.*

Personally, that's a bit dehumanizing for me. I don't like the visual that's conjured up when I think of *self-segmenting*. And the term *conversion* seems to imply that your site will turn its visitors from one thing into another, when in reality I doubt any such metamorphosis can occur with just a few clicks. In this age of customer control, you owe a rewarding site experience to anyone

Tip

Start with these questions to help define the content structure of your site:

How much content does your site have?

How will the site grow over time?

How many authors will the site have?

What do you want from site visitors?

How will you get visitors to any pertinent content within a click or two?

Will the site support user-generated content?

How will you approach the user-generated content?

How many versions of a navigational flowchart will you create?

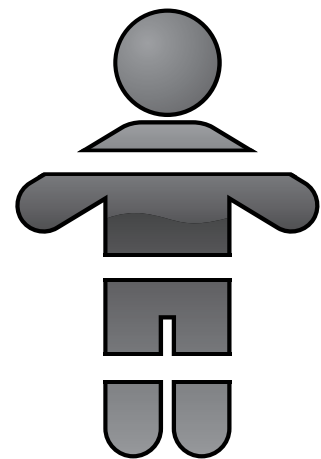How do your SEO needs affect how the site architecture is built? (more on SEO later in this chapter)

Figure 2.4 Users don't think of themselves as segmented. Why should you think of them that way?

Figure 2.5 People should feel comfortable being guided through your site.

who visits your site and that's what I think these conversion paths are really all about. I prefer to think of them more as guided tours wherein the person visiting your site is handheld through a very easy-to-understand series of interactions.

While the term *conversion path* typically refers to ads and search campaigns, you can also build these guided tours into the general architecture of your site by defining potential scenarios in which visitors can offer information that will help you guide their experience so that it is more useful. Rather than converting them into anything, you are simply offering them the option to better custom-tailor the experience to their personal needs.

First, you need to figure out what they want and what you have to offer to guide them through the experience. Are they looking to get advice? Buy a pair of shoes? Make their house more environmentally friendly? Are there specific nuances that may lead them down diverging paths on your site (men's versus women's shoes, for instance)? If so, be sure to make it as easy for them to do that as soon as possible and ask questions along the way, the answers to which will help create a customized experience that suits their needs.

Then figure out what, if anything, you want from the exchange. Do you want site visitors to sign up for your email newsletter? Fill out a form? Contact support? Make a donation? Buy shoes? Business is inevitably a two-way street, and *all* relationships are built on some level of give and take. It's okay to ask for something in return if you are providing something that adds value.

Figure 2.6 *Web Design for ROI.* Lance Loveday & Sandra Niehaus. New Riders. 2007 www.wd4roi.com.

Figure 2.7 It's okay to ask for something in return if you provide something that adds value.

In the book *Web Design for ROI*, authors Loveday and Niehaus noted, "research has proven that visitors' ultimate likelihood to transact with an organization is heavily influenced by their experience with an organization's website."

After you have completed this exercise for one section of your site, lather, rinse, and repeat for the remaining sections. More information on usability is included in Chapter 4.

Customer Service

How many times have you tried accessing a company's support site only to be thrown into a maze of "options," the result

of which only serves to endlessly confuse and frustrate you? Many times you don't get the questions you had in the first place answered with any level of efficiency. You are already on the site because you have problems with something the company offers. Why exacerbate the situation? To me, this is one of the most critical user experience scenarios for fostering good customer relationships and one that too many companies don't pay enough attention to. If customer support plays a role in your site, it is extremely important to have a solid strategy for how you will approach it.

People like interacting with people. Build your strategy around customers being able to get in touch with an actual person as quickly as possible. This is not to say you shouldn't include support information on your site, but giving customers easy avenues to communicate with you when they have problems can often make the difference in their opinions toward your company or organization. That's not rocket science, it's common sense, so why do so many companies ignore this?

In a time when customers have the power to tarnish a brand and reach hundreds of thousands of people instantly via social networks, shouldn't you make it as easy as possible for them to communicate with you in as many ways as possible?

So how does one build effective communication into one's web-based support system? Here are a few ideas:

- Make support content searchable both within your site and via the web.
- Create a searchable FAQ page for each product or service.
- Implement live chat support features.
- Include phone numbers on every support page.
- Create easy-to-use forms.

When devising a customer service and support strategy, consider the following questions:

- What information will site visitors need?
- How can you get it in front of them as quickly as possible?
- Will search functions help them find the information they need?
- Why or why not?
- How much will it cost to offer support via phone or email?

Figure 2.8 Too many options can get confusing.

Forms

Little things can bring about big problems when building an effective strategy for site forms. *Do* sweat the small stuff here. Adhering to design standards is of utmost importance, but a little
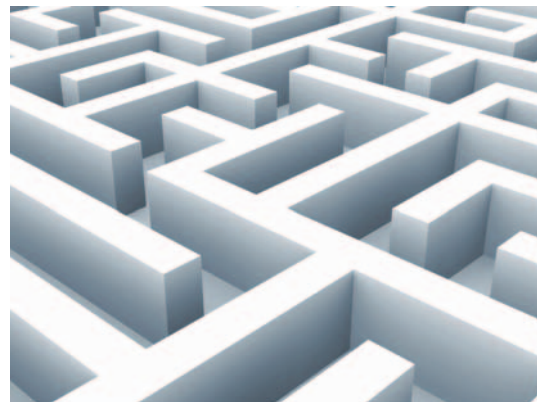
bit of psychological insight into the mindset of your users can go a long way as well. For instance, users tend to be more apt to provide credit card information at the bottom of a form than at the top. It's a time investment thing. Also, clarity and friendliness, as well as minimizing the number of required fields in your forms, will help their effectiveness. Knowing things like this will make a difference in how you design, create, and test form functions. Allow for an appropriate amount of time to decipher how you can make site forms friendly, easy to understand, and even easier to fill out.

In Lance Loveday and Sandra Niehaus's book, *Web Design for ROI*, they emphasized that there is one key metric for online forms: percentage of form submission. This is the percentage of visitors to a form who successfully complete and submit the form on that page.

Form creation is covered in more detail in Chapter 5.

Design Strategy

Your site should adhere to credibility-based design standards that portray your company or organization as professional and support a cohesive brand identity. This is essential to your site's success. As mentioned earlier, your website is most likely the first experience anyone will have with you or your brand. Make sure the design reflects the professionalism of your business.

Credibility-Based Design

Andrew B. King, author of O'Reilly's *Website Optimization,* cited credibility-based, professional design as the number one factor in maximizing site conversion rates. Speed, reliability, and attractiveness are the three primary criteria he noted that will help create a seamless, pleasurable experience that conveys you or your company as a trustworthy industry expert. Your website is often the first impression your audience has of your brand, organization, products, services, and how you conduct business. It should reflect the importance and quality of all of these things even better than if you were planning and preparing for a face-to-face meeting with a potential customer.

Speed. If your site doesn't load and react quickly, you will lose customers.

Reliability. If it spits back errors in spelling, facts, code, style, or grammar, you will lose customers.

Figure 2.9 Ask for what you need in your forms. Nothing more.

Attractiveness. If the visual design detracts from rather than supports the information presented, you will lose customers.

If your site doesn't convey professionalism and credibility upon first glance, you have already undermined its ability to play an integral role in creating online relationships. Make sure to pay careful attention to this as you devise a design strategy.

Cross-Format Brand Identity

There are more media formats than ever to consider when devising a strategy for maintaining brand consistency. Mobile phones, kiosks, websites, devices, touchscreen interfaces, tablets, video walls, and so on create new design challenges every time a new device or platform shows up on the market, which these days is almost every other day. Building a cohesive brand identity is one thing, but maintaining consistency across multiple media formats can be a challenge that rears its ugly head regularly and costs both time and money if you don't plan for it.

Economies of Scale

Building a strategy for optimizing and deploying content to each of these implementations takes careful forethought. Though it's virtually impossible to create a contingency plan for every new media format that arises, try to plan (and budget) for as many potential implementations as possible. It will save time and money in the long run.

Figure 2.10 So may devices to choose from. Which will you support?

Standards-Based Content

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), regarded as the international community for web standards, has devised a set of guidelines by which websites should be designed and developed. The W3C regularly publishes documents defining web technologies and specific processes to promote quality, fairness, and public accountability, which then in turn the rest of us web folks and media creators should follow. Through this process, the W3C publishes its recommendations for web standards. Published recommendations are posted at w3c.org by year and topic in great detail.

Tip

Here are some questions to get you started when devising a strategy to maintain brand identity and design integrity across multiple devices, browsers and platforms:

What media formats will your website support (text, video, audio, etc.)?

What devices will your content support?

What formats are required for these other network-enabled devices?

Will the additional formats require rewrites, reedits, and so on?

How much time will it take to reexpress content to each device?

What brand elements are required for each format?

What are the technical specifications for each?

How will you translate a consistent brand identity from format to format?

There are many more incentives to build great standard-compliant websites: ease of maintenance, show of professionalism, or, in the words of A List Apart founder Jeffrey Zeldman from a post on his Twitter account, "Client who saves $5,000 buying cut-rate non-semantic HTML will later spend $25,000 on SEO consultant to compensate."

Figure 2.11 Among the many advantages of building standards-based websites is consistency across multiple browsers.

Creating web standards-based content—code, design, images, rich media, and so on—has many advantages. Standards-based content is easily crawled and indexed by search engines, so it helps greatly with SEO efforts. It also works with screen readers and other devices for people with disabilities, which ensures that your content is "508-compliant" (so named after Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act in 1998). And, of course, because it is based on a defined set of web standards, it will appear and function consistently across most browsers.

Planning for a standards-based implementation of your site takes time and requires careful consideration so that expectations are properly managed throughout production. Analyze everything from page hierarchy to code standards, image optimization, tags, supported rich media formats, XML sitemaps, and so on. Ultimately, this will have an effect on how search engines crawl and index your content, how users with disabilities will experience it, and how visually consistent it will appear from browser to browser and platform to platform.

Figure 2.12 Standards-based content even looks the same across platforms.

Standards-based content as provided by W3C on web content accessibility guidelines 1.0 is presented here. Version 2.0 is in the process of development, and updated content can be viewed on the W3C site.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

- Provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.
- Don't rely on color alone.
- Use markup and style sheets, and do so properly.
- Clarify natural language usage.
- Create tables that transform gracefully.
- Ensure that pages featuring new technologies transform gracefully.
- Ensure user control of time-sensitive content changes.
- Ensure direct accessibility of embedded user interfaces.
- Design for device-independence.
- Use interim solutions.
- Use W3C technologies and guidelines.
- Provide context and orientation information.
- Provide clear navigation mechanisms.
- Ensure that documents are clear and simple.
  Details on these guidelines can be found at w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT.

Then ask the following questions:
- Do all team members have a fundamental understanding of standards-based development?
- If not, how will you facilitate that knowledge transfer?
- How does adhering to web standards affect marketing and business decisions?
- How do web standards affect design and development time?
- Will the site contain rich media elements, such as Flash, video, or audio?
- If so, how will you make those elements accessibility-compliant?

Search Engine Optimization

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the volume or quality of traffic to your site from search engines via organic measures (i.e., those you don't specifically pay for, as in search engine marketing). Techniques for optimizing your site and content for the major search engines—Google, Yahoo, and Bing—are peppered throughout Section Two of this book. As SEO is an always-evolving process that should begin before you start work on your website and continue long after an initial launch, there are several important distinctions to make when devising an SEO strategy.

What Color Is Your Hat?

In the golden age of television, you always knew who the good guys were and who the bad guys were by the color of their hats. Good guys wore white and bad guys wore black. SEO practices have their own color coding as well via two distinct and very different categories: *black hat SEO* and *white hat SEO.* Make sure you keep your SEO hat nice, crisp, and white. Engaging in black hat techniques can get you banned from the search engines.

According to Wikipedia:

> *Black hat SEO tactics, also called* spamdexing, *attempt to redirect search results to particular target pages in a fashion that is against the search engines' terms of service, whereas white hat methods are generally approved by the search engines. White hats tend to produce results that last a long time, whereas black hats anticipate that their sites may eventually be banned either temporarily or permanently once the search engines discover what they are doing.*

It is important to stay on top of what is considered a white hat technique and what is considered black hat technique. Wikipedia's listing for Search Engine Optimization does a great job outlining the differences between each in simple, easy-to-understand language: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Search_engine_optimization.

Tip

Your SEO strategy, like your site's content, will evolve over time. Here are some initial questions to ask. Understand that the answers to these questions will change over time as you better define both your needs and the results of your efforts.

What are your specific SEO goals?

What site/page tagging methods will you use? (title tags, description tags, alt tags, etc.)

How much time can you devote to keywords, content and creating an effective link strategy?

How will you maintain fresh, regularly updated content over time?

How will you create links in context relevant to your site content?

How will you regularly patrol broken links?

How will you create and regularly update a sitemap?

What role will analytics programs play in monitoring your results?

When devising an SEO strategy, choose the techniques you wish to pursue and start small, evolving them over time.

Semantic SEO

If you are still refining these and improving your SEO techniques through steps outlined in this book, you might as well get prepared for the next big evolutionary step: semantic SEO.

As CMS Wire, a popular blog on content management systems, explained:

> Web content as it is presented today has not achieved its potential. It is simply not reaching its revenue potential for publishers, nor its usefulness potential for consumers. This is an absolute fact, when you take into consideration the implications of what has been called the Semantic Web….The Semantic Web looks like it will make things a whole lot more complicated. In essence, it will mean websites and applications will be talking directly to each other, sharing information wholesale and taking action, on-the-fly, as this informational context evolves.

Syndication Strategy

As mentioned in Chapter 1, good content is the foundation of your online endeavors. That content doesn't need to sit only on your website, however. Really simple syndication (RSS) allows you to auto-publish content to a variety of online sources, thus increasing its potential exposure. RSS is a key area where your on-site and off-site strategies work in tandem. Though the content is initially published on your site or blog, it can be fed automatically as soon as you hit "submit" or "publish" to any social sites on which you have subscribed to your own feed. Plus, users can subscribe to your feed, and your content will show up in their preferred reader of choice.

Update Frequency

In general, RSS-based social sites post user-generated content chronologically, meaning that the more often you post content, the more often you show up at the top of the feed page (and not below the fold), thus increasing the chance that your content will be viewed. This makes another good case for frequent updates.

We discussed an editorial calendar in Chapter 1. Now it is time to get down to business on the reality of how often your blog or website will be updated. Can you handle making updates on a daily or near-daily basis? Or is it more appropriate that your site be updated every week or so? Because your content will be fed via RSS to any number of online destinations, you may also want to consider publishing at peak times when more users are on your social networks of choice.

Identifying Syndication Targets

There are hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of sites that will allow you to associate an RSS feed with your profile. The key to

Figure 2.13 Really simple syndication.

success with RSS is finding audiences who will find your content useful. In other words, if you are a medical education organization, perhaps College Humor isn't the best destination for your feed. You have already defined your users and their needs, now identify where they hang out online, if you haven't already. It's okay if you can only find a handful of relevant places. You can always find more later and post your feed when you do. We'll discuss finding appropriate social content destinations and social media optimization more in Chapter 3.

Other Challenges

Finding appropriate content destinations isn't your only challenge when feeding RSS content to other sites. Many sites don't have the tools in place to import formatting along with feed data, so what looks good on your blog may actually look a bit ungainly on other sites. Several flavors of RSS exist (Atom, RSS 1.0, RSS 2.0), so you should also be certain your feed format is supported on the sites to which you send it. Additionally, users will oftentimes simply copy and paste a feed URL from a browser into their reader of choice, circumventing any attempts you may have made to track them.

RSS is covered in much more detail in Chapter 9.

Keyword Strategies

If good content is the foundation of your online presence, keywords are kind of like the bricks or, more aptly, the cornerstones. Your site content obviously can't consist *entirely* of keywords because it wouldn't make much sense to those reading it, but the relevant placement of keywords on your page can help search engines understand and analyze your site content and include said content in results pages.

Keywords aren't something you define once and then forget about. Your keyword strategy is something you define, hone, and redefine over time, so how do you build a strategy around keywords?

Start with the following:

- What do you need to know about your site to build a keyword strategy?
- What keywords and search phrases will people use to find what you offer?
- What combination of long tail (more specific) and broad head (more general) keywords and phrases will provide the results you want?

Figure 2.14 Keywords are the cornerstones of your web content.

- What keywords differentiate you from your competitors?
- Will you use pay-per-click tools like Google AdWords to drive traffic?
- If so, what kind of budget can you afford?

Keywords and how to build content around them are covered in detail in Chapter 4.

Rich Media

Rich media engages like little else. Flash games, viral videos, podcasts, and so on capture visitors' attention and, if the content is updated regularly, keep them coming back. Using elements such as Flash, audio, and video on your site will help keep it fresh and captivating. Plus, you can expand the reach of audio and video elements by posting them to social media-sharing sites, thus increasing the potential that more people will see them.

Figure 2.15 Flash games offer an effective way to engage your audience.

These engaging media elements take time and resources to create, however, and their content is often hidden from search engines behind the wall of their format. When devising a strategy for rich media, there are a number of things to take into consideration, not the least of which is figuring out what you have to say. The same rules for keeping content interesting and useful to your community apply to rich media as well as text and images.

So first figure out what you have to say. Speak to your passions, and those with similar interests will find your content appealing.

Figure 2.16 Set realistic goals for your video endeavors.

If you have designs on creating serial-based content, make sure your message can maintain integrity for the long haul.

You will also need to devise a budget for your endeavors and a timeline to make them happen. Budget and quality are typically proportionally related. It's okay if you don't have the budget for high-end equipment to shoot video or record audio. There are tools out there that will give you decent quality for minimal cost. Just keep in mind that the importance of credibility-based design applies to audio and video content as well. Giving your content a professional sheen with a high-quality logo animation, slick editing, or a smart jingle can make a big difference in regard to how your business or organization is interpreted by visitors and potential customers.

Audio and Video

There are many things to consider when devising an A/V strategy. The best advice is to start small, be realistic, and try to maintain your commitment over time. You can always grow your efforts as you gain more success.

Viral video and detailed strategy for other social media sharing techniques is covered in more detail in Chapters 3 and 14.

Flash

Using Flash content has a number of pros and cons associated with it as well. At this point, the Flash plug-in is ubiquitous on the Internet, so only people living in caves or without Internet access altogether will run into situations where a missing plug-in serves

Figure 2.17 Does Flash play a role in your online strategy?

as a barrier to content access. And even then, simple workarounds exist to maintain usability.

Flash's potential to deliver immersive rich internet applications (RIAs) and connect to virtually any kind of database-driven back end makes it a great option for games, media players, data visualization, and any other experience where extensive use of audio, video, animation, and interactivity is required for increased user engagement.

Historically, Flash has been criticized for many things, but one of the biggest complaints has been that search engines cannot index Flash content. In July 2008, Adobe and Google made a joint announcement called the Flash SEO Initiative, giving Google the ability to crawl and index online

Flash content. Google has also released a promising solution for tracking user interaction with Flash content via an ActionScript 3 API for Google Analytics. GA for Flash allows the popular metrics and site-tracking software to collect interaction data from Flash movies. The Internet Marketing Driver, company blog of G-Squared Interactive, noted in a February 2009 post:

> *The Google Analytics for the Flash tracking component enables you to track specific events and functionality in your Flash movies and seamlessly communicate with Google Analytics for tracking. It gracefully handles any DOM issues that could cause problems in other types of Flash tracking using Analytics. It's an open source initiative between Google and Adobe Systems and you can find more information on the Google Code Project website (http://code .google.com/p/gaforflash).*

Rich Media Strategy: Flash

When devising your strategy for using Flash, take the following questions into consideration:

- Is Flash the only way to create the experience you require?
- Do your users have the Flash plug-in? (Yes, you still have to ask this question.)
- If so, what version?
- What plug-in contingency plan will you use for alternate content?
- Is the Flash content self-standing or does it need to integrate with the rest of your site in some way?
- What about mobile content?
- Does the Flash content need to collect data?
- If so, what data and how will the data be collected?
- What can you afford to produce?
- Will you produce the content internally or outsource it?
- Will your content be serialized?
- How often will you update it?
- Does updating the content require a CMS-driven administrative back end?
- What sort of testing environment do you require?

Others

Microsoft Silverlight, Apple QuickTime, Ogg Vorbis, H.264, M4V, MP4—the sheer number of online rich media formats quickly becomes a dizzying array of acronyms that feels more like a random bowl of alphabet soup than a cohesive list of media delivery options. What's more, the success of deploying these formats directly relies on whether or not they are supported by the devices or platforms on which they are viewed. Make sure the format you are considering is supported by the majority of users you will target.

Figure 2.18 Rich media comes in many flavors.

For a more complete list of other online rich media formats, check out the companion site to this book.

User-Generated Content

If your site supports user-generated content—which includes everything from music and video uploads to blog comments—you are faced with a unique set of strategy and content challenges that is not necessarily inherent to a site that supports only one-way communication. On one hand, your site offers a much higher level of engagement, which often leads to more users interacting with both your brand and each other. On the other, you could lose any control you may have over controlling the brand experience. If you edit dissenting comments, you could be viewed as undermining an open dialogue, which could be detrimental to the perception of your company or organization.

Devising a strategy for how you will monitor, support, and, if applicable, moderate user-generated content becomes a priority that requires consensus on what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable and how much time and resources are necessary to engage the community.
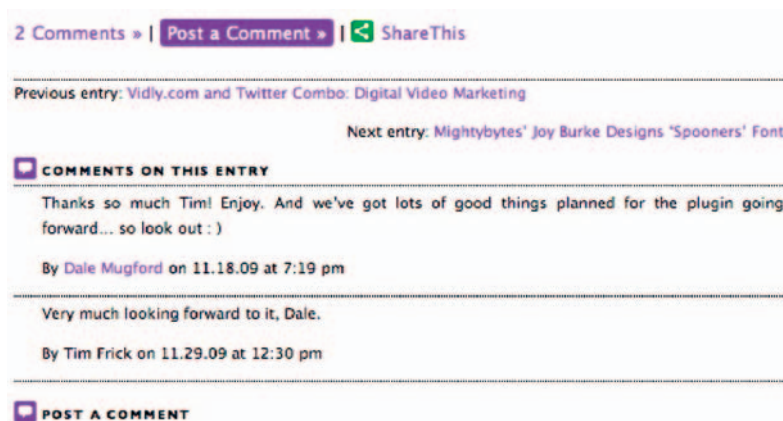
Figure 2.19 User-generated content fosters engagement. How will you support it?

Analytics Strategies

The metrics data of traffic patterns on your site can provide valuable information regarding why the site may or may not be living up to the bottom line expectations placed upon it. Entire books have been written on analytics, but for the purpose of this manuscript we will simply outline the facets of a solid analytics strategy and follow that up in Chapter 15 with a more detailed breakdown of how to choose, set up, and work with an analytics package to get the information you need to improve site performance.

Figure 2.20 Use data from your analytics software to make important decisions about your site.

It is important to ascertain what data you need before you can decide what you will do with those data. If you don't capture the right data up front, then you can't make educated decisions about how best to improve site experiences and continue to engage your community.

The most important question you can ask in terms of analyzing metrics data for your site is not "How is my site meeting business goals?" but "How well is my site meeting customer needs?" When you give this question top priority, it tends to reshape the questions you should ask in order to get useful analytics data:

- Why are people using your site?
- What needs does the site serve?

- How easy is it for users to get what they need from the site?
- How often are they completing tasks?
- What tasks are they completing?
- What tasks are they not completing?
- How does the completion of these tasks affect revenue?
- How can you improve user experiences?
- How do answers to these questions influence the tools you need?

Analytics Packages

Once your site is up and running, you will want to analyze how it performs. We will cover available analytics packages in detail in Chapter 15. When devising an analytics strategy, however, it is important to ascertain the features you need in order to make an educated decision about the right tool to meet those needs. This implies a more business-centric approach to questions than was outlined earlier. Although customer needs should remain the focus of your strategy, you have to take fundamental business decisions such as timeline, budget, and feature sets into consideration as well:

- What traffic pattern and user data do you need to track?
- What traffic sources provide the most fruitful customer interactions?
- What traffic sources provide the least fruitful experiences?
- Where does the most important site content lie?
- What sections of the site provide the most direct revenue?
- What analytics solution should you choose?

Companies with successful analytics programs put customer needs at the heart of their strategy but also pay careful attention to business requirements in order to make decisions that suit as many parties as is possible. They then put significant time into making insights as actionable as possible and realize that this process is an iterative one that evolves over time. The questions asked today may only be moderately relevant in six months—or not at all.

Avinash Kaushik offers a simple 10/90 rule in his book *Analytics: An Hour a Day* from Sybex (an imprint of Wiley Press): "10 percent of the budget should be spent on tools, and 90 percent spent on people (brains) who will be responsible for insights."

Commitment Issues

Without a doubt, one of the biggest challenges to reaping the benefits of a solid on-site website strategy is maintaining a

commitment to that strategy over time. Daily work tasks get in the way, new approaches become a priority, and before you know it your ability to meet the tangible goals outlined in your strategy has been compromised.

Conclusion

We have reviewed a number of important facets of building an effective web strategy that fosters engagement and will help you manage the time and resources necessary to make your site a part of daily business routines. A solid strategy provides the framework on which content and marketing efforts are built as well. While it is important to have a strategy going in, it is also important to realize that web strategy is an iterative process. If after several attempts you realize something isn't working, reevaluate your techniques and try something new. Eventually, you will find an approach that works.

Tip

Revisit your strategic approach regularly and tweak efforts accordingly:

Are you meeting your goals?

Are there new tools or technologies available that can save you time?

Do you need additional help to keep up with your daily tasks?

Are the tasks you currently undertake giving you the results you need?

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3

OFF-SITE STRATEGY

You have established a reliable strategy that will provide a good home base from which to operate in the form of your website. Now let's discuss all the resources outside your website that can be used to drive traffic, increase your site's page rank, and build effective relationships. Thousands of online tools and resources are available to help increase your digital footprint, and planning your strategic approach to using them is a key factor in long-term, ongoing success.

Link Power

One of the easiest ways these external efforts can help marketing endeavors is through the simple act of adding website links to the social media profiles you create. Every time you create a profile on a social networking site, web directory, blog, or social bookmarking site, you are offered the opportunity to include a URL with your profile. These links not only provide an opportunity for profile visitors to check out your site, but each of these links contributes to how search engines interpret the validity of your site's content as well.

Figure 3.1 A hotlink in its natural habitat.

On a personal level, every time someone follows me on Twitter, almost without fail I check the website link on the person's profile. Through a combination of information included in the Twitter feed and the experience I glean from the site I will make a conscious decision regarding whether or not to follow the person back and whether to contact the person for further opportunities. This simple act occurs millions of times each day on Twitter alone. Think about how exponentially more often that happens on the thousands of social sites across the Internet.

Page Rank

From a search engine optimization (SEO) perspective, external links to your site offer an additional bonus as well: they help

Figure 3.2 PageRank is a good general barometer for how much traffic your site gets.

increase traffic to your site. Google ranks all websites with a system from one to ten—called PageRank—that is based on external links and Google's perception of the linking sites' reliability. Though PageRank isn't as important as it was once considered, it still offers a good general barometer of where your site sits in the overall traffic patterns of the Internet.

The more links you have from reputable sources, the higher your rank will be. The higher your rank is, the more often you will show up in search engine results pages as a valid source of information. The more often you show up on search engine results pages (SERPs)—well, you get the picture.

> *A search engine results page (SERP), is the listing of web pages returned by a search engine in response to a keyword query. The results normally include a list of web pages with titles, a link to the page, and a short description showing where the keywords have matched content within the page. A SERP may refer to a single page of links returned, or to the set of all links returned for a search query.*
>
> **—Wikipedia**

So, in a nutshell, if you perpetuate a large number of good, quality links to your site from key sources, you will benefit on many levels. I know this is very *World Wide Web circa 1997,* but it's a fact that still holds true today. In fact, with the proliferation of social networking sites online, it's relevant now more than ever. By the very nature of their existence, social networking sites are preordained to help increase your page rank, because each profile you create offers the opportunity to link back to at least one site, sometimes several.

Relationships

You don't want to target random social sites all willy-nilly, however. After all, it's not about the *amount* of traffic you get but the quality of that traffic. A more important element of your off-site strategy is the relationships you create and nurture on blogs and social networking sites.
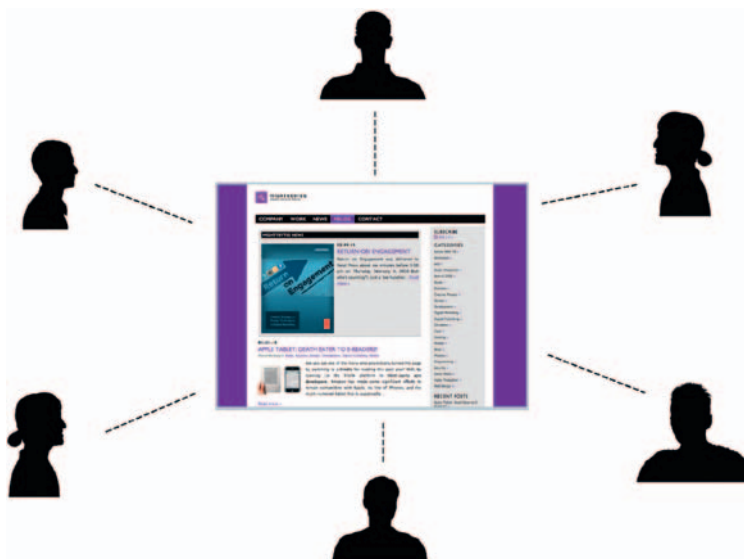
Truth and Transparency

You may think you use social networking sites and blogs to get business, but the reality is you're here to help people, provide information they will find useful, and build relationships, so don't forget that. The natural extension of these efforts is that you may prove to be reputable enough to earn someone's trust and maybe, if you're lucky, their eventual business. But really, those who find success in online community building are there to help, not sell.

The whole notion of transparency is tantamount to this. Companies have been paying bloggers to talk about their products for years, and most online communities will blacklist anyone who they find out is undertaking this process without full disclosure. Or at the very least they will cry "shenanigans." Stay true to who you are and make your intentions as altruistic as possible. It's hard enough to build solid, trust-based relationship face-to-face. Doing so online only adds another set of hurdles to an already challenging endeavor.

Your parents and teachers probably taught you the Golden Rule, to treat others as you would like to be treated. If you've neglected that rule, now is the time to dust that sucker off and put it to good use. Don't lie. Don't complain about people just for the sake of complaining. And don't bother people with unwanted marketing messages. It will only alienate rather than engage them.

Figure 3.4 I can see right through you. And that's a good thing.

> **Tip**
>
> Ponder your approach by starting with these questions:
> Who do you want to align yourself with?
> Who can benefit from what you have to offer?
> How can you help people in ways others can't?
> What value does your expertise provide?
> How can you provide consistent helpful content over time?

Community Consensus

Many of the social networking destinations offer groups centered around a common theme. These groups can be valuable for getting advice, finding resources, networking, and so on. They can also be great destinations for your content. To best take advantage of what they have to offer, however, you will need to make a significant investment in time and energy. Answer questions posed to the group as frequently as you can.

Q. I need this information for my MIS class. The question goes like: If you were to name top three skills that are considered valuable to an organization's IT department these days, what would they be?

Asked by Nazli B. Yuzak (Ta) | October 16, 2007 in Software Development | Closed

★ This answer was selected as **Best Answer**

Tim's answer:
My two cents would be: - Thorough understanding of web technologies as they apply to the business. - Ability to communicate precise technical... see more

Figure 3.5 LinkedIn's "Best Answers" feature.

> **Tip**
>
> Consider the following questions about community consensus:
>
> How will social networking groups factor into your strategy?
>
> What groups are relevant to you?
>
> What groups are relevant to your customers?
>
> What do these groups have to offer you?
>
> What do you have to offer these groups?
>
> Are there opportunities for one-on-one relationships?
>
> How often will you present questions or needs to each group?
>
> How often will you add content to each group?

LinkedIn, for example, has a "Best Answers" feature, which gives group members the ability to rate answers to questions they have posed. Those who provide the best answers as rated by each group have their expertise automatically posted to their profiles. As you can see, truly taking advantage of this feature alone requires some strategic thinking, vigilance, expertise, and plenty of time to peruse questions and provide smart answers.

Mind Your Media

While text-based media is currently the most easily indexed form of content, don't limit yourself to just the written word. Images, audio, video, and other rich media forms such as Flash offer many opportunities to better engage people.

Figure 3.6 Text is most easily indexed now, but other media types are not far behind.

Even though text is currently the most easily indexed form of content, Google and other companies are hard at work creating tools to index other media forms beyond text. Most audio- or video-centric social sites offer the opportunity to tag your content with keyword-rich metadata as well.

More media content means more potential interaction across the vast array of social media and networking sites available. With more messages to convey, possibly in multiple channels to the same users, it's especially important to start with a solid strategy. Below are a few ideas for launching your social media endeavors:

- Research your audience. What sites are they frequenting? Are they expecting text, photos, and other media from you? What types of content are they interacting with? Why is one particular tool or tactic more appropriate for them than another?
- Listen, watch and learn. Posting media in an ongoing stream but not listening for audience comments or feedback, or worse, not engaging in the conversation are common mistakes. Make engagement work for you by engaging in return.
- Use reporting tools to measure the success of what you put out there in all forms of media, then analyze accordingly and, if necessary, revise your approach. Set early goals and adjust your marketing and media plans along the way.
- Your audience may surprise you. You may find that you get unexpected positive responses from a completely new audience or from content that you didn't expect to perform. Don't set your plans in stone. If something works well and surprises you, or doesn't work, don't be afraid to re-evaluate.

On Target

So how do you target the right places for your content and engagement? If one of the biggest challenges in developing a successful off-site strategy is defining an appropriate list of destinations relevant to your business or organization, what approach do you take for finding them? And how do you figure out exactly what the right approach is for providing consistent content to each?

Figure 3.7 Start with a search engine.

Lon Safko and David K. Brake outlined five different types of social media participants in their *Social Media Bible,* published in 2009 from Wiley Press. Their examples were cited for Flickr but could be applicable across any number of social sites.

Lurkers. Those who look but don't participate.

Novices. Those just starting to engage.

Insiders. Those who consistently add to the community.

Leaders. Those who are viewed as experts based on their contributions.

Elders. Those who have moved on.

As with many online endeavors, you can start with a search engine. There are hundreds of directories listing thousands of social sites and tools that may or many not be relevant to your particular needs. All you have to do is search for them. The companion site for this book includes hundreds of relevant links as well. Start by compiling a list of those most relevant to your needs and then prioritize the ones most important to you. As time progresses and you begin spending time in each community, revisit these targets regularly and refine your approach as is relevant to the users each site, tool, or directory serves.

Social Networking

Targeting appropriate social destinations can be challenging and fraught with many false starts. There are scores of sites with more coming online every day, each servicing a specific audience with specific needs. Oftentimes, figuring out whether a site is relevant to your needs means sitting back, listening to the conversations taking place on that site, and deciding whether or not you should participate. Deciding to participate is when the fun really starts, and participating takes time, so plan for that.

Figure 3.8 It seems like there's always a new social networking site out there. Pick those that will best suit your needs.
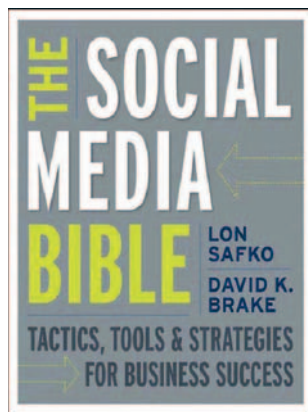
Figure 3.9 *The Social Media Bible.* Lon Safko & David K. Brake. http://www. thesocialmediabible.com/

Lon Safko and David K. Brake, authors of the ox-stunning Social Media Bible say that the motivation for joining and participating in social sites is typically a two-way street. "People usually become motivated to contribute valuable information to the group with the expectation that one will receive useful help or information and recognition in return."

When considering your social strategy, here are a few questions to ask:

- What sites are relevant to you?
- How many sites can you realistically participate in?
- How will time or budget constraints impact your participation?
- How often will you participate in each?
- What do you have to offer?
- What do you expect in return for your participation?

One ID, Many Sites

Another challenge in managing your digital footprint is keeping track of your presence on each social site where you have a profile and are updating content. Once you have amassed a hundred or more social media profiles, how do you keep track of all your user names and passwords on each site?
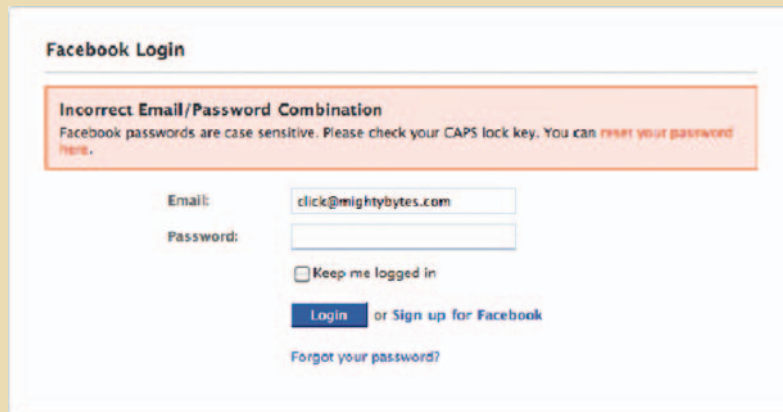
Figure 3.10 What was that password again?

Tools like Facebook Connect and Google's OpenID, which are covered later in this book, can be very helpful for managing log-ins for multiple sites.

Social Aggregators

Another huge challenge is managing your content on each social networking site. Most social accounts offer the ability to post content and comment on the content of others. This can be done in groups, on posted notes, in feeds, on walls, through status updates, and so on.

Also, desktop tools like Sensidea, Nambu, TweetDeck, and others can help you manage connections and content on each site. These tools and others are covered in more detail in Chapters 11 and 12 on social media.

Blogosphere

BlogPulse tracked the number of blogs online at the end of 2009 at 126 million. With numbers that high, there are ample opportunities to connect with like-minded people, share ideas, find resources, make friends, and potentially earn new business. Just because you have a blog of your own, however, shouldn't mean you're exempt from using other blogs and being a valuable

Tip

Here are some questions to ask about social aggregators:
  What software tools are available?
  Which tools are relevant to your needs?
  What technology options (operating system, device, etc.) should be considered before implementation?

member of those communities. This is one of the most common missteps of new bloggers. So much time is spent creating content for their own blogs that they neglect the wealth of resources and connection opportunities available to them on the blogs of others.
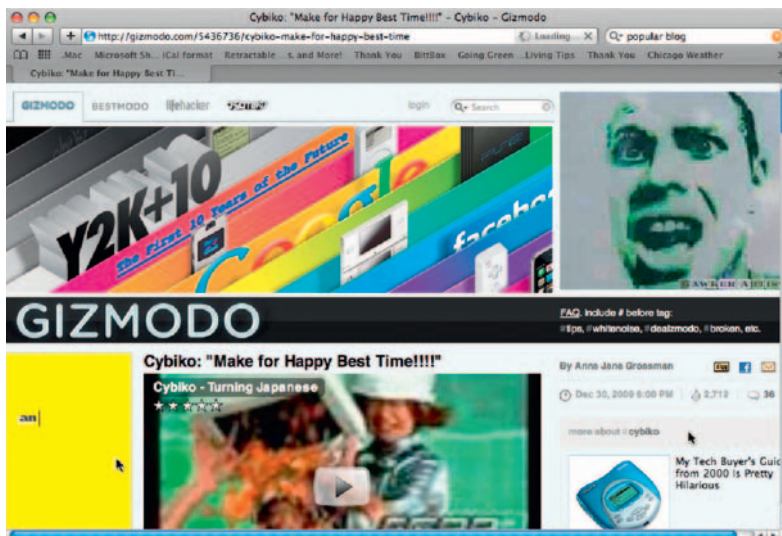
Figure 3.11 Keep the blog rolling.

Lack of traffic is one of the most common reasons for blog abandonment. If your blog isn't generating any traffic, most likely one of two things is happening: either you are not providing content that is relevant to your audience's need or you are not putting enough effort into building community around your content. Because this chapter covers off-site strategy, we will focus on other people's blogs, not your own.

Commenting on other blogs provides you with an opportunity to offer your expertise, connect with people, and link back to any potentially relevant content of your own. This is a great way to reinforce your expertise and drive traffic to your own blog or site. It is a powerful way to build community and increase your digital footprint, but it also requires a significant amount of time and effort.

That said, include ample time in your strategy for commenting on other blogs relevant to your own. Budget for that time, and then make sure you do it as often as the budget allows. You will indeed see a marked difference in traffic patterns, connections, and so on.

Directories

There are nearly as many business and organization directories online as there are social sites. Some serve as general web listings, others serve specific niche audiences. All of them offer an opportunity to include a link back to your own site or blog.
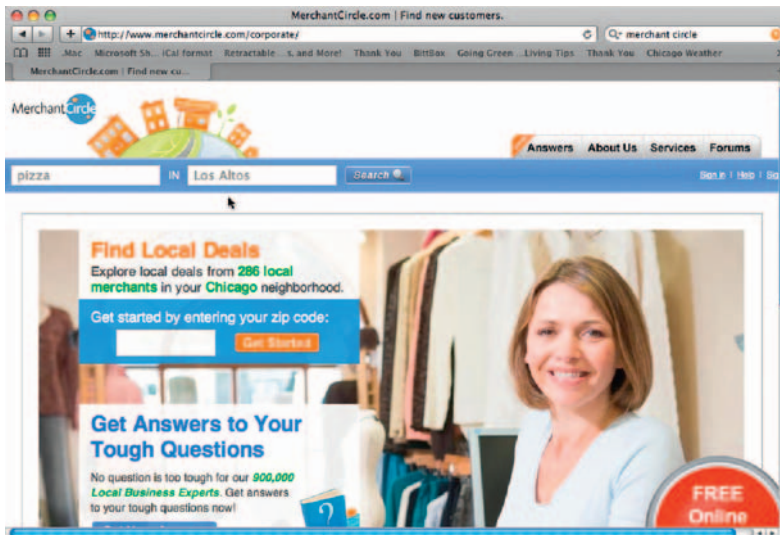
Online directories fall into several categories.

Blog Directories

Sites like Blogcatalog.com and Bloggingfusion.com are blog directories that offer blog search and listings categorized by topic. In many cases these listings are free.

Business Directories

Sites like Merchant Circle and Yelp offer free general business listings and other online promotional tools to help potential new customers find your blog.

Community Directories

Directories like Top Design Firms and Design Directory offer community listings centered around a certain topic, such as design and environmentalism.

Industry Directories

Sites like Hoovers.com, Yahoo! Directory, Google Directory, and others offer business listings by category and local listings as well. These provide categories by industry and detail to target your audience. You can also search for industry-specific sites.

Personal Directories

If you're a freelancer or "gun-for-hire," perhaps directories like Freelance Switch or eLance would be better suited for you.

Article Directories

Submitting content to article directories based on a targeted directory topic category can increase search engine results and drive traffic. In addition to generating traffic, many of these sites provide back links as well. Thousands of article directories exist. Here are a few:

- FindArticles.com
- Buzzle.com
- GoArticles.com

Be careful how you approach article submission, however. Search engines don't tend to take kindly to duplicate content. Be sure the directories you submit content to are reputable and provide valid services. Article spinning—the process of rewriting articles, or portions of articles, to avoid being penalized by the search engines—is considered a black hat SEO technique. There are even software applications you can purchase that will spin the articles for you. Using them or a blacklisted directory can get you banned from the search engines.

DMOZ

The Open Directory Project is a manually edited list of sites and businesses. According to DMOZ, it is "the largest, most comprehensive human-edited directory of the Web. It is constructed and maintained by a vast, global community of volunteer editors."

Figure 3.13 DMOZ is still maintained by humans. How novel!

Of course, you can manually submit your sites to the major search engines in just a few minutes, but it's questionable as to how effective that will actually be. Without good content to back your submission up, it may be a moot point.

Unlike a lot of social sites, directory listings can, for the most part, be filled out once without a stringent requirement for return visits.

Social Bookmarking

Sites like Delicious, Digg, StumbleUpon, and Reddit allow you to post links to relevant content and apply tags to your link. Each link gets associated with your profile, and each tag gets thrown into the site's *tag cloud*, which all users can see. Some sites, such as Digg, place links hierarchically on their front pages based on user votes. In this manner, your content can potentially be seen by thousands of viewers in a very short time. In their book, web design pundits Smashing Magazine noted "we didn't observe significant spikes in traffic until . . . our stories started hitting the mighty Digg's front page" (*Smashing Book*, p. 292).

Also, some URL shorteners such as bit.ly will give you metrics data on how many clicks your link received, so sometimes if you want to track how many specific hits your link gets, it might make sense to run the URL through one of these tools before posting the link.

Figure 3.14 Digg it. Social bookmarking sites can potentially spike your site traffic quickly.

Press Release Services

Online news release distribution services offer another great way to build link power. Each time you distribute a release through these services, you can include links to your site, your work, your awards, and so on. Some services charge distributions fees, others are free. This is a great way to disseminate thousands of links to high-profile destinations in a short period of time.

Awards, high-profile projects, volunteer work, strategic partnerships, new clients, and so on all offer great press

Figure 3.15 Industry awards offer a great opportunity to put out a press release. Of course, you do have to win them first.

release opportunities. Of course, having a publicist with his or her own set of existing media relationships will help widen your coverage as well, but barring that, writing a release and distributing it via a wire service is a simple and easy way to get started.

Photo Sharing

Every photo you post to a sharing site like Flickr has text-based metadata associated with it. This offers another great opportunity to associate keyword-rich content and site links with your profile. Photos taken at industry events, how-to tutorial photos, or other images that may be of interest to your community are perfect subject matter and should be updated as regularly as your schedule allows.
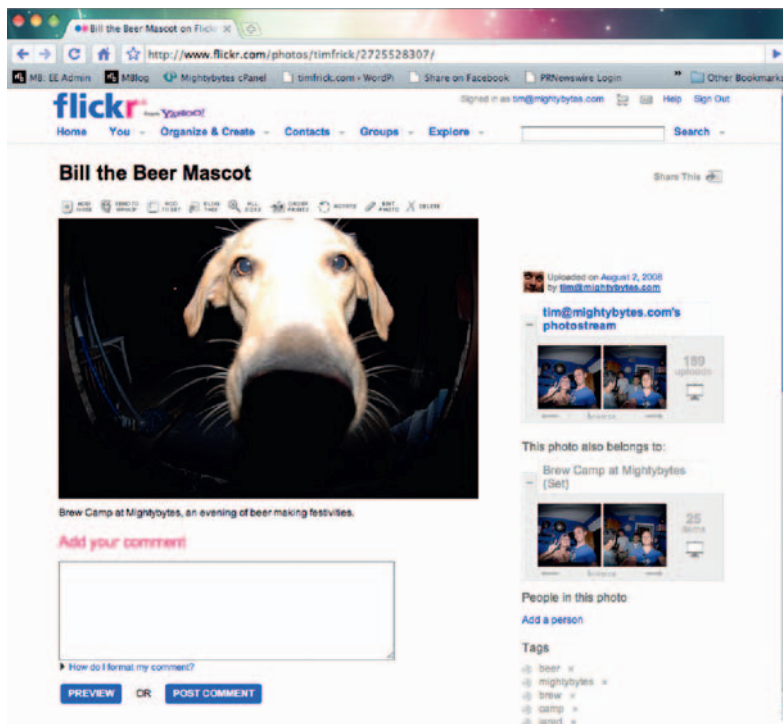
Figure 3.16 Flickr gets high marks for how well its photos rank in the search engines.

Video

Video is an incredible communication tool, but one that requires a bit more forethought. It takes up more bandwidth than any other media format and can be time-consuming to create. It typically requires editing skills and, if you want a professional result, graphic design, animation, and audio skills as well.

Figure 3.17 Zontar says use video wisely.

There are many ways to create video that will work well online, but you need to figure out the following:

Video Strategy

- What sort of content will you produce?
- How often will you produce this content?
- What kind of content production budget do you have?
- How much traffic do you hope to get with this content?
- What tools will you need to purchase for creating content?
- Do you need a dedicated editor/producer?
- Which sites are appropriate for your content?

Video Implementation

- How will you maintain a high level of video quality throughout production?
- What hardware do you need to create video content?

- What software do you need to create video content?
- How many graphics, animations, and other finishing touches will be required for each piece?
- How long will it take to create each video?
- What video sharing sites are relevant destinations for your content?
- Will you host the video content yourself or use online tools?
- How will you distribute the video content?
- How will you track video performance and metrics?

Answers to these questions are covered in detail in Chapters 13 and 14 on video production and distribution.

Commitment Issues

As mentioned in Chapter 1 on general strategy, maintaining momentum and a commitment over time to the proliferation and aggregation of your content and the relationships you build online is, for most people, the biggest challenge to seeing a viable long-term return on these endeavors. Time, energy, and the resources necessary to stay up-to-date on new techniques or tools offer daunting challenges if you are trying to integrate social media and other off-site marketing efforts into an already busy work schedule. Put some serious thought into resource management and how you will keep momentum for the long haul.

Monitoring and Metrics

Google Analytics, Compete, Woopra, and other available monitoring tools will give you huge amounts of information regarding the traffic on your own site, but how do you measure your influence on blogs, Twitter, and across social media sites? Many tools are available to help track your influence, some better than others. Find tools that will work for your specific needs, and build a strategy around them.

Lather, Rinse, Repeat

The key to success with analytics tools for both on-site and off-site endeavors is to use the data they provide to regularly try new techniques and figure out which work best. Build new landing pages on your site, try a new content approach on Twitter, segment your Facebook fans into special groups. As you hone and refine your approach, you will begin to see which efforts work and which don't.

The Plan

So then what do you put into an effective off-site and social media plan? Just as in previous chapters, answer all or many of the questions posed in this chapter, and you're off to a good start. Document the answers, organize them into categories that make sense, assign tasks and divvy up resources, then share the results with all relevant parties so you can get started. And remember to revise as you go along. As time passes you will find that your approach will no doubt evolve, and that's okay.
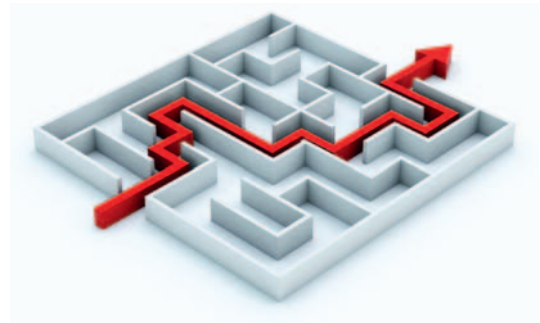
Figure 3.18 Have a plan.

Conclusion

Over the past three chapters we have covered a general approach to managing your online presence, building relationships, and increasing your digital footprint through general content and specific on-site/off-site strategies. In the chapters to come, we will explore more hands-on approaches to many of the concepts outlined thus far.

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ON-SITE TECHNIQUES

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4

CONTENT

While search engines are feverishly working to extract relevant content data from rich media files (audio, video, Flash, etc.), text, links, and metadata still rule as the de facto standard by which they interpret site content and feed results. Developing keyword-rich site content that is updated frequently and that search engines can easily recognize will go a long way in determining the amount of traffic you get.

Search engines aside, how you write and organize your content will also make the difference between satisfied or frustrated users. If your goal is to convert those users to customers at some point during their visit, you obviously want to alleviate the frustration factor at all points.

In this chapter we'll discuss your site's content and how it can be created in a way to benefit both humans and machines without alienating either.
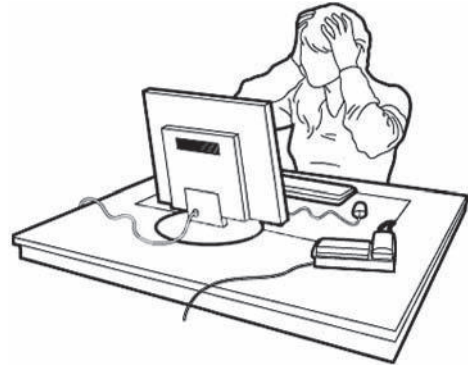
Figure 4.1 Frustrated users are unlikely customers.

General Content Guidelines

There is a wealth of information available on writing content for the web. A Google search of 'writing content for the web' turns up about 86,900,000 results, of which 89,700 are books and 18,700,000 are blogs. From all of these resources we can glean a handful of key guidelines to consider when developing content for your own site:

- Write content in your users' vocabulary.
- Write content in an active voice and make sure grammar and spelling are correct.
- Write text that is brief and easy for readers to scan for relevant information.
- Use keyword-rich content that conveys your message and works in search engine strategies.
- Use short paragraphs or bulleted lists for ease of reading.
- Show pricing clearly, or indicate if something is free (requires membership, etc.).

- Use keyword-rich anchor text in your links.
- Clearly what a user's next move is through consistent use of calls-to-action.

Information Architecture

Any good site uses a foundation of strong information architecture (I/A). It is an important step worth mentioning when it comes to building an effective website. Again, if you put all your off-site efforts into driving traffic to a site that is confusing or poorly laid out, those efforts are all for naught and you may lose that potential customer.

To maintain relevancy as I/A relates to this book's content, we will cover the broad strokes of information architecture in regard to building connections with customers and providing an experience that will help users become customers.

If the goal is to get users to the page they need within one or two clicks at all times (which it should be), you owe it to them to keep the content organized in a hierarchical manner that makes sense. Depending on the nature of your site, this could take five minutes, five days, or five weeks. Keeping the end user's experience in mind at all times will go a long way in creating a navigation system that makes sense.

Books › **Computers & Internet** › **Project Management**

Figure 4.2 Users should always be able to get where they want to go in a click or two as this breadcrumb trail shows.

Also, if you are building a site with some sort of content management system (covered in detail in Chapter 6), you will need to set up content categories anyway, so you might as well do it as part of the content development process.

Usability

Although usability is often associated with the design process, the structure of your site's content is really where best practices start. It's about defining your site's content in a manner that makes intuitive sense to users (we'll cover search engines in a bit). The structure should make natural sense to anyone arriving at your site looking for relevant information, and what users can't find by clicking on a couple well-placed buttons, they should be able to reach via a search field. This usually entails breaking up your content into primary navigation categories (about us, contact, news, etc.) and subnavigation categories (press releases, electronic press kits, press coverage, etc.). Any content or messaging you are using to drive traffic should be clearly displayed

Breadcrumb Trail

A navigation aid that helps users keep track of their location within a site. Breadcrumb trails typically appear horizontally across the top of a web page.

on the user landing page as well in order to continue a fluid user experience.

Main Navigation

Although there's no hard-and-fast rule that applies to all sites, in general it's a good idea to keep your primary navigation to about a half-dozen broad-stroke categories or so if at all possible. This makes it easy for users to decide where to click to get the necessary information once they arrive on your home page or a custom landing page. They can then drill down for the specifics of what they need.

Figure 4.3 A common navigation bar.

Subnavigation

Most likely, your sublevel navigation will run deeper than your main navigation, with more links and categories as you figure out how best to sort through the information on your site and present it to users. The biggest challenge here is figuring out where sublevel categories fall under your main navigation headers so that content areas don't confuse users. Success in this area often comes through trial and error and prototyping, and looking at your site metrics along the way to see where users may be clicking or getting lost.

It is also a good idea to visually separate subnavigation from your main navigation, though this is more a design challenge than a content development challenge and as such will be covered in detail in Chapter 5.

Cross Nav

Linking sections of your site together from within sublevel pages can also help users to quickly get the information they need. This is especially important for service-based companies like design firms, landscapers, accountants, and so on. A breakdown of services will be much more useful if at the end of each service description you include direct links to work you have done in that specific service category. Product sites like Amazon, iTunes, and eMusic use this technique to great effect as well with a referral feature: "People who bought this title also bought . . ."

Search

If your site only has a handful of pages, a search box may not be necessary. But because regular content updates drive search engine traffic, the content will no doubt grow and eventually you will need some sort of search functionality, even if it is just a simple text field with a search button. Most content management systems have built-in search functionality that is easy to implement.

Forms

Include contact forms on your site rather than email addresses, which can be harvested by spammers. Well-designed forms are the quickest and easiest way for potential customers to get in touch with you, offer feedback, discuss potential projects, get support, and so on. This may seem like obvious advice, but you would be surprised at how many sites still don't include them.

Testimonials and Case Studies

Few things offer more credibility than enthusiastic testimonials from your customers, patrons, donors, and so on. If possible, give them a place of prominence on your site.

If you're a service-based company, potential customers will probably want more information on the details of some of your projects. Consider adding keyword-rich case studies.

Potential Pitfalls

What if you have content that doesn't neatly fit into any one category? How do you weigh its priority within the bigger picture of your site architecture? Again, the best answer to these questions is often found through trial and error by polling users, prototyping, and extensive testing.

The goal is to find as few well-defined categories for main and sublevel navigation as possible and fit content within those categories. If some content doesn't fit neatly into these buckets, you may need to include custom links, buttons, callouts, and other such features that fit nicely into the design but do not compete with your navigation.

Custom Landing Pages

Custom landing pages are used for a variety of reasons but most often they include special offers, deals, discounts, free content, and so on for the purpose of increasing sales or building a customer base.

Figure 4.5 Make sure your custom landing pages are a no-brainer for your customers.

When you add custom landing pages to your site, make sure users have an easy-to-follow navigation path to get them where they need to go. If you want something from your customers—their email address, for them to buy a product or make a donation, and so on— make sure what you want users to do is neatly laid out before them. In other words, if you are offering a free white paper in exchange for email information, make sure that clearly labeled buttons or form elements on the page make their next step a no-brainer.

Once you have guided users through this process, be sure to make it easy for them to get back to your site again in the future, and offer a follow-up link after their action is complete for a continued experience to relevant site content. It is important when using custom landing pages that are offered for a limited time frame (as many are), to keep an eye on that custom URL when nearing the offer expiration. At the end of your promotion, it should redirect to a new page, and/or at least offer a message about the state of your custom offer and provide users a link to continue on to something on your site of value.

The Nav Chart

Once you have sketched out the general framework of your site in rough draft form, be it on cocktail napkins or sketch paper, consider formalizing it for everyone to review. A well-built navigational flowchart is extremely helpful in getting clients, designers, writers, and marketers on the same page, so to speak.

Nav Chart Exercise

Cocktail napkins, stickies, or sketch paper are a great place to start fleshing out site categories, but if you prefer to share digital documents, software programs like Omnigraffle or Visio provide

Figure 4.6 Cocktail napkins are fantastic in a pinch, but there are great digital tools for fleshing out your ideas as well.
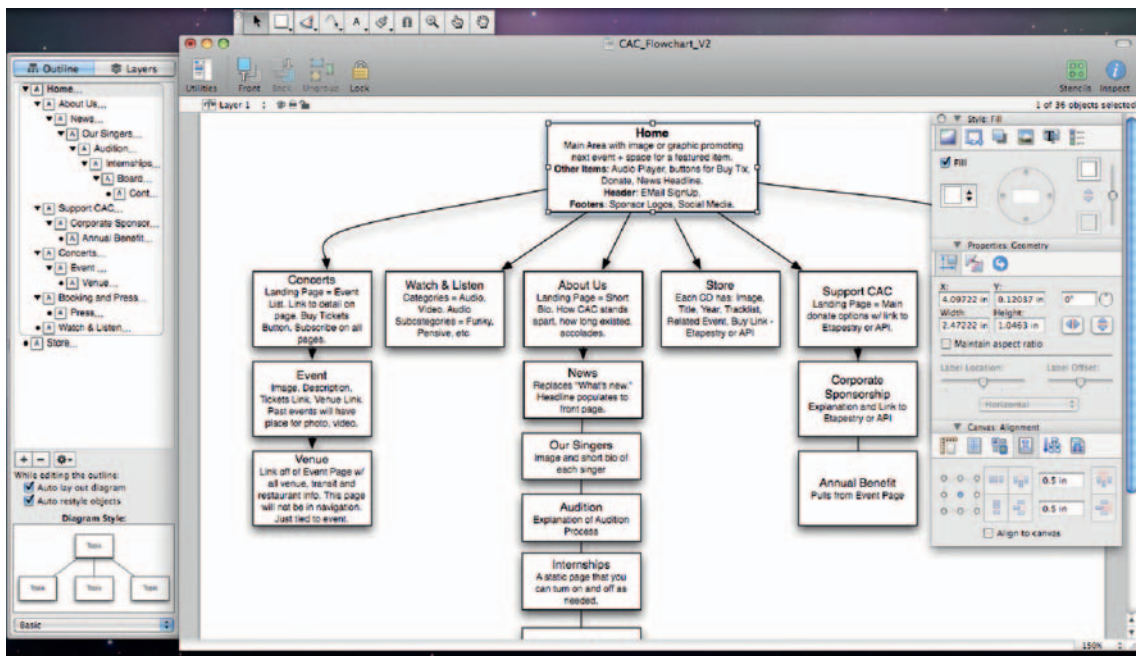
Figure 4.7 Omnigraffle is one of many apps great for creating navigation charts.

a wealth of tools for building navigation charts in nearly every shape or form you can imagine.

Try these basic steps to create your own navigation chart or to serve as a team exercise with your staff:

- *Map.* First, write out every possible category you can think of. The sky's the limit. Don't hold anything back. Jot them all down in no particular order, focusing on any and all potential needs now and in the future. Include external content such as social media profiles as well. If you're kicking it old school, sticky notes or a whiteboard are a great way to get started. Otherwise, the software packages mentioned earlier offer palettes that allow you to create content boxes with drag-and-drop ease.

- *Organize.* Group your list of categories together in ways that make sense to you. Are there sublevel sections that fit neatly under several categories? How will you deal with this?

- *Prioritize.* Are there categories you can merge or delete? How will internal site pages and external social media pages maintain content consistency? If applicable, color code site sections for easy visual identification.

- *Connect.* Visualize connections with arrows or lines between your boxes. Include both linear and nonlinear user paths through the site.

Sitemaps

Adding a sitemap can be a great way for both humans and search engines alike to better interpret your site and its content. An HTML sitemap gives users a quick bird's-eye view of all the content on your site in a visual hierarchy, which can help them quickly find the things they need.

Figure 4.8 HTML sitemaps are handy for users.

Figure 4.9 XML sitemaps help search engines understand your content.

Figure 4.10 There are a lot of handy tools out there to assist with sitemap generation.

Webmaster Central

Google offers a handy set of tools for webmasters to help you manage your site and Google's interpretation of it. There are lots of helpful pages including Webmaster Checklist, Guidelines, and a Webmaster Central Blog to get your feet wet. Plus there are a ton of links to more specific resources and discussion boards to help you along the way.

You can also submit your sitemap for stats and indexing of URLs. The keywords table Google finds when crawling your site is a great tool to find what is on the site currently, and this can be used to redefine new content, determine keywords, marketing and advertising choices, and more. In short, it is an easy-to-use resource to improve targeted traffic. Google Webmaster Central is located at www.google.com/webmasters.

Webmaster Tools Tip

Register your website in Google Webmaster Tools to get free access to your dashboard, which these site categories: site configuration, your site on the web, and diagnostics. With it, you can view various features on your site:

Top search queries
Crawl access and errors
Crawl stats
Links to your site
Site links
Keywords
Internal links
Subscriber stats
HTML suggestions

Figure 4.11 Google's Webmaster Tools provides a handy interface for submitting a sitemap.

Keywords

Once your site's information architecture is nailed down, you'll need to focus on design and written content. We'll cover design specifics in Chapter 5, but for the purpose of this chapter we're focusing on written content. And where better to start discussing the actual written elements of your site than with keywords?

Keywords versus Meta Tags

There is an important difference between the keywords you use in your site content and the *keywords* meta tag that is inserted into the header of your web page. Metadata is inserted into page code to help provide structural content definition, guide search engines, provide semantic identifiers, and so on. Keyword-rich content is what your users and site visitors actually read and interact with. The *keywords* tag is one of many used within your site's code. *Title, Anchor,* and *Description* tags are also of importance when it comes to SEO, but for now, let's focus on the keywords that reside in your written content.

Wherever possible, keywords should be used early and often within the actual written content of each page. Such is not the case with the keywords metatag. Keywords there should be used sparingly and strategically. Unfortunately, the all too common practice of keyword stuffing—cramming hundreds of keywords into a web page's metadata—has rendered the keywords meta tag nearly useless over time. Google has stated it "doesn't use the 'keywords' meta tag in our web search ranking." Nonetheless, a small handful of strategically important keywords in the tag can't hurt. You are not going to take a huge hit in download time just by adding a half-dozen words to your metadata.

Keywords are a set of search terms and phrases that people might use to find you. By including them in the written content of your site, there's a better chance that your content will show up in search engines results pages (SERPs), thus driving more traffic.

But with the web, it's never really that simple, is it? If it was just a matter of including some smart words on your pages to reach Google's top spot, wouldn't everyone do that? Success with keywords depends on a number of things:

- *Keyword placement.* Site pages that contain a greater concentration of keywords higher up within page content tend to be ranked higher than those with few keywords or keywords at page bottom.
- *Keyword location.* Important keywords should, preferably, be featured in the first few words (50 to 100, but hopefully even sooner) of a page's text content. "The engines do appear to

Figure 4.12 Keyword stuffing your meta tags is a technique on the naughty list (often referred to as "Black Hat SEO").

Types of Keywords

Long Tail: Highly specific search phrases comprised of three to five keywords.
(Example: iPod Nano 8GB with video)

Broad Term: Search terms that are more popular and generalized.
(Example: Music Player)

Figure 4.13 Hold the stuffing: Location, placement, and density are three important factors to consider when adding keywords to your pages.

have some preference for pages that employ keywords sooner, rather than later, in the text." (From "The Perfectly Optimized Page," SEOmoz.org.)

- *Keyword density.* To date, pages with more keywords tend to show up higher in search results than those with little or no keyword density. Abuse of keyword repetition in recent years has created some shift in how search engines treat dense keywords, however. The number of keywords that is ideal is in some debate. In general, a keyword density somewhere between 2% and 8% seems to be considered acceptable.
- *Update frequency.* Regular site updates incite search engine crawls. The more often you add keyword-rich content to your site, the more often it is crawled and the more likely it is that your content will show up higher in SERPs.

Search engines are programmed to provide more prominence to fresh content (just in case it is time sensitive information ideal for mass consumption). This reporter-like quality has an advantage to blogs which have RSS feeds (really simple syndication) which go out to a roving audience skimming for related topics. As a result, your RSS feed is one of your website's greatest assets for acquiring traffic and links if your content has appeal.

—Jeffrey Smith, SEO and the Fresh Link/Content Factor

Keyword Tools

So how do you figure out which keywords are right for your site? There are a number of online options to help you define the

Figure 4.14 Wordtracker and Google Trends are helpful keyword tools.

right set of words and phrases to use on your site, your social media profiles, website directories, and so on.

Wordtracker

Wordtracker is an industry-leading keyword research tool, from a privately owned company, that identifies keywords and search phrases. A great tool for marketing, designers, and developers, you can see how many competitors are using what words; Wordtracker also helps you to see what keywords are relevant for your user's potential queries. It works generally by creating a database of millions of search terms gathered from Metacrawlers that are updated weekly. It has a great amount of applause and many success stories associated with its use in web design and business planning. Wordtracker is available with a subscription from www.wordtracker.com, and a more detailed tour of its use is offered there. Wordtracker also offers a free keyword help tool at http://freekeywords.wordtracker.com.

Google Trends

Figure 4.15 With Google Trends, you can choose terms and see how they have been searched in the past. Sweet!
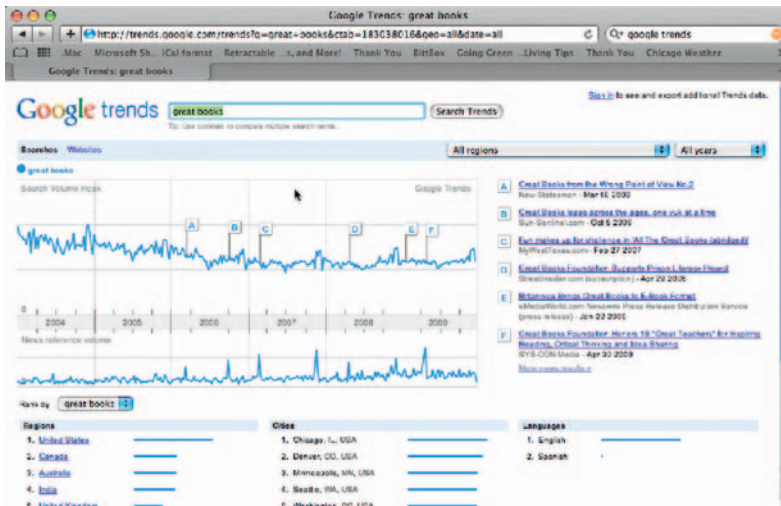
Google Trends is a free tool, available at Google.com/trends, that compares the most popular search terms by global Google users. You can choose up to five topics to see how they have been searched over time, how frequently they have appeared in Google News, and in which regions the searches are most performed. A handy graph displays its Search Volume Index, an analysis by Google Trends of web searches for the terms you are looking into. A good starter's tool is the Google Search-Based Keyword Tool (www.google.com/sktool/#) where you can check for suggested keywords and search terms.

More free and for-purchase keyword tools and applications are being released all the time, but these are two good places to start, and they are trusted sources. Be aware that some free web

keyword tools are used by companies as promotions to get users to sign up for services, so as always, look into what you are using before you invest a lot of time into it.

Keyword Exercise

If you don't want to use the tools discussed earlier and you still can't figure out which keywords to use for your site, try this simple exercise to get you on the right path:

- Write down five to ten words that describe your website offering.
- Write down five to ten words that differentiate your site from others.
- Narrow each list down to a few choice words.
- Write three search phrase combinations from those words. Remember to use a combination of broad term and long tail keywords in natural phrases that one would actually search on.

In other words, if you are selling bobbleheads online, you might consider the following keyword phrases:

bobblehead customized

bobblehead personalized

booblehead collectible

bobblehead celebrities

bobblehead sports figures

bobblehead superheroes

bobblehead political

If you're the only place that sells the talking variety of bobbleheads, then you might want to consider these keywords:

talking bobbleheads

bobbleheads with voice

Considering what people often search for in terms of your area of expertise, you might pare down these lists into the following:

talking superhero bobbleheads

talking presidential bobbleheads

From that final list, consider carefully what phrases people might use in their search queries:

Superhero Obama talking bobblehead

This way, if you are selling this item (as this exercise found one such for sale), your customers will find it in a few easy clicks.
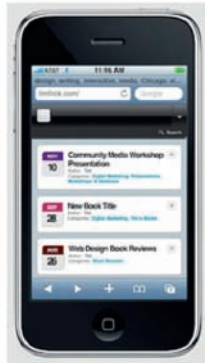
Content Approaches

Once you have defined a set of keywords and search phrases, how do you create written content for your site that meets the needs of the people who read it and the search engines that crawl it?

Figure 4.16 It's important to write using a tone that is suitable to your company's image.

Keep It Real and Readable

In addition to writing for people rather than machines, be sure to find a voice that sounds natural and approachable. Avoid "corp-u-speak" whenever possible. It just turns people off. Professionalism is one thing, but people want to interact with a person, not an inhuman machine.

Shoot for a reading level that appeals to the broadest audience possible. Sure, you want to sound intelligent and passionate, but big words can be as intimidating as they are fun to look up in your thesaurus. Use them sparingly.

Finally, have a sense of humor about yourself. This may be a personal preference, but in general I have found people tend to react more favorably to web content that is infused with elements of humor than they do to dry, wordy pages chock-full of industry buzzwords. Of course, irreverence only goes so far. Having a sense of humor is one thing, offending people or undermining your own integrity for the sake of getting a laugh is quite another.

Maintain Consistency

Although a multiuser blog *should* have different voices for each author who contributes to it, a level of consistency from page to page for the actual content of your site will go a long way in conveying a sense of professionalism. For instance, on the Mightybytes company blog we have a content developer and marketer who creates most of our posts, but we also have posts from developers, designers, and colleagues who offer their own expertise and perspective in their own unique voice and who can convey and create discussions best with their target audience.

Maintain Balance

Find a workable balance between clarity, voice, keyword usage, and simplicity whenever possible on your site pages. The old adage "Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, tell 'em, and tell 'em what you told 'em" is a good, simple approach to take. A mildly more technical way of saying the same thing is to shoot for the following in your entries:

Figure 4.17 Writing for your audience can be a balancing act.

- *Topic sentence.* A keyword-rich introductory sentence that outlines what your content is all about.
- *Content.* The "meat and potatoes" of what you have to say.
- *Review.* A brief wrap-up that recounts your main idea(s).

Oh, and don't forget word count. If you can do all of the above in 500 words or fewer, your readers will appreciate your clarity and ultimately get more from your content.

Again, write for people, not machines—but keep the machines in mind.

Tag, You're It

While keywords should be peppered throughout the user-facing front end of your site, there is an equally important though less frequently seen element that also plays a large role in how search engines interpret its content: tags and metadata.

Metadata for Search Engines

The following is a partial list of tags that can help search engines better understand the markup used on your site pages.

Recommended tags

- Meta content language = <meta http-equiv = "Content-Language" CONTENT = "en-GB">
- Meta content type = <meta http-equiv = "Content-Type" content = "text/html; charset = iso-8859-1">
- Meta description = <meta name = "description" CONTENT = "Chicago design firm.">
- Meta language = <meta name = "language" content = "English"/>

Optional Tags:

- Meta keywords = <meta name = "keywords" content = "Mightybytes, interactive, design, Chicago, design driven media, web, video, Flash, mighty, bytes"/>
- Meta author = <meta name = "Author" CONTENT = "John Doe, jdoe@mysuperwebsite.com">
- Meta copyright = <meta name = "copyright" content = "Copyright 2008">
- Meta MSN (No ODP) = <meta name = "msnbot" CONTENT = "NOODP">
- Meta abstract = <meta name = "Abstract" CONTENT = "Short description of page">
- Meta designer = <meta name = "Designer" CONTENT = "Joy Burke">

Check with the search engines you are using for specifications, and it is recommended that you use meta tags in accordance with the World Wide Web Consortium Metadata Specifications from W3C.org.

Search engine optimization for organic search results, not paid search listings, depends on several facets of your website techniques. The following guidelines from the SEO Traffic Spider site (www.seotrafficspider.com/webmasters-guide.html) offer tactics for improving the search engine positioning for your website.

Page Title

The page title, also referred to as the "title tag," should be unique for each page of your website. This tag tells search engines and the visitors what that particular web page is all about. The title tag of each page should contain the business/website name followed by important information that relates to the web page. One must avoid the following:

- Recording a title tag that is not relevant to the information present on the web page
- Recording the same title tag across all the pages of the website
- Recording long title tags over 50 characters or so

Meta Description

The meta description tag gives both the search engines and the visitors who perform a search on the search engine an idea of what the web page is all about. That's why it's important to precisely summarize the content of your web page. It's always safe to keep the meta description tag within 160 characters (including spaces), as the rest of it is truncated. One must avoid the following:

- Writing a meta description that is not relevant to the information presented on the web page
- Recording the same meta description across all the web pages of the website
- Recording the meta description with only keywords

URL Structure

It's important to create a URL structure that is friendly to the search engines as this will help in better indexing of your website. For this reason, it is essential to create appropriate filenames and expressive categories on your website. For example, an unfriendly URL structure is http://www.mywebsite.com/forum21//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=454737.htm. Such a URL is not only unfriendly but also confusing.
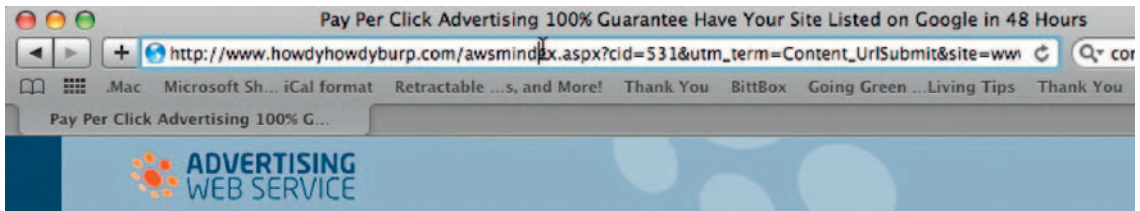

Tag vs. Meta Title

There is a difference between a page's Title Tag and a Meta Title Tag that should be noted when building pages.

The Title Tag is expressed as:

<TITLE> **Page Title Here**</TITLE>

The Meta Title Tag is written as:

<META NAME="Title" CONTENT="**Page Title Here**">

While a keyword-rich Title Tag is essential to search engine optimization, the jury's out as to the effectiveness of the Meta Title Tag. SEO guru Jerry West of Web Marketing Now says results boosts are "nonexistent" when using a Meta Title tag within your pages. "Personally, I don't use the tag as I see no benefits and have seen some instances of lower ranking in using it."

http://www.webmarketingnow.com/tips/meta-title.html

URL Tips

Avoid the following:
Recording long URLs

Recording the same URL across all the web pages

Recording deep nested subdirectories

Recording irrelevant directory names

Figure 4.18 Make sure your URL is search-engine friendly, not like this one.

Website Navigation

A website that is easy to navigate can help visitors find the information they are looking for. It also helps the search engines in indexing pages appropriately. It is important to ensure that all the web pages of your site are interlinked properly and show the correct page when clicked on. The use of sitemaps both HTML and XML help the spiders to crawl the website easily and also index it. Avoid the following:

- Creating complex websites that are difficult to navigate
- Creating drop-down menus
- Developing an HTML sitemap in which the pages are not organized
- Indexing 404 pages in the search engine

Unique Content

The content that is hosted on your web page needs to be informative, such that it can elicit action. Ensure that the content is not copied and is 100% your own creativity. Keep the content focused around your primary keywords, and ensure that the keyword density somewhere between 2% and 8%. It is also good to keep changing the content on your website so that the visitors can see that the site is not static but dynamic with its content. Avoid the following:

- Using images that serve as textual content
- Using long sentences
- Including incorrect grammar and spelling mistakes
- Duplicating content across pages of your website
- Stuffing keywords unnecessarily

Anchor Text

Also known as link label or link title, the anchor text of a hyperlink is what a user actually reads in the links on your site. Clearly written anchor text will help users understand where links

lead, and it helps search engines interpret what a page is all about and where it links to. Avoid the following:

- Using general anchor texts like 'click here' or 'read more'
- Using anchor text that is not related to the content of the web page it sits on
- Using long sentences
- Creating unnecessary links

Ford, General Motors and Chrysler are hoping to gain ground at the expense of Toyota — the reverse of what they had been experiencing for decades — by offering $1,000 discounts to buyers who trade in a Toyota vehicle through the end of February. Hyundai offered a similar deal, but it ended Monday.

Toyota said on Monday that dealers would begin making repairs by this weekend and that sales could resume of the recalled models after they have been fixed, but vehicles that already had been sold are a priority.

Figure 4.19 The anchor text is what a user actually reads in your hyperlinks.

Heading Tags

Heading tags are used to represent the hierarchical structure of a web page's content. Heading tags come in six sizes: h1, h2, h3, h4, h5, and h6. These tags should be used to represent the structural order of the page: H1 holds more weight than H2, and so on.

- Each page should only have one H1 tag.
- Each H1 tag should refer to specific page content rather than the entire site.
- H2 – H6 tags should help break the page into sections in a natural hierarchical order.

Alt Tag Optimization

Images can't be read by a spider when they crawl on the website. Therefore, it is important to use alt tags for the images. It is best to use the primary keyword as the alt tag following the contents that describe the page:

- Avoid using long filenames.
- Avoid stuffing an excess of keywords in the alt tags.

Robots.txt File

A robots.txt file is used to prohibit the robots from crawling a particular page based on the nature and content of information that is available. This file must be placed in the root directory of your site and also named as robots.txt.

Example of a Robots.txt File

```
User-agent: *
Disallow:
/cgi-bin/
Disallow:
/error/
Disallow: /font/
Disallow: /images/
Disallow: /includes/
Disallow: /mt-static/
Disallow: /newsletter/
Disallow: /.htaccess
Disallow: /dev/
Disallow: /TSG/
Disallow: /robots.txt
Disallow: /click/
Disallow: /old_site/
Disallow: /webmail/
Disallow: /AEP/
Sitemap:  http://www.
  mysite.com/sitemap.xml
```

The Perfect Page

So how do we put all this into play? How do we create content that is optimized for search engines yet written for people? Try the following brief guidelines:

Keyword Phrase: Obama bobbleheads
Page URL: www.mbbobbleheads.com/ObamaBobbleheads
Page Title: Obama Bobbleheads | MBBobbleheads
Meta Description: MBBobblehead's Obama talking bobbleheads are the best-selling, highest quality, most-wanted talking political bobbleheads available anywhere.

Page Headline <H1>: Talking Obama Bobbleheads from MBBobbleheads

Image Alt Tag: Obama Bobblehead

Body Copy:

Obama bobbleheads

bobbleheads

talking Obama bobbleheads

Image file: ObamaBobblehead.jpg

bobbleheads

political

Obama

political bobbleheads

talking Obama bobblehead

Figure 4.20 A perfectly optimized page.

- *Page title.* This page should be keyword-rich with a maximum of 60 to 70 characters.
- *Header tags.* Include more keywords and make sure they are relevant to page content.
- *Alt tags.* Make sure images have keyword-relevant alt tags.

- *Keyword density.* Keep the density higher toward the top of the page.
- *Keyword meta tag.* A smattering of relevant keywords couldn't hurt (no stuffing!).

Conclusion

Your content is single-handedly the most important part of your online presence. Be it on your website or social media profiles, people interact with your content to find out more about you, read about your products or services, and decide whether or not they want to become a customer or part of your community. Search engines interpret your content and serve up your pages in results based on your keywords. Creating your content so that it makes sense for a targeted group of users and is optimized for search engine "crawlability" will help the right folks find you and interact with you in a manner that benefits all.

DESIGN

Successful websites find a seamless blend between form and function to create great user experiences that educate, entertain, sell, increase brand loyalty, and so on. This chapter focuses on implementing specific techniques from your on-site strategy and content plans as they relate to your site's front-end design and how people interact with it.

Credibility-Based Design

A design that looks exciting but is incomprehensible is nothing more than a beautifully painted square wheel!

—**Colin Wheildon in** *Type and Layout: Are You Communicating or Just Making Pretty Shapes?*

Good design of is one of the most important ways to instill confidence in online visitors. Your site, your blog, and even to some extent your social media profiles (inasmuch as you can control their visual appearance) should all adhere to professional design standards that communicate credibility, reliability, expertise, and consistency across media types. You have but a split second to make a good first impression, and few things will drive a potential new customer away from your site faster than bad design.

A successful ambassador or salesperson will arrive with excellent references and present a sparkling, well-dressed appearance.

—**Loveday and Niehaus note in** *Web Design for ROI* **(p. 51)**.

A landing page can do the same through design, function, and visible references. This includes putting ample thought into color, typography, page layout, and, of course, usability.

Figure 5.1 *Type & Layout: Are You Communicating or Just Making Pretty Shapes*? The Worsley Press, 2005.

What Makes a Design Credible?

Andrew B. King, author of the very informative *Website Optimization* from O'Reilly, cited credibility-based, professional design as the number one factor in maximizing site conversion rates. Speed, reliability, and attractiveness are the three primary criteria he states as integral to credibility-based design. If all three

are working in tandem, they will create a seamless, pleasurable experience that conveys you or your company as a trustworthy industry expert. In other words, if your site doesn't load and react quickly, you will lose customers. If it spits back errors in spelling, facts, code, style, or grammar, you will lose customers. If the visual design detracts from, rather than supports, the information presented you will—you guessed it—lose customers.

Figure 5.2 *Website Optimization*. Andrew B. King. O'Reilly, 2009. www.websiteoptimization.com.

Figure 5.3 Don't undermine your credibility with bad design.

If these three elements are the gold standard to which all credibility-based design is held, here are a few ideas for implementing them into your site.

Speed

Each page of your site should load within just a few seconds for the majority of users and be instantly responsive once loaded. This includes text, images, code, and any interactive elements. Everyone wants a fast and rewarding Internet experience, so make certain you give your visitors one. Analyze every portion of every page on your site to be sure it adheres to user standards for speed across devices, browsers, and platforms. If many of your users are on slower connections, this could mean optimizing each of your pages to be as small as possible, perhaps even under 100k.

In 2008, the number of broadband households worldwide grew by over 18 percent to exceed 400 million. Asia-Pacific is the largest market, with over 160 million subscribers. The report predicts that the region will contribute for over 49 percent of the global broadband market share by 2013.

—IPO Communications study, July 8, 2009
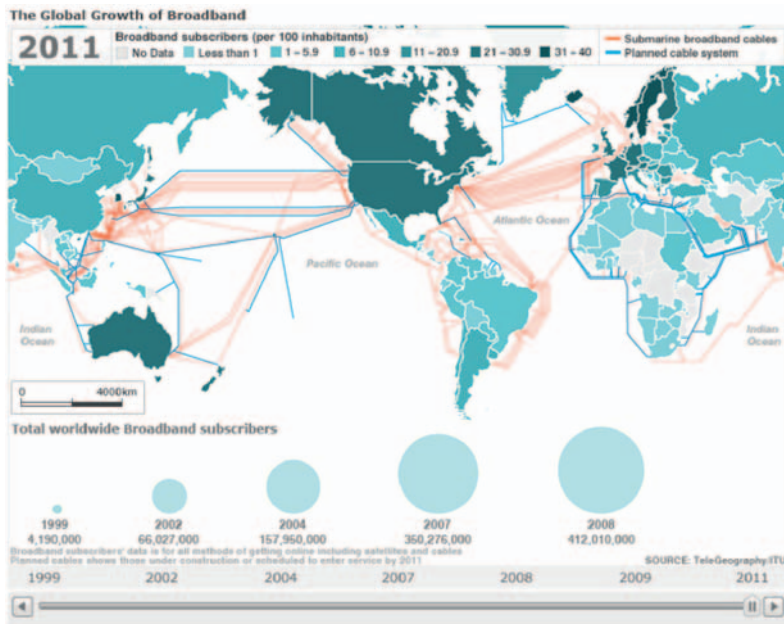
Figure 5.4 Your cable or DSL Internet may be plenty speedy, but as this chart shows, not everyone is so lucky.

Graphics Optimization

All site graphics should be optimized to get the best file size-to-image quality ratio. Be sure to run a few tests early on during the design process to ensure that the following occurs:

- Photographic images don't exhibit compression artifacts.
- Gradients and drop shadows aren't pixilated or banding.
- Rounded corners don't have "jaggies."

Find an acceptable balance between the efficiency of download times and the necessity of visual impact. Make sure to keep your target page size in mind when exporting graphics as well.

Graphics Optimization Tools

Adobe Fireworks is the often underutilized workhorse of graphics programs, especially when it comes to optimization upon export. Fireworks and Adobe's flagship image manipulation product Photoshop use different compression technologies, which means you will get different results from each when trying to compress images for the web. An 80% compression rate in Fireworks, for example, is relevant to a 60% compression rate in Photoshop, meaning you should consistently get better quality graphics with smaller file sizes by using Fireworks.

Yahoo!'s Smush.it tool is great for crunching those images and graphics down as well. Simply upload your Photoshop-optimized images into the Smush.it application, and it will work its proprietary compression algorithm magic to decrease graphics and image sizes by an average of 40% without sacrificing image quality, providing download links and a report for each image.
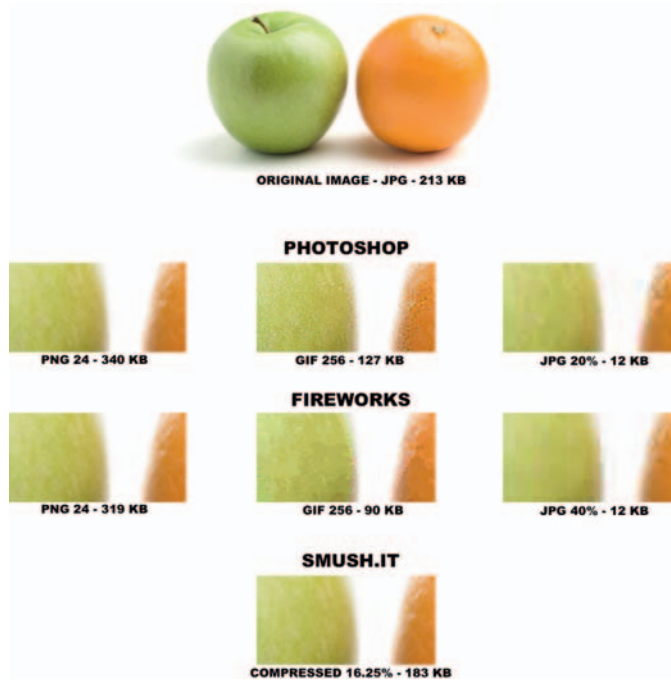
Figure 5.5 A side-by-side comparison of graphics exported from Photoshop, Fireworks, and Yahoo!'s Smush.it.
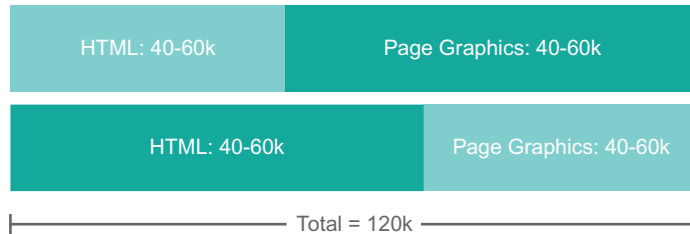
Figure 5.6 Max out your page size at 120 KB: 40 to 60 KB for graphics and another 40 to 60 KB for HTML and code.

Rich Media Optimization

Rich media elements—Flash, animation, video, games, and so on—will take up the lion's share of a user's bandwidth. Be sure to make the experience a worthwhile one. As mentioned in Chapter 2, rich media has the potential to engage users like few other things on your site. It also has the potential to annoy them with long download times as well. The "impatience factor" increases exponentially when a site visit is marred by long download waits for video files or Flash movies. Most likely, you will lose visitors after a few seconds of waiting. Optimize your files so that they download as quickly as possible. If there's no getting around long download times, clarify expectations in as succinct a manner as possible. Users will wait for a large white paper or tutorial video if expectations are managed properly.

Tip

As Internet speeds get faster and pages get larger, is there room for larger pages? According to Keynote Systems, page sizes should break down as follows:

HTML and code = 40 to 60 KB

Page graphics = 40 to 60 KB

This limits your page size to a maximum 120 KB, which should load in under 24 seconds for dialup users and just a few seconds for broadband users.
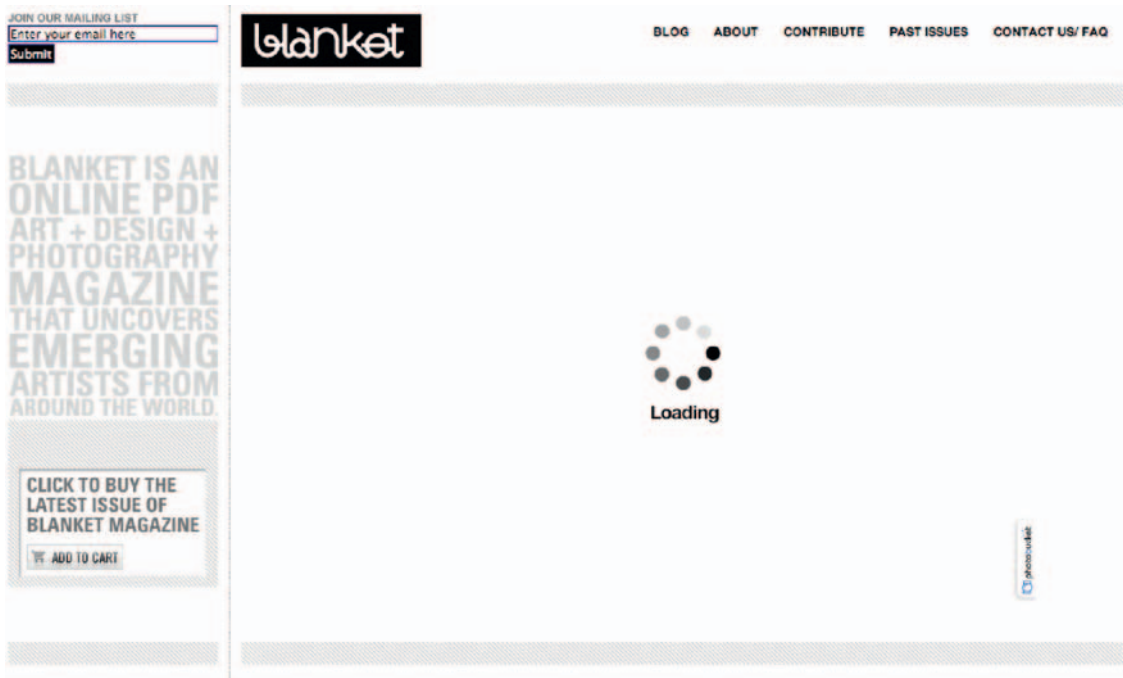
Figure 5.7 Minimize load times whenever possible.

Also, optimize each element following the same quality-performance standards you set for site graphics—balancing quality with speed and performance. Audio, Flash, and video files should load as quickly as possible and look great. If you must use a loader, make it engaging and worthy of the content that's about to follow. There's no excuse for tiny, pixilated video or long load times.

Here are a few other considerations for speedy delivery of rich media files:

Figure 5.8 If you have to use a loader, try to make it engaging. Not like this.

- Use a format that's widely adopted by your site visitors.
- No autostart! Use a clickable thumbnail instead.
- Break large files into small manageable chunks to decrease load time.
- If you must use a loader, make it engaging.
- Run tests to ensure files play quickly upon loading.
  Rich media is covered in more detail in Chapter 13.

Reliability

Grammar, spelling, facts, visual design, code, rich media, and every other site element should work in tandem across browser, platform, and device to provide a dependable experience *every time.* And on the rare occasion your site does throw out an error, make sure it provides a custom message that will assist in your

users' quests to find what they need, not some cryptic server warning that leaves things open to interpretation.
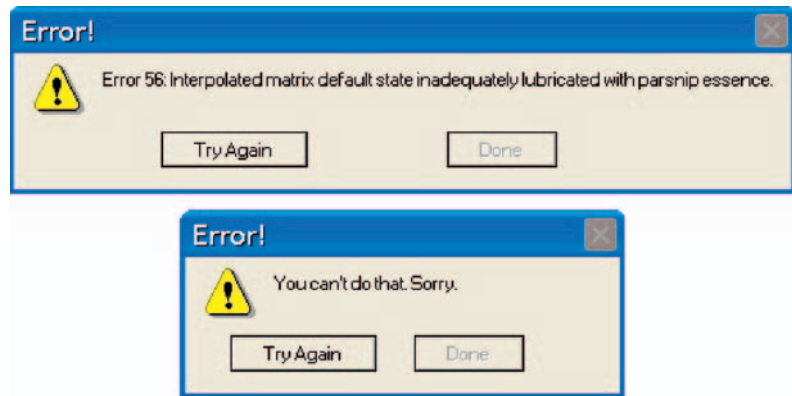
Figure 5.9 Which of these would you rather bump into?

Attractiveness

Beauty being in the eye of the beholder and all, you should still design relevant to your particular industry or audience in a professional manner. This includes your logo (which, by the way,
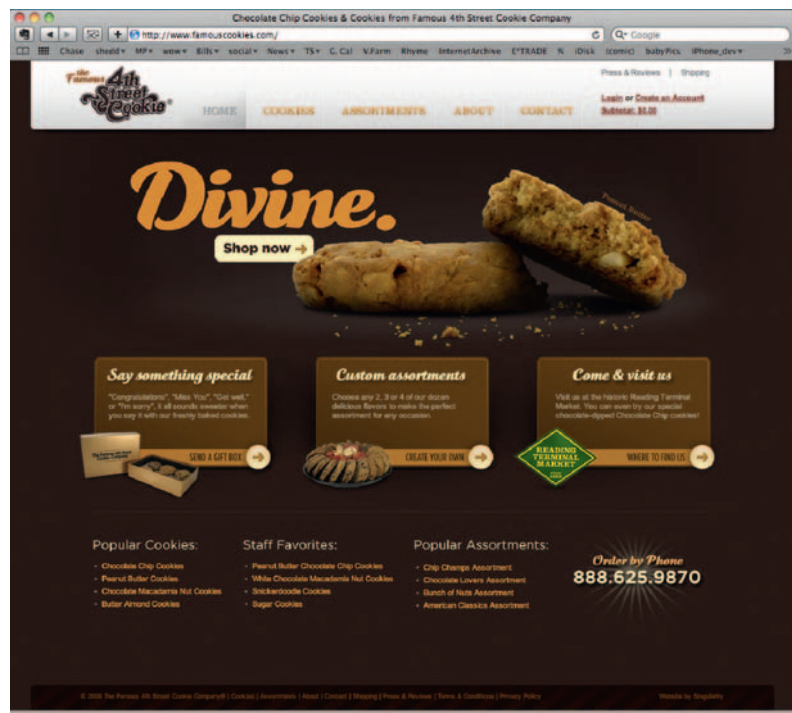
Figure 5.10 Design can be downright tasty if you follow a good recipe.

King has cited as the *third* most important factor in successful site conversion rates). Your company or organization's mark should be in line with site design and represent you accordingly. Colors should be relevant to your industry. Type should be legible. Page elements should adhere to an obvious visual hierarchy. And so on.

Of course, this is all somewhat subjective, but spending a few hours on competitive analysis will provide you with a springboard from which to devise a design strategy that will properly represent you.

Design Considerations

In addition to speed, reliability, and attractiveness, there are other important elements to take into consideration.

Page Layout

The specific layout of information that is presented on your site's pages is directly related to how a user interacts with it. In their book of best practices for web design, the folks at *Smashing Magazine* noted that "While design elements determine flow and hierarchy within the design, Web layouts build up the skeleton of the website, providing space and a structure in which the design elements can breathe and serve their role" (*The Smashing Book*, p. 30).

Building page layouts that support the structure of your content and provide a natural visual hierarchy that users will find engaging will increase user retention as well as the site's "stickiness." With that said, your site's most valuable propositions should be immediately apparent upon page load, so make them blindingly easy to find. Don't leave any room for interpretation or any question in a user's mind regarding how to interact with your site. Maintain the following principles:[1]

- Do not obstruct or compete with users' critical tasks.
- Present elements related to specific tasks based on frequency, importance, or sequence.
- Make buttons and links consistent, using the same label for the same function (in potentially the same place) across the entire site.
- Don't push unexpected animation, audio, or video on users. In other words, *no* autostart or the cardinal sin of sins, *Skip Intro.*

Page Layout and SEO

Additionally, the major search engines have applied for patents on technologies for reading and interpreting web pages based on visual layout. These technologies will allow search engines to

[1] Based on "Analytics: An Hour a Day," based on Nielsen Norman Group study.

Figure 5.11 *The Smashing Book.* From the creators of *Smashing Magazine.* www.smashingbook .com.

Layout Crawlers

Microsoft uses a technology called Vision-based Page Segmentation (VIPS) to extract the semantic structure of a web page based on its visual presentation. Google uses Document Segmentation Based on Visual Gaps to ascertain how web pages are segmented based on the amount of white space between content sections. Yahoo! too has applied for a patent to approximate web page layout without rendering the page.

better catalog sites and understand their content based on page layout.

So not only does it make good sense for visitors to your site, but good standards-based page layout practices can potentially benefit how the search engines interpret your site as well.

Page Length

We emphasized the notion of terse, benefits-driven content in Chapter 4. The *amount* of content is directly proportional to the viability of your page layout as well. Ensure manageable page lengths. Don't use any scrolling on home pages, and, as a general rule, make sure interior pages are fewer than 2.5 screens. Extensive scrolling, especially on a home page where visitors get a first impression of your business, is a quick path to user frustration.

The Gutenberg Rule

When devising concepts for site page layout, consider incorporating the Gutenberg rule into your process. The Gutenberg rule utilizes a concept known as reading gravity, which is based on the natural pattern our eyes take when reading a page: top left to bottom right.

Primary Optical Area

Strong Fallow Area

Reading gravity pulls the eyes from top-left to the bottom-right of the layout

Weak Fallow Area

Terminal Area

Figure 5.12 The Gutenberg rule splits a page into four quadrants.

The four quadrants of a page adhering to the Gutenberg rule are as follows:
- *Top left.* Primary optical area.
- *Top right.* Strong fallow area.
- *Bottom left.* Weak fallow area.
- *Bottom right.* Terminal area.

The Gutenberg rule can work very well in tandem with the attention, interest, desire, and action (AIDA) concept, where the strongest areas in your pages are reserved for the most important content correlating with attention and action.
- *Attention.* According to a Nielsen Norman survey, most users start by scanning the content area. Put important benefits-driven header text and (if applicable) a call-to-action button in the primary optical area where they will be viewed first and provide a natural lead-in to the page's content.
- *Action.* By default, a reader's eyes will end up in the terminal area at the bottom right of your page. Put action items such as purchase call-outs, form lead-ins, and invitations to learn more in this area. Remember to make the buttons obvious and the text an easy indicator of what to do next.

AIDA

A model for sales and marketing, AIDA can also be used on site pages and employs four concepts:

Attention: Create content that attracts attention.

Interest: Provide information that generates interest.

Desire: Link product or service features to the desires of a potential customer.

Action: Provide a clear, easy path for user action.

Layout Types

Web page layouts come in all shapes and sizes: fixed-width, elastic, hybrid, liquid, and so on. What works for one designer with one skill level may not work for another. Choosing the right kind of layout usually boils down to a combination of designer skill, audience needs, and personal choice.

So how do you choose which layout type is right for your site? Thankfully, there are some standardized guidelines for choosing web layouts. Let's start with some common layout types.

Fixed-width Layouts

Fixed-width layouts adhere to a pixel-perfect wrapper width that doesn't vary. Designers have maximum control over page layout, but that doesn't allow for much flexibility on the part of the user if, for instance, they use a screen reader or require large font sizes.

Pros

- A fixed-width layout is easy to implement and customize.
- The content area is tightly controlled.
- Some visual effects can only be achieved with a fixed-width layout.
- The designer has some control over content readability.

Cons

- Increasing browser text size can break layout integrity.
- If the fixed-width is too narrow, the content area will look small on monitors with larger resolutions.
- This format could create excessive white space.

Figure 5.13 DCATheater.org uses a fixed-width layout.

Fluid Layouts

Fluid or liquid layouts don't specify a wrapper width and rely more heavily on percentages as units of measure rather than pixels, allowing for site pages to take up 100% of a browser's view port width without concern for display resolution.

Pros

- A fluid layout can adapt to the width of any browser's view port.
- It makes the most of available screen real estate.
- It gives users the freedom to define page width.

Figure 5.14 Panda.org uses a fluid layout.

Cons

- The layout can appear cluttered.
- Without setting a maximum width, interfaces can become difficult to use on displays with larger resolutions.[2]

Elastic Layouts

Elastic layouts use ems, which are square units of font size, as their default measurement. Because ems are relative to text and font sizes, content areas will scale in proportion to an increase or decrease in text sizes on the page.

Pros

- An elastic layout allows for consistent scaling of the web layout.
- This format maintains the line length to body copy ratio.
- It creates realistic zoom effects.

Cons

- Significant font size increase can undermine layout integrity.
- The conversion process from pixels to ems can be tricky.
- Images, Flash, and video quality suffer if scaled over 100%.

Figure 5.15 Mike Cherim's submission to CSS Zen Garden is an elastic layout. View it at www.csszengarden.com/?cssfile=http://green-beast.com/portfolio/zen/css/zen.css.

Fluid Grid Layouts

Fluid grid layouts use elements laid upon a grid that are expressed in proportion relative to the containers in which they

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[2] Note that IE6 does not support CSS property max-width.

reside. In other words, content can scale relative to browser view port size, display resolution, and so on but still maintain a desirable grid-based design.

Pros

- Designers can maintain a grid-based design without sticking to fixed-width layouts.
- Designers can review how their layouts will look across multiple resolutions during the design process.
- Layout integrity can be maintained across large and small monitors.

Cons

- Browsers tend to render subpixel elements up or down, resulting in broken layouts.
- As with elastic layouts, fixed content in a fluid framework can degrade quickly if scaled over 100%.
- This format requires a number of workarounds to address maximum usability.

Figure 5.16 DesignInfluences .com includes handy templates for creating fluid grid-based CSS layouts.

Adaptive Fluid Layouts

Adaptive fluid layouts address a common problem with fluid layouts of extreme content resizing for very large or very small resolutions. Adaptive content, created to address a specific range of screen resolutions, inhabits a fluid layout, resulting in more control over layout integrity across an array of screens, browsers, and devices. Adaptive fluid layouts are largely considered a workaround for getting fluid grid layouts to behave properly.

Hybrid Layouts

Hybrid layout tends to be a catchall term for layouts that pull elements from each of the preceding types, such as liquid elastic, fixed liquid, and so on. They often contain fluid wrappers within fixed-width content areas, sometimes resulting in a coexistence of tables and CSS in the same layout.

Figure 5.17 TheManinBlue .com uses an adaptive fluid layout.

Layout Decisions

With such a dizzying array of options, how do you figure out which layout is right for you? The answer most often lies in the type of site you are building. If your site requires more control over specific design parameters, such as a portfolio showcase, for example, perhaps a fixed-width layout would be preferable. If your target users span a vast array of display resolutions, browsers, and devices, perhaps an elastic or fluid layout of some sort will work better.

One thing is for certain: people are browsing the web with an ever-increasing array of devices (large and small) that make adaptive layouts more attractive, even though they may require more customization to implement. The point is to weigh the pros and cons of each as cross-referenced with your target community to make the most educated decision that will maintain layout integrity and maximum usability for as wide an audience as possible.

Print Style Sheets

Style sheets for controlling how a web page is presented in various media types are commonly overlooked. A page's print function is a perfect example. Most people don't want to print off your site's navigation bar, advertisements, or, worse yet, the page background. To keep users from cursing you for using up their ink cartridges, be sure to create a style sheet specific to each type of media a page will be displayed on.

Use the LINK element with a media attribute to associate your document with the type of media you would like to present it on. Here is an example for print:

```
<LINK rel="stylesheet" type"text/css"
href="print.css" media="print">
```

The print.css style sheet will only be called on when a user selects a print function and will have no effect on the document's

There are currently 10 defined CSS media types according to the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C):

- *all.* Suitable for all devices.
- *braille.* Intended for braille tactile feedback devices.
- *embossed.* Intended for paged braille printers.
- *handheld.* Intended for handheld devices with small screens and limited bandwidth.
- *print.* Intended for paged material and documents viewed in Print Preview mode.
- *projection.* Intended for projected presentations.
- *screen.* Intended for color computer screens.
- *speech* (formerly *aural*). Intended for speech synthesizers.
- *tty.* intended for media using a fixed-pitch character grid (such as teletypes, terminals, or portable devices with limited display capabilities).
- *tv.* intended for television types.

Your pages may not need to adhere to all of these media types, but they are definitely worth considering as you build your site, especially media type print, as it is by far the most common.

display when it is viewed using a monitor, screen reader, or any other nonprinting device.

Content, Not Ads

People tend to have common expectations regarding what constitutes a banner ad these days. Ads are often punctuated by animation in somewhat standardized sizes (skyscrapers, banners, buttons, and rectangular popups). With that in mind, don't design critical page information that looks like advertising. Not only could it be off-putting to users, but it undermines the importance of what you have to say by using a formula that could potentially confuse users.

Navigation

We discussed navigation in detail in Chapter 4, particularly as it relates to a site's information architecture. Here we will focus specifically on design approaches for your content's primary navigation.

Dmitry Fadeyev in his chapter on user interface design for *The Smashing Book* noted:

> *User interface design isn't just about buttons and menus; it's about the interaction between the user and the application or device, and in many cases, it's about the interaction between multiple users through that device. This means that user interface design isn't about how a product looks, but rather about how it works. It's not just about arranging buttons and picking colors, but rather about choosing the right tools for the job. Does a particular interface even need buttons? If so, what do those buttons need to do? What do I need to provide users with so that they can figure out how my application works and accomplish what they want to do with ease? (p. 10)*

Figure 5.18 Jiri Tvrdek's portfolio site features navigation that is both intuitive and well designed.

Invisible Interfaces

Creating effective navigation is a huge part of interface design, so it stands to reason that one should put careful thought into how it is implemented. "What makes a design visible is the frustration it brings," noted usability expert Jared M. Spool in an article on his company User Interface Engineering's site. "Great designs should be experienced and not seen."

These days, many interaction designers strive to create "invisible" interfaces, where the navigation is so intuitive and tuned into established conventions that they essentially become invisible to the user and thus extremely easy to use. This means that any potential frustration points should be eliminated from the *entire* user experience, including simple site navigation from page to page, the purchasing process, filling out forms, and when there are error messages—*especially* when there are error messages.

Also, remember that less is often more. Adding links to every possible page on your site and overclarifying those links will just make the interface bloated, sloppy, and confusing. Conversely, giving users too little information will often result in confusion as well. Success with creating an invisible design often harkens back to developing effective information architecture that will work seamlessly with the design of your site or application's interface.

Usability testing and regular prototyping during the design process can go a long way toward helping you ascertain how "invisible" your interface is.

Phenomenology

With the new array of devices and ways in which one can interact with content, however, it may not be enough to create an invisible interface. You may want to strive for creating interfaces that are an *extension* of the users rather than invisible to them. This concept, touted online at *Johnny Holland Magazine,* is known as *phenomenology.* "Take the example of using a car," author Vicky Teinaki stated. "No one who drives would ever say the car disappears. Instead, through sitting in the seat, putting your hands on the steering wheel and your feet on the pedals and starting the motor, it becomes an extension of you. The car doesn't become invisible, your bodily awareness expands to include the car."

When taking the massive success of devices like the Wii or iPhone into consideration, this concept makes sense. Effective navigation is usually gestural, relying on natural motions from our arms, fingers, and so on to interact with content. After several decades of visual computing, we are used to interacting with a mouse and keyboard. How then does one translate these limited physical inputs into a more rich experience via the flick of a wrist or finger? Consistent usability tests and regular prototyping are applicable here as well.

Additional Considerations

A study by the Nielsen Norman Group makes the following navigation recommendations:

- Use persistent navigation to support frequent movement between tasks.
- Don't force users to hover over something to see options.
- Link names should communicate the content of the page they link to. When relevant, avoid generic links such as "Click Here" or "More."
- Underline all links. Do not underline any other words. Everything clickable should have a rollover effect.
- Links should change color to indicate which links the user has visited.

In contrast, the web design experts at *Smashing Magazine* often advocate the use of hover controls for simplifying and de-cluttering interfaces, with a couple caveats:

- Consider discoverability of the navigation elements.
- Consider accessibility for screen readers and mobile devices.

We have also worked on sites where hyperlinks were given underlines *only* on rollover and links were delineated just by color. In usability tests no one had problems finding links, so again, take into consideration that these recommendations are just that: guidelines for you keep in mind as you build navigation for your content.

Color

The effective use of color can enrich user experiences across the board and help with the organization of information, balancing layouts, assisting in the decision making process by drawing user attention to specific page elements, and so on. Good usability and audience engagement are often enhanced through use of color in strategic places throughout site pages.

Devising an effective color palette is usually one of the first steps toward building out a site's overall aesthetic look and feel. It is also one of the most important.

Here are a few suggestions for making good use of color on our site:

- Use colors relevant to your industry.
- Consider potential cultural implications of color choices.
- Avoid using color as the only source of important data.
- Consider neutral backgrounds for content-heavy sites.
- Site sections can be delineated by color use.
- Light type on dark backgrounds is often difficult to read.

Of course, every rule has its exceptions, and it helps to know the rules before you can break them, so take that into consideration when adhering to these suggestions.

Figure 5.19 The Ernest Hemingway Collection site presents a shining example of great web typography.

Typography

Good web typography is fraught with challenges. Limited font sets across platforms, browser rendering, user type-size preferences, and about three dozen other things often gang up on web designers to undermine the integrity of their design work.

Readability

Choosing type elements that support your awesome layout is, of course, an important part of the design process. Of equal relevance is the readability of your type. Here are a few quick guidelines for ensuring maximum readability:

- Use a 10-point or larger font for all text.
- Maintain high contrast between background and text colors.
- Use bulleted lists, introductory summaries, clear titles, and stand-alone chunks to facilitate scanning.
- Use relative rather than fixed fonts.

Font Workarounds

For years, web designers have been devising workarounds to the limited number of fonts available across browsers and platforms. If you don't want to limit yourself to a handful of fonts in your designs, other options are available for presenting stunning typography while maintaining a page's SEO-friendliness. Here are a few tools that offer alternate approaches to the basic handful of fonts installed on most machines:

- **sIFR** is short for Scalable Inman Flash Replacement. It swaps out text using JavaScript and CSS, then it replaces it with a Flash equivalent, letting you use virtually any font imaginable in your site. The content and navigation still reside in the HTML, so using sIFR doesn't mess with the search engines' ability to index your site.

Figure 5.20

- **@font-face** is a CSS tag that allows authors to specify online fonts for displaying fonts on their site.
- **Typeface.js** and **Cufon** use a JavaScript engine to render fonts in a browser. Because of font licensing issues, however, its use is somewhat limited.
- **TypeKit** is a hosted, subscription-based service that links to font files on a dedicated server.
- **FLIR,** short for Face Life Image Replacement, uses PHP server-side scripting to generate an image that replaces text on a page.

Menus and Submenus

In Chapter 4 we discussed the important role of information architecture. The significance of a seamless marriage between site architecture and good design cannot be understated. The ease with which a user can clearly understand multiple navigation options throughout a site starts with an effective visual translation of architectural charts, wire frames, and prototypes. Most of this translation takes place in the creation of easy-to-understand menus and submenus with obvious placement throughout the overall interface.
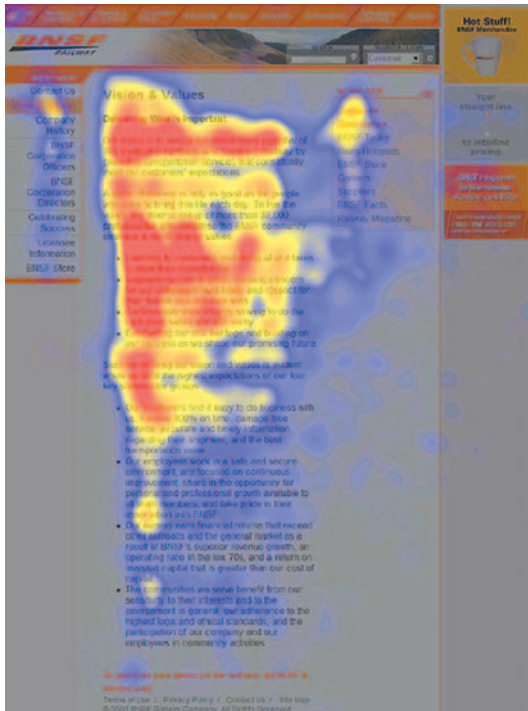
Figure 5.21 Heatmapping uses color coding to show the most commonly viewed area on a page. Design your menus with this in mind.

Figure 5.22 Drop-down and fly-out menu systems often lead to frustrated users.

The Place to Be

The effectiveness of your menu system often has to do with placement. No one will find it below the fold, across the bottom, or cryptically hidden behind fancy Flash animations. The human eye tends to scan pages from top left to bottom right. Create navigation systems that fall in line with this thinking.

Wherever you place the primary navigation options, keep it consistent. If your navigation sits across the top of your home page, put it in the same (or similar) place on your sublevel pages. The same goes for sublevel navigation on secondary pages. If one section has subnavigation options on the left and another has them on the right, you're only going to confuse users.

Image versus Text

Although the visual impact of image-driven buttons can offer a better-looking navigation system, what you make up for in attractiveness you lose in optimization options. Whenever possible, make your buttons text and use CSS to style them appropriately. Here's why:

- Screen readers can't interpret images without relevant alternate text.
- Neither can search engines.
- They are way easier to change as text.

Drop-Downs and Fly-Outs

Drop-down or fly-out menus come with an interesting set of usability challenges. They pose several potentially significant problems:

- Drop-downs can be problematic over Flash movies.
- Older browsers may not support them.
- They can pose problems for screen readers.
- Fly-out menus can pose significant usability issues.
- Users follow a pattern: they decide what they are going to click on before they move the mouse. It isn't until after they've decided where to click that they see what a cascading drop-down element has to say.

Once users realize there's more information available to them (via cascading drop-downs), they stop and reevaluate the screen, questioning a choice that seemed to be a good one earlier. Very long menus make it impossible for users to see all their choices in one glance. As a result, it may be better to present a long list of options as a regular list of hypertext links. Putting menu choices in mutually exclusive drop-downs (viewable one at a time) eliminates the ability to make a choice in context (with an understanding of all possible choices). Cascading menus demand that you repeatedly hit a small target, a target that will disappear if you miss it or even if you take the wrong path to it. Users often have to slide their mouse through two precise 90-degree turns just to reach the second level of a cascading menu. Many web-based cascading menus are not well implemented online (via poor DHTML programming).

There are pros as well:
- These menus use up little screen real estate.
- They don't overwhelm users with too many exposed options.
- If implemented well, they can speed up navigation for users who repeatedly interact with a particular application.

If 508 compliance is a priority for your site, then these menus are probably a deal breaker, because they pose such significant problems for screen readers. In general, the cons seem to far outweigh the pros for using them. If you are unsure of whether or not they are a smart idea for your site, consider prototyping them early in the design process and getting feedback through focus groups or other targeted users.

Forms

Next to the checkout process, forms represent one of the most important areas where you can glean useful information from those who visit your site. Treat them with the time and detail they deserve.

Here are some suggestions for maintaining form integrity:
- Minimize the number of fields.
- Give users enough room to type.
- Keep labels and fields close to each other.
- Don't clutter up forms with extraneous design elements.
- Left-align copy and fields.
- Mark required fields appropriately.
- Use informative error messages.
- If necessary, use complete sentences and clear descriptions.
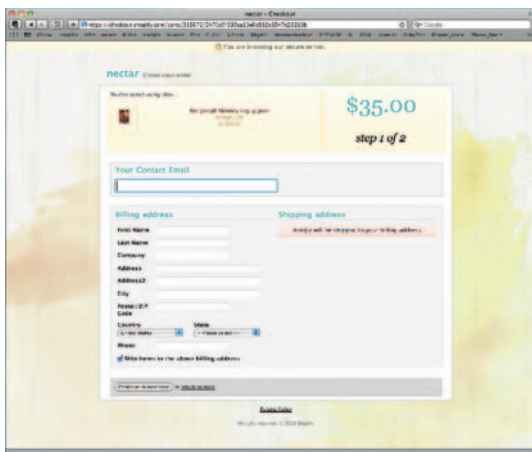
Figure 5.23 Visitors want a simple, easy-to-understand checkout process like this one from Nectar Boutique.

- Use separate forms for separate functions.
- Don't return users to an altered form if something is missing.

Checking Out

Are your customers checking out before they actually check out? If you notice a significant rate of abandonment during the shopping cart checkout process on your site, consider spending some time and resources customizing the experience for better results. A Coremetrics study[3] cited a 65.61% shopping cart abandonment rate in the United States in 2009. Visitors want a simple, easy-to-understand process that puts emphasis on usability and reassures them every step of the way.

If your shopping cart provides a less-than-seamless user experience, consider the following:
- Show users where they are in the process (e.g., step 2 of 6).
- Make checkout and add-to-cart buttons obvious at all times.
- Minimize the number of steps to checkout.
- Show cart items at all times.
- Always provide a "Verify Cart" page.
- Make shipping options clear up front.
- Make payment options clear up front.
- Don't require registration for new users.
- Include "Continue Shopping" links.
- Reassure privacy and security measurements.
- Provide visual assistance with graphics.
- Provide email receipts and a detailed "Thank You" page.

Site Social

If your site serves a community and is social in nature, there are a number of expected key features it should have. Social site users expect the ability to post, share, comment on, and edit site content. Be sure to provide recognizable and easy-to-share functions for users.

When designing an interface for your social site, consider the following:
- User profiles
- Comments

[3] www.blogstorm.co.uk/average-ecommerce-conversion-rates.

- Easy ability to share content between users
- Ability to post photos, videos, links, and so on
- Status updates
- Ability to import really simple syndication (RSS) feeds, subscribe to feeds, and the like

A well-designed interface will provide seamless integration of these functions without distracting users from their experience.
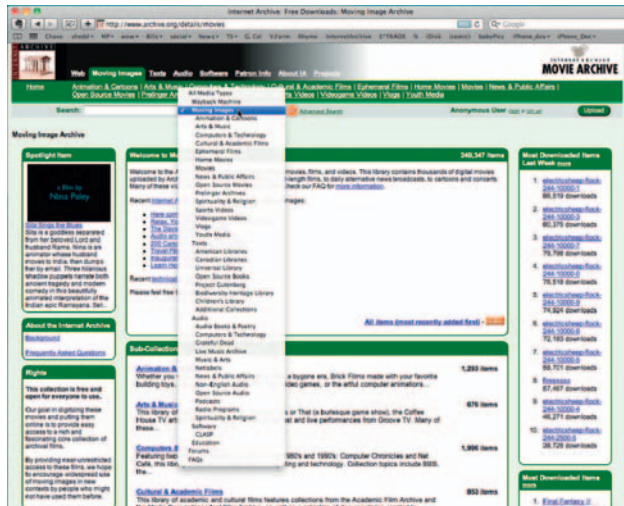
Figure 5.24 A content-heavy site like Archive.org really benefits from a robust search tool.

Search

If you're site is content heavy, it will likely benefit from an easy-to-use search function. If it has only a handful of pages, a search function may not be necessary, but as your content grows, so does the need for users to quickly find the things they need.

Consider the following when designing a search interface:

- Display a search box in the upper right corner of every page.
- Allow users to limit searches to specific site sections before hitting submit.
- Divide search results into categories (product info, support, press releases, etc.).

Conclusion

The interface is the first thing users see when they come to your site. Pay careful attention to design and usability, including color, typography, layout, and all the important elements.

Using a professional, credibility-based design will go a long way toward increasing site usability and visitor happiness. When combined with good, current content and well-built architecture, as well as a solid strategy for engaging your community, you will be well on your way to reaping the benefits of what it offers.

CASE *study: Court Theatre*

Joy Burke and Tai Palmgren of Mightybytes, Inc., discuss their tag-team efforts in designing an award-winning website for Court Theatre, at www.courtheatre.org.

This chapter discussed credibility-based design as crucial. Looking at the theater's site today, Burke and Palmgren speak to what most successfully makes the design "credible" to visitors.

Speed

Burke cites, "One thing I think we did really well on the Court site was to avoid using extra graphics, which weigh down the site and therefore slow it down big time. Really the only graphic elements, other than images uploaded by the client, are very tiny gradients we used to offset the stark white background and give the site a touch more character. We used real text for buttons, et cetera. This significantly decreases the time it takes to load each page." Real text is selectable, crawled by search engines, and rendered by the browser rather than through image processing.

Reliability

For site reliability, the two designers performed cross-browser testing on various types of machines, making sure the site worked right and looked right in each scenario. "Throughout the project we were in consistent communication with the client, ensuring that they were happy with both the functionality and the look and feel from start to finish," Palmgren states.

Attractiveness

Visual appearance is especially important for an arts and entertainment site. Burke says the site's "main attractive qualities are the fact that it's clean, legible, and carries the feel of the theater throughout the design of the site through use of a color palette and imagery." The theater's existing branding identity was reinforced in the design by incorporating its dark red color into the header and using white as the main background, thereby offering a simple support and continuation of the brand "without shoving it in the user's face." Typography on the site maintains an appropriate hierarchy and mimics color treatments throughout the site, and that makes it easy for users to understand how to navigate throughout the site and to comfortably read the content.

Color and Typography

In their tag-team design approach, Burke and Palmgren worked with both the existing brand color palette of Court Theatre, and used new colors to offer a unique online web presence from affiliate site University of Chicago, which has a similar color scheme. Palmgren notes, "we used web-safe typography in order to maintain fast loading times, accessibility for users without Flash or JavaScript compatibility, et cetera."

Site Layout

The Court Theatre site uses a fixed-width layout design with the header at the top, followed by horizontal main navigation below, a basic three-column layout for the body, and, of course, the footer at the bottom. Palmgren says, "We almost always do this for consistency and to keep the layout and design more controlled." The designers solved a hurdle of large monitor displays by extending the header and footer bars to be 100% of the browser window, no matter what size screen the visitor was using.

The team also essentially followed the Gutenberg rule, as discussed earlier in this chapter, for a design guideline. The logo and two most important buttons of the site remain in the top left on every page. The client, Court Theatre, wanted to incorporate photos from its shows in the header, so that was incorporated in the top right with a slide show effect.

Navigation

Burke says navigation choices for the site were based on information architecture developed with the client. "The site flowchart showed three levels of navigation. Therefore, in order to keep things as clear and visible as possible, we have the main navigation horizontally available at all times, with the sublevel navigation that shows up on hover."

Because there are three levels of navigation for this site, and a lot of pages, the main navigation is horizontally laid out across the top for easy access. This design choice enabled the second two levels of navigation to be placed in the left column in a clean, easy-to-understand manner. The second level of navigation is always available to the user upon hovering over the main navigation. Therefore, no matter where the user may be on the site, he or she essentially always has access to any page, which enhances site usability and ultimate performance success.

The Court Theatre site had a preexisting third-party e-commerce area for ticket purchase. This limited what could be done within the e-commerce area, but the design project enhanced that very important site area by incorporating colors from the site and a header image that created a seamless user experience to connect content pages with e-commerce pages fluidly.

Solutions

"One of the biggest challenges of this site was handling a great amount of content and presenting it in a manner that wouldn't overwhelm the user," notes the design team. To achieve this goal, they took the following steps:

- Used minimal graphics and a small gradient.
- Compressed template files on the site using GZIP, which basically decreases the file size and therefore load time.
- Designed with a complementary blue color to draw attention to key calls to action, such as the persistent "Buy Tickets" and "Donate" buttons.
- Treated body text in a dark gray sans-serif font, while subtle gray tones in the background helped to communicate on a subconscious level the professionalism of the organization. The site earned an American Graphic Design Award in 2009 from *Graphic Design USA* magazine.

Burke and Palmgren offer a best practice take-away from the Court Theatre project: "[Use] a strong typographical hierarchy in a clean, consistent layout to organize a vast amount of information."

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CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

We have already extolled the value of content and how it can draw traffic to your site. This chapter covers the ins and outs of working with various available content management systems (CMSs) and how they can help ease the burden of online content creation, among other things. We will compare blogging systems with CMS options and demystify the workflow process of configuring a CMS for your own site. This chapter will help you decide which CMS option may be right for your site and start you on the path of managing your own online content.

CMS Explained

There are many flavors of CMS:
- Enterprise CMS
- Web CMS
- Document management systems
- Mobile CMS
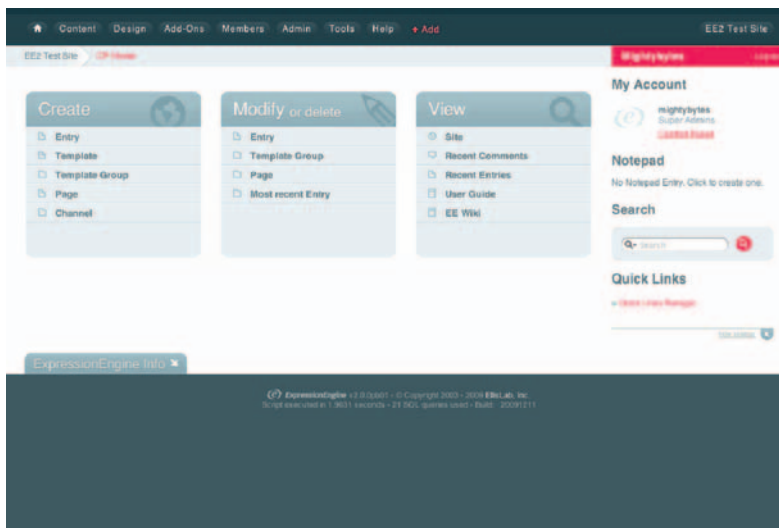
Figure 6.1 A good CMS provides you with an arsenal of tools for creating, editing, organizing, and publishing your content.

- Component CMS
- Media CMS

Each has carved out its own niche in the content management market to varying degrees of success and they range in scope from free blogging tools to extensive, enterprise-wide systems that cost thousands of dollars to implement. For the purpose of this chapter, we will focus on web-based solutions, both free and for-pay systems, that allow nontechnical users without extensive markup or programming experience to create, edit, and publish content to the web, usually via a browser-based administrative interface. To keep this chapter within a reasonable scope, we will focus on open source tools that run on PHP and MySQL.
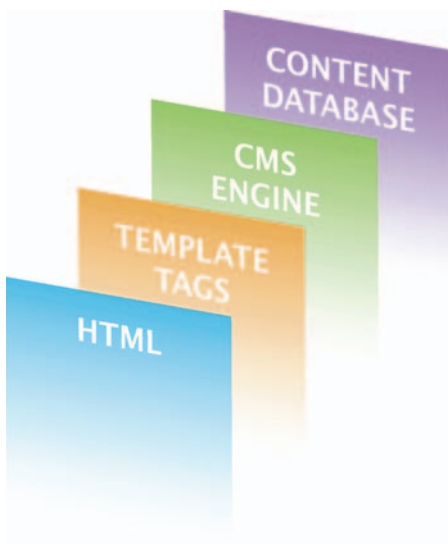
Figure 6.2 The four main components of many content management systems.

Web Content Management Systems

Web content management systems are the often underappreciated workhorses of your online presence. They arm you with a powerful arsenal of tools for creating, editing, organizing, and publishing your content as well as managing other administrative aspects of your site. Most are extensible via plugins or modules created by the CMS authors or third parties.

Implementing a site-wide content management system will not only simplify the process of site content updates but it will inevitably give you control over extended functions such as forms, e-commerce, forums, and blogs, and—if properly implemented and frequently updated—will increase your search engine rankings as well.

How They Work

Not all content management systems are created equal. As mentioned earlier, they possess a wide range of functions, components, and scopes that vary greatly based on the users they target. Most nonhosted PHP and MySQL CMS apps have four main components:

- A presentation layer where website visitors interact
- Custom template tags that merge the interface with content functions
- An admin interface that allows users to add content, make changes, and so on
- Database(s) where content and metadata reside

Presentation Layer

Typically built in HTML and CSS (or occasionally Flash), this is the front-end interface with which your site visitors interact. The presentation layer should be as clear and seamless as possible with intuitive navigation and frequent calls to action that guide the user experience. Depending on the system you use, the interface is often (but not always) built on the fly when users call up the page in a browser.

Custom Template Tags

These custom tags or "hooks" provide the conduit by which the front-end design and the content residing in a database come together for front-end user experience. They are snippets of CMS-specific code that call up pieces of content and insert them into the interface when a user browses from page to page on a content-managed site. If the interface is built properly, the experience should work flawlessly for users.

Admin Interface

This is, in effect, the CMS engine. Users have a specific and often unique URL to log in and access the site's administrative functions, add or edit content, publish files, perform site maintenance, and so on. Most systems allow interface customization based on user permissions. In other words, a content author most likely wouldn't have all the same options as a site administrator would.
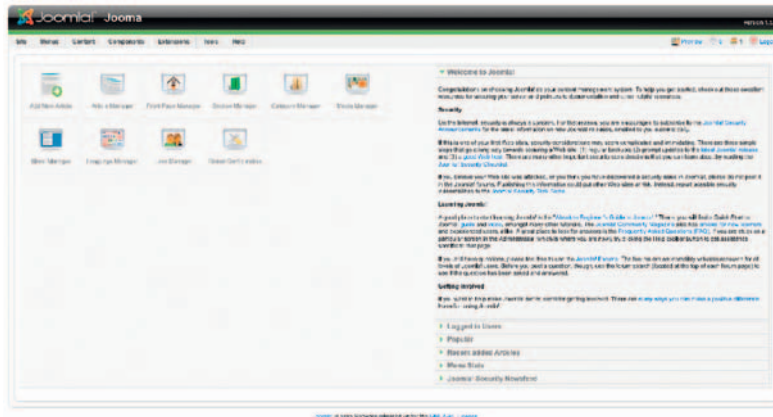
Figure 6.3 The Joomla Admin interface.

Database

This is literally where the content lives, a database file (or files) that houses text, images, audio, video, user settings, and so on. Ownership, usage, and security are big issues with any site data.

Whether you select a hosted or nonhosted CMS, explore the fine print and functionality in terms of your ability to access, store, and export your data over time. Find out if there is third-party access (or host access) and the details for using it.

Available CMS Tools

There are literally hundreds of CMS tools out there, ranging from simple solutions devised by individual developers to enterprise-wide systems that allow for thousands of editors, publishers, and administrators (with price tags to match).

Here are just a few of them. Links to each can be found on the companion site to this book.

- Bricolage
- Crownpeak
- CushyCMS
- Drupal
- DotNetNuke
- Expression Engine
- Joomla

- Mambo
- Pixelsilk
- Plone
- Squarespace
- TextPattern
- TYPO3
- Vignette

Figure 6.4 There are many CMS options to choose from.

A few, such as WordPress and Movable Type, straddle the line between CMS and blog software. We'll discuss those in the discussion of blogs in Chapter 8.

For a more comprehensive list, visit the following URL; but word of caution, it is not for the acronym phobic: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_content_management_systems.

CMS Examples

It is not feasible to cover the nuances of every CMS on the market in a single chapter, so for the sake of brevity and maintaining page count, we will stick to a few options, described next. With the exception of Expression Engine, which is a commercial application for which you purchase a license, the options described are open source and built on a foundation of PHP and MySQL.

Drupal

Drupal is a content management option with a passionate developer base and many examples of large-scale web applications and content deployment in its oeuvre. Large-scale sites such as www.internationalrivers.org and www.theonion.com were built using Drupal. It is a highly flexible and extensible system that excels on social and community-driven sites with many users. Of the systems mentioned in this chapter, it is also the most complex and, depending on the nature of the site you are building, requires advanced programming skills.
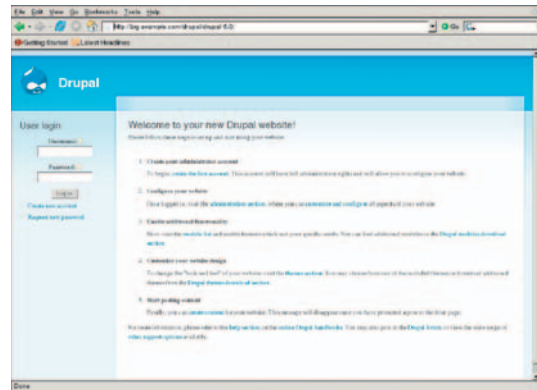
Figure 6.5 The Drupal interface after installation.

Pros
- Open source
- Easy install
- Flexible architecture
- Huge community of developers
- Many online forums addressing specific development challenges
- Thousands of plug-ins available

Cons
- Developer-centric (requires solid PHP and MySQL skills)
- Complicated and can be difficult to understand
  For more information on Drupal, check out www.drupal.org.

Expression Engine

Ellis Labs' contribution to the deep pot of CMS applications is often lauded for its clean interface and flexible set of tools. Like WordPress and Movable Type (discussed in Chapter 8), it straddles the line between blog software and CMS. Unlike the other

Figure 6.6 A content entry in Expression Engine.

tools in this list, Expression Engine is a commercial application with a sliding scale price range based on deployment (personal, commercial, enterprise, etc.).

Pros

- Clean interface
- Free personal version (there is a fee for the enterprise version)
- Workflow from the ground up makes a system very flexible

Cons

- Not typically supported by one-click install (discussed later)
- Limited plug-ins and extensions available
- Not a lot of existing themes available

Joomla

Another open source PHP/MySQL CMS solution, Joomla, also has a large, passionate developer base and has been used for many large-scale sites as well, such as www.guggenheim.org and developer.palm.com. Like Drupal, it is a complex system but with an arguably more user-friendly interface. Clients love Joomla for its attractive graphic admin icons but (in our experience, at least) are often overwhelmed by the many, many options it presents administrative users.
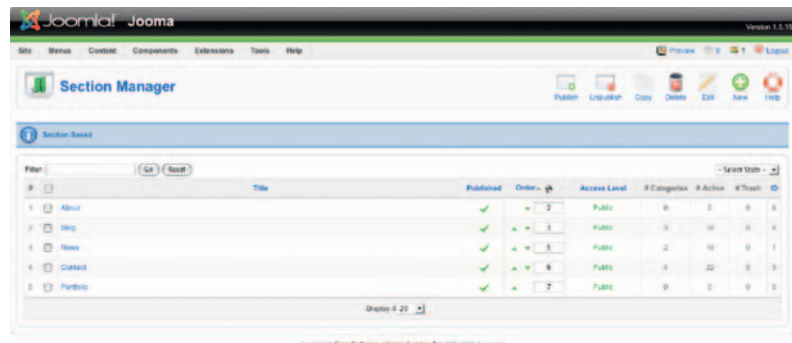
Figure 6.7 Joomla's interface for managing the sections of your website.

Pros

- Easy installation process
- Expandable via thousands of available plug-ins
- Thousands of prebuilt templates available

Cons

- Historically, community forum reports issues with slowness
- Template creation process is a bit complicated

Squarespace

Launched in 2003, Squarespace is a full-hosted CMS for tens of thousands of websites for personal and business use. To use and build websites or blogs there is a subscription fee, but nothing needs to be downloaded or installed and Squarespace provides hosting, which makes it very convenient. Squarespace operates "free from the restrictions and obligations of organizations controlled by outside investors," according to the company's site.

Squarespace delivers a very user-friendly interface and a robust platform. Engineering is of critical importance with a strive toward excellence. The "About Us" page proclaims, "Squarespace was conceived to be—and will remain—a departure from the sea of free products and 'me too' services that pollute today's web marketplace."

Pros

- A fully hosted, managed environment by Squarespace
- Basic statistics included
- Full control over your content and site customization
- A comprehensive, flexible platform

Figure 6.8a Squarespace in action.

Cons

- Fully hosted, no price-shopping on certain parts (e.g., hosting)
- Advanced features require subscription upgrades
- Statistics not as detailed as, say, Google Analytics
- Releases are less frequent than bigger CMS options

Tumblr

Tumblr is a New York–based microblogging and CMS hybrid that hosts more than a million blogs. Image-rich and self-proclaimed "the easiest way to share yourself," users call it intuitive and addictive, finding it a great way to archive and share

Figure 6.8b A Tumblr account takes only seconds to configure.

photos and images. Timelines are available to track links and conversations. It has a rich aesthetic and image-focused feel, and is experiential and fun. It boasts an 85% retention rate, more than 40% on Twitter, according to Wikipedia. Its basic service is free, and the company FAQs cite plans to keep it that way, though you can purchase additional features.

Pros

- Highly aesthetic (for those who aren't, this is a bonus)
- Easy reblog, like, and follow features

Cons

- Text answers hard to find on such image-rich sites
- Mixed feedback, what is considered limited comment abilities

Modular Expansion

Before you can make an educated decision about which CMS solution is right for you, you need to answer several important questions. The key to finding a tool that will work for you is to choose one that you can grow into as you go. Sure, there may only be a few dozen pages on your site now, but as your organization or company grows, rest assured your needs will expand. It is important to find a content management solution that will fill those needs over time.

That said, no system will offer the perfect solution. Sooner or later someone will say "Wouldn't it be really great if we could integrate this with our accounting software or ticket-buying engine?" and you suddenly find yourself in a situation where out-of-the-box solutions no longer apply.

Server and Technology Considerations

Make sure the system you are considering will support the technology and server specifications required for your project. If you have chosen to host the content management software on your own server (on your own domain), answer the following questions:

- What operating system does the server run?
- What database formats are supported?
- What kinds of administrative tools are available?

> **Tip**
>
> Ask yourself these questions to help ascertain feature requirements for a CMS:
>
> How many content creators will you need?
>
> Will everyone have the ability to publish immediately, or is there an editorial process to consider?
>
> Who can access which CMS features?
>
> Will the CMS be hosted locally or externally?
>
> What server platform will the CMS reside on?
>
> How will your budget affect any of these considerations?
>
> How will any of these needs change in a year? In three years?

- What kinds of backup and security systems are in place?
- How does the CMS solution you want to use support answers to these questions?

If finding answers to these questions proves difficult, a hosting provider with a great track record for service and support can make all the difference. In fact, I'd venture to say that finding the right hosting provider is one of the most important steps toward a harmonious web project. Choose wisely. View a list of hosting providers on this book's companion site.

Hosted CMS Solutions

Some content management systems include hosting as part of their offering. In other words, there's no need to install CMS software on your server or within your hosting provider account. You simply sign up for an account with the CMS provider, and all your content sits on its servers. Most (if not all) offer domain resolution as part of their package, so to the end user the fact that your content is hosted elsewhere is irrelevant.

Here are some common hosted CMS options:

- Tumblr
- Squarespace
- Pixelsilk
- WordPress
- LightCMS

Many hosted CMS solutions offer their wares based on a monthly fee using the software-as-a-service (SaaS) model. The advantage of this approach is that in most cases you can focus
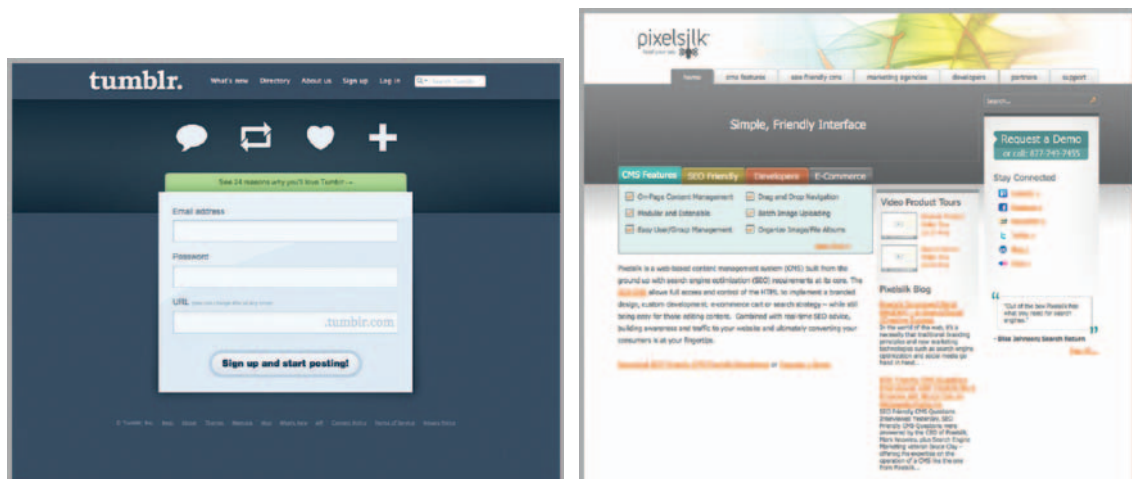
Figure 6.9 Squarespace, Tumblr, and Pixelsilk offer hosted CMS options.

on design and content rather than server specifications and programming languages. The downside is that the SaaS approach adds a recurring long-term cost to your budget. Also, if the company hosting your content goes out of business under the cover of night, you may find yourself without a website. A bit doom and gloom, yes, but stranger things have happened.

Installation

If you are hosting the CMS on your own server, there are essentially two ways to install the tools described earlier: via one-click install using server tools like cPanel and Fantastico, or manually.

Figure 6.10 Auto-installation tools like Fantastico can save you time when installing a supported CMS, but they are not always stable and may not support the version you need.

One-Click Install

One-click install is a process that (mostly) lives up to its name: you click a button (or two or three) and the software is installed

on your server, ready to use. It requires a few tools to be available on your server before you can try it.

cPanel

cPanel server software facilitates easy management of hosting and domain settings, such as email accounts, subdomains, FTP, and even some basic web stats. It also supports Fantastico DeLuxe by Netenberg, which is needed for one-click install. Fantastico support aside, it's worth using a hosting provider that supports this software if not only for the easy control it gives you over administering your website.

Figure 6.11 The cPanel interface.

Fantastico

Tools like Fantastico and Simple Scripts put a graphical user interface (GUI) on the sometimes tedious process of manually installing server components and tweaking configuration files. This is especially helpful when installing CMS tools for the first time.

If server permissions and config files aren't your forte, you might consider using the tools discussed earlier for a quick
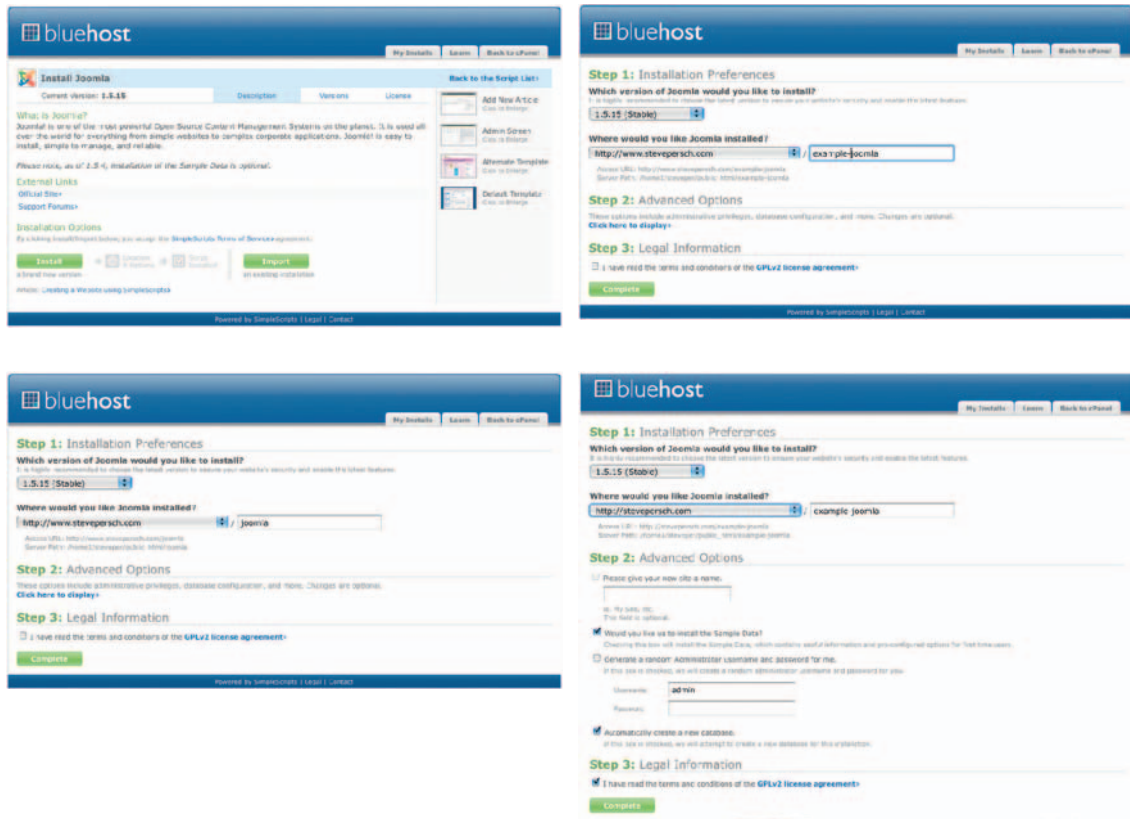
Figure 6.12 The Fantastico Joomla installation process.

installation of your favorite CMS package. Just keep in mind that they may not support the latest software version, which could lead to security issues, and if for some reason the installation fails, you will have a bunch of random files that will require manual deletion, cluttering up your server.

Also, these tools don't currently support the installation of modules, plug-ins, and extensions, which will require manual installation. For a base install of many server and web tools, however, cPanel and Fantastico offer a great way to get started with a CMS and many other options as well.

Configuration

Once a CMS is installed, it should be configured to meet your site's needs. Administrative users and content creators will need to be set up with accounts, templates, or themes applied, and the navigation structure must be implemented.

Categories, Sections, and Tags

The vernacular used for your site's various content components will vary from system to system, but the process of creating them is essentially the same. If you have undertaken any information architecture exercises during the design process, this should be a piece of cake.

Most (if not all) content management systems have some sort of built-in system for categorizing your content into various topics or sections centered around a common theme—a news section, for instance, or all entries tagged with the word "design." Although the nomenclature may be different (in WordPress you use posts, pages, categories, and tags, whereas in Joomla you use categories, sections, and so on), the basic premise is the same: first you enter overall categories or sections into the system, then you flesh the site out with content that fits into those categories.
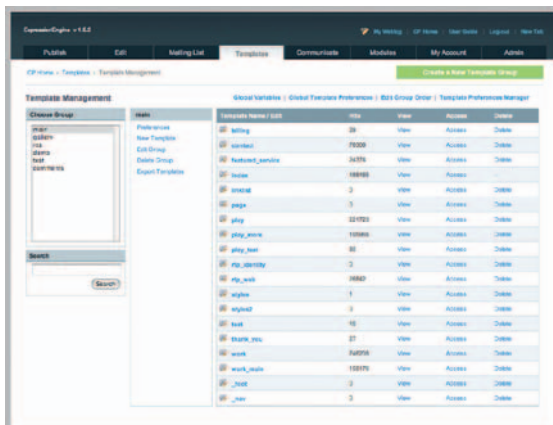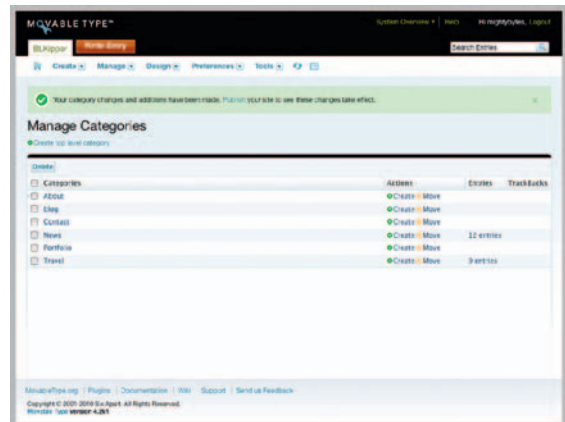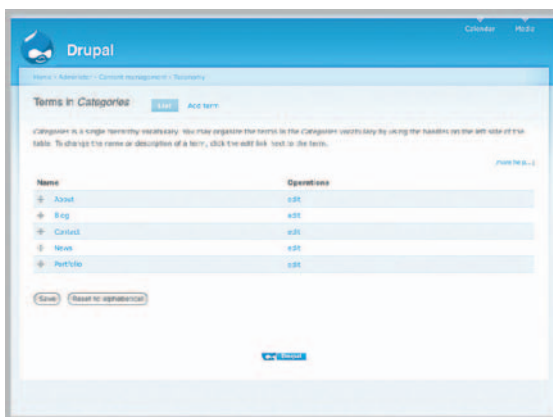
Figure 6.13 Though the specific interfaces for entering category information varies from system to system, the result is the same.

Themes and Templates

In addition to giving you tools for instant content creation and publishing, another area where the power of these systems really becomes apparent is in their ability to separate content from presentation. Through use of CMS themes and templates, you can change header styles, page layouts, banners, background colors, and so on without affecting the integrity of your content. With some systems this can be done in just a few clicks.

Figure 6.14 On the front end, your sections, categories, and content can be "skinned" any number of ways.

Theme and Template Resources

For systems that support easy installation, you can find thousands of prebuilt themes and templates available for free or for a fee (depending on where you look). Here are a few places that offer free and for-purchase templates:

- Template Monster, www.templatemonster.com
- Drupal Templates, www.templatemonster.com/drupal-themes.php and http://drupal.org/project/Themes
- Joomla Templates, http://resources.joomla.org/directory/extension-providers/templates.html
- Expression Engine Templates, http://expressionengine.com/templates

The advantage of this approach is that templates can easily be swapped out with new ones, changing your site's look and feel in minutes. The drawback, of course, is that you run the risk of your commercially available template being used on many other sites as well. Some templates have been downloaded from the preceding sites thousands of times. This could seriously undermine your design credibility and the brand identity of your business or organization.

The preferred alternative, of course, is to build a custom template that reflects your site's technical requirements and reinforces the organization's brand identity with professional, credibility-based design.

A wealth of information on CMS configuration and development has been included on the companion site to this book.

CMS for SEO

Most CMS solutions aren't optimized out of the box for SEO. By their basic nature of separating content from presentation, they pose inherent challenges for search engines. Also, to make a CMS work for your SEO needs, you have to use it. Often. Remember, it's all about what you have to say and how often you say it. Regular, consistent, keyword-rich entries with appropriate titles and headers will keep the search engines crawling your site for new content.

Content updates alone won't bring you SEO success with a CMS, however. Many solutions require proper configuration with add-ons, plug-ins, or modules to make them more search engine–friendly. After all, what's a search engine supposed to do with this?

www.mydomain.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=32

It certainly doesn't tell *me* anything. A much easier-to-understand option (for both users and search engines) would be something like this:

www.mydomain.com/about/company-history/how-we-started.html

That said, there has been an ongoing movement to make CMS apps more search engine–friendly.

Proper SEO Configuration

To make your CMS more search engine–friendly, consider implementing the following:

Search engine–friendly URLs

Semantically relevant page titles, headers, and other tags

SEO plug-ins

An XML sitemap

It should be noted that not all content management systems offer these features for a base install, but most can be tweaked for better performance via plug-ins and some inventive content creation.

SEO Plug-Ins

As mentioned earlier, there are literally thousands of plug-ins available for these systems, and although SEO plug-ins are a small subset of these, there are still far too many to list within the space of this book. However, when searching for plug-ins to help with your SEO, make sure they cover the following:

- *Sitemap creation.* Some plug-ins will automate the process of creating an XML sitemap for your content. The sitemap file will tell search engines (specifically Google) how much content is on your site, how often it is updated, categories, site sections, and so on.

- *Metadata.* SEO plug-ins such as WPSEO for WordPress give you an administrative interface for editing site metadata such as keywords and descriptions.

Figure 6.15 WPSEO gives you an administrative interface for editing site metadata.

- *Robots.* Some SEO plug-ins will allow you to activate and edit values for the *robots* tags on your site, giving you control over which pages are indexed and archived by search engines.
- *Content sharing.* Although plug-ins like ShareThis or AddThis don't specifically relate to how search engines interpret your site, they do make it easy for users to share site content with their friends or business associates via email or social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn.

SEO-Friendly Content Management with Pixelsilk

The Oregon-based company Pixelsilk has developed its own CMS solution to meet the ever-growing SEO needs of content creators. Touted as "a web-based content management system built from the ground up with search engine optimization requirements at its core," Pixelsilk is the only CMS (as of this writing) with SEO tools built into the system. Users have complete control over URL strings as well as full access and control of the HTML, which enables branded designs, custom development, e-commerce, the use of theme and navigation tools, integration with business and social apps, access to search strategy and advice, and easy content editing. Created with the needs of both developers and marketers in mind, features and functions surround a core of online initiatives. Features of Pixelsilk include abilities to do the following:

- Perform competitively in organic search engine rankings
- Utilize social applications for marketing
- Control SEO and design elements
- Drive conversions and ROI
- Content edit easily on-page
- Combined with real-time SEO advice, building awareness and traffic to your website and ultimately converting your consumers is at your fingertips
  Pixelsilk lists its SEO-friendly CMS features:
- Supports SEO best practices
- Follows "white hat" SEO code of ethics
- Full HTML and URL control

Figure 6.16 Pixelsilk touts itself as built for SEO from the ground up.

- All theme code is available from the <DOCTYPE> tag to the </HTML> tag
- Extensible via client and server application programming interface (API)
- Real-time search advice while content editing
  The Pixelsilk platform can integrate with popular third-party applications within the CMS, including e-commerce, Twitter, and WordPress.

The Skinny on CMS Plug-Ins

We have discussed plug-ins that work specifically for site SEO. Most CMS solutions offer a huge number of add-ons to extend functionality across the board if you want to add e-commerce, CRM, custom RSS feeds, and so on. As a general rule, if there's something you need your website to do, most likely a resourceful company or third-party developer has come up with a module or plug-in to do it. This can be a huge time/money-saver and a great boon for your site but one that has its share of potential pitfalls as well.

Potential Plug-In Drawbacks

Although these plug-ins are extremely helpful for extending your CMS, keep the following in mind:

- *Updates.* If you upgrade your CMS, the plug-in may also require an update. Third-party developers aren't often on the same schedules as the organizations that build content management systems, so it could be weeks or even months before a stable plug-in update is available. Updating your CMS while using an unsupported plug-in could cause your entire system to crash. If the CMS update addressed security issues, using an older version could leave you vulnerable to hackers as well.
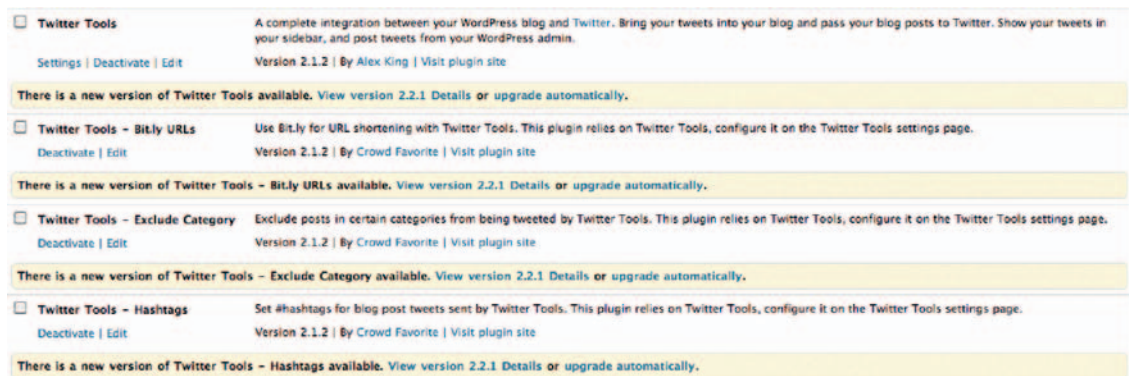
Figure 6.17 CMS updates can sometimes wreak havoc on third-party plug-ins.

- *Code quality.* Also, not all developers are created equal, unfortunately. Shoddy code can lead to unstable systems and security breaches as well. Thankfully, most systems have online forums that allow users to rate and review plug-ins and extensions, so you can get a solid idea of an individual solution's pros and cons before installing it on your site.
- *Real estate.* Many plug-ins have specific interface requirements that take up valuable real estate on your site's pages. This is not so much a pitfall as it is a design challenge that
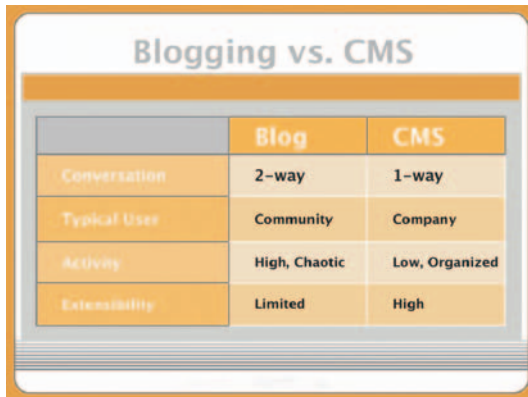
should be taken into consideration early on in the interface design process.

Blogs versus CMS: Which Is Better?

So how does all this information stack up against the ever-popular blog approach to content creation? As I see it there are two primary differences: perspective and flow of communication.

Perspective

Whereas the content on a corporate website should be professional and written in a vernacular that reflects the organization as a whole, blogs operate under no such constraints. The whole point of a blog is to humanize and provide information from a personal perspective, so the primary difference lies in content creation and how it is approached.

Flow of Communication

Blogs are meant to foster community and as such support a two-way line of communication, whereas many content-managed sites disseminate information in a one-way manner. The primary difference here from a technology perspective is a blog's ability to support comments and trackbacks. This can easily be turned on or off in most blog software, allowing a blog to operate more as a CMS rather than as a vehicle for community interaction.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a detailed breakdown of blogs and blogging is covered in Chapter 8.

Figure 6.18 Common differences between blogs and content management systems.

Blogging vs. CMS	Blog	CMS
Conversation	2–way	1–way
Typical User	Community	Company
Activity	High, Chaotic	Low, Organized
Extensibility	Limited	High

Conclusion

The topic of the CMS is worthy of an entire book in and of itself, and there are many written on specific systems such as Drupal or Joomla alone. With hundreds of solutions available and scores of technical considerations, making the right decision starts with assessing your needs and finding tools that will do more than those needs. Having the right CMS in place arms you with a plethora of tools for maintaining your online presence and ultimately driving traffic to your site with a wealth of inspired and useful content. By covering the basics of working with these tools, you hopefully have the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions regarding what's right for you.

7

DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned in Chapter 5, form and function go hand in hand, leap-frogging over one another to build the foundations of any great user experience. In this chapter we will focus a bit more on function and discuss available tools with which you can create community-based social destinations as well as tweak your existing site to maximum efficiency.

Development Landscape

"When people ask me about marketing their web products, which they increasingly do," Chicago-based developer Whit Nelson noted, "I make sure to first explain the nature of how things become popular on the Internet. Understanding the prime mechanism at work is critical to mastering it."

Whit is that special breed of developer who not only explores all the new web development technologies as they are released, but also has a keen understanding of why one particular tool will work better than another for a client's business needs. Most innovation on the web (and in computing in general) occurs at the code level, so having a developer in your corner who understands the technology as well as the business model is a valuable commodity. This is increasingly becoming a more common requirement in the development of digital products.

We have discussed the constantly blurring lines between marketer, strategist, writer, designer, and developer in nearly every chapter of this book. It is in the actual hands-on development of marketing-driven web applications where lines between the aforementioned roles become more readily apparent. Many of the tools and techniques discussed in this book can be implemented by someone with a little drive and a modicum of technical knowledge or interactive design skills. Blogs, content management systems, and tools that let you easily share content across multiple social networks have made most marketers and content creators perfectly comfortable with writing basic HTML and CSS as a natural extension of their daily work tasks. Few, however, are likely writing their own web apps.

It's a somewhat slippery slope to cover development techniques as they relate to digital marketing. Discussions quickly turn to programming frameworks, languages, server platforms, and so on, topics typically outside the realm of most marketers, business owners, or designers. That said, this is not a chapter about writing a Facebook app from scratch or building your own social site by hand (though we will cover some best practices for optimizing your interfaces). We'll assume that if you want to accomplish those tasks you will collaborate with a dedicated developer (or better yet, a team of them). Rather, like the rest of the book, this is a discussion of potential avenues through which you can communicate a message and create great user experiences. The avenues in this chapter just happen to be more development-centric than in other chapters.

That said, let's talk about two of the biggest challenges that arise when creating applications with the primary objective of building community through social connections: scalability and security.

Figure 7.1 Is bigger better? Scalability becomes a huge issue for social sites that have millions of users.

Scalability

Scalability often proves to be one of the biggest challenges of building applications that capitalize on social network structures. With few limits on how much content a user can post, social sites like Facebook and Twitter face huge hurdles when dealing with user-generated content, not only in terms of server load but also in terms of pulling huge amounts of content from multiple external sources.

Most standard sites typically pull content from only their own database and maybe one or two other locations if they use external application programming interfaces (APIs). Plus, for the most part, only a small percentage of traffic is on the site at any given time.

A social networking site, on the other hand, has to load not only your own user profile data every time you log in but also

extensive amounts of data from your connections as well. If you have 500 or more friends, for instance (depending on how the site is structured), a social networking site will have to load not only your own profile information but also status updates from each friend, recent content your friends have posted, and so on. Add a complex layer of privacy and permissions on top of that and you can see how scalability quickly becomes an issue.

Figure 7.2 Facebook randomly distributes its content across thousands of databases to help deal with scalability issues.

Facebook has addressed this challenge by randomly distributing its content across thousands of databases. Its memory cache services 120 million queries every second but is easily corrupted, so it's not a perfect solution. The *pull-on-demand* approach runs a complete query every time a request is made, so to find out if one friend has added a new favorite tune or photo album, it pings all of your friends and returns a complete list of what's new. With this in mind, it's not surprising that Facebook puts a 5,000-person limit on the number of friends you can have (or that it's sometimes pretty slow).

An alternate way to address this issue is to use a *push-on-change* approach. When a user makes a change to his or her account, the change is then pushed to all that user's connections and cached with those accounts. Though this approach removes the need to query all of your connections, there are still complications that can arise when multiple permissions layers are added to the equation, especially if the user has thousands of connections. Duplication of content becomes a big issue, and if the user decides to delete the content that has just been cached, it adds yet another layer of complexity.

Of the two approaches, the push-on-change approach seems to be more easily scalable because not all data is requested at once, in real time. Queuing the caching process can take some of the initial stress load off the application.

Load Testing

Load testing is the process of putting demand on a website, system, or device and measuring whether or not it returns the desired response. This is critical to building successful social applications.
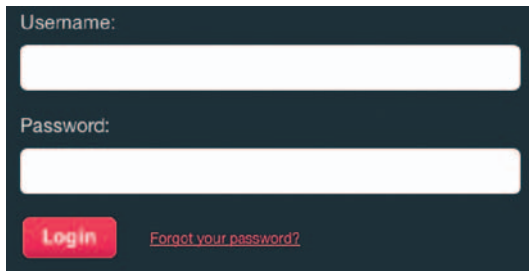
Figure 7.3 Are your social accounts secure?

We will talk about minimizing HTTP requests (on a *much* smaller scale) later in this chapter, but it's important to know how much of a challenge scalability can be when building social applications. Viral loops are awesome, but they can quickly bring your server to its knees. Load testing is a critical component of building any large-scale social application for all the reasons we discussed here.

Security

Most of the major social sites have been hacked at least once. These security breaches come in many shapes and sizes, and the level of breach varies greatly in terms of the harm it presents to users. Social sites rely on the rapid spread of information, which is precisely what often makes them most vulnerable to hackers.

Most social sites don't store credit card information or social security numbers. However, the information they do store—dates of birth, passwords, and so on—can potentially be used to gain access to that information, as well as bank account data and other financial details. Often social site passwords are the same as bank account passwords. This information is also often sold on the black market.

If you're a user, there is a standard set of steps to take if your account has been compromised: change your password, alert friends or followers, and so on. If you are building a social site, you have your own set of challenges to consider and address:

The vulnerability: spam scams. Even though most of us don't fall for Nigerian bank scams anymore, there are still some people who do. This is the simplest form of exploitation, and it requires little, if any, knowledge of programming or hacking.

The take-away. Monitor your network constantly. If your community suddenly has a rash of members who have inherited $7 million or are stuck in a Zimbabwe hotel with no cash to get home, chances are, spammers are at work.

The vulnerability: friend phishing. Resourceful hackers often use existing profile data to build faux profiles that appear to be legitimate but in actuality are covers for malicious code. They will then use these spoof pages to make thousands of friend or follower requests. Clicking on these requests results in a compromised account.

The take-away. Encourage users to be careful about accepting requests from unknown people and be even more careful about what information they share on their profiles. Monitor forums and other areas of your social site for suspicious activity.

The vulnerability: spyware. How bitter is the irony that comes with an error message warning you that a site contains viruses

or other information harmful to your computer, only to compromise your system when you click on it? Spyware, adware, malware, call it what you will. Ultimately, it's the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing.

The take-away. Encourage users to keep their antivirus software up to date, and take appropriate similar precautions on your servers.

The vulnerability: worms. Worms can be very damaging to social networking sites because they replicate and send themselves to all of your connections. The potential for worms to reach huge numbers of users literally in minutes makes them a huge security risk.

The take-away. Same as above. Keep your server security software up to date, and encourage your user base to do likewise.

The vulnerability: cross-site scripting (XSS). The rise of APIs and the ability to share content across networks offers developers the ability to create innovative applications that access multiple data sets from different locations. Poorly developed applications, however, can open both data sets up for exploitation. In a security report[1] published in 2008, Symantec reported that XSS made up to 80% of all security vulnerabilities documented by the company.

The take-away. Remain vigilant in developing secure applications that take advantage of XSS. Some methods for decreasing vulnerability include validating and rejecting undesirable characters in user input fields, using additional security controls when handling cookie-based user authentication, and, in extreme cases, disabling scripts.

The vulnerability: third-party applications. As more social networks invite developers to build add-ons to their network, they also open themselves up to potential weaknesses in their infrastructure. Ambitious hackers love to exploit these vulnerabilities.

The take-away. Employ a somewhat stringent review process for third-party applications. You don't need to be oppressive about it, but a code review can go a long way in helping to maintain security on your site.

The vulnerability: Flash. Adobe's robust rich media platform is not immune to these malicious attacks either. Same goes for Microsoft's Silverlight. Although both companies remain vigilant in keeping their rich media platforms safe, vulnerabilities have been exposed in past versions of the players.

The take-away. Develop Flash applications for the latest version of the plug-in. Though using an older version of Flash may potentially open up your application to more users, it

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[1] Symantec Internet Security Threat Report Trends for July–December 2007, Volume xiii, published in April 2008.

could also open it up for exploitation. The upgrade process is easy for users, so there's really no reason you shouldn't build your apps to support the most current version of the player.

As social networks become more robust with advanced features, the types of malicious attacks will also increase in complexity and become more organized. Many attacks will be focused specifically on ways to access bank accounts and other methods of monetization. As these attacks progress, administrators of social sites will be under increased pressure to maintain the security of user data. If you plan to build a social site or data-sharing web application, it is important to take all of these challenges into consideration and create a plan accordingly.

Site Optimization

No discussion of best practices for digital marketing would be complete without covering the optimization of one's website. In Chapter 5 we discussed optimizing graphics and Andrew King's notion of speed, reliability, and attractiveness as integral parts of a credibility-based site design. Attractiveness aside, the task of streamlining code to decrease load time and increase reliability across browsers and devices will play a huge role in visitors' impressions of your site and subsequently your organization's credibility as a whole. As King said in his book *Website Optimization:*

> *Proper structural markup conveys helpful information to whoever is maintaining the site with headings, paragraphs, and list items. Semantic markup can save countless hours of work in site redesigns. Search engines look for structural markup to see what information is most important. Accessibility and cross-platform access through mobile devices is enhanced when you use structural markup. Screen readers key off structural waypoints and users tab through a page based on semantically meaningful markup. (p. 161)*

There are a wide variety of tasks to consider when optimizing the code for your site or web application. Several of the more common practices are discussed next.

Semantic Markup

We have discussed the importance of using hierarchically organized semantic markup in several chapters of this book, and we will discuss another important facet of semantic markup—RDFa and microformats—later in this chapter. The most important thing to remember is to adhere to standards recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). When it comes to search

Figure 7.4 Diets aren't just for people anymore. Your website could stand to trim down as well.

engines, your site pages will fare most favorably when built using semantic markup, which, to date, means that they are XHTML 1.0- and CSS 2.0- or 3.0- compliant.

Code Validators

Not sure whether your site's code adheres to standards set forth by the W3C? Use a code validator to see how it stacks up. These tools will scour your site's pages; analyze HTML, CSS, and other elements; and offer suggestions for improvement:

W3C CSS Validator: http://jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator

W3C Markup Validator: http://validator.w3.org (Also, W3 Schools, the largest web developer site on the Internet, offers a handy tool that lets you validate HTML, XHTML, CSS, XML, and WML files all from a single URL.)

W3 Schools Validators: www.w3schools.com/site/site_validate.asp

Take the results these tools offer with a grain of salt, however. Just because a validator finds errors on your site pages doesn't mean those pages are broken. They're just not as well optimized as they could be. Besides, a missing `alt` tag or extraneous comment is hardly a reason to fire your programmer. As the W3C has noted, "Validity is one of the quality criteria for a Web page, but there are many others. In other words, a valid Web page is not necessarily a good web page, but an invalid Web page has little chance of being a good web page."

Also, it's a common perception that too many chefs can spoil the broth. The same concept may apply when too many authors potentially invalidate the code of your

Figure 7.5

site pages through improper use of the content management system. A little bit of training and lessons on proper markup technique can go a long way toward getting the most out of your CMS in a standards-based way that can be validated.
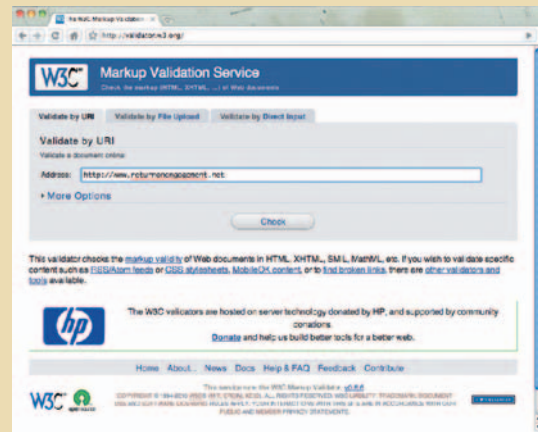
HTTP Requests

Every time a browser renders images, scripts, server-side includes (SSIs), style sheets, and so on to build the pages of your website, HTTP requests are made. With each HTTP request, the browser makes one of several request methods—`Head`, `Get`, `Post`, `Trace`, `Connect`, and so on—to the server, depending on the type of content being requested. The server in turn responds by feeding the appropriate content back to the browser, which renders it. This could happen dozens of times during the load of a single web page, so it stands to reason that the fewer requests your pages make, the speedier they will load.

Most browsers will load external JavaScript or CSS files referenced in the `head` of your pages before loading the `body` content,

Figure 7.6 Ask not of the hypertext transfer protocol.

which could potentially increase the amount of time it takes for a user to actually see content loading on your pages. Combining multiple external JavaScript and CSS files into single documents will help `body` content load quicker. Why use three external style sheets when one will suffice?

CSS Expressions

CSS expressions are a perfect example of *just because you can, it doesn't mean you should*. They take a lot more cycles to render and they waste computing resources. They have never been accepted as a standard by the W3C and are thus not widely supported by most browsers, which means using them can potentially break your pages. They are simply bad news.

Figure 7.7 Clean CSS' Formatter and Optimiser.

CSS Optimization

Earlier in this section we noted that combining CSS files will help minimize HTTP requests. There are a number of other optimization techniques that can be effective for making your site pages more responsive and quicker to load as well. For instance, converting old-school table layouts to CSS will usually save about

25% to 50% in page size. Here are some other tips and techniques for optimizing the CSS in your site pages:[2]

- Remove white space and excess comments.
- Remove any duplicate scripts.
- Use conditional statements for Internet Explorer workarounds.
- If you're using an existing framework, be sure to weed out any unnecessary rules not applicable to your project.
- Use layering and inheritance to save space and increase compatibility.
- Use embedded or SSI abbreviated styles for maximum speed.
- Layer style sheets for speed. Use cascading to combine linked, alternate, and imported style sheets to layer your presentation for older browsers and alternate media, such as print or screen readers.
- Group selectors with the same declarations and vice versa.
- Set global and element-wide styles (for type styles like `body`, `h1`, `p`, and `dt`) using simple selectors high up in the document hierarchy.
- Use descendant selectors to get specific without class or ID selectors.
- Use multiple classes to group common style declarations.
- Use value replication on border, padding, and margin properties.
- Use short class and ID names.
- Use relative lengths for maximum flexibility.

CSS Shorthand

Shorthand CSS properties do exactly what their name implies: they allow you to combine multiple "longhand" property values, which would normally take up several lines of code in your CSS, into one small, lean statement. They offer one of the quickest and most effective ways to get your CSS file size down.

For instance, this:

```
font-size: 1em;
line-height: 1.5em;
font-weight: bold;
font-style: italic;
font-family: serif
```

becomes this:

```
font: 1em/1.5em bold italic serif
```

when CSS shorthand is invoked. Background properties, fonts, lists, colors, borders, margins, and padding can all be optimized using shorthand techniques, which can shave significant amounts off the size of your CSS.

For other CSS shorthand resources, check the companion site to this book.

[2] www.townnews.com/Material%20for%20Regionals/generic/Bandwidth%20 Optimization.pdf
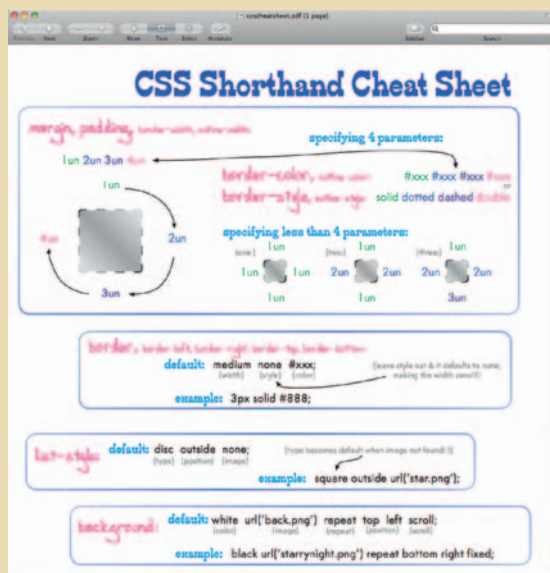
Figure 7.8 Developer Eddie Welker offers a quick, down-and-dirty CSS cheat sheet on his blog at www.eddiewelker.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/csscheatsheet.pdf.

Figure 7.9 The JavaScript Compressor at www.minifyjavascript.com.

Script Placement

As mentioned earlier in this section, where you place scripts on a page can make a difference in how the page loads and subsequently what sort of experience the site offers users. Style sheet requests that directly affect page display work better in the `head` portion of your pages, whereas JavaScript references are better served at the bottom of the page, just before the closing `body` tag. Placing JavaScript at the bottom of the page prevents it from rendering the page before other requests have completed.

Minify Scripts

Minifying CSS and JavaScript removes excess characters within your code without changing its functionality. Unnecessary characters typically include white space characters, comments, block delimiters, and so on. You can, of course, engage in this rather tedious process by hand, but why bother when there are a number of free online tools that will help with the process? Here are a few:

- JavaScript Compressor: www.minifyjavascript.com
- Vlead's Compressor: www.vlead.in/resources/tools/minify-javascript
- Vance Luca's JavaScript Compression Tool: http://jscompress.com
- Yahoo!'s JavaScript/CSS Minifier: http://developer.yahoo.com/yui/compressor

Redirects

If files get moved around a lot on your web server, you will inevitably need to create redirects to ensure users can find what they need. Redirects take up valuable server resources, so from an optimization perspective, it is a good idea to keep track of them and try to optimize the redirect chain as much as possible. If a redirect begets a redirect, which begets another redirect, you might want to shorten that chain to just a single redirect whenever possible.

Optimization Wrapup

Of course, this is one small section of one chapter in one book. Entire books have been written on the topic of site optimization. It's an integral part of creating a great user experience and can help your site serve its purpose as your finest marketing tool. I have included some good tips to get you started here. I've also quoted Andrew B. King's *Website Optimization* and *The Smashing Book* numerous times throughout this book. Both are excellent resources. If keeping your website in tip-top shape is one of your job responsibilities, I would definitely suggest adding it to your library. The book goes into great detail covering each of the topics mentioned earlier.

Semantic Web

The semantic web can be a somewhat esoteric concept for people to wrap their heads around. Semantic markup gives developers the power to include HTML elements in their code that allow search engines to derive context and meaning from indexed content, thus helping them discern between Paris the city in France and Paris the Hilton, or Paris, Texas, for that matter. Implications for this are huge when one considers how much easier it will ostensibly be to get results that are specifically relevant to your search criteria rather than just a random set of similar words and phrases.

Figure 7.10 Semantic markup can help search engines understand context, giving them the power to discern between many flavors of Paris, for example.

RDFa versus Microformats

Semantic markup is created using two currently competing data formats: RDFa, a standard developed by the W3C semantic team that uses XML as the basis for its format, and microformats, an effort spearheaded by the Technorati development community that uses metadata attributes that have been common to HTML for years.

RDFa

The Resource Description Framework-in-attributes (RDFa) format adds a set of attribute-level extensions to XHTML for embedding rich metadata within web documents. The RDFa data model mapping enables its use for embedding RDFa triples within XHTML documents as well as their extraction by compliant browsers, devices, search engines, and so on.

So what is an RDFa triple, you ask? The RDFa methodology, in a word, treats attributes like sentence elements, called *statements*. Large collections of data are broken down into individual statements that are constructed in a particular manner that make them easier to process. Statements typically fall into three categories: subject, predicate, and object, which are used in combination—aptly called a triple—to specify an attribute name/value pair about a particular resource:

- *Subject* identifies what object the triple is defining.
- *Predicate* defines the piece of data in the object being given a value.
- *Object* is the actual value.

The W3C gives a great explanation of why this is important using Albert Einstein as an example. Let's first look at the following statements.

```
Albert was born on March 14, 1879, in Germany. There is a
picture of him at the web address, http://en.wikipedia.org/
wiki/Image:Albert_Einstein_Head.jpg.
```

Figure 7.11 Albert is semantic-curious. Aren't you? (Even just a little bit?)

Search engines currently would have some difficulty interpreting this content. If we separate the data into smaller, more manageable statements, it becomes easier to interpret:

```
Albert was born on March 14, 1879.
Albert was born in Germany.
Albert has a picture at
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Albert_Einstein_Head.jpg.
```

Using the concept of RDFa triples, `Albert` becomes the `subject` in all of the preceding statements. Likewise, the phrases—`was born on`, `has a picture at`, and `was born in`—are the `predicates`. Finally, the remaining elements—`March 14, 1879`, `Germany` and `http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Albert_Einstein_Head.jpg` are the triple's objects.

With the defined structure of RDFa in place, this content becomes easier for data applications (i.e., search engines, though the ramifications extend beyond that as well) to interpret.

Shelley Powers, author of the O'Reilly title *Practical RDF,* has explained it this way:

- Each RDFa triple is made up of subject, predicate, and object.
- Each RDFa triple is a complete and unique fact.

- An RDFa triple is a three-tuple, which is made up of a subject, predicate, and object—which are, respectively, a `uriref` or `bnode`; a `uriref`; and a `uriref`, `bnode`, or `literal`.
- Each RDFa triple can be joined with other RDFa triples, but it still retains its own unique meaning, regardless of the complexity of the models in which it is included.

With an explanation like this one, you can see why easily defining the semantic web quickly becomes a somewhat esoteric endeavor. Without getting into the details of `bnodes`, `urirefs`, and `literals`, the most important thing to remember is that as more and more web content embraces these standards, the nature of what we know as search today will change significantly.

Microformats

In contrast to RDFa, microformats offer a web-based approach to semantic markup wherein developers can reuse existing XHTML and HTML tags to convey metadata and other attributes. This approach allows information intended for end users (such as contact information, geographic coordinates, calendar events, etc.) to also be automatically processed by software and search engines.

On the surface, the two systems seem remarkably similar. Both aspire to encode semantic information into web documents so that content can be reused for both humans and machines. In both systems, this goal is achieved by using attributes typically hidden from users to indicate location and contextual meaning of the metadata.

The two systems clash in their methodology, however, resulting in yet another age-old war between computing standards. More people currently use microformats, but RDFa has been developed by the W3C and uses XML, an existing standard, to provide a scalable format for semantic content. Microformats are supported by a number of browsers as well.

As of this writing, one standard has not emerged supreme over the other, meaning that in addition to creating web content for many different browsers and devices, developers will need to integrate competing data formats as well if they want to support semantic markup in their site pages. Regardless, with its focus on context rather than simple strings of letters and numbers, the semantic web offers the potential to redefine how we find information online.

Progressive Enhancement

We have discussed the power of semantic markup for content in terms of how it can help with accessibility, 508-compliance, and search engine optimization. A technique commonly referred to as *progressive enhancement* allows everyone to access the basic content and functionality of a web page, using any browser or Internet

connection, while providing those with better bandwidth or more advanced browser software an enhanced version of the page.

For Flash

Progressive enhancement is also commonly used for Flash projects as a helpful way to assist search engines with the task of indexing Flash content. Here's a quick breakdown of the process:

- *XML.* Put all text and image paths from your movie into an XML document.
- *XHTML.* Convert the XML doc to XHTML using XSLT.[3]
- *Parse.* Load the XML into your Flash document and display it.
- *Embed.* Use SWFObject to embed the Flash movie into your page.[4]
- *Detect.* SWFObject detects if the user has Flash; if not, it will display an alternate content DIV.
- *Display.* Add code to display your XML/XHTML document.
- *Design.* Apply CSS to style your content.

The resulting content will be crawled by Google and other search engines and will be displayed on browsers or devices that don't have Flash, such as the iPhone.

APIs

Application programming interfaces have been around for as long as developers have been making software for computers. The rise of social networks and Web 2.0 also spawned the rise of the web API, also known as *web services*, a set of tools that, among other things, gives third-party developers the power to capitalize on a social network or web application's data sets.

The W3C defines web services as "a software system designed to support interoperable machine-to-machine interaction over a network." Thousands of Facebook apps wouldn't exist today without the Facebook API, which, if you're one of the 14 people on Facebook who don't play Farmville or Mafia Wars, may not necessarily be a bad thing. The same goes for Twitter. You can access Twitter via your iPhone because some smart developer built an app that harnesses the power of Twitter's data sets. Many of Google's tools—such as Maps, Analytics, and YouTube, to name few—have

Figure 7.12 I'll have my API call your API. We'll do lunch. It'll be fun.

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[3] Too many acronyms? Try this tutorial from the W3 Schools: www.w3schools.com/xsl/xsl_transformation.asp.
[4] SWFObject embeds Flash movies into a web page using JavaScript. For more information go to http://code.google.com/p/swfobject.

APIs. Facebook, Flickr, and most every other major social site has one as well. Developers use these tools to build applications and data mashups that capitalize on a site's existing data structure, reusing it in new and innovative ways. Their potential for marketing, communicating, and sharing information is extensive.
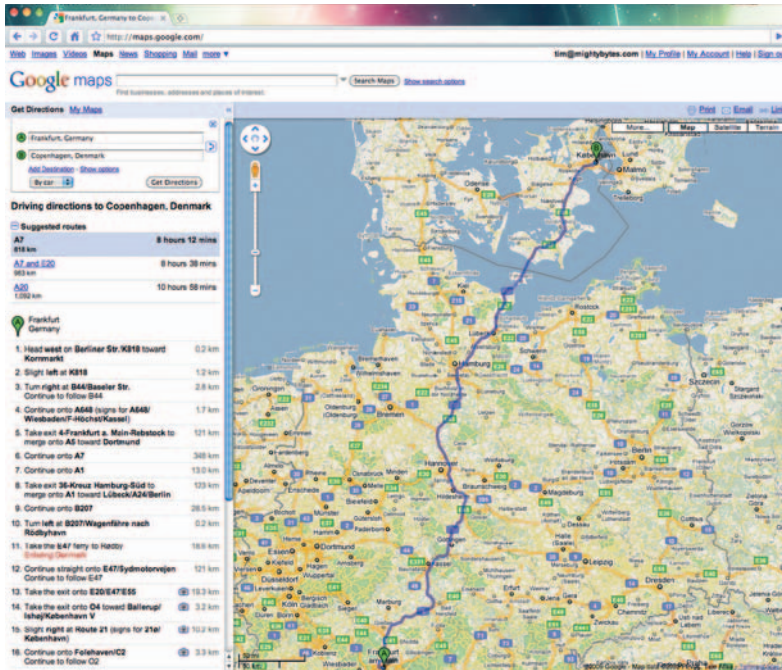
Figure 7.13 Many of Google's applications have APIs.

How They Work

An API call is no different than your own website pulling text or image content from a CMS database, except that the data being pulled in is sitting on someone else's web server as part of someone else's application or website. If built properly, the experience is invisible to the end user. Just as some sort of user interface handles interactions between a person filling out a form on your website and a server processing form data, an API serves as the conduit between one application talking to (or pulling data from) another application. The API is a translator of sorts that determines specifications for programming routines, data structures, object classes, and protocols between the two applications.

With web APIs, a set of HTTP requests between two (or more) applications is defined, as is a data structure such as XML, JSON, or other common web data formats. Web APIs also allow developers to combine multiple data sources into new, unique applications, usually referred to as "mashups." Housing Maps (www.housingmaps.com), a combination of data from Google

Maps and Craigslist, is a commonly referenced example of a mashup.

Benefits

Creating an API for your web application is a smart business and marketing strategy that facilitates the symbiotic growth of businesses on top of other businesses, resulting in a sort of ecosystem that stems from the original data but often involves two or more independent companies or organizations. For example, Netflix created an API for its data, which allowed independent third-party developers to create apps for the iPhone, Xbox, and PS3. Users win because they have more options when renting movies. Third-party developers win because they created the popular apps. And, of course, Netflix wins because the company has more revenue opportunities.

Leveraging the work of others to grow your own business via APIs also helps get your services and information to where people are, as their use often capitalizes on the social nature of the web by facilitating easy content sharing and viral loop creation on community-driven social sites or apps. In a nutshell, if users are regularly "screen-scraping" your data with the old copy/paste routine, then an API might be right for you, as there are numerous business benefits.

Potential Business Risks

Creating an API for your social app can be a great idea if you want to reach more users and open your data up for potential innovation by third parties. There are some inherent risks as well, however. Although the vast majority of developers who integrate their own code with your API will use your data responsibly, there are some who won't. For example, for all its forward thinking in terms of API development, Netflix has also come under fire for not respecting user privacy. In December 2009, users filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission stating that the movie rental company violated its privacy policy when it ran a contest offering $1 million to anyone who could improve upon its existing movie recommendation software by more than 10%. The contest was open to the public, and participants were given large amounts of data, including 100 million subscriber movie ratings. Plaintiffs stated that the information released includes sensitive data that could be used to imply personal information such as the political preferences or sexual orientation of Netflix's users.

According to Hollywood Law blog THR, Esq. "The lawsuit argues that Netflix broke its own privacy policy, seeks $2,500 in damages for each of its more than 2 million users, and asks for an enjoinment from launching a second contest that will give

out user data including ZIP codes, age, and gender with movie ratings."

Poor programming practices can lead to disaster just as easily as poor judgment or lack of forethought can. An improperly configured API can potentially open up private user data (including credit card numbers) to third parties who can exploit them, so it's very important to keep possible business risks at mind every step of the way when developing a public API for your application.

Try though you may, there is really no way you can peek into the future and foresee all potential business risks. Sometimes the best you can hope for is an acceptable risk. There's no way to guarantee how people will react when you share data, especially if the data contains sensitive user information. But even so, weighing risks remains an important part of the process of ascertaining whether an API is right for your organization or business.

Best Practices

While a full list of best practices for API development would not only be extensive and not necessarily within the scope of this book (at least in terms of programming), there are some general

factors to consider when weighing the pros and cons of building your own API. Ask yourself questions like the following:

- *Will people use your data?* There's no sense going to the trouble of defining your API standards if nobody wants the data you have to offer.
- *What are the liability risks for private data?* If you run the risk of being sued over data sharing with third parties, perhaps creating an API isn't worth the effort you will put into it.
- *Will third-party applications help grow your own business?* There's little sense in making efforts to standardize an API if your company won't benefit from it in any way.
- *How will you maintain data integrity?* Allowing third parties to write to your database is a quick ride on the short bus to disaster. Be sure to make your API *read-only*.

This last point is extremely important. Many companies with APIs maintain data integrity by only opening their data to developers who agree to prototype reviews prior to launch. This assures that a third-party app won't undermine the integrity of your brand with shoddily written code, a bad user interface, or security loopholes. This is another one of those slippery slopes, however. Apple, for example, has potentially done more damage to its reputation via the tight reins it holds on iPhone app developers than anything else the company has done. There is a fine line between maintaining integrity and exerting unnecessary control. Developer autonomy often sits right on that line.

You may also want to consider limiting access to your data only to those who will in turn help your business grow along with their own. *The New York Times*, for instance, gives full API data access to developers who direct traffic back to their website. Those who don't are given limited (and potentially less valuable) information. This practice allows other compliant companies to benefit alongside *The New York Times* when using its data sets to create mashups or new applications.

APIs offer a great way to squeeze more innovation out of the data a web application provides. Twitter is both a great example of this and a cautionary tale as well. Dozens of third-party applications have gone far beyond what Twitter itself offers by capitalizing on its API. In the same breath, the microblogging site has been the victim of numerous phishing scams and other malicious attacks. If you're considering the plausibility of developing your own social application, be sure to keep important potential threats and challenges—especially those related to security issues surrounding user data—at the top of your list of things to monitor and pay careful attention to.

Let's take a look at some popular social APIs in action.

API Lists

Can't seem to find the right API? Programmable Web offers a comprehensive, regularly updated list of APIs with search and categorization features that allow you to find web services based on company, data format, protocols, release date, and so on. APIs can also be sorted by name, release date, popularity, and category. In addition to giving individual API specs, each listing also tells you how many PW-registered developers are using the API, how many mashups have been created with it, how many APIs the company has, and a URL that can lead you to more information. Registering with the site allows you to track individual APIs as well.

Figure 7.15 Programmable Web's API directory.

As of this writing, Programmable Web's list included 1,642 APIs. You can find the full list at www.programmableweb.com/apilist.

OpenSocial

"The web is better when it's social," states the page for OpenSocial, Google's approach to creating a framework for building social applications. "OpenSocial defines a common API for social applications across multiple websites. With standard JavaScript and HTML, developers can create apps that access a social network's friends and update feeds."

The OpenSocial API can be used to build social applications, app platforms, desktop apps, or social sites. PollDaddy, iLike, BuddyPoke, and Google's FriendConnect—an application whose

Figure 7.16 Google thinks the web is better when it's social.

Figure 7.17 Facebook, however, thinks the web is better when you're playing Farmville.

main focus is to simplify the connection between social and nonsocial websites—are all examples of OpenSocial applications, but there are hundreds more.

The framework offers several development approaches. Typical implementations consists of application data, social

data, and a template, which are combined when rendered based on client-side requests. Google's OpenSocial site says, "In the OpenSocial ecosystem, these components can come from several places. Client-Side apps can use JavaScript to render data into a template. Social networks can store both social and application data, and server-side applications can take advantage of databases and server-side frameworks to produce rendered output."

Facebook Apps

Facebook offers developers a variety of tools for building applications that capitalize on the social behemoth's structure and huge amounts of user data. Using its provided tool set and handy *Getting Started* guide[5] it's possible to have a simple app running within just a few minutes—that is, if you know what you're doing, of course. Developers should be well-versed in code structure and how to build applications using PHP or other languages—such as Ruby on Rails, JavaScript, or Python—that have client libraries for the Facebook API.

Facebook released its Connect product—an app (similar to Google's FriendConnect) that lets users log into external blogs and other social sites using their Facebook log-in information—in 2008. By the end of 2009, the company claimed that Connect was used on more than 80,000 sites. One third of Huffington Post's new readers make comments on the popular blog via Facebook Connect, and daily registrations to Citysearch have tripled since the site started using the product. Also, 94% of users who write reviews on Citysearch end up sharing their reviews via Facebook.[6]

Facebook Connect plug-ins are available for WordPress, Drupal, Movable Type, and a number of other content management systems, giving you easy access to its features without having to hand-code your own app.

Widgets

Widgets—sharable "miniapps" that can be easily embedded into blogs, web pages, and social profiles—have been around in one form or another since the early days of the World Wide Web. Early forms of widgets included link counters and advertising banners, but they have evolved over time to offer more robust capabilities such as local weather, news tickers, sports scores,

[5] http://developers.facebook.com/get_started.php?tab=anatomy. Guidelines are direct from FB but referenced in context.
[6] www.slideshare.net/lazerow/building-across-the-social-web-the-implications-of-social-web-technologies-on-social-media-content-strategy

Figure 7.18 Netvibes' Widget Directory.

stock reports, photo slideshows, blog feeds, social links, Twitter profiles, and so on.

Widgets typically come in two categories:

1. Installable desktop widgets such as those in Apple's Dashboard or Opera's Mobile Widgets.
2. Web widgets, also known as modules or badges, that are built using standard web development techniques and are shared dynamically on blogs or social networking sites.

Widgets offer a great way for marketers to build sponsored, sharable content on a smaller scale than, say, creating an entire microsite or social web app. As mentioned earlier, web widgets are typically built using standard web technologies such as JavaScript, Flash, HTML, and CSS. Though the code, graphics, and media content are hosted in one location, embedded codes that can be easily copied and pasted allow users to post widgets in a wide variety of places online. Installable widgets, on the other hand, are compiled and downloaded as a single package for installation on a variety of platforms and devices (though many include web access as part of their core functionality).

Web widgets use and depend on web APIs exposed either by the browser or by a widget engine (see the accompanying box titled 'Widget Engines'). WordPress offers a set of specifications that enable themes built for the blogging platform to be "widget-ready," giving bloggers the power to embed widgets into their blogs with ease.

The W3C has made recommendations for standardizing widget specifications. These recommendations cover everything from interfaces and digital signatures to interoperability and security. As of this writing they are recommendations, however, and not adopted as standards.

As with most software development, if you are thinking about developing a widget, it is critical to define user needs, platform, technical specifications, architecture, and so on before starting full-on design and development. Also, remember that most widgets are single-function miniapps with a rather focused purpose, so don't think you are going to reinvent Photoshop for your blog.

Creating a widget for use on blogs and social media profiles can be an excellent way to help your content reach a wider audience. If your content is useful and invites sharing, your widget could potentially reach a very wide audience in a very short period of time.

Widget Engines

Widget engines offer an easy alternative to building web widgets from scratch. Solutions like Widgetbox, Widsets, Akami, WebWag, or Plusmo provide you with a variety of tools to package your blog, Twitter feed, YouTube channel, and a variety of other sources into tidy packages that can be embedded into blogs, web pages, or social profiles.

Figure 7.19 Widgetbox and its ilk offer many tools to make your widget pretty.

Widgetbox, for instance, lets you create *Blidgets* with a simple, elegant interface. Content can be integrated from a variety of sources, including Twitter, Flickr, Vimeo, YouTube, RSS feeds, and more. Custom tools for creating polls, countdowns, slideshows, and forms are also available. Blidgets can be customized with user-specified colors, patterns, backgrounds, headers, and the like so you can create miniapps that meet existing brand standards.

Conclusion

We have by no means scratched the surface of challenges inherent to developing applications that capitalize on what the social web offers and what digital marketers need. We have, however, covered a number of important high-level concepts and considerations to take into account before taking that first step down the path of building your own apps. We have also covered a number of critical steps to take for optimizing your site for search engines. Popular resources for developing social or viral applications of your own have been touched on as well. If you're not willing to take on the development challenges yourself, social sites like Agency Scoop and 37 Signals' Sortfolio can help you find potential developer partners to collaborate with.

THE BLOG

How many times have you searched for information on a particular topic and found that some of the highest results returned are from blogs? Blogs offer a wealth of information, good and bad, but have become widely used in combination with websites as a key business and marketing tool. This chapter offers a general overview of blogs, the technology behind them, and why they are important digital marketing tools.
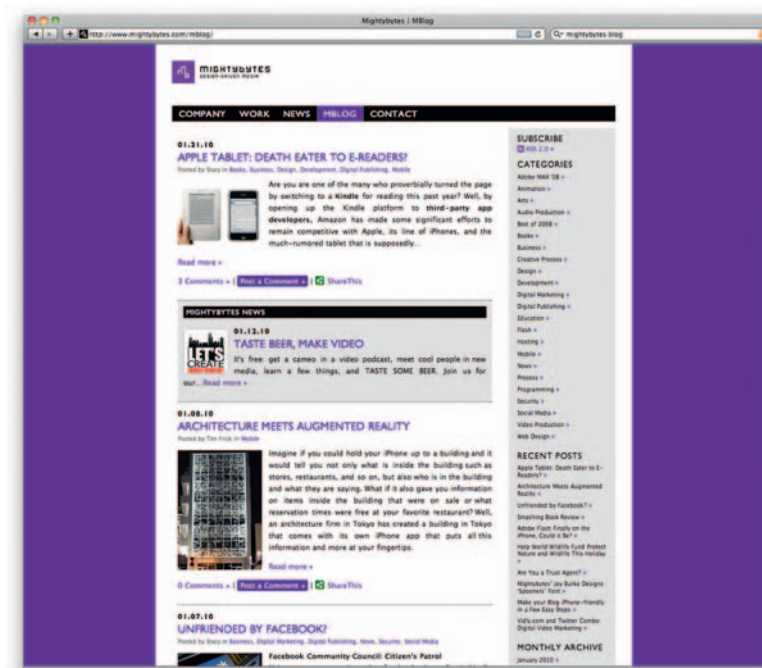
Figure 8.1 Blogs, or "web logs" for those not into the whole brevity thing, can offer a wealth of useful information, all of which is typically crawled by search engines.

To Blog or Not to Blog?

If you're reading this book, you have probably asked yourself that question once or twice. Blogs can be for personal or for business use, and they are often a hybrid of both. Some blogs are personal rants shared with the masses; others are private musings.

Business blogs exist for marketing and communications, and when done best they offer real-person writings and engagements. Successful blogs for business express a human side of company culture, allow many voices to speak and become brand ambassadors, and are a great way to pass on information and ideas and to initiate two-way communications.

You may think you don't need a blog. It's true, not everyone requires one, but remember: a blog is a tool for expression that if used effectively helps build relationships and drives search engine traffic. If the new digital marketing means connecting with people on a much more personal level, then having a tool at your disposal that supports that goal will certainly make it easier to accomplish.

SEO

Your blog is another channel in which to drive search engine traffic, usually along with your website itself. When considering the content of your blog, yes, make it personal and real, but remember to include keywords and phrases that will capture targeted traffic as well. This can be done the same way it is done on your website. It's also a good idea to regularly check your search engine rankings for your website, and your blog should follow up directly under it. We discussed written content in detail throughout Chapter 4.

Comments and Moderation

Comments

The comments systems built into all blog software offer great ways to foster community. In your content, make sure you include prompts or questions to foster a discussion in your blog. After all, it is a point of engagement and discussion, not just a soapbox. Of course, be ready for people to disagree with you or to point out that you are wrong possibly. Most blog software allows you to moderate comments or to enable all comments to be posted without moderation.
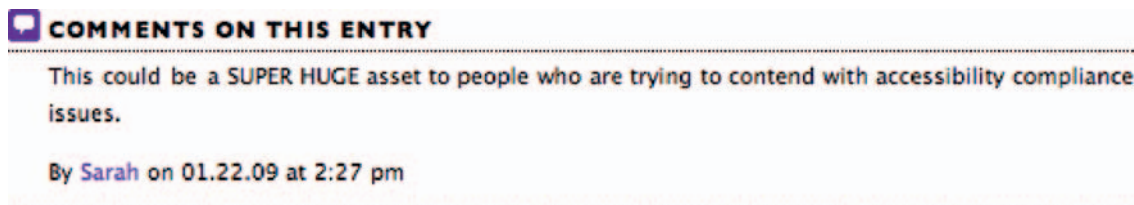
Figure 8.2 Allowing comments on your blog transforms it from a one-way soapbox to an information community.

Moderation

Be advised, if you moderate comments, it is important to be on task to read and publish them regularly, or you are letting go of the timeliness of the comments and their discussion abilities. Another great way to build targeted traffic to your blog and build community is to regularly follow and comment on blogs related to yours. Look for industry groups, other recognized professionals, and many of these folks you already connect with via social media. Keep this in mind: those who are reading their blogs may very well want to read (and share) the content of yours.

Blog versus CMS

So by now you're probably saying to yourself, didn't we just cover that in the chapter on CMS? Well, sort of. Today, many blogging software apps contain features analogous to those in content management systems, and the lines tend to get blurrier with each new upgrade that is released. There are a few key differences.

The Differences

Though the line is rapidly blurring between content management systems and blog software, especially in applications like WordPress, Expression Engine, and Movable Type, the subtle differences tend to be driven by how content is presented and how users interact with it.

Blogging software typically presents content in a chronological display with most recent entries at the top of the page. Users can typically comment on content entries. Links are usually present for post entries in side navigation. Features like blogrolls keep blogs recognizable for users as a "blog" and not the company website.

One-way versus two-way communication is a key difference in blogs. Most website CMS tools allow you to publish your content and have forms or areas for contact, but they do not allow the public or users to comment on content entries. Blogs, on the other hand, offer two-way communication via comments on the blog itself and share features that let you distribute and syndicate the content via RSS and through social media and blogging sites. That said, with a little finagling, most content management software can be tweaked to work like a blog and vice versa.

Blog Tools

There are a lot of blog tools out there now. How to know which to choose is based on the creator's technical capability, budget, resources, and marketing and design importance. Salon.com

and Blogger are both easy-to-use blog websites that anyone can start and be up and running in no time. The design and display options are somewhat limited, however, and jumping to the next level of blogs such as WordPress and Movable Type can require more code and technical ability than the average layperson has. So here we look at few of the offerings.

Figure 8.3 Many blogging tools are available. Which one is right for you?

Blogger

Blogger is easy to set up and use, which is in part why it has become such a tremendously popular blogging tool. Simple customization, such as changing colors and fonts and adding custom header images, can be done with little to no knowledge of web development. Further customization requires CSS skills. Like all blogging platforms, it supports RSS feeds, allows for easy addition of blogroll links, and supports a variety of widgets and plug-ins for extending its capabilities.

Movable Type

Movable Type is a part of the Six Apart services, and its latest versions offer built-in social networking functions and content management system functions. It is written in Perl and works in conjunction with MySQL and others. It can also be used with some databases such as Oracle. In addition to the free version, you can purchase support or buy a license. Movable Type is used by a lot of showcase companies including NBC and NPR.

WordPress

WordPress is another content management/blogging tool built on a foundation of PHP and MySQL that offers a rich set of features. The hosted version, WordPress.com, allows you to change themes, but you can't use your own custom CSS without paying. There are plenty of widgets to use, and some are more useful than others.

WordPress.org, where you can download the WordPress software and install it onto your own web server, is a bit more feature

rich than its hosted counterpart, but it might be a tad more complicated for beginners.

Tumblr

Tumblr is a microblogging service, mostly used for sharing things one finds across the web or for amateur photographers. Basically, each post is just one thing, such as a photo, video, link, and so on. Tumblr is not really for people who want to do serious ranting, but it is nice for someone who likes to quickly post things now and then. Posterous is a similar service.

Squarespace

Squarespace is a hosted blog product that has a reputation of being fairly easy to use, and it creates polished and sophisticated websites. Their company site notes that it "powers tens of thousands of sophisticated websites for businesses, bloggers, and professionals worldwide and currently serves hundreds of millions of hits per month." It is not free, but it offers monthly starting prices of less than $10.

Blog Terminology

To walk the walk, you have to talk the talk, right? Here are some common terms often bandied about in the blogosphere.

- *Comment.* A written or submitted media comment in response to a blog, typically text. This often is required to be supplied in a form in the blog with a "human verification" step used to reduce spam, called a CAPTCHA. These display letters and numbers in a graphic image that the user has to reenter in a typed form box.

Figure 8.4 Robots are good for making many things, but comments are not one of them. CAPTCHA is one of many tools that ensure your comments area remains for humans only.

- *Ping.* Short for packet Internet grouper. Blog and ping help to notify other blog tracking tools for updates, changes, and trackbacks.
- *Trackback.* When a ping is sent from one blog to another blog to acknowledge the blog article. As Wikipedia states, "This acknowledgment is sent via a network signal (ping) from the originating site to the receiving site. The receptor often publishes a link back to the originator indicating its worthiness. Trackback requires both sites to be trackback-enabled in order to establish this communication. Trackback does not require the originating site to be physically linked to the receiving site."
- *Tags.* Keywords attached to blog entries where users can search and view by tag entries.
- *Blogrolls.* Lists of links to other blogs, usually in the blog side navigation.

Hosted versus Nonhosted Solutions

There are essentially two ways you can set up a blog: by installing the software on your own server or by using a hosted solution. Blog resource site Bloggingbasics101.com offers this simple breakdown of the pros and cons of each.

Hosted Blog

This is a blog that resides on the blog company's server. It does not require users to obtain separate hosting accounts, download or install software, and so on. All content and software is hosted by the company that makes the blogging platform. Google's Blogger is a good example of this.

Pros

- These sites make it easy to start and maintain a blog.
- Very little coding expertise is required.
- Domain resolution means the content can appear to reside on your domain.

Cons

- Bloggers are often faced with only a limited number of themes, so custom branding can be a challenge.
- There is less control over CSS and HTML.
- Some hosted blogs do not allow advertisements, an important consideration if you are trying to monetize your blog.

Nonhosted Sites

This is a blog that resides on the user's (your) server. When using a nonhosted blogging platform, you must pay a third party to host your blog and install the software on your server account.

Pros

- You have complete control over CSS and HTML.
- You have control over permalink names (which can help with SEO).
- You have control over how archives are managed.

Cons

These sites can be intimidating to new bloggers because they must often discover how to configure the blogging software on their own.

Setting Up a Blog

WordPress Example

Wordpress is considered a solid blogging solution because it offers the following features (and more):
- Clear online documentation
- Great user interface
- Many developers available for custom solutions
- E-commerce capable via plug-ins
- Multi-user versions for social sites
- iPhone version

It does have a few shortcomings:
- Third-party plug-in quality can vary greatly.
- Shoddy plug-ins can lead to security loopholes.
- Plug-ins can break with software upgrades.
- Shoddy themes exist.
- Some themes have been used thousands of times.

The hosted version, WordPress.com, is an open-source free blogging tool with features that include:
- Ready-made themes that are easy to install
- Thousands of templates
- Paid access to CSS themes for $15 per year
- Defaults to yourblogname.wordpress.com
- Option to redirect blog to a custom to a domain name

WordPress is also infinitely expandable via plug-ins that give you control over everything from sitemaps and SEO to

e-commerce, calendars, productivity, comments spam, and social media integration with sites like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

If your hosting provider supports one-click install via tools like cPanel and Fantastico, you can install WordPress in seconds (see cPanel/Fantastico information in Chapter 7).

Keep in mind that this method of installing WordPress is not always error-free and is specific to the services your hosting provider offers.

Once you have the software setup and configured, many of the remaining steps to getting a successful blog up and running are those covered elsewhere in this book:

- Creating a content strategy (covered in Chapter 2)
- Setting up the site's structure and information architecture (covered in Chapter 4)
- Creating great keyword-rich content (covered in Chapter 4)
- Implementing a credibility-based custom design (covered in Chapter 5)
- Optimizing the blog for maximum efficiency (covered in Chapter 7)
- Using RSS and social media tools to share your content across multiple destinations (covered in Chapters 9, 11 and 12)
- Use email campaigns to help drive traffic (covered in Chapter 10)
- Adding video content to your blog to increase engagement (covered in Chapters 13 and 14)
- Using analytics and metrics tools to hone your approach (covered in Chapter 15)

Custom versus Plug-n-Play

Weigh the decision to use an existing blog template versus a custom design very carefully. There are a number of pros and cons to each approach.

Custom Design

Pros
A custom design will adhere to your brand standards.
It will be unique to you.

Cons
A custom design is more time consuming.
It will be more expensive to implement.

Figure 8.6 There are advantages to customizing your blog, but there are also advantages to going with a preexisting template.

Extensibility

Additional tools for marketing your blog, such as ShareThis and AddThis, are fairly easy to install and absolutely critical for building traffic and awareness to your content. In some blog tools such as Blogger, adding new tools is as easy as choosing a widget. As of this writing, the WordPress plug-in directory offers 8,925 blog plug-ins that have been downloaded 82,794,844 times. Review plug-ins for your own blog here: http://wordpress.org/extend/plugins/.

Monitoring the Blogosphere

Blog-specific search engines such as Technorati and its ilk enable you to find blogs wherein you can create dialogues and potentially traffic back to your own blog. Google Blogs, BlogCatalog, IceRocket, BlogDigger, and the Blog Search Engine are also great resources to find blogs built around topics that interest you.

Technorati watchlists, which function somewhat like Google Alerts for blogs, were discontinued in February of 2010, but Technorati cites that it hopes new features will perform similar functions in the future releases.

Conclusion

By now, this overview of blogs, how to configure one and how to use it, should have helped when considering including one in your return on engagement strategy. A blog is a much more free-form platform to communicate with customers, colleagues, and mass audiences. Think of a blog as a way to tell a full story and then share that via social media, bloglists, search engine links, and so on. The case that follows presents an example of someone who was inspired to blog by personal passion, which led to a big business growth as well.

Existing Template

Pros
An existing template is quick to implement.
It is cost effective.

Cons
The results are not unique to you.
The template could be on thousands of other sites.
It undermines credibility.

Deanna Shoss is a marketing/communications professional and is the creator and author of the blog Intercultural Talk as well as Intercultural Talk, Inc., a multicultural marketing consulting business. "I wanted to explore the space between multicultural marketing, intercultural communications and social justice—as in antiracism," she explains. Described as "Anthropology Meets Marketing," the blog is www.interculturaltalk.org.

Vision and Strategy

Shoss's passion drove her to begin a blog in April 2008. "I said I positively must do something to combat racism," she recalls. Stereotypes in advertising, intercultural communications, multicultural parenting, and diversity training are some of the blog topics. As followers grew, this became a natural platform to drive business for her consulting, in terms of the services and packages she began to offer. By the end of 2008, Shoss was able to catapult into rebranding the entire business, both her blog and her consulting company, as Intercultural Talk.

Blog and Relationship Building

Tangible return on engagement for Intercultural Talk is measurable relationship building. One example for Deanna Shoss is when a company in Puerto Rico found her through her blog and invited her to speak at a conference. There, she made a connection with a person from Executive Diversity Services, and after several months of pursuing business together, Shoss has now become a formal associate of this company. "It now means that I can offer engagement and inclusion and diversity services for companies as large as 10,000 people via my relationship with EDS." Further, she notes that business connections like this solidify her identity as a growing leader in intercultural communications.

Content

Initial blog entries were more from personal anecdotes, and over time she connected with other blogs to find out about

trending topics and sprinkle her posts with connections to other articles and sources. "I will try to bring out the bigger issues or questions raised, but it's not about making a stand, saying who's right or who's wrong—it's about taking day-to-day experiences to demonstrate unconscious bias and to look at how one grows stronger once biases are revealed. It's providing those tools and that process that I continue to work to package to sell as a consulting product—so once again, it's building a reputation that says I can help you maneuver through, embrace and thrive in an ever-changing, increasingly diverse world," says Shoss.

She finds inspiration for content in places such as adfreak.com, blog sites, and even Twitter. "My topics are multicultural marketing and specifically looking for stereotypes in advertising, intercultural communications, and raising multicultural children." She ends each post with a question and will often include "how to" lists as a way of drawing parallels to intercultural communication.

Keywords

Shoss advises others to use keywords in headlines. For example, "Intercultural communications: topic for blog post," and repetitive keywords in the post for searchable phrases. Her best performing phrases for SEO include "multicultural marketing" and "intercultural communications."

Social Media

Shoss says, "I need to balance why I'm blogging with the amount of time that I spend on blogging." Currently she keeps to her commitment to blog three times a week and to Twitter three to five times a day Monday through Friday, plus write general email. "The hardest part on top of that, which is critical, is finding time to look at other people's work, to comment and promote them. The thing about social media is it only works when it's a two-way street, and that takes time."

Shoss has accounts and actively posts on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, using the Twitter and LinkedIn feed, noting the credibility-building aspect of social media. She adds that following other people on social media like Hotspot and Chris Brogan helps her build her content too.

Like many, Shoss does not yet have a product to sell to the mass public (until her first book is published), so engaging on social media outlets does not yet have a direct monetary correlation. She understands the value of interacting, relationships, referrals, and building awareness, as the blog

does convert into real business and allows her to speak passionately about topics she cares about.

Metrics

Shoss uses Google Analytics for blog metrics, Hubspot's Blog Grader, and Google searches and sees visitors from almost every country. Such global audience interest reassures her of the blog's multicultural focus. Now she is more closely looking at bounce rate to see which types of content posts perform better than others, noting "mostly it's the 'how to' or 'top 10' or 'top three' type lists that people love. They're looking for answers."

Conversion

The Intercultural Talk business site currently refers 25% of visitors from the blog, linked on the blog (at interculturaltalk .org) and mutually from the business site (interculturaltalk. com). Shoss's business information and bio are also included on the blog in the About the Author section. She is still measuring and evolving conversion opportunities. "What I don't have yet on the blog is a conversion form. There is a conversion form on my business website, but I do not yet have a strong link between people visiting the blog going to the website and then contacting me for business." Her next step is to better close the loop between people who are visiting the site, transferring to the business site, and then converting those people into conversations.

Find out more about Intercultural Talk and Deanna Shoss at InterculturalTalk.org and on Twitter @culturalguru.

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REALLY SIMPLE SYNDICATION

Really simple syndication (RSS) is an easy way to spread your content to many people across multiple locations, including social networks that support the format in its many flavors. Conversely, RSS also allows you to pull content from numerous unrelated sources into one location for quick and easy perusal. This chapter focuses on defining RSS technology, explaining why you should make it part of your content strategy and demonstrating how it can be a valuable marketing tool as well.

Figure 9.1 Really simple syndication. It sounds like what it is.

RSS Defined

Built on a foundation of extensible markup language (XML), RSS is an updatable and distributable feed format that supports images, text, audio, and video. RSS feeds also include important metadata that allow compatible software to read and interpret entry information like publish date, description, authorship, and so on. It is a great way to share and view headlines and media content and is supported by many different software products, including browsers, blogs, email programs, content management systems, and feed reader applications.

History

RSS has been around since the late 1990s and has survived numerous specification changes.[1] It evolved from several previous (though unsuccessful) attempts to adopt standards for web content syndication, including Apple's Meta Content Framework, which had a short shelf life. Meta Content Framework was a specification of a format for structuring metadata, which was under research and development at Apple Computer between 1995 and 1997, but the project was discontinued and its developer left for Netscape.

[1] www.w3schools.com/rss/rss_history.asp

RSS Timeline

- RSS begins in 1997 as developer Dave Winer creates scriptingNews.
- In 1999, Netscape develops RSS 0.90, extensible markup language (XML) with an RDF header that supports scriptingNews.
- Next in 1999, Dave Winer at UserLand develops scriptingNews 2.0b1. Netscape's RSS 0.90 features are included in this version.
- In 1999, Netscape develops RSS 0.91 version. The RDF header is removed, but this version includes much from scriptingNews 2.0b1.
- In 1999, UserLand moves to use of RSS 0.91 and no longer uses scriptingNews. Netscape ends RSS development efforts after this.
- In 2000, UserLand releases the official RSS 0.91 specification.
- In 2000, Rael Dornfest and team develop RSS 1.0 at O'Reilly. A unique version that actually has no connection to previous 0.91, it uses RDF and namespaces.
- In 2000, Dave Winer at UserLand develops RSS 0.92.
- After departing UserLand, Dave Winer develops RSS 2.0 in 2002. Winer donates the specification to a noncommercial third party, Harvard Law School, in order for it to be endorsed, as competitors are hesitant to use it with his involvement in its development. In 2003, an official RSS 2.0 is released through Harvard Law School under a Creative Commons license.

RSS really became a valuable tool for marketers and content creators with the rise of blogs. Software programs like Movable Type and WordPress as well as hosted solutions like Blogger integrated the technology with their feature sets, and resourceful bloggers found ways to proliferate their content to multiple destinations. Feed reader software also allowed writers and web editorial teams to peruse content from hundreds of blogs in a short span of time, giving them powerful tools to help implement their online strategies.

Figure 9.2 With the growing population of blogs, RSS feeds are coming into their own.

Unfortunately, widespread adoption for businesses has been historically slow, though news organizations were early adopters. Slow adoption is due in part to competing standards and lack of a single clear vision regarding universal adoption, as well as to the

simple fact that people didn't understand what RSS was or what it could do for them. Also, unless RSS feeds are run through an online converter like Feedburner, subscribers are hard to track, making it difficult to get useful analytics data on your user base. In October 2008, technology analyst company Forrester reported that consumer adoption of RSS had reached 11%. Some thoughts are that with adoption of RSS used in different terms for the masses, such as Facebook's news feed, more people are getting comfortable using RSS, even when building their own blogs and sites. Ed Lee of Com.motion offers:

> *Google is also trying to promote the hell out of RSS because it owns a) the biggest blogging platform in the world (Blogger) and b) the biggest RSS provider in the world (Feedburner). Blogger is now promoting its own "Follow" feature which will be a quick, easy and utterly passive way to introduce RSS to the main stream.[2]*

Standards

The competing RSS standards mentioned in the discussion make for a number of challenges when implementing the format into your site. Currently, three formats are vying for supremacy:

- *RSS 0.91.* A simplified version with removed RDF elements and incorporated elements from Winer's scriptingNews syndication format. Called RSS "rich site summary."
- *RSS 2.0.* Retitled as really simple syndication, 2.0 removed the *type* attribute added in the RSS 0.94 draft and added support for namespaces.
- *Atom.* Atom Syndication Format is an XML language used for web feeds. An alternate syndication format, it began in 2003 in an effort "to get a clean start free of the issues surrounding RSS, and has been adopted as IETF Proposed Standard," according to Wikipedia.

As of January 2007, tracking data from www.syndic8.com indicates that the three main versions of RSS in current use are 0.91, 1.0, and 2.0. Of these, RSS 0.91 accounts for 13% of worldwide RSS usage, RSS 2.0 accounts for 67%, and RSS 1.0 has a 17% share. These figures, however, do not include usage of the rival web feed format Atom. As of August 2008, the syndic8.com website is indexing 546,069 total feeds, of which 86,496 were some dialect of Atom and 438,102 were some dialect of RSS.

RSS versus Atom

Of the many feed flavors that have arisen since the mid-1990s, there are two—RSS and Atom—that remain.

Figure 9.3 Atom is the new kid on the block and offers more robust options.

[2] http://edlee.ca/2008/10/24/is-rss-adoption-peaking

RSS 2.0

The most widely accepted feed format is RSS 2.0, which may be attributed to its use by WordPress. It is the one format variety that has corrected many problems from earlier versions, but it still has some downfalls. For example, RSS 2.0 does not allow XML markup, which limits its use in RSS syndicated-content elsewhere because it only supports text or escaped HTML. With only three required fields on a per-item basis—title, link, and description—some key inclusions are considered absent.

Atom 1.0

A more recent specification than RSS 2.0, Atom offers more features and is considered more robust but Atom requires an "updated" field, which supplies time of update content and it requires both title and link, whereas RSS only requires them in breakdown areas.

Atom feeds include a unique self-pointer autodiscovery URL to alert users of feed availability more easily than past autodiscovery features.

Media RSS

Media RSS (mRSS) is an RSS module that extends RSS 2.0 syndication capabilities from text, images, and audio to include other media types as well, particularly video, giving content publishers and bloggers the ability to syndicate multimedia content such as TV and video clips, movies, images, and audio. Created in December of 2004, the spec continues to evolve. As of this writing, the most recent update was in September 2009.

Anatomy of a Feed

In addition to the content itself, RSS feeds include valuable publishing data for each entry, including who wrote it, what its title is, when it was published, and so on. Here are some of the common elements typically included in an RSS feed. I say "typically" because to date many flavors of RSS are out there and don't all contain the same elements.

What It Looks Like

Here's an example of what a typical RSS feed looks like in its rawest state:

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="ISO-8859-1"?>
<rss version="2.0">
<channel>
<title>My Company Blog</title>
<link>http://www.myblogurl.com</link>
<description>My keyword-rich blog description</description>
<item>
```

```
<title>My First Entry</title>
<link>http://www.myblogurl.com/myfirstentry</link>
<description>Description of my tutorial</description>
</item>
<item>
<title>My Second Entry</title>
<link>http://www.myblogurl.com/mysecondentry</link>
<description>Description of my second entry</description>
</item>
</channel>
</rss>
```

Syntax

The first line of the document is the XML declaration. Included here is the version and character encoding used. In this case, it specifically conforms to the 1.0 specification of XML, and it uses the ISO-8859-1 (Latin-1/West European) character set.

The following line is the RSS declaration. This identifies that it is an RSS document, here RSS version 2.0.

Channel

The <channel> element describes the RSS feed and requires three child elements:
- <title>: title of the channel
- <link>: hyperlink
- <description>: description of channel

Every <channel> element is allowed one or more <item> elements.

Item

Every <item> element defines a story, an article, in the RSS feed. It has three required child elements:
- <title>: title of the item
- <link>: hyperlink
- <description>: description of item

The final two lines close <channel> and <rss> elements.

Media RSS Feeds

Alternately, if you don't want to build a video sitemap from scratch, Google will allow you to submit a media RSS (mRSS) feed URL as a video sitemap. An RSS 2.0 feed with additional media-specific information, the mRSS feed specification was created expressly to help content producers syndicate additional media formats beyond text, audio, and images. It supplements the <enclosure> element capabilities of the RSS 2.0 spec to allow for more robust media syndication.

Here is an example mRSS entry. Required mRSS-specific tags are in red. Other tags, such as credit role or rating scheme, are optional.

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="utf-8"?>
<rss version="2.0" xmlns:media="http://search.yahoo.com/
mrss/"
   xmlns:av="http://www.searchvideo.com/schemas/av/1.0">
   <channel>
   <title>Tim's Digital Media Tutorial Videos</title>
   <link>http://www.example.com/rss/today_videos/mrss.xml
</link>
   <description>Tim's Collection of Digital Media Tutorials
</description>
   <item>
   <title>Creating a Media RSS Feed</title>
   <link>http://www.example.com/watch/76930/create-a-media-
rss-feed/</link>
   <description>This video covers a step-by-step breakdown
for creating a Media RSS feed.</description>
   <guid isPermaLink="true">http://www.example.com/
watch/76930/create-a-media-rss-feed/</guid>
   <pubDate>Mon, 01 Feb 2010 02:50:07 +0000</pubDate>
   <media:description>This video covers a step-by-step break-
down for creating a Media RSS feed.</media:description>
   <media:content url="http://www.example.com/watch/76930/
create-a-media-rss-feed.flv/"
   type="application/x-shockwave-flash" medium="video"
height="345" width="400" duration="243"/>
   <media:player url="http://www.example.com/watch/76930/
create-a-media-rss-feed/"/>
   <media:thumbnail url="http://www.example.com/
thumb/504942/3406372/4/rss_feed5/0/
   create_media_rss_feed.jpg" width="120" height="90"/>
   <media:title>Create Your Own Media RSS Feed.</media:title>
   <media:keywords>video, RSS 2.0, feed, mRSS, Media RSS,
tutorial</media:keywords>
   <media:credit role="author">Tim</media:credit>
   <media:rating scheme="urn:simple">nonadult</media:rating>
   <media:category>Education</media:category>
   </item>
   </channel>
   </rss>
```

This mRSS feed can then be submitted to Google using its Webmaster Tools. The search engine will then know when new videos are added and will have the appropriate metadata necessary to better index your content.

mRSS Specs

According to Yahoo!, the mRSS specification contains two primary elements to describe syndicated media content: <media:group> and <media:content>.

<media:group>

<media:group> is a subelement of <item>. It allows grouping of <media:content> elements that are effectively the same content, yet different representations. For example, a group may contain two

versions the same song recorded in both WAV and MP3 formats. It is an optional element that should only be used for this purpose.

<media:content>

<media:content> is a subelement of either <item> or <media:group>. Media objects that are not the same content should not be included in the same <media:group> element. The sequence of these items implies the order of presentation. Although many of the attributes appear to be audio/video specific, this element can be used to publish any type of media. It contains 14 attributes, most of which are optional:

```
<media:content
url="http://www.example.com/movie.mov"
fileSize="12216320"
type="video/quicktime"
medium="video"
isDefault="true"
expression="full"
bitrate="128"
framerate="25"
samplingrate="44.1"
channels="2"
duration="185"
height="200"
width="300"
lang="en"/>
```

There are also many other optional elements.
Here are some tags specific to the media RSS format:[3]

<media:title>

Parent-tag: <item>

String containing the title of the video in this <item>. Each <item> must have a <media:title> or <title>.

<title>

Parent-tag: <item>

String containing the title of the video in this <item>.

<media:description>

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing text description of the video. When provided, the length of this description is typically one to three sentences. Each <item> must have a <media:description> or <description>.

<description>

Parent-tag: <item>

_____

[3] http://developer.truveo.com/DirectorDocumentation.php

A string containing a text description of the video in this result. When provided, the length of this description is typically one to three sentences.

```
<media:player url=height=width=>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

The URL attribute points to the HTML page where the video can be played. This is a standard HTML page with an embedded video player or a popup window that plays the video in a browser. The height and width attributes are the height and width of the popup window. Each item must have a <media:player url=height=width=> or <link>.

```
<link>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A URL that points to the HTML page where the video can be played or a page containing more details about this video. In the absence of a <media:player url=> tag, this tag should contain the URL of a standard HTML page with an embedded video player or a popup window that plays the video in a browser. Otherwise, this item will be assumed to be a URL to an associated page that contains more details about the video.

```
<media:category>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

The category for the video.

```
<media:credit>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

Gives attribution to the creators or contributors of a video. We support the following roles.

```
<media:credit role="actor">
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing the names of one or multiple actors associated with the video in this item. When available, this string is typically a comma-separated list of actor names.

```
<media:credit role="author">
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing the name of the person or organization responsible for authoring the video associated with this result.

```
<media:credit role="director">
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing the names of one or multiple directors associated with the video in this item. When available, this string is typically a comma-separated list of director names.

```
<media:credit role="producer">
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing the names of one or multiple producers associated with the video in this item. This field is commonly used for movie trailers and clips. When available, this string is typically a comma-separated list of director names.

```
<media:credit role="writer">
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing the names of one or multiple writers associated with the video. Typically this is the person who wrote the script or dialogue for a video. When available, this string is typically a comma-separated list of writer names.

```
<media:credit role="artist">
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing the name of the musical artist or group associated with the video in this item. This field is typically used for clips such as music videos. Multiple artist tags should be used for each artist related to the video. The artist tags will be consolidated into a single artist field in the search results.

```
<media:credit role="distribution company">
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing the name of the distribution organization, such as "Warner Bros." or "Sony Pictures," associated with the video in this item.

```
<media:copyright>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string containing any applicable copyright message for the video in this item.

```
<media:keywords>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

A string that contains a comma-delimited list of phrases that are used to describe the video. For example, this string might be

something like "funny, jerry seinfeld, TV." A single phrase cannot contain a comma, as the phrases are comma separated. Terms in this field will be used for tagging the video, in addition to any global tags you may have set for the feed.

```
<media:thumbnail>
```
Parent-tag: <item>

The URL for the thumbnail image for the video. This should be in JPEG format. If multiple thumbnail URLs are provided for a single item, we will use the first thumbnail URL and ignore the rest.

```
<media:content duration=>
```
Parent-tag: <item>

An integer that represents the runtime of the video in seconds.

```
<media:content lang=>
```
Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:content lang="en"/> A string that contains the primary language associated with the video in this item. Language codes possible are detailed in RFC 3066. This attribute is used similar to the xml:lang attribute detailed in the XML 1.0 Specification (third edition).

```
<media:content type=>
```
Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:content type="video/quicktime"/> A string containing the standard MIME type of the video.

```
<media:content bitrate=>
```
Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:content bitrate="512"/> An integer representing the kilobits-per-second rate of media.

```
<media:content fileSize=>
```
Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:content fileSize="12216320"/> An integer representing the number of bytes in the video file.

```
<media:content height=width=>
```
Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:content height="120" width="160"/> Integers representing the value in pixels for the height and width of the video in this item.

```
<media:content framerate=>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:content framerate="24"/> An integer that specifies the frames per second for this video in this item.

```
<media:content url=>
```

Parent-tag: <item>

The direct URL for the video, such as "rtsp://www.hosthame .com/video.rm." This is the URL that is passed to a media player so it can play the video.

Television Schema Support

The media RSS specification also includes television and music category schemas. The television hierarchy is as follows:

```
Television
Series Name
Episode
Episode Number
```

```
<media:category scheme="http://search.yahoo.com/mrss/
category_schema"> television
```

Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:category scheme="http://search.yahoo.com/ mrss/category_schema"> television/The Simpsons/Bart Sells His Soul</media:category>

Music Schema Support

Music schema includes the artist, album name, and song title. The hierarchy for music is as follows:

```
Music
Artist
Album
Song Title
```

```
<media:category scheme="http://search.yahoo.com/mrss/
category_schema"> music
```

Parent-tag: <item>

Example: <media:category scheme="http://search.yahoo
.com/mrss/category_schema"> music/Depeche Mode/ Some
Great Reward/People Are People</media:category>

`<media:rating scheme="urn:mpaa">`

Parent-tag: <item>

String containing the rating for the video in this item. Currently
Yahoo only supports the Motion Picture Association of America
(MPAA) rating system.

`<pubDate>`

Parent-tag: <item>

A string that describes the date or time period when the video
in this result was originally produced.

Feeding Frenzy

Blogs aren't the only types of web software that support RSS
feeds. Most content management systems support some version of
RSS as well, which means you don't have to hand-create and update
your XML document every time you add a new content item on
your site. Any portion of your site that is regularly updated is a prime
candidate for RSS implementation, including job postings, support
updates, online portfolios, shopping carts, and so on. When you
consider the sheer amount of site content that is updated regularly,
the potential for RSS implementation becomes readily apparent.

Figure 9.4 RSS feeds can save you a ton of time and work by removing the need to hand-create and update an XML document every time you add content.

Feed Me: Inbound

Online feed readers such as Google Reader or Bloglines as well as software such as Apple Mail, Microsoft Outlook, and FeedDemon allow you to pull content from multiple sources, putting the ability to consume huge amounts of content in a short period of time at your fingertips. Feed readers' built-in ability to aggregate content from any source that supports RSS make them a natural and time-saving fit for your content strategy.

Feed You: Outbound

Many social sites support RSS as well, which means you can subscribe to your own content on Facebook, Plaxo, FriendFeed, and hundreds of others, thus significantly increasing its viewership and giving connections more opportunities to engage with you.

Burn Me

FeedBurner, now a part of the Google suite of products, offers several advantages over the RSS implementation built into blogs and content management systems:

- It converts your feed to a universal standardized format that permits subscription to updates and delivers them automatically through a web portal, newsreader, or email. Feeds allow packaged content via widgets, mobile devices, and other technology for display of media including blogs, podcasts, and text.
- It allows you to track feed subscribers.
- Some converters offer other functions such as splicing several RSS feeds together, comments tracking, and so on.
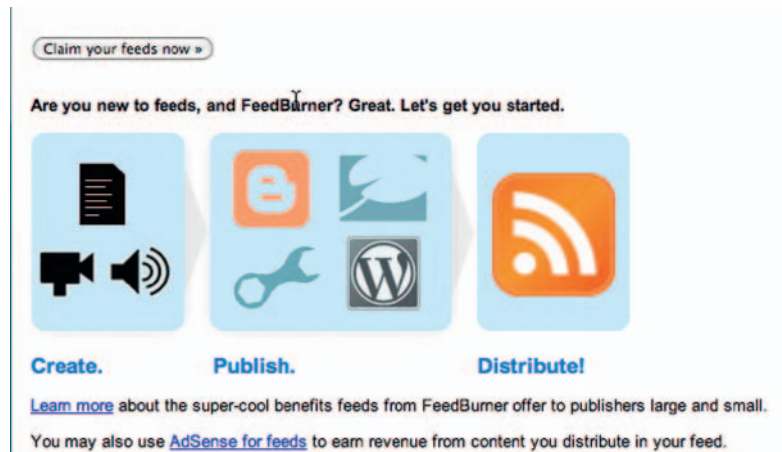
Figure 9.5 Feedburner can be a great help in tracking feed subscriptions.

RSS and Social Media

As mentioned earlier in the chapter and in several other places throughout this book, social networking sites are great places to send RSS feeds. What could be more convenient than updating your blog once and having the content proliferate to many sites? Here is how to subscribe to your feeds (or someone else's, for that matter) on a few of the more popular sites.
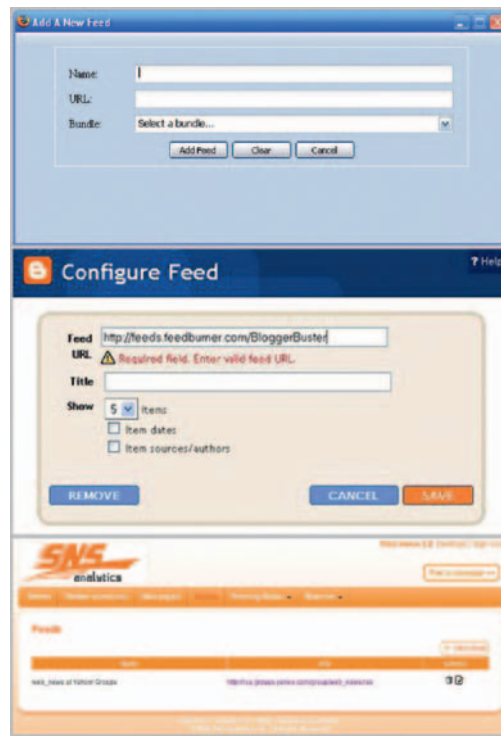
Figure 9.6 RSS feeds are supported in many applications and websites.

Conclusion

Though by Internet standards it is older than many of the digital marketing tools outlined in this book, RSS is an extremely powerful technology that can help bring content to you and your content to a wider audience with little effort. Once your feeds have been configured, the maintenance is minimal yet the rewards can be many.

10

EMAIL MARKETING

Email marketing may seem a bit out of place in a book where many of the technologies discussed are still in their infancy, but despite its being a little long in the tooth compared to, say, multimedia messaging service (MMS) or mobile apps, its use continues to grow, making it a great option for communicating with your community. This chapter covers the resources for campaign management and discusses how to integrate your email marketing with other efforts, such as branding, site content, and your blog.

Figure 10.1 Email marketing. Still going strong.

Still on the Rise

According to a white paper by ExactTarget's Morgan Stewart, email usage is still on the rise. Though some users have added social media, mobile, and other new technologies to their communications lineup, "the overall ratio of consumers using email is more often higher than both social media and text messaging."[1]

The ExactTarget study cited that 50% of consumers make purchases as a direct result of email, which also drives more conversions than any other channel. "Individuals who have increased their usage of social networks … are also using email more by a ratio of 11:1." The report also noted a specific increase in email usage with "heavy" users of Twitter and Facebook, which makes sense. Think of how often you get an email every time one of your friends breathes on Facebook.

Additionally, a survey by Forrester Research showed that email is the single most trusted information source online. The survey noted that expected growth will be from $1.2 billion in 2009 to $2 billion in 2014.

Of course, like most online social endeavors that trust needs to be earned. Email marketing has become widespread, and though reckless spamming is somewhat under control thanks to junk filters and the CAN-SPAM Act, it is still easy for users to unsubscribe from your subscription list by merely clicking on a link. To keep that from happening, you need to provide *good content* that recipients actually want to read and interact with.

[1]http://email.exacttarget.com/uploadedFiles/Resources/Whitepapers/ExactTarget_EmailUtilization.pdf, p. 2

Your Approach

There are about as many tools available for creating email content and managing campaigns as there are client applications

to interpret your content. This poses a significant number of implementation challenges, which we will cover throughout this chapter. Regardless of the challenges, however, when creating email content the same strategic approach you use for your blog, website, and social media endeavors applies: figure out what your audience wants and then give it to them.

Using email in combination with other channels, such as social media, your blog, site content, and so, on will help drive traffic and potentially engage the people you are trying to reach. Email campaigns can be heavily customized based on specific user interests, but again the content should speak for itself.

Best Content Practices

So just what should you include in an effective email campaign? As this is a somewhat mature communication medium, it's easy to put a few best practices into play. Here are some things to consider.

Subject Line

It's the first thing that people see, so make your subject line a strong one. Kevin Potts in his book *Web Design and Marketing Solutions* stated, "An effective subject line for the e-mail newsletter can dramatically increase the open rate among recipients, just as a poorly phrased one can ensure prompt attention of the Delete key" (p. 318).

A subject line that is direct, factual, and to the point will get more attention than one that is gimmicky or tries too hard. It's a small space in which to convey information, so include the important stuff like your name (or company name) and pertinent details that are relevant to content within the email itself.

Consider the following sample subject lines:
- Organize your social media accounts with FriendFeed.
- Hurry! Viagra! Click now! This offer ends soon! Don't be left out!

The first subject line provides a tangible potential benefit to users. The second just has a lot of exclamation points and is likely destined for the recycle bin. Stick to something that gets the point across in as few words as possible, represents the integrity of your organization, and, most important, outlines specific benefits to the person on the receiving end.

Written Content

How many times have you opened up a marketing-based email to find that its content scrolls beyond the bottom of your screen—and scrolls, and scrolls?

Figure 10.2 *Web Design and Marketing Solutions for Business Websites*. Kevin Potts. Friends of ED. http://graphicpush.com/books.
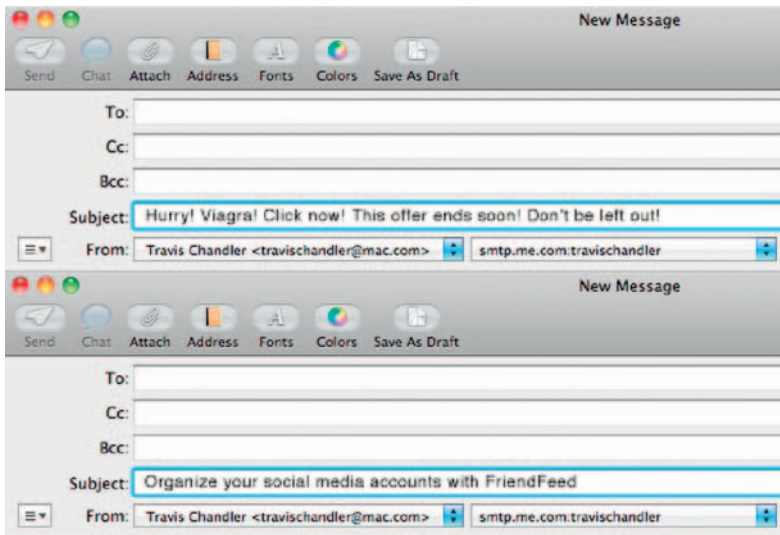
Figure 10.3 Your subject line can make or break your email campaign.

In this age of microblogging and two-second sound bites, almost no one has the attention span, or time, to read more than a few sentences. This is an area where becoming, or assigning, a good content developer for web and email becomes critical. It is challenging to whittle your information down to a few key points when you have a lot to convey, but if you want to keep your readership up and get great click-through performance, that's exactly what you need to do.

Here are some tips for writing good email content:

- Write killer topic sentences.
- Follow those up with short, smart paragraphs.
- Include headers and subheaders where relevant.
- Create small text blocks that are easy to digest.
- Bullet highlights in lists.
- Bold, italicize, or highlight text for concept emphasis.
- Provide links where readers can get more information.

Keep your writing style terse, professional, and benefits-driven but also unique in a manner that reflects you or your organization's personality. Now is not the time for flowery prose but rather the time to showcase your professionalism and ability to communicate key topics in as little space as possible.

Links and Calls to Action

Sharing information in a one-way medium is only seeing half the picture. An email campaign's biggest strengths (and goals) lie in users clicking through to get more information on a particular subject. If you elicit a response of some sort, then your readers are likely engaged and your success ratio will increase. Desired

responses can be as far-ranging as commenting on a blog entry, generating a conversation between readers, filling out a form or request of some sort, purchasing a product or service, and so on. Adding frequent clear calls to action within your content should be high priority. Make it clear what you want readers to do and, more important, *how it will benefit them.* In other words, "Read more" is rather passive, whereas '"Get [document name] Now" makes it clear to the user what the response of clicking on that link will be.

If "Read more" is the best call for the job, then go ahead and use it. Another thing to keep in mind, however, is that email management systems often use the text of any hyperlinks to denote how many users clicked on each link, so if you are trying to gauge click-throughs once your campaign is over, it may be difficult to decipher one link from the next if they are all labeled "Read more."

Also, if you send readers to a landing page specifically optimized for their benefit with clear calls to action, your bounce rate— the number of users who access only one page of your site before leaving—will decrease.

Spam

Figure 10.4 Spam—not as tasty as it looks.

Email marketing has gotten a terrible reputation over the years with quantities of unwanted spam so large that the government had to pass a law regarding what's acceptable and what's not. It is important to keep this in mind when developing your campaign content, lest it fall into the dreaded spam category.

In 2003, the CAN-SPAM Act set the rules to define what constitutes good and bad email behavior. Enforced by the Federal Trade Commission, the law doesn't only apply to bulk emails but to "any electronic mail message the primary purpose of which is the commercial advertisement or promotion of a commercial product or service."

The law's primary requirements include the following:

- Don't use false or misleading header information.
- Don't use deceptive subject lines.
- Tell recipients where you're located.
- Honor opt-out requests promptly.
- Monitor what others are doing on your behalf.

Many lawsuits have been filed under the CAN-SPAM Act, the largest of which (for $1 billion in damages) was filed in 2007. The lawsuits have moved beyond email spam as well. In October 2009, self-described "spam king" Sanford Wallace was ordered to pay $711 million to Facebook for compromising user accounts for the purpose of distributing phishing spam throughout its network.

This court order came only a year after Wallace was ordered to pay $234 million to MySpace for similar practices and three years after a $4.1 million judgment against him (some people never learn). In the largest judgment in history for a case brought under the CAN-SPAM Act, in 2008 the federal court in San Jose awarded Facebook $873 million in damages against a Canadian man accused of spamming users of the site.

These are big examples but still should be considered cautionary tales when compiling strategies and approaches for your own email marketing. If you provide content that your recipients actually want to read, you shouldn't have any problems. In order to be a law-abiding content provider, however, be sure to include the following simple elements in *all* emails you send:

- Truthful statements (duh)
- An easy way to opt out
- Your company mailing address

Tools

As of this writing, Google search of "email campaign software" brings back about 17,200,000 results. With all those options, how does one make an educated decision about which package to choose? The choices can be daunting. Cross-referencing your needs with budget and the features each system provides can help narrow down options.

Here are several popular tools:

- My Emma: www.myemma.com
- Constant Contact: www.constantcontact.com
- PatronMail: www.patronmail.com
- Mail Chimp: www.mailchimp.com
- Campaign Monitor: www.campaignmonitor.com
- JangoMail: www.jangomail.com
- iContact: www.icontact.com
- Streamsend: www.streamsend.com
- SubscriberMail: www.subscribermail.com

Figure 10.5 There are a plethora of powerful email campaign tools. Here are a few.

Each of these tools will allow you to create, send, and monitor email campaigns. The amount of flexibility and number of features varies from system to system, but most offer ready-to-use templates, the ability to upload and use your own HTML, and tracking of click-through information, subscriptions, opt-out, and so on.

Other common features email marketing tools provide are as follows:

- Personalization of email using customer-provided data
- List and campaign segmentation abilities and easy-to-use survey features
- Unsubscribe and bounce-back management
- Direct-send ability with an internal server or option to authenticate to SMTP and POP servers
- Provided templates
- HTML and plain text editors for custom designs
- Really simple syndication (RSS) feed integration
- Robust reporting and analytics
- Integration with site content management system (CMS) (depends on tools used)

CMS Tools

Many content management systems have email communications built into them as well, and if they don't, most likely someone has created an extension or module that can work with your CMS to provide round-trip analytics on how your email campaigns can be integrated with the existing system. If you use Drupal, Joomla, WordPress, or Expression Engine for your site's CMS, plug-ins and extensions are available to meet these needs.

Adobe Business Catalyst

The Adobe Business Catalyst platform is a hosted solution that allows you to build online businesses with a wide variety of advanced features (including search, forums, blogs, password protected areas, web forms, integrated email campaigns, analytics, and "out-of-the-box" online stores). Included modules allow you to enable and configure functionality without programming. Think of these prebuilt code snippets as building blocks that you can use to easily and quickly expand your online business.

A free tool that complements the Adobe Business Catalyst platform, the Business Catalyst extension for Dreamweaver allows web developers to access many of the features provided in the Business Catalyst Admin Console without changing their development workflow. This extension makes it possible to log in directly to your site to add, edit, delete, and upload pages and templates; you can also add and configure modules using the extension.

Features List

Using the Business Catalyst extension for Dreamweaver, you can do the following:

- Log in and connect to your Business Catalyst site. Enter your FTP information to define a new site with the Quick Site Setup wizard.
- Use the Files panel to access site files and upload them via FTP. Edit pages, templates, and associated files (CSS, JS, etc.) in the document window.
- Preview the page content in Live View. Access the list of modules and apply them to web pages.
- Configure modules using the provided wizards in the extension interface.

As for social media plug-ins, there is not currently a "one-click widget" concept for social site integration. However, Business Catalyst allows users to include any HTML/CSS code in the site, so you can easily add off-domain integration points into the interface by adding it to the code.

Campaign Implementation

Once your content is written and edited and you have chosen an effective tool for creating campaigns, you can start putting together your first mailing by stylizing your content; creating a layout; adding images, typography, design elements, icons, and so on.
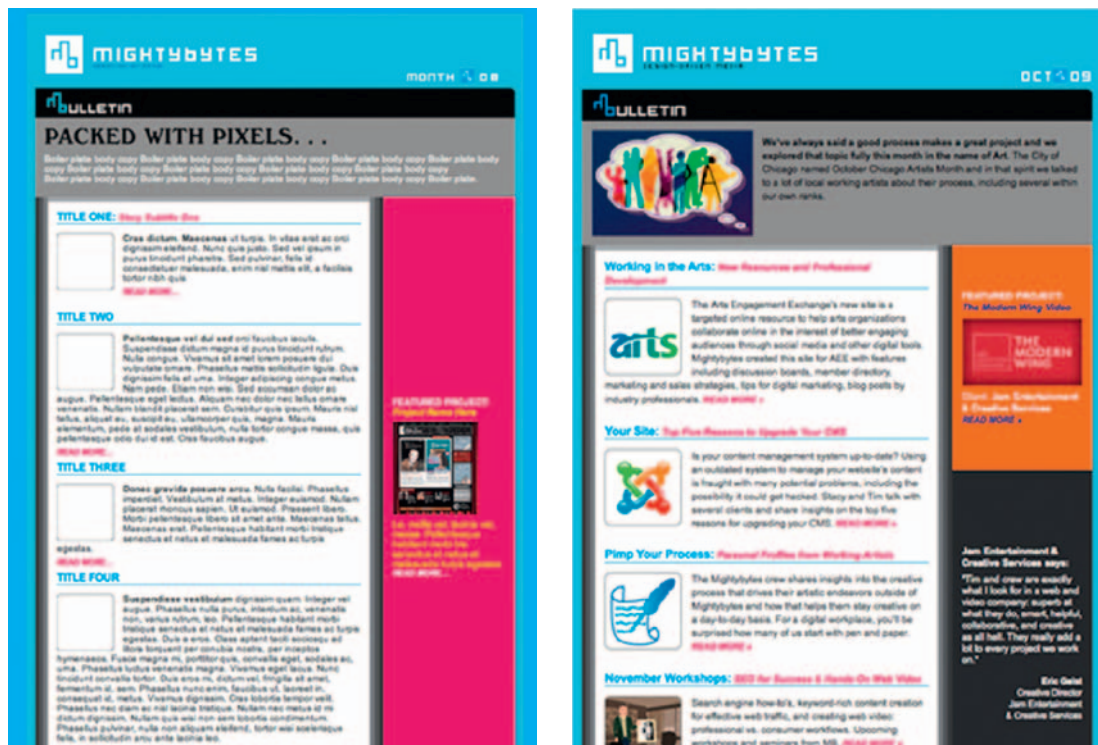
Figure 10.6 Filler copy will never be as effective as actual copy when devising layouts.

While you can use "lorem ipsum" text for placeholder content when designing an email interface, oftentimes adding the actual content can have a visual impact on the layout's integrity. By using final, edited content in your design, you will be assured that the layout's visual integrity will be maintained throughout design and production.

Each available email software solution has a different set of workflow nuances to consider when creating a campaign. For our needs here, we will assume the tool you have chosen supports custom HTML. Even with a custom-designed layout, however, the challenges to maintaining visual and functional integrity in your campaign can be many, as we will see.

Design and Usability

You may not want to invest the time to create your own custom HTML campaign template design, which is fine because all software options offer some sort of built-in template function. If you want to maintain consistent brand identity, however, you should consider spending the time up front to design a campaign that effectively represents your existing visual identity. Also, oftentimes it is not enough to merely design a good email template that employs your logo. Design integrity should be maintained across the entire click path, including auto-responders, campaign forms, preferences, landing pages, and other campaign elements. A consistent and recognizably branded look will help assure best performance.

Maintaining design integrity in an email campaign can be one of the biggest challenges in its execution and a source of endless frustration for designers. Email campaign tools vary greatly in features offered, and email clients like Outlook, Gmail, and Apple Mail all seem to support different implementations of HTML campaign content, which means what looks beautiful in one program is completely messed up in another.

Since 2007, some email clients began lessening support of CSS, including Gmail and Microsoft. Gmail did support inline styles before 2007, however, and continues as of 2008 to ignore other formats. So in general, support for CSS is sporadic and, in some systems, nonexistent. Nearly all of them support inline styles, however, but only repeated within email content, as most content within the <head> tag is usually ignored. Speaking of heads, is yours spinning yet? I thought so.

Some advancements to standardize email content are being made by the Email Standards Project, whose mission is to "drive the use and support of web standards in email, working with email client developers to ensure that emails render consistently." Depending on which campaign tools you use, remember to include *absolute paths* for any images you include in your campaign. Many campaign software packages won't support hosting

embedded images or relative paths, so be sure to include a complete absolute path to any embedded content.

Other considerations for email template design include the following:

- *Size:* 600 pixels wide or less.
- *HTML:* use tables for layout.
- *CSS support:* use (and repeat) inline styles.
- *Flash, video, rich media, and so on:* test ability to view and load times, and have a backup for readers that may not be able to view these.

Testing

Most email systems will allow you to preview your campaign within the system, but often that's not enough. Create a test group to several individuals within your organization, preferably

Figure 10.7 If the system lets you preview your email campaign, don't stop there. Send it to a test group, preferably through multiple email clients.

people who use different email clients, and check how your campaign appears in their email clients, browsers, and so on.

Subscription Management

Managing subscriptions can be a fairly easy task, but checking in regularly to clean your email lists of incorrect addresses and spam takes time. It's an important step though, as this simple disconnect could cost you customers. Also, segmenting lists will help define specific target groups for unique offers or relevant content. Segmenting recipients by signup date, links clicked on,

and so on allows you to provide them with much more targeted content that, if all goes well, subscribers will find more useful.

Some campaign management systems also provide a handy feature where you can welcome new subscribers with special offers and target loyal customers with unique information. If during your strategy phase you have done the legwork to figure out what sort of content your community will appreciate, half the battle is won.

Create Groups

Email management systems will also let you create separate groups for more targeted mailings. This can be extremely helpful when you want to provide subscribers with content that is specifically relevant to their needs.

For instance, My Emma allows you to save people who clicked on a particular link as a group. So if you included a story on creating web video in your email, you could then send those people future emails on similar topics, thus increasing their level of engagement and the relevance of content you send them. This

Figure 10.8 Most email management software will let you save campaign viewers as specific groups.

feature lets you get pretty granular when figuring out who is interested in different types of content.

Signup Forms

Be sure to include well-designed signup forms as a prominent part of your site design, preferably on the home page and several key places within your site. Make it as easy as possible for users to sign up, and don't ask for superfluous information. If possible, let them manage the entire process—including signup, submit, and thank you messaging—without ever leaving the page they're on.

It is also a good idea to consider sending an immediate follow-up email after signup to confirm their interest in receiving correspondence from you.

If you offer content on a variety of topics, it can also be helpful to segment new signups as they register, giving them options for receiving specific kinds of content from you.

Opt In, Opt Out

If you plan to send out a lot of email, you might want to consider giving recipients the ability to edit their preferences by letting them administer the following tasks:

- Change email addresses
- Unsubscribe
- Invite friends
- Add contact info

Most email management programs will have built-in features to facilitate these functions, but it's definitely something to look into before making a purchase decision.

Also, don't forget to include succinct instructions on how to unsubscribe at the bottom of every email. If someone unsubscribes from your list, be sure the person's address doesn't show up on any future mailings. Again, most email management systems will automate this process for you.

Tracking Click-Throughs

All campaign management systems are built on the concept of tracking click-through data, but many don't have built-in analytics software integration, so there ends up being a disconnect between site performance and campaign engagement. Google Analytics does offer several features that will help you maintain the connection between email and website. Google recommends using campaign tags applied to links. Once clicked, information is passed to Google Analytics and can be interpreted accordingly.

Make sure new link tags are used for every new campaign to track new actions. Several email marketing solutions automatically apply Google Analytics campaign tags to the links within your emails:[2]

- Campaign Monitor: www.campaignmonitor.com
- MailChimp: www.mailchimp.com
- VerticalResponse: www.verticalresponse.com
- AWeber: www.aweber.com

Conclusion

The advantage of using email marketing systems is that they have been around for a while and therefore are often feature-rich. Still, with minimal support offered by most email client applications for robust, full-featured HTML pages, the effort to create and manage campaigns and maintain integrity for all recipients poses a unique set of design, content, and production challenges. Once you get a workflow down that is in sync with your chosen system, however, the process should become a regular extension of your content and digital marketing endeavors.

[2]http://analytics.blogspot.com/2009/03/tips-for-tracking-email-marketing.html

Elizabeth Handlin is CEO of Ultimate Resumes, www .ultimate-resumes.com, a company committed to helping job seekers land that once-in-a-lifetime position. Recognized in marketing, communications, and recruiting for more than 20 years, Handlin works directly with clients' career goals by transforming resumes into engaging career stories.

Her business success, having doubled every year since she launched the company in 2004, is in large part due to the committed one-to-one attention she gives to clients, many of whom are at executive and senior leadership levels. So email marketing is key in her communications. Other sites also syndicate her business articles and techniques, and she performs webinars for many companies. Driving traffic to her site via email marketing is critical to her company after a one-to-many public speaking engagement on behalf of a conference or other company.

Email System

Handlin currently uses Jango Mail for an email system, but she points out that it requires a small amount of coding. Switching to Salesforce, a paid email system, she notes, would help with record keeping as it has so many data fields and allows for more segmentation of her clients and their career industries to better provide targeted tips and information. "It's incredibly comprehensive. Considering how much time I want to spend on records management is going into the decision making of a new email system," she says about Salesforce. With a subscriber list of about 2,000, she does not find she needs a lot of segmentation at this point, but with her continued business growth, beginning to segment by each client's needs and services level is moving to the forefront of planning.

Contact Forms

Ultimate Resumes has plans under way for a new site currently and is giving contact forms and email signup consideration for further evolvement. With her first site launch, Handlin did not use forms for contact and has found performance improvement since implementing them.

Along with a best practice discussed in this chapter, the Ultimate Resumes site will incorporate separate forms in its next release, one specifically for clients interested in updates on resume services and one to receive the email newsletters. Handlin cites that in retrospect, having a single email signup form now will mean that she has to comb through existing subscribers to find out which communications they want to receive as she moves forward with refining her subscription management system.

Frequency

Successful email frequency is dependent on the audience. With Ultimate Resumes' clients, Handlin has tested quarterly,

Incentives of Value

 The Ultimate Resumes site serves as a storefront for Elizabeth Handlin's services and expertise, an online presence that reinforces her brand and credibility. In her marketing, she has tested offering free ebooks to drive email signup activity, which has been a tremendous success. Handlin authored a Thank You Notes ebook that has garnered 30,000 downloads to date as a free giveaway that drives email registration and eventual business referral and growth. The Thank You Note ebook is also available as a Kindle download, which is a bit trickier to track, she notes.

Some of her ebooks sell for $9.95 and some are free. She is still measuring the return on ebooks as a marketing channel but says, "The focus is on brand building through this, good materials of value with a reputation of excellence."

monthly, and weekly emails and has found that quarterly has the best response rate for longer emails, but she is testing tweaking content to move to a monthly email. "I get a great response from the subscribers that read them, but am left wondering, what about the people that don't read them?"

Email Content

She is creating a new email format with streamlined content, approaching content writing from a different angle, less like her blog posts and offering more quick tips, shorter articles, and highlights of success stories that are happening with her company. Her clients and site visitors make repeat visits to her archived newsletter section, which she sees from traffic metrics. "They want a repository of information, tips, and tricks," she adds.

Tips from Handlin on Email Marketing

- Shorter content has a better response rate.
- Avoid writing about personal success (write about the company's success instead).
- Key message: refer people here with confidence.
- Keep subject lines short and pithy (e.g., "Can Anyone Find Out I Got Fired?")
- Have an email design with a signature line for social media links.

Referrals as Response

The return on engagement that happens for Ultimate Resumes' emails is a uniquely successful referral and forward rate. The main response Handlin sees from email marketing is that "Clients forward the enews; this is the main activity. With every enews, a client forwards it to peers and this generates five or six new leads." For her Ultimate Resumes service, that equates to five or six new long-term clients and projects.

Handlin's expertise and concierge service with individual clients is sometimes hard to measure and quantify, but the success rate of client to new client referrals demonstrates it is working. "A lot that is non-digital that goes into it. I handwrite a note with a business card to every client, and go the extra mile for clients and refer them to people relevant to their needs," says Handlin.

She speaks to her email goal of forwarding and referral as "I want emails to be little postcards that work to easily refer to a friend, without having to ask them to refer." With her personal attention to clients, she explains that "people getting Ultimate Resumes' email generally know me," so her subscriber referral is working to get out the word of her services, consulting, and spreading the brand message of her company. By focusing on excellence and doing her work, her clients essentially become person-to-person evangelists for her, word-of-mouth marketing to which she says, "you can't buy marketing like that."

OFF-SITE TECHNIQUES

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SOCIAL MEDIA OVERVIEW

Social Media can be called a strategy and an outlet for broadcasting, while Social Networking is a tool and a utility for connecting with others….The difference is not just semantics but in the features and functions put into these websites by their creators which dictates the way they are to be used. There's also a kind of, which came first, the chicken or the egg kind of argument to be made here. I suspect that Social Networking came first which evolved into Social Media.

—Lon S. Cohen, The Cohcom Blog,
http://lonscohen.com/blog/2009/04/difference-between-
social-media-and-social-networking/

The rapid rise of social media and networking sites has changed the way we interact online, how we connect to people, and, of course, how we market ourselves, our products, and our services. This chapter gives a brief overview of some popular social tools and, delves into niche social sites with discussions on how these tools have changed the way we communicate with each other online and overall.

Social Landscape

Although early success stories such as MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook were built on the premise of general social interaction, current trends show that social networking sites are migrating toward niche interests and smaller communities. An article

Figure 11.1 These three set the general stage for online social interaction, but the more recent trend is toward more focused, specific online groups.

from *Business Week* noted that "newer social networking sites . . . are gaining traction not by focusing on the mass-popularity model that made News Corp.'s MySpace famous, but by helping users connect with smaller, more specific, groups."[1]

What's more, tools like Ning, WordPress MU with BuddyPress, and Social Engine make it easy to create sites that feature built-in social components without requiring ground-up development, thus bringing social tools to a much wider audience and increasing resources for particular niche interests.
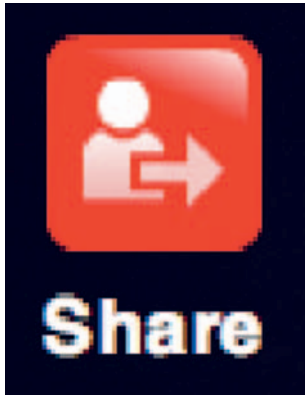
Social Structures

A great cultural shift has occurred over the past few years wherein our association with technology and online collaboration has evolved from the isolated *one-to-one* relationships of email, instant messaging, and chat to a more social *one-to-many* correspondence via social media, networking sites, blogs, and microblogging sites like Twitter. This has had a pronounced effect on business, marketing, and social culture in general.

Figure 11.2 Pass it on!

The Share Button

Network effects, viral expansion loops, call them what you will, content sharing via social networks is making a huge impact on marketing and business, and user adoption is through the roof. Adam L. Penenberg, author of the book *Viral Loop*, noted that the phenomena his book is named after have "emerged as perhaps the most significant business accelerants to hit Silicon Valley since the search engine. [It's] like compounding interest on a bank account: one user becomes two, then four, eight, to a million and more."

Penenberg noted that "some of the most iconic companies of our time—Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter—attracted millions of users practically overnight, by unleashing . . . a viral-expansion loop . . . . The trick is that each of these businesses created something people really want and then made it easy for customers to happily spread their products for them to friends, family, and colleagues."

Of course, viral loops don't happen unless something is *good*. In other words, if it is considered worthy of sharing, it is potential viral loop material. This is an important distinction to make.
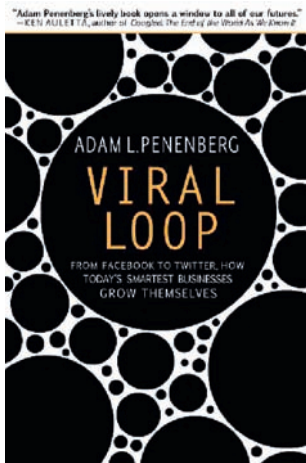
Figure 11.3 *Viral Loop: From Facebook to Twitter, How Today's Smart Business Grow Themselves.* Hyperion. http://www.viralloop.com.

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[1] www.businessweek.com/technology/content/mar2007/tc20070314_884996.htm

How Much Does Facebook Owe You?

In culling his research for *Viral Loop,* Adam L. Penenberg outlined the basic premise of user participation playing a significant role in the net worth of companies founded on social networking. This brought him to a significant question: if sharing content on Facebook was actually worth *money,* Penenberg wanted to know how much.

Teaming with New York–based digital design firm StudioE9, he developed a Facebook app to accompany his book *Viral Loop.* By analyzing your activities, communications, and connections, it estimates the value of your net worth on Facebook.

Though the app is Facebook-specific, it provides a good exercise for ascertaining what your engagement time is worth when using social media sites. It works by using an algorithm (details not disclosed) that takes into account your level of activity, your friends and *their* levels of activities, and your influence, meaning how much of what you do is picked up, liked, shared, and promoted by others in your network.

If you want to know how much you are worth to Facebook, get the app at www.viralloop.com.

Figure 11.4 According to Adam L. Penenberg, this author is worth $150.40 to Facebook.

Network Effects

Author Amy Shuen noted in her book *Web 2.0: A Strategy Guide*, "Every time you click on Google, Wikipedia, eBay, or Amazon, you are sparking 'network effects' (p. xi). If you use a Flickr-enabled cell phone or tune into iTunes podcasts or check Yahoo! Finance for stock quotes, you are creating monetizable value for businesses—even if you don't actually buy anything. . . . So many people are connected to and contribute to the Internet now that economies of scale not only lower costs, they create value."

These network effects and viral loops have sparked new business models and redefined perceived value for investors. "Companies are developing business models that involve creating appealing destinations on the Web where people with shared interests can form communities," Shuen said. "When people come together over the Web, their efforts are multiplied rather than simply added together."

In other words, when you share content on social profiles and your network of friends in turn share it as well, the potential for reaching huge numbers of people with little effort and in a small amount of time could be construed as a tangible business transaction, at least in terms of its marketing potential. This "social capital" has historically proven very attractive to investors.

Whether you create social sites or contribute to them, the potential for marketing is clear. As we have outlined in other chapters, however, it isn't just about posting your one-way marketing message to your wall. It requires a different approach completely.
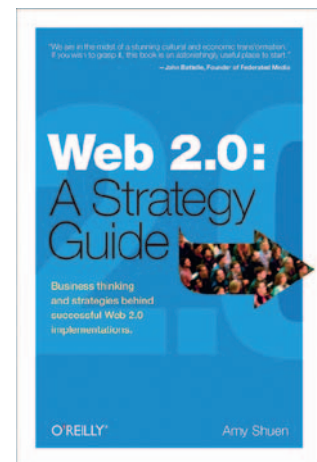
Figure 11.5 *Web 2.0: A Strategy Guide*. Amy Shuen O'Reilly. http://oreilly.com/catalog/9780596529963.
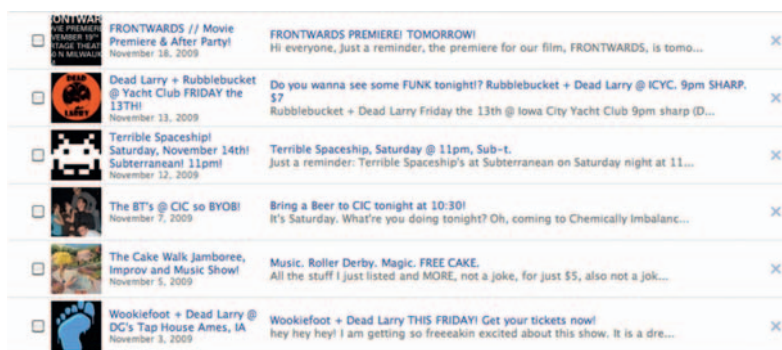
Figure 11.6 You can't just post an ad and hope for the best anymore.

Social Benefits

Hooking up with old friends from high school or college. Following your favorite design firm, actor, or CNN anchorperson. Sharing photos with family and friends. Looking for a job. Posting birthday greet   ings to your aunt's wall. Giving away free tickets. Sharing sale items at your store. And, of course, meeting that special someone. The benefits of online social networking are obvious and numerous. Your personal profile is linked to everyone you know, including friends, high school classmates, clients, colleagues, customers, and, very likely, people you really don't know at all. This phenomenon has opened the world to us and also blurred the lines along the way. Our personal lives have become enmeshed with our professional lives. Our best friend has the same access to us as that car salesman we met once at a party 12 years ago.

Finding people you want to meet or connect with is often as simple as typing their name into a search field, especially if they are active bloggers, tweeters, yelpers, and so on. Of course, it is just as easy for someone to find you as it is for you to find them, so you want to make sure the information you share on social sites is what you want all of those connections to see.

Three of the biggest benefits of online social networking are making connections, finding opportunities, and driving traffic. Let's explore each in a bit more detail.

Making Connections

This one is pretty obvious. These are *social* sites, after all. Using them to make *real* interpersonal connections can have a profound effect on both your personal and professional life. If you have defined a clear and concise approach that makes it clear what you offer potential connections, there's no reason you can't build a successful network based on common interests in a very short period of time.

Some social sites are wide open and make no distinction between content that is visible inside or outside your network.
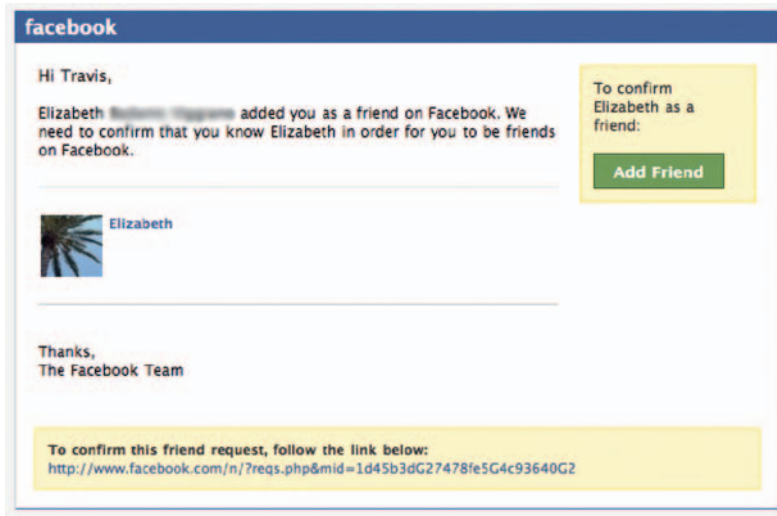
Figure 11.7 Does making connections mean befriending a palm tree named Elizabeth?

Figure 11.8 Guessing who you may know is now a common feature on most social sites.

They also make little distinction regarding who you should or shouldn't connect with. Other social tools are very explicit about connecting only to people you know. These sites often give users the ability to filter content between groups such as friends, family, or business contacts. Oftentimes, viewing a person's full profile is only possible if you have added that person as a friend or connection (and the person has, of course, accepted). Facebook employs this approach. Most (if not all) social sites offer robust search features that allow you to find potential connections by network, groups, friend lists, and so on.

Many social sites offer robust referral features as well. User data are cross-referenced, and the site makes "people you may know" referrals for potential connections based on common schools attended, hometown, groups, past employment, and so on. This feature also makes it easy to quickly build a sizable network of connections based on common traits, experiences, or points of interest.

Of course, making connections can be a slippery slope. Having 30,000 Twitter followers or 5,000 Facebook friends will make it difficult indeed to maintain any sort of real personal connection with your entire network. In their voluminous tome *The Social Media Bible,* Lon Safko and David Brake discussed the

Finding Opportunities

Once you have connected with people who share your interests, the natural next step will hopefully be that collaboration opportunities—business, personal, cause related, or otherwise—will arise. Of course, these opportunities don't typically just come out of the woodwork. You have to *earn* them through trust and a proven track record.

numbers of connections that can be actively maintained. In an interview with Management Consulting News, Safko addressed his own Twitter profile as "I'm just over 2,000 and I can't read all the tweets. I know that pearls are buried in there, so I use tools to sort and review them every day. I glance through and pick out the people I respect the most to see what they have to say."[2]

Of course, a natural by-product of maintaining these connections is that they will potentially lead to opportunities. Whether the opportunity is an increase in sales, an invitation to a high-profile industry conference, a book deal, or what have you, there is definitely potential to find some sort of return on your engagement efforts.

Business opportunities like job openings or potential projects are posted on Facebook and Twitter at a lightning-fast rate. For those hiring, this has a built-in background information system if someone connects via social media as the hiring person can see the candidate's photos, posts, friends, and more. Also, the faster the posts, the faster the responses, proving that those adept in social networking have nearly real-time access to relevant information.

Numerous social sites feature groups centered around common interests that cover nearly every topic imaginable from animation techniques to healthcare reform and back again. Facebook and LinkedIn feature groups, and Twitter offers lists. The goal of each of these features is to bring people together over common interests. Quick searches within these groups will return hundreds of potential collaboration opportunities, but again you have to earn them. Simply joining a group isn't in itself an act that will lead to a new job, project, or increase in sales. Like many of the approaches outlined in this book, making the best use of groups within social sites takes time, personal interaction, and good content that positions you as an expert and is worth sharing.

Many social sites offer features for creating events as well, opportunities for real people to actually (gasp) connect face to face. Events on social sites are great for driving traffic and generating interest around a particular topic as well as the obvious opportunity to strengthen connections with real person-to-person interaction.

Moving beyond general social sites to niche sites devoted only to one particular topic or cause can potentially yield even more
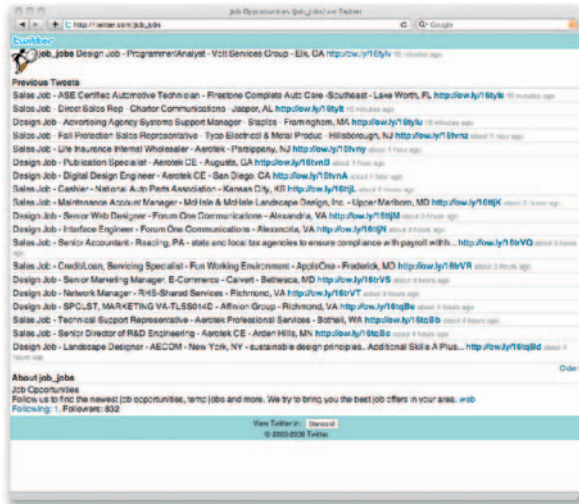
Figure 11.9 People post job opportunities on Facebook and Twitter, but you have to move fast to take advantage of them.

[2] www.managementconsultingnews.com/interviews/safko_interview.php

Figure 11.10 Just joining a group isn't enough. Collaboration is driven by interaction and engagement.

opportunities specifically honed to your interests. Shelfari and GoodReads, for instance, are popular social sites devoted solely to books.

Chances are if you have a particular interest or area of expertise, someone has created a social site devoted to it. And if a niche site for your particular topic doesn't exist, you have a wonderful opportunity to create one.

Figure 11.11 Here it is, the king of shared content elements: the link, attractively featured in a tweet.

Driving Traffic

Single-handedly, the most shared content element across social sites is the almighty link. You add them to your profile upon its creation, you add them to groups, you post them to other people's walls, and on it goes.

From a purely SEO perspective, more external links to your own site, of course, increases search engine performance. But the human element should be taken into consideration as well. People actually *click* on these links. When people click on your links, they actually view your content. Yeah, I know. Sounds super crazy, right? So from a human perspective it makes sense to actually have something to say in these posted nuggets.

Account Management

There are thousands of social networking sites online, each of which will allow you to share content and to post links, videos, RSS feeds, and more while connecting around a set of common interests. This can make account management a huge challenge. Thankfully, tools such as Facebook Connect, OpenID, and Google Friend Connect let you use a single log-in for a vast number of social sites, ostensibly alleviating the need to remember user names and passwords across dozens of accounts. Of course, social sites need to support these tools in order for them to become useful, but it is definitely a step in the right direction.

Tip: Account Management Resources

Get started adding social elements to your own site with these resources:

Google Friend Connect: www.google.com/ friendconnect

Facebook Connect: http://developers.facebook .com/connect.php

Open ID: http://openid .net

Other tools are available for managing account information and multiple account information as well. Some popular tools include:

Tweetdeck

CoTweet

PeopleBrowsr

Ping.fm

Social Tools

To date, social networking sites typically fall into several distinct categories. Let's break down some of the common types and review some examples.

Video Sharing

It seems there is a new video site every week that enters the market looking to topple YouTube's dominant share of the user-generated video market. Countless video-sharing tools enable you to view videos, build playlists, create channels, and share video content across blogs, websites, social networking sites, and email. About 20 minutes of content are added to YouTube every second, so these new players will need to work overtime to catch up.

We will cover details for video production and content distribution in Chapters 13 and 14. In the interim, the most important thing to keep in mind is to make sure the content you post is suitable for the site's target audience. Not only is posting health care content to a site like College Humor, for instance, missing the boat in terms of finding the right audience, but most likely the site will reject the inappropriate video content as well.

Figure 11.12 There are a vast array of video-sharing sites, each with strengths and weaknesses. Sites like Vimeo offer fantastic video quality, but no one has as much content as YouTube.

Example Video Sharing Sites

Some of the following sites serve specific niche markets, such as College Humor and Funny or Die, while others are more general in nature.

- *Vimeo*. For noncommercial or artistic content: www.vimeo.com
- *Funny or Die*. Comedy video site featuring celebrity skit comedy: www.funnyordie.com
- *College Humor*. Comedy targeted toward college topics and demos: www.collegehumor.com
- *Mevio*. Specializing in episodic new media videos: www.mevio.com
- *MySpace Video*. The video vertical to mass MySpace audience: vids.myspace.com
- *Blip.TV*. Hosting platform and distributor of user-generated video: www.blip.tv
- *JibJab*. Upload your image into topical animated humor videos: www.jibjab.com
- *Atom.com*. Aggregate comedy video site with TV clips and originals: www.atom.com

Photo Sharing

Though Flickr, a Yahoo! site, is the one that gets all the coverage for its ability to drive traffic via search engines, there are dozens

Figure 11.13 Flickr gets the most attention of the photo-sharing sites, but there are a bunch out there.

of photo-sharing sites online that allow you to post and categorize photos, create albums, write descriptions, and so on. As with video sites, much of the power in sharing content on these sites is the link power they offer and the ability to be found on sites with high traffic patterns through metadata, categories, and tags.

Example Photo Sharing Sites

Here are some examples of popular photo-sharing sites:
- Flickr: www.flickr.com
- Webshots: www.webshots.com
- Fotki: www.fotki.com
- KodakEasyShare Gallery: www.kodakgallery.com
- PhotoBucket: www.photobucket.com
- Smugmug: www.smugmug.com
- Shutterfly: www.shutterfly.com

Social Bookmarking

These sites allow you to post bookmark links that then become associated with your profile, giving you a great opportunity to amass a significant amount of content on a particular topic of interest. Links can come from your blog or site as well as other web content. In other words, if it has a URL, you can save it. Links are categorized through extensive folksonomy, a collaborative system for tagging and categorizing content.

Example Social Bookmarking Sites

Here are some examples of popular bookmarking sites:
- *Delicious*. Links are categorized via a robust tagging system.
- *Digg*. Users vote items to the front page.
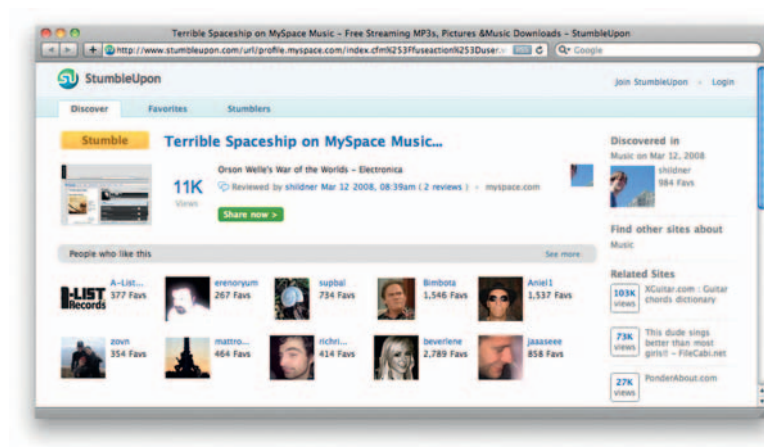
Figure 11.14 Sites like StumbleUpon take advantage of randomization as a technique for finding interesting content.

- *StumbleUpon.* A randomized engine for finding content.
- *Reddit.* Social news website.
- *Slashdot.*org. News for nerds.
- *Newsvine.* World events topics.

Microblogging

Microblogging tools allow you to post very small snippets of content, usually 140 text characters or less, or a single photo, single video, and so on. These days Twitter, a typical microblogging tool, is about as ubiquitous as a social application can get, sporting millions of users and as many as 850,000 tweets each day according to a 2009 Hubspot report.[3] Much of Twitter's power lies in its huge user base and the fact that tweets are now crawled by Google (they didn't used to be). Like many social tools, Twitter also has an open API that has spawned hundreds of third-party client applications that give users the ability to interact with Twitter data via mobile devices, desktop applications, and so on.

Twitter isn't the only microblogging tool out there, however. There are a number of others as well. Pownce, for example, originally a significant competitor to Twitter, was shut down when it was bought by Movable Type and replaced with Motion, a social tool that lets you manage and control your message across all social networks on the web. Though Motion is significantly more robust than Pownce was, it includes microblogging functions and requires an installation of Movable Type to run. Other apps like Edmodo feature microblogging functions geared at a specific audience. In Edmodo's case, that's education.

Example Microblogging Platforms

Twitter is the biggie here, but here are some other microblogging tools as well:

- *Posterous.* Anything online via email.
- *Tumblr.* Microblog photos, music, video, text, and the like.
- *Plurk.* Digestible chunks of a social journey.
- *Squeelr.* Anonymous location-based microblogging.
- *DailyBooth.* Photo microblogging.
- *12 Seconds.* Microblogging with video in 12-second spurts.

Wikis

A wiki is a do-it-yourself website in which the user community can edit or add content, Wikipedia being the most common

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[3] www.marketingcharts.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/hubspot-distribution-tweets-per-day-june-2009.jpg

Figure 11.15 Edmodo is a private social platform for education that includes microblogging.

example. Wiki engines are installable server applications much like stripped down content management systems that are used to control, edit, and publish content. Unlike content management systems, however, they don't typically have extensive template systems or multiple levels of user permissions.

Wikis offer a great repository for user-generated content, but, of course, integrity becomes a considerable issue since they can be written and edited by anyone with something to say. Many wikis are patrolled to ensure the integrity of their content.

Wiki Examples

Here are some examples of popular wikis:
- *wikipedia.org*. The world's largest online encyclopedia.
- *about.com*. Articles by real people on topics.
- *wikitravel.com*. Free worldwide travel reviews.
- *wikihow.com*. Collaborative how-to site.
- *Mographwiki.net*. Specific to the motion graphics industry.

Directories

There are hundreds of sites online that serve as directories for specific industries to help users find resources in a particular area of expertise. Others, like Merchant Circle, for example, offer services for general business use and enhanced services beyond just listings. Each of these sites offers company or personal profiles where you can post keyword-rich content, links, and so on. Some also offer users the ability to post photos, work samples, audio, and video as well.

Example Directory Listing Resources

Here are examples of popular online directories:

- *Merchant Circle.* For businesses.
- *Freelance Switch.* For freelancers.
- *Crunchbase.* Business listings.
- *Agency Scoop.* For the advertising agency world.
- *DesignTaxi.* A global creative network.
- *JustRealEstate.org.* A directory of real estate companies.

Review Sites

User-generated review sites like Yelp or TripAdvisor have done a great job cashing in on the power of word-of-mouth referrals. Larger companies like Amazon and Netflix have added user review functions to their sites as well for the same reasons. These sites invite and sometimes reward users, even if by only improved recommendations, for reviewing products or services. Reviews and ratings can help users to make purchase decisions, find correlating products or services, or generate resolutions to customer service issues.
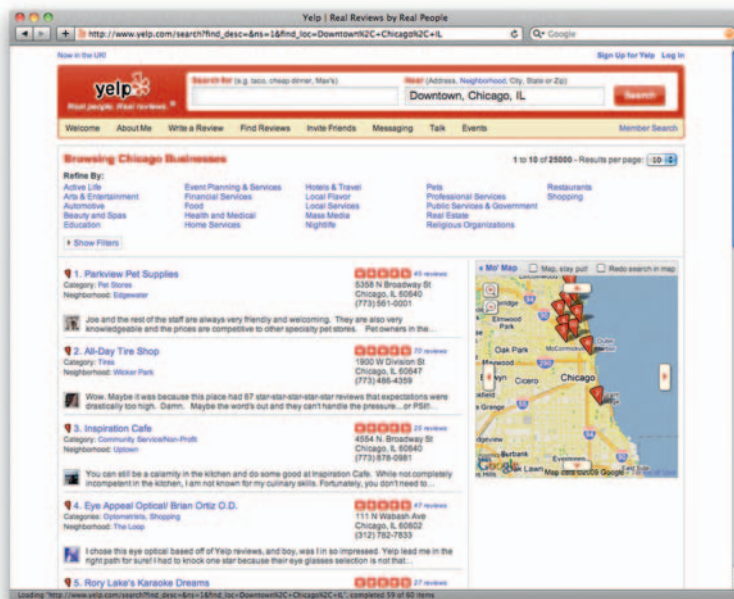
Figure 11.16 Yelp is a powerful word-of-mouth referral system.

Reviews on these sites will also show up in search engine results pages, so in addition to contributing content you should also monitor what is being said about you or your business on them. More on that in Chapter 15.

Example Review Sites

Some popular review sites that support user-generated content include:

- Yelp
- TripAdvisor
- ConsumerReports
- CNET
- Merchant Circle

Social Apps

If you have a Facebook account, most likely you have also received at least one request to play Mafia Wars or Farmville, probably more—potentially *way* more. Many social networking sites support applications developed by third parties that enhance the site's features or add new ones. Facebook alone offers over 500,000 active applications, according to the stats page in its press room.

Figure 11.17 Social apps can take on many guises.

If built with user engagement in mind, social apps offer sticky content and built-in functions that help them spread quickly via sharing features. Some apps deliver their own promotion or advertising. Others offer stripped-down features meant to illicit subscribers to a pay service via a freemium model.

An app can be developed and used for promotional purposes; for example, a lot of charity awareness organizations find success in apps where social media sharing results in donated dollars or cause awareness. Some apps have been known to carry viruses, so be cautious about clogging up your entire social media profile with these.

Examples of Social Media Apps

Here are some examples of popular social media apps:

- Mafia Wars
- Farmville
- Which ___ are you? (fill in almost any TV or film character)
- Yearbook
- Social Interview
- How Much Are You Worth to Facebook?

DIY Social Tools

Build Your Own

As social media networks have become more mainstream, niche social sites have cropped up left and right, catering to communities with interests as varied as web design, real estate, and health care and providing opportunities to reach people with specific common interests. Software developers have risen to the occasion as well and developed a number of tools that make creating social sites quicker and easier.

Tools like WordPress, Blogger, and Movable Type made *blogging* a household word a few years back. They are relatively easy to set up and configure, and hosted services like Blogger or Wordpress.com take most of the guesswork out of getting up and running quickly with your own blog.

Figure 11.18 DIY blogging tools have given rise to a wealth of similar tools for creating social sites.

Similarly, a number of tools have emerged to help you build social networking communities without coding them from the ground up. Some of these tools still require development skills to implement, whereas hosted services like Ning, though limited in features compared to others, let you build social networks in just a few minutes with simple customization options. Here are a few options from this rapidly growing set of tools:

Social Engine. A social platform that you host, Social Engine offers hundreds of options for building feature-rich online communities, including CSS template customization, events, chat, user profiles, private messaging, groups, statistics, and many more. It also offers support for video, photos, and blogs and has several privacy options. Find out more at www.socialengine.net.

Pligg. An open-source "social networking CMS," Pligg offers features similar to Digg, where users vote on content submitted by other members. Pligg also features groups, private messaging, user profiles, and RSS feeds, and is enhanced for SEO. Multiple languages are also supported. Find out more at www.pligg.com.

WordPress μ. Though not a social platform on its own, with the addition of BuddyPress (discussed next), WordPress μ, the multiuser edition of WordPress, gives you the tools to build a great community-based site. Wordpress.com, the hosted version of WordPress, is built on a foundation of WordPress μ and supports thousands of blogs on one installation. Find out more at http://mu.wordpress.org.

BuddyPress. A set of social plug-ins for WordPress and WordPress μ, BuddyPress converts your WordPress blog into a social site by adding extended profiles, private messaging, friends, activity streams, forums, and so on. Find out more at http://buddypress.org.

GroupSite. A hosted service with various monthly pricing plans, GroupSite offers discussion forums, blogs, group calendars, file and media sharing, member profiles, and several member management options. Plus, the site has a great logo! Find out more at www.groupsite.com.

GoingOn. A social platform built on top of Drupal that focuses on knowledge management and social collaboration for academic institutions. Find out more at www.goingon.com.

Ning. Started by Marc Andreessen of Netscape fame, Ning offers hosted, easy-to-use tools that will help you quickly set up a social site based on community, industry, profession, interest, or other topic. Ning offers standard social functions such as profiles, connections, status updates, messages, and so on. Find out more at www.ning.com.

It is also worth noting that many existing content management systems such as Drupal, Expression Engine, and Joomla now include modules or extensions for adding social features to a site and managing them through a single administrator interface.

These are but a few options. For a more comprehensive list of DIY social tools, check the companion site to this book.

Mobile Social

Figure 11.19 Social mobile apps are great. You can walk around and be a nerd at the same time. Just kidding. Kinda.

Though this chapter is devoted to social media in general, a thorough discussion of social options would not be complete without mentioning the rapid migration to mobile devices. Social mobile apps put simple and real-time ways to collaborate with your followers, friends, and connections at your fingertips. Post updates, replies, photos, and videos from your mobile phone to your Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, and Twitter account instantly. Find friends with similar interests in close proximity to you. Book restaurant reservations, download coupons, or even find a place in your neighborhood that serves your favorite brand of beer simply by pointing your mobile device down the street. The list of functions grows by leaps and bounds every day. As Fast Company once noted, "If apps are the next big platform—and the most wide-eyed analysts argue that apps will be as big as the PC, as big as the Web—then the mobile equivalents of Microsoft, Google and Amazon are waiting to be discovered."[4]

Check out the companion site for this book to download a complete e-chapter on mobile marketing and location-based services.

What's Next?

In just a few short years, social tools have evolved way beyond simple websites with friend functions and profile features. They have migrated to our handheld devices, our cars, and even to the facades of buildings. Social mashups—which use data from several APIs to create new tools—will continue to evolve as well,

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[4] http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/135/app-mania.html

both on the web and in our mobile devices. Sites like Second Life and many platform-based games for PS3, Xbox, and others offer opportunities to collaborate in real time via 3D avatars and virtual environments. Real-time feeds, location-based services, and the huge proliferation of viral video will continue to change the way we work, the way we shop, the way we communicate, and the way we collaborate. All of this will also have a profound effect on how we market our products, services, and ideas.
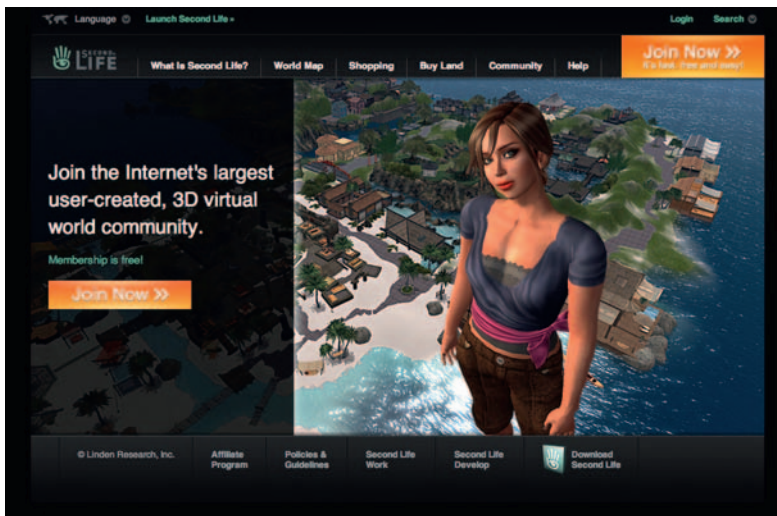
Figure 11.20 Second Life offers you a chance to live out a fantasy life, collaborate on projects, or both.

Conclusion

The evolution of online communication from *one-to-one* to *one-to-many* has generated thousands of online tools and destinations to connect with others on a specific and personal level around common interests and topics, opening up countless potential opportunities for business and personal collaboration. We have covered some general social categories and tools in this chapter. In the next chapter, we will cover specifics of how to work with these tools on a daily basis and optimize content for each one.

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SOCIAL MEDIA OPTIMIZATION

Now that we have discussed detailed descriptions of various social media outlets, let's focus on optimizing content for various social sites and discuss best practices for implementation.

SMO Defined

The term *social media optimization (SMO)* is often bandied about in digital marketing circles and used in tandem with search engine marketing. Social media optimization is related to search engine marketing but differs in several ways. The focus tends to be on driving traffic from sources other than search engines, though improved search ranking is also a benefit.

Social media optimization typically entails content generation using social media, really simple syndication (RSS) feeds, online communities, and community websites with the hopes of driving traffic and creating interest in a particular product, service, or topic.

SMO is also a critical component of online reputation management (ORM). If someone has trashed you on Yelp, for instance, and that's the first thing that comes up when someone searches on your name, a vigilant SMO campaign is one way of potentially pushing that result to the second or third page of search engine results.

Before we can truly discuss an approach to social media optimization, let's first consider some of the challenges unique to using these tools.

Personal versus Professional versus Privacy

There are countless stories of people being fired (or not hired) because of content on their MySpace or Facebook pages.
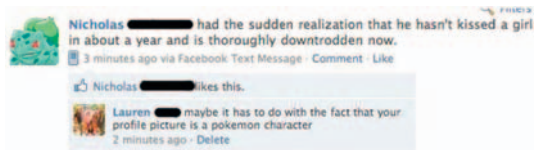
Figure 12.2 Social media has an amazing blooper reel.

Just as many stories exist of people who post their vacation status on one of many random social sites, only to return and find their home robbed. If you have a Facebook account, you have probably also experienced others posting something inappropriate to your wall. Sure, you love that you're back in touch with old college friend Bill, but does he have to post those tragic twenty year-old party pictures of you all the time? People have even used Facebook's relationship status feature as a tool for breaking up with their partners. The list of stories goes on and on.

Of course, experienced social site users have typically figured out the rules of engagement and learned a few valuable lessons in the process, but there seems to be a learning curve for all of us at one point or another.

"Naive and beginning users may fail to make the distinction between public and private/personal information," Wikipedia notes, "sharing data that could make them vulnerable to harm ranging from financial to physical. Further, the social networking sites sometimes reveal personal information by default, either requiring the users to turn off viewing or sometimes not providing a way to hide or cancel information deemed personal by many."

So where does one draw the line with what is considered personal, professional, or private when engaging in all these social sites? As of this writing, Facebook presents us with the specific challenge of what constitutes appropriate personal versus professional behavior, primarily because of its uncanny knack for connecting people based on common profile criteria—be it personal or professional—and the ease with which its users can share content. But what applies to Facebook can (and perhaps should) just as easily apply to your online reputation as a whole. Posting those semiclad body-shot pics on jDate, Gay.com, or that other dating site may have seemed like a good idea at the time—until, that is, you find them on Facebook tagged with your name.

Legal Unease

Lawsuits regarding issues of privacy, slander, libel, and other potentially lascivious pursuits on social networks have cropped up over the past few years as well. In mid-2009, for instance, a Chicago real estate company sued a woman who posted something to her 20 Twitter followers about the mold in her apartment. The company sought damages of $50,000, claiming that the user "maliciously and wrongfully published the false and defamatory Tweet on Twitter, thereby allowing the Tweet to be distributed

throughout the world."[1] (It is worth pointing out that several equally damning reviews on Yelp went ignored.)

Beacon Madness

In September of 2009, a court ordered Facebook to set up a $9.5 million foundation in response to a class-action lawsuit filed against the social networking giant's practices with the Beacon advertising system. The purpose of the foundation was to educate "users, regulators, and enterprises regarding critical issues relating to protection of identity and personal information online through user control, and to protect users from online threats."[2] Individual plaintiffs were awarded $15,000 and $7,000, respectively, as well as their court costs and attorney fees.

Notable examples of Beacon-in-action include Facebook users having their Blockbuster video rentals broadcast to friends via their news feed and one user who bought flowers for his girlfriend only to have his wife find out via Facebook.
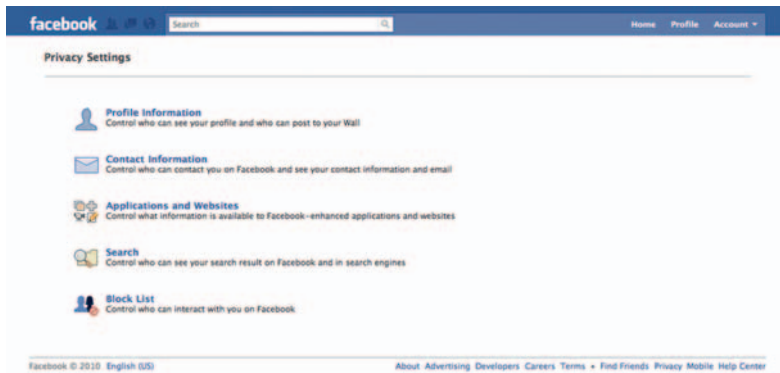
Figure 12.3 Make sure to set your privacy settings *before* you post naughty business. Not that you have naughty business. Just sayin'.

Of course, there is only so much you can do if others post content in which you are the subject, bringing to light the point that you can only influence (and never control) the conversation. We will cover that in more detail later. (At least with Facebook you can remove a personal tag from an unflattering photo.)

Although certain types of personal information may be private, public information that you post to social sites is just that: public. In December of 2009, Google announced a real-time

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[1] http://www.chicagonow.com/blogs/chicago-bar-tender/2009/07/exhibit-a-will-one-chicago-womans-tweet-cost-her-50000.html
[2] http://www.circleid.com/posts/a_look_at_the_facebook_privacy_class_action_beacon_settlement/

Forever Is Forever

Be careful what you share. It's obvious advice, but remember that once you post content to the Internet, it is cached by servers and exists online indefinitely. If someone looks hard enough, they can find it. And they can share it. Check your profile settings carefully and tweak them to match your comfort level *before* posting any content. You only have to do it once for each site you have a profile on.

search product called "Latest" that literally reduces content indexing times down to seconds, and it includes both Facebook and Twitter integration, meaning that your latest tweet or status update can be found via Google within seconds of hitting the share, submit, or update buttons. This is definitely something to consider before sending those late night bar tweets.

Pages and Profiles and Lists and Groups and …

Thankfully, most social tools allow you to categorize your contacts into groups, giving you the ability to better control who sees what. You can tag individuals as personal friends, professional acquaintances, or associate them with a specific time in your life, such as high school or college.

You can also take advantage of creating separate personal and professional destinations on a single site. Facebook, for instance, allows you to create personal profiles, pages for companies and organizations, and groups for causes, associations, and so on. Twitter allows you to group followers and topics into lists.
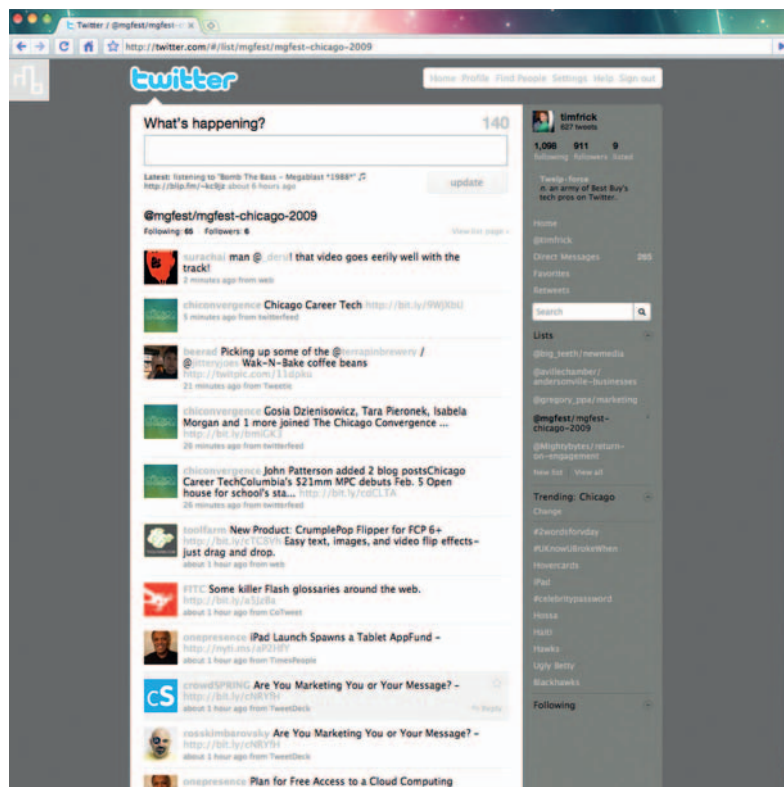
Figure 12.4 Twitter's "List" function allows you to group followers by topic.

Much like blogs, social bookmarking sites use tag clouds and categories to help people easily find content. Each site offers adjustable privacy settings as well. Delicious, for example, allows you to hide your network from other people, StumbleUpon lets you show or hide favorites from your network, Twitter lets you protect your tweets, and so on.

Security

Privacy concerns are only part of the picture. Both Twitter and Facebook were plagued by significant security threats and phishing scams in 2009, resulting in thousands of hacked accounts. Though Twitter doesn't hold credit card data, it still contains all your account information, including your email address, password, and the names of all your friends, connections, and followers. Although a hacked Twitter account may not cost you in cash, it could certainly cost you followers and potentially relationships, considering that many hacked accounts result in huge volumes of spam sent to users. Plus, if you use the same password across multiple social networks and someone gets that password, you have opened up your online reputation to the whims of someone who certainly won't have your best interests in mind.

Figure 12.5 If hackers get your Twitter account password, they can do some serious damage. It won't cost you money, but it could cost you followers.
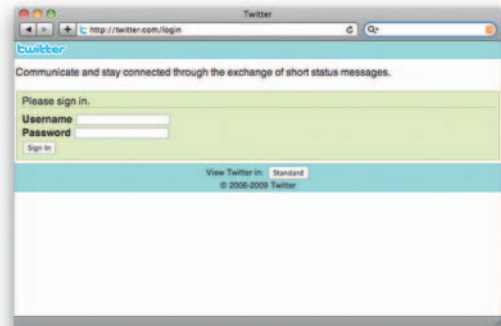
Safety First

Of course, there's no foolproof way of guaranteeing that your accounts will be safe from harm indefinitely, but here's the skinny on some things you can do to increase security:

- Change your password frequently.
- Be wary of strange links.
- Check your settings frequently.
- Tweets with content about quizzes may be spam.
- When in doubt, message the sender first before opening.
- Take time to explore new connections before proceeding.
- Turn off or block questionable applications.

If your account has been compromised, be sure to update your status and send any personal messages out to folks who may appreciate an apology. Again, this could be a potential challenge with 3700 Facebook friends and four times as many Twitter followers, but it will be appreciated by those who could consider you a potential spammer.

User-Generated Content

As we discussed in earlier chapters, tools like blogs and social networks have leveled the playing field in terms of defining what a content publisher is. Many people get their daily news from RSS readers and Twitter more often than they do from traditional media like radio, print, or television, or even sites like CNN and its ilk. Indeed, many breaking news stories come from people armed with recording devices who happen to be in the right place at the right time when something happens. Some of the first images of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the 2005 bombings in London, and the January 2009 US Airways flight 1549 that landed on the Hudson River in New York City came from a new breed of citizen journalists armed with mobile cameras, iPhones, and Minos.
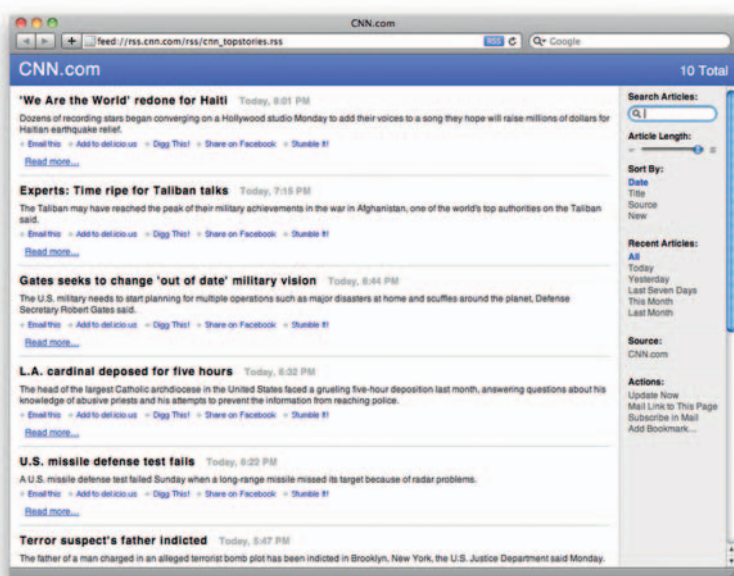
Figure 12.6 Breaking news moves through RSS feeds like wildfire.

Traditional news organizations have taken notice and scrambled to embrace the idea. In 2005 the BBC employed a user-generated content team of three, and in 2006 CNN and Fox News Channel launched iReport and uReport, respectively, to capitalize on the trend.

Outside of the news industry, advertisers began creating user-generated content experiments with mixed results, the most notable of which was Chevrolet's attempt to let users edit their own Tahoe commercials. The resulting entries focused more on the vehicle's impact on the environment and General Motors'

business practices than they did on promoting the SUV. Given the wide amount of exposure the incident received, however, GM still considered it a success.

With examples like these turning up around every corner, the coverage was enough to prompt *Time* magazine to pronounce "You" as their Person of the Year for 2006.

A few years and hundreds of experiments later we are a little older and a little wiser, but have we mastered the art of working with user-generated content? Though it's hard to predict the future, we can follow a few simple guidelines to address the unique challenges of working within a community eager to publish their words, thoughts, pictures, and videos. Let's first discuss the challenges inherent to working with user-generated content.

Figure 12.7 You were the Person of the Year in 2006. No, seriously. You were. Apparently.

Challenges

Content creators and site administrators face very different challenges. Content creators focus on the integrity of their content while many times serving their own needs or those they are trying to reach. Site administrators may be more concerned with hardware and software issues, scalability, and the needs of site users. Thus, the challenges are broken down into two distinct categories.

For Content Creators

If you use social sites to build community through content creation, here are some potential questions to answer before getting started:

Frequency. How often will you post content?

Consistency. How will you maintain content consistency over time and across multiple networks?

Connectivity. How will you keep in touch with an ever-growing network of users?

Engagement. How will you regularly engage community members and encourage participation?

Technology. What tools (and skill sets) will you potentially need to resize photos, edit videos, create animations, and so on?

For Site Administrators

If you have built your own social network either from scratch or are using an online tool such as Ning, you have your own set of unique challenges to contend with. Consider these questions:

Scalability. How will your community grow while maintaining a seamless user experience?

Moderation. How will you patrol the integrity of posted content?

Technology. Do you have enough bandwidth and server space to facilitate traffic spikes?

Marketing. How will you plant the first seeds to initiate a potential viral loop?

Staying power. How will you remain relevant over time?

Content

User-generated content takes many forms, from blog entries and videos to links on social networking sites, from online discussion forums and wikis to consumer review sites like Yelp and Merchant Circle. It extends beyond standard browser-based websites to include social mobile apps and collaborative gaming environments like Sims and World of Warcraft as well as virtual worlds like Second Life as well.
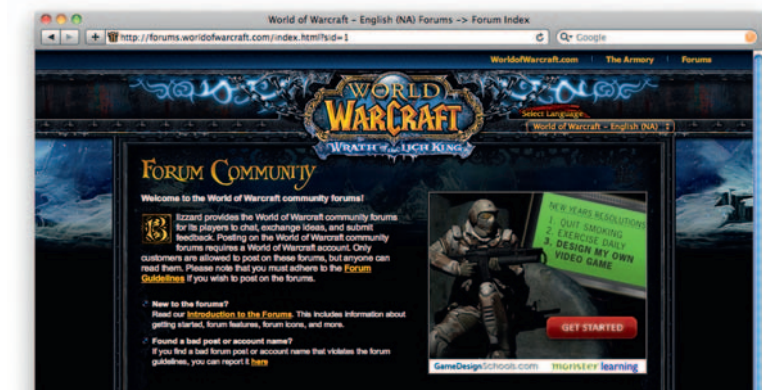
Figure 12.8 Nerds need forums too. Actually, nerds need forums the *most*.

SMO Best Practices

With hundreds of potential tasks split across thousands of social sites in a dozen or more categories, how does one adhere to some sort of regular routine that provides tangible results? Because we have already discussed a number of approaches in the chapters of this book on strategy, let's focus specifically on a set of best practices for social media optimization. Here are some ideas based on concepts outlined in *The Social Media Bible* (see sidebar).

Act Like a Publisher

Editorial calendars, publishing schedules, educational standards—publishers have been working with these things since the printing press came around. Acting like a publisher was mentioned in other sections of this book, particularly in terms of building an effective strategy, but when you are neck deep in answering tweets, recording a new podcast, and updating your Facebook status, it can be easy to forget the need for a method to your madness. If you conduct your online actions like those of a professional publisher with fresh and interesting content that is relevant to your community, you will undoubtedly reap the benefits.

Lon Safko and David K. Brake list the following commandments for social media engagement in *The Social Media Bible,* a giant 800+ page tome on all things social media:
1. Act like a publisher.
2. Know your audience.
3. Create content.
4. Differentiate your concept.
5. Know your competition.
6. Build a community.
7. Seek influence but not control.
8. Experiment.

Know Your Audience

As noted earlier, throwing content blindly against a wall to see what sticks doesn't tend to be a very effective way to engage users. Instead, figure out who those users are and what they want and then provide it to them.

Create Content

Lots of it, and as often as you can. Create content in as many formats as possible: blog entries, podcasts, links, you name it. And don't forget to make that content useful.

Differentiate Your Concept

Figure out how what you have to offer differs from other solutions available. Concentrate your efforts on maintaining that unique edge with your content.

Know Your Competition

You probably already know who your competition is. What are your competitors doing with social media? Figure out ways to do it better.

Build a Community

Find like-minded people in your social networks who need what you have to offer and focus on maintaining regular connections with them. Introduce them to others who share the same interests.

Seek Influence

Foster discussions in which you are a part but not the controlling force. Offer your expertise, but be open to that of others as well. Nobody likes a social media bully.

Experiment

The willingness to experiment is another social media essential. If something doesn't work, try something else. If that doesn't work, shake things up again.

Listening and measurement are two notably missing topics on Safko and Brake's list. Measurement has its own chapter in this book. Here are a few other thoughts on listening.

Listen

We're more likely to trust those who listen to us and respond in kind than we are to trust those who flood our in-boxes with one-way, blindly distributed marketing messages. By listening to others on social networks and ascertaining their needs you will be able to devise a strategy of your own for engaging people in mutually beneficial conversations. I'm not suggesting you merely put on the *face* of listening. No, *actually* listen to people. Find out what they need. Discover what their interests are. See how they might be in line with your own. I mean, how can you offer solutions if you don't know what the problem is? Building relationships starts by listening to your constituents.

The techniques noted in the margin are by no means comprehensive, but they will provide you with a good jumping off point to a future of blissful listening. Each is covered in more detail in the chapter on measurement.

Tools

If social media optimization is all about content creation, then it stands to reason that arming yourself with tools that will help you actually create content is a logical next step. Professional content creators use professional tools, and if you have designs on creating text, image, audio, video, *and* Flash or Silverlight content, getting the tools necessary to do so could set you back a pretty penny. If you don't have Photoshop, Dreamweaver, Final Cut Pro, and the bevy of other tools available to professional media and web content developers, don't worry. Hundreds of free or low-cost alternatives are available online to help you bring your content to life. Here are several.

Design

GIMP is a Photoshop alternative with a full range of design tools and many plug-ins available to enhance the product's capabilities (www.gimp.org).

Seashore is a more basic version of GIMP, with tools for creating gradients, textures, and other effects, but it is not as fully developed as GIMP. It is very OSX friendly (http://seashore.sourceforge.net).

LiveQuartz is a simple application for creating simple designs using layers, filters, and other familiar software tools. It is not a great Photoshop replacement, but it has a nice Mac interface (www.livequartz.com).

InkScape is a decent alternative to Illustrator, offering many of the same features. Various exporting options (including .eps)
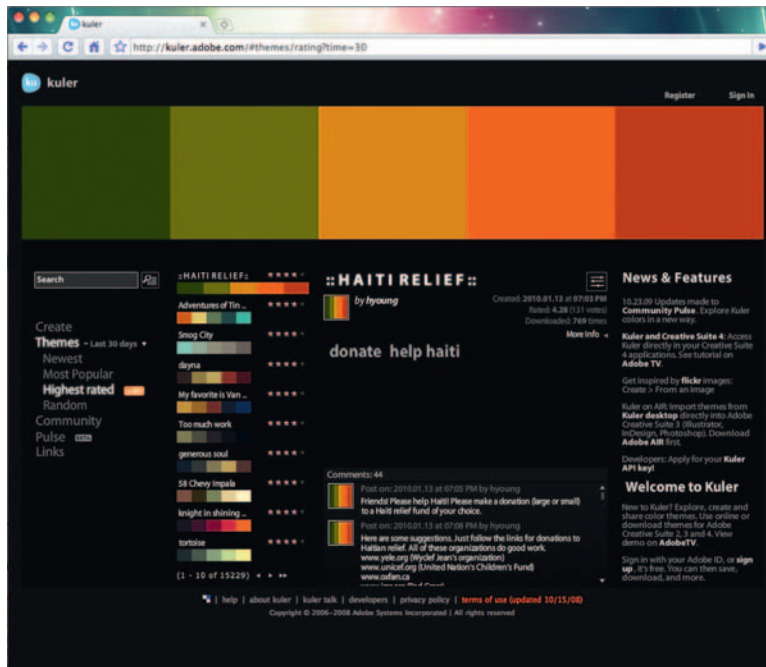
Figure 12.9 Free tools like Kuler can be incredibly useful.

can in most cases easily be transferred to or from Illustrator for further editing (www.inkscape.org).

Kuler is a web-hosted application that allows users to create infinite possibilities of color palettes; export them for using with Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, and other image-editing software programs; save them for future reference; and share them with other users (http://kuler.adobe.com).

Scribus is an open-source alternative to Adobe InDesign. It is a page layout program that enables users to perform virtually all of the tasks available through InDesign, and files can be exported as PNG, EPS, and PDF (www.scribus.net).

Skitch is a Mac app that basically enables users to use a "screenshot" or "capture" of a design piece they're working on and add comments using nondestructive arrows and notes, which is good for presenting design concepts that are difficult to explain in just words (http://skitch.com).

Paparazzi is a Mac app used for screen grabs. It has much more functionality than simple built-in keyboard shortcut keys allow. Users can capture an entire web page, no matter how long it scrolls, and they can export single files in PNG, PDF, JPEG, or TIFF formats (http://derailer.org/paparazzi).

DigitalColor Meter is included in the Apple Utilities folder. The color picker shows any one pixel on your screen in value formats of RGB, YUV, and CIE.

Photography

Imagetricks is a Mac app that features many filters and effects similar to those in Photoshop. Export images in any web file format (http://belightsoft.com/products/imagetricks/overview.php).

Pixius is a simple yet very handy tool for measuring anything onscreen in pixels. It is great when referencing other websites to make comparable size ratios. A lightbox effect highlights the window area you're measuring and dims out everything else in the background (http://code.google.com/p/pixus).

iZoom is a simple application that lets users resize and crop photos for optimized display for various mobile purposes, such as for an iPod, sending messages to friends, or even whatever you need for the web. JPEG is currently the only available export option (http://izoom.us).

iPhoto Apple's photo management software application that comes free with the purchase of any Mac and includes basic image editing tools as well as photo management tools.

Picasa, Google's free photo management tool, offers editing capabilities and support for iPhoto integration (http://picasa.google.com).

Figure 12.10 It's amazing that MPEG Streamclip is free. It's like a video professional's Swiss army knife.

Video

iMovie by Apple, like its photo counterpart, ships free with every Mac. It offers basic editing tools and easy integration with the other tools in the suite (iPhoto, iTunes, etc.)

Movie Maker is a free video editor from Microsoft that exports movies in a variety of Windows-friendly formats.

MPEG Streamclip is an easy-to-use video compressor. It has a drag-and-drop interface, a simple menu system, and tons of power under the hood (www.squared5.com).

HandBrake is a video compression tool with an impressive interface and numerous professional features that belie its free price point (http://handbrake.fr).

Audio

GarageBand, Apple's loop-based music creation tools, is, like iTunes, iPhoto, iMovie, and so on, also included with the purchase of any new Mac. It often gets high props for interface and ease-of-use.

Audacity is a free, cross-platform tool for audio editing and recording. It supports a number of effects and plug-ins as well as standard waveform editing tools (http://audacity.sourceforge.net).

Over time and as your budget allows, it probably makes sense to purchase professional content creation tools, but if you're in a pinch
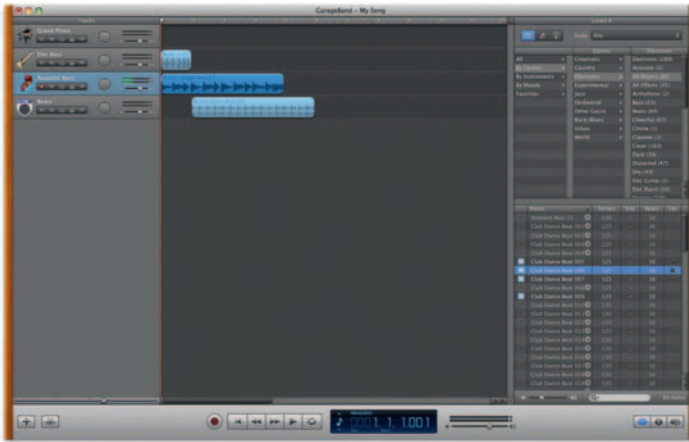
Figure 12.11 GarageBand, which ships free with new Macs, looks like a simple toy. Don't be fooled. It's a powerhouse.

Welcome to the Birdcage

If you never want to leave the Internet (and really, who does?) but still want to create content, the fine-feathered folks at Aviary.com have devoted their development efforts to building an ambitious suite of creative tools, all of which are delivered free online via the Adobe Flash Player. Each Aviary app also sports a cute, bird-themed name:

Phoenix is a robust image editor with many of the features of a desktop application like Photoshop.

Peacock is an effects editor that allows you to experiment with pixel-based imagery in entirely new ways.

Falcon is a tool for quickly capturing images and pages from the web and cropping, resizing, or marking them up with visual feedback. Great for reviewing design comps!

Myna is Aviary's audio editor. Use it to remix audio tracks and clips, apply sound effects, and record voice or instruments.

Toucan is a color editor that lets you choose, analyze, and work with various color palettes, including those from imported imagery. It works very well in tandem with other Aviary image editing tools.

Figure 12.12

Raven is Aviary's online answer to Adobe Illustrator, a robust vector editor with layers, path tools, and a variety of collaboration tools.

Talon is a browser extension for creating screen grabs.

Account signup is quick and simple and gives you access to each of the aforementioned tools.

and need to do some quick photo, audio, video, or image editing, these free (or very low-cost) tools will definitely do in a pinch.

Dressing Smart

Many social sites give you tools to customize your profile, ranging from the simplicity of changing a background color to using custom images, HTML, and CSS layouts for a full overhaul. Although use of these tools has resulted in some pretty awful-looking MySpace pages, good designers will find this a perfect excuse to spread their brand across multiple outlets. Here are some examples of good (and not so good) custom profiles as well as some tips and tricks for customizing your own.

MySpace

One of the earliest social tools to give users the power to really customize their profiles, MySpace allowed users to add backgrounds and images, rearrange page content, change font colors, and tweak numerous other settings, including custom HTML and CSS. Pimp-My-Profile.com is a custom layout generator for MySpace, but there are many, many more. In fact, a Google search of the phrase "free myspace layouts" returns about 15,700,000 results.

The mass proliferation of all this profile customizing resulted in an amusing but tragic trend toward pimped profiles with leopard print backgrounds, flashing neon navigation, and any number of design travesties. But for every design disaster there are many individuals and corporations who have customized their profiles with elegant design.

MySpace recently updated its profile pages so they feature many more customization options, including the ability to add

Figure 12.13 Some MySpace pages are, well, a bit design-challenged, whereas others don't look like MySpace at all.

and remove modules or place them in your page layout via drag and drop, extended CSS control, an expandable/collapsible control panel, and other advanced editing options.

YouTube

The video-sharing monolith added a lot of options for customizing the design of a branded channel. The basics are included right on the default channel edit page:

- Recent activity
- Privacy settings
- Displayed settings for profile information
- Subscriptions
- Friends
- Channel comments
- Channel settings
- Themes
- Modules

The Modules tab will allow you to remove or display many of these content modules. There are numerous other customization options to choose from as well. Though background images are constrained to a maximum file size of 256 KB, you can upload any custom image, edit transparency settings, and change colors to a variety of channel elements. The default color palette allows you to choose from 64 colors, but if you know web color HEX values, you can input any value to create your own unique combina-

Figure 12.14 YouTube gives you a great deal of control over customizing channels.

tions. If you are not familiar with web-safe HEX color values, you can get a handy chart at http://html color-codes.com.

Updates to YouTube channel customization can be followed at the YouTube Channels blog at http://youtube-channels-beta. blogspot.com.

Twitter

Twitter allows you to change your profile's background, text, and link colors. Its primary content block, which includes the

Figure 12.15 Well-designed Twitter profiles make followers happy.

timeline and sidebar, is 765 pixels wide and always centered. Knowing this, with a little design know-how and some ingenuity, you can design custom background images that enhance the existing Twitter interface while extending your brand.

Facebook

Facebook seems to have taken the "less is more" approach to profile customization in comparison to a site like MySpace, and its interface consistency from profile to profile seems to have served it well. Users do still have several options for making a profile their own, however. The Facebook interface will allow you to control what boxes show up on your profile, but if you really want to create something that's uniquely yours, a third-party application is required. Facebook Expressions and PageRage are two such apps. Though neither gives you access to HTML and CSS-level customization, PageRage does allow you to upload your own custom images for backgrounds and FBExpressions offers a Photoshop template to design your own layouts. The FBExpressions team must manually approve custom layouts, however.

Just a word of caution: the number of intrusive ads on the FBExpressions site was, for me, reason enough not to use its app.

Also, if you want to create a customized box on your profile using your own HTML, an app called, appropriately enough, Custom Profile Box offers that functionality.

Most other social sites allow for some level of profile customization as well, either through built-in editing functions or third-party apps. Dressing up your social profiles can be rather time-consuming, but in general you will be shooting for consistency of message across all of them. By offering profile visitors customization that shows a commitment to maintaining brand identity, the time spent will be worth it.

Figure 12.16 PageRage and FB Expressions are two third-party applications for customizing Facebook profiles.

Figure 12.17 Mightybytes content developer and digital marketer Stacy Jones Sutton.

SMO in Action

To give an idea of social media optimization in practice on a daily basis, here's a breakdown of how content is typically created and promoted via social networks on mBlog, the Mightybytes company blog.

Stacy Jones Sutton—content developer and digital marketer at Mightybytes—and I typically tag team on most content for the Mightybytes site. I interviewed her for the purpose of putting this SMO breakdown together.

"Most of the content additions to the Mightybytes site end up on our blog," Sutton says. "We of course post news items and add entries to our portfolio, but the lion's share of content is typically on the blog."

The mBlog isn't strict in its editorial guidelines. Topics covered can range from something cool happening in Chicago to programming sliding tiles using jQuery. "Our primary goal is that the blog's content is useful," Sutton says. "Marketers, designers, programmers, animators, businesspeople, and project managers should all be able to find useful things on its pages. At the end of the day, our hope is that the blog showcases both our passion for what we do and our expertise at doing it."

Past topics have included the following:

• Technology news
• Social media
• Digital strategy tips
• Local events
• Design trends
• Conferences and trade shows
• Artist profiles
• New software
• Tutorials
• Web design techniques
• Digital marketing tips
• Business practices
• Video production
• Animation challenges
• Mobile apps
• Programming and development tips
• Content management systems

Writing and Editing

Sutton keeps a list of potential topics handy at all times, and sites like Fast Company, Twitter, Digg, Engadget, and others are regularly scoured for relevant topics as well. "The most typical challenge for blog content is time," Sutton says. "We never have

any shortage of things to write about but always seem to have a shortage of time to actually do the writing. The CMS on our site allows us publish content and media very quickly and well, so when the content is ready, it goes live. We are very hands-on with the blog and those of us creating content publish directly, so there is no waiting game for another person to get it on the site and into the social media outlets."

Although many folks at Mightybytes write blog entries and are encouraged to do so in their own voice, Sutton tends to drive production and work with individual team members to develop content. "I may interview my coworkers or people in our industry on a particular area of their expertise or just work with them to help craft useful entries."

Copy isn't the only content posted to the blog. Photos are typically posted to Flickr and embedded into blog entries. Custom video content is distributed via TubeMogul and Blip.tv, and video clips are embedded into the blog from one of Mightybytes' video accounts on YouTube or Vimeo. (We'll cover more on creating, posting, and distributing video content in Chapter 13.)

Figure 12.18 Interviews provide a perfect format for providing information.

Publish and Pimp

Once a blog or site entry has been published, the first step is usually to create a shortened version of the link for social destinations. "We used TinyURL and others in the past but lately rely more on bit.ly because of its ability to track click-throughs," Sutton notes. "I can easily find out how many people clicked on an individual link. Sometimes we'll create one bit.ly link per blog entry. Other times we'll create a bit.ly link for individual sites so we can tell how much traffic an individual social networking site generates. It's a great way to get an idea how much traffic our content gets."

Social Sharing

Once the bit.ly link has been created, the next step is to create lead-in or teaser sentences to describe what the link is about. Different sites tend to get different lead-ins based on their user
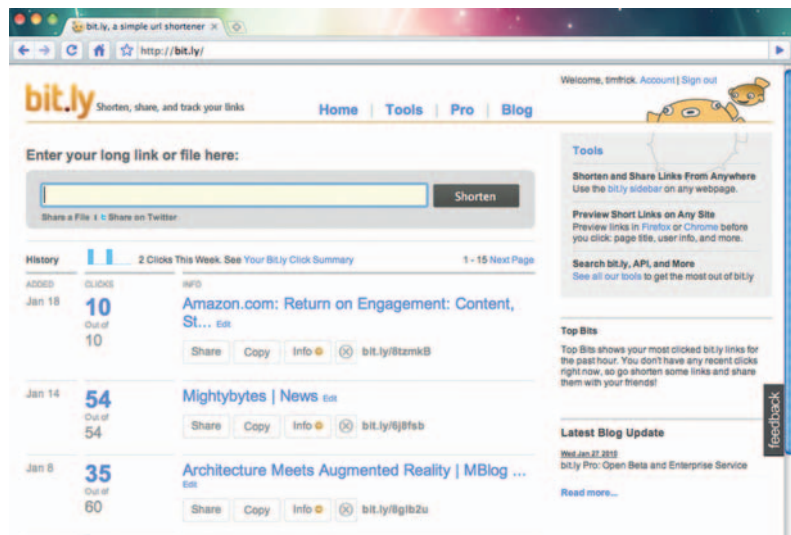
Figure 12.19 Bit.ly allows you to track how many people click an individual link. Nifty!

base, character limit, and so on. "With Twitter's 140 character limit, we obviously get right to the point," Sutton says. "With other sites, like Facebook, LinkedIn, Digg, and so on, we have a bit more freedom with what we can say. Either way, the lead-ins are always benefits-driven, since we want it to be very clear what someone will get when clicking on the link, and we avoid any sales hype and typical marketing vernacular, since that's not what our blog entries are about."

It depends on content relevance, but a typical story is usually posted to the following destinations the day it is published:

1. Mightybytes Twitter account
2. My personal Twitter account
3. Mightybytes Facebook account
4. Occasionally personal Facebook accounts
5. Technorati
6. BlogCatalog
7. Delicious
8. Sometimes via my personal blog at timfrick.com
9. LinkedIn status update and groups (if applicable)
10. Reddit
11. Digg
12. StumbleUpon
13. And so on . . .

"If we're due to put out one of our email newsletters, we often include blog links in those as well and track respondents via Emma, our email campaign management system of choice and Google Analytics," Sutton says.

Figure 12.20 Friendfeed lives up to its name by ingesting most of Mightybytes' social feeds.

News Services

Mightybytes occasionally posts news releases to the site as well when professional milestones have been achieved, such as awards given to the company or when a particularly unique project has been completed. In addition to social outlets, news releases are also typically distributed via services like PR Newswire and PRWeb.

RSS Feeds

Many of Mightybytes' social profiles contain a subscription to one or more of our feeds, so the content is also picked up at the following sites via RSS:

- LinkedIn
- FriendFeed
- Google Reader
- Flckr
- Xing
- Ning

Though the automated proliferation of our content is nice, we prefer to use new blog entries as an excuse to actually *engage* people by asking questions, soliciting feedback, offering advice, and so on. We consider most blog entries as an invitation to converse rather than an opportunity to blast followers or connections with marketing messages.

Comments

The blog receives occasional comments, but a lot of interaction takes place on social sites like Facebook or LinkedIn as well. "The benefit of importing RSS feeds to social sites is that you don't have to manually post content to those sites every time you make an update," Sutton notes. "The down side is that much of the engagement occurs on the social profile pages and not the blog. However, that is part of engagement. We participate in responsive conversations wherever they occur. By posting a link, you will definitely drive more traffic, so there are pros and cons to both approaches."

Still, Sutton always tries to wrap up each blog entry with a question to incite interaction of some sort. "We have experimented with a bunch of different content approaches, some of which work better at fostering conversations than others. Timeliness of topic, humor, technical level, and a number of other factors all play a role in the level of engagement our content incites."

The Mightybytes blog is far from the most trafficked destination on the Internet, but it serves a specific purpose for a small creative organization and often gets great feedback from those who read it.

Conclusion

Social media optimization techniques are a great way to manage your online reputation, build topic-specific communities, and drive traffic. They also play a valuable role in experimenting with how best to fulfill digital marketing goals. If something doesn't work on Tuesday, try a different approach on Wednesday. Gradually, you will find a set of tangible guidelines that will help drive content creation and meet goals. Remember, if your content is valuable enough to those who want it, there are few ways to connect with an audience faster.

CASE *study:* Explore Chicago

The Chicago Office of Tourism has seen great success using social media tools to connect with visitors and drive traffic to Explore Chicago, the city's official tourism site (www.explorechicago.org). Sarah Best, who leads the web team and focuses on social media strategy, says a lot of that success comes from focusing on customer service. "I see our mission as extending what a traditional visitors' center would do by using online avenues to answer questions, offer suggestions, and basically help people coming to the city with their needs."

Explore Chicago's successful approach has earned the company high rankings from organizations who monitor social media engagement. The GoSeeTell Network, a company that runs several Twitter content services and ranks about 450 destinations on Twitter every month, ranked Explore Chicago in the top three slots for several months standing. And that's without any online advertising whatsoever.

Best says their successful, advertising-free approach evolved organically. "At first, we were mostly using our Twitter feed to promote events going on in the city to drive traffic to our website. As an experiment, we decided to partner with BlogHer, which at the time was a conference of about 1400 participants consisting of women who run their own blogs. We offered concierge services via Twitter to conference attendees, answering their questions about anything from 'where's the nearest Starbucks' to 'what museums are free today,' that kind of thing. It worked better than we anticipated. We answered 200 questions over the course of three days and gained 300 followers from the experience as well as dozens of messages saying how great the service was and how well it was appreciated."

Best and her team learned several important things from the experience:

- Being very proactive is a great strategy.
- It takes a lot of staff to provide that level of service.
- What works on one platform doesn't necessarily work on another.

They have applied these important lessons to their daily approach and upped their efforts to increase engagement. "It's really satisfying to see that our followers are increasing by hundreds every month through organic means while many other destination sites are spending thousands of dollars on

Figure 12.21 Explore Chicago's approach to social media has evolved via lots of trial-and-error and experimentation.

Figure 12.22 Sarah Best leads Explore Chicago's web team and focuses on social media.

advertising to achieve the same results," Best says. "It's a true testament to word of mouth. If you provide people with good service, they are going to tell their friends about it."

Another important lesson that Best has learned through trial and error is the importance of matching content to audience. "Facebook and Twitter are so different from each other," she says. "What works on one usually doesn't work on the other, and that requires a lot of thinking about how to approach each. I find Facebook much less conducive to having conversations and the kinds of engagement that are easily measurable, like click-throughs, commenting, and so on.

It doesn't mean that Facebook isn't a good tool for connecting with people. It just means that things like photography, which is by nature passive, are much better suited to Facebook than Twitter, which really excels at conversations."

Best has a staff of several people who answer questions, research content, and basically tag team efforts to make sure Explore Chicago provides stellar service to the people who need it. "We offer the service seven days a week, usually from about 7 a.m. to 8 at night, so it's definitely a group effort."

As a city-sponsored organization, Explore Chicago strives for objectivity, which means Sarah and her team always make sure to provide at least three recommendations at a time whenever someone asks a question, be it about restaurants, museums, or what have you.

"Our approach is always changing and requires constant planning," Best says. "But through regular experimentation and constant reevaluation efforts, we are moving in the right direction."

13

WEB VIDEO PRODUCTION

The face of video has changed significantly over the past several years. Nothing communicates ideas quite like video, and the ease with which video content is now created and shared makes it a great solution for engaging people and driving traffic. This chapter gives an overview of online video tools and techniques and offers suggestions for incorporating video content into your digital marketing endeavors.

The Video Landscape

A November 2009 study by Eyeblaster showed that online video advertising in the United States will quadruple from $1.1 billion in 2009 to $4.1 billion in 2013. Associated Content reported that "an exact number [of online videos] doesn't really exist, as videos are constantly being uploaded or removed. Back in 2006, a *Wall Street Journal* article reported that YouTube hosted about 6 million videos. In 2008, a YouTube search returned more than 80 million videos and 3 million user channels, so it's safe to say that the total number is currently well into 100 million videos."[1]

That was 2008. As of this writing, YouTube estimates that 20 hours of content is posted to YouTube every minute. Also, the stats mentioned earlier are *only* for YouTube. There are currently hundreds of video-sharing sites online, so the amount of video content currently on the Internet is astronomical.

The same study by Eyeblaster also quotes statistics from Millward Brown and Dynamic Logic that only 21% of the people watching DVR playback and 30% of people watching TV airtime pay attention to commercials, compared to 46% of people watching In-Stream video ads online.[2] Even at 46%, those numbers are pretty low. It's probably a safe bet that not a lot of those ads are

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[1]www.associatedcontent.com/article/1927414/how_many_videos_are_on_youtube .html, July 9, 2009

[2]www.dynamiclogic.com/na/research/whitepapers/docs/MB_KnowledgePoint_ OnlineVideo.pdf

Figure 13.1 Web video is skyrocketing. Do you have your pilot's license?

Figure 13.2 Sharing is caring. Create video that people will want to share.

shared with friends. Regardless, if you want to engage people with video content, the message these numbers send seems clear: don't barrage them with sales-driven ads and bland marketing messages. Give them something they actually *want* to watch. Or better yet, give them something they want to share with others. Sound familiar?

Three Types of Web Video

Taking the same strategic approach with video as you do with online written and image-based content will likely make a big difference in the level of engagement it receives. Remember, a video with your name on it (let alone your image) is as much a reflection on you as the words you add to your blog and the photos you put on Flickr. So what kind of video content *should* you create?

Video marketing mavens Reel SEO posted an entry on their blog[3] that breaks business-driven online video down into three categories:

- *Viral video* is used to drive traffic from external sources through sharing. Successful viral videos gain widespread viewership, primarily through posting on mass video distribution channels such as YouTube, and then become quickly and virally shared via email, posts on Facebook and other social networking sites, blogs, mobile phones, instant messaging, and so on.

- *Conversion video* is used to reach a specific goal via a call to action. Successful conversion videos often include professionally created content or broadcast-quality commercials that are distributed on a company or organization's website, shared via YouTube or other social sites

Figure 13.3 Reel SEO offers heaps of useful advice for getting the most traffic from your online video efforts.

that support video content, or forwarded via email or other "viral" channels. Not-for-profit spots or political campaign clips perform well in this arena. The "Yes We Can" music video by artist Will.i.am supporting Barack Obama's presidential campaign received well over a million views on YouTube alone and went on to earn an Emmy Award. When done right, conversion videos can drive signups, referrals, and sales—and win awards, apparently.

- *Educational video* is aimed at teaching a topic or guiding users through a process. Learning through video is plentiful on the Internet now in both paid and free content channels. Online learning courses from schools and universities, video webinars, professional development, educational publisher content, and learning activities and games for children offer video content in exciting, engaging ways. Open-source learning management systems like Moodle have merged educational video with course management, putting video-based online curricula into the browsers of more people than ever.

Figure 13.4 You can take all kinds of video-driven classes online. And many are free.

[3]www.reelseo.com/types-online-video-business

Of course, if you take business out of the picture, plenty of videos are created solely to entertain you, repulse you, titillate you, and so on. Many TV shows have migrated online via sites like Hulu, Netflix, or desktop apps like iTunes. For our purposes here, we will assume that most of your video endeavors will be at least partially driven by business-related goals. And as with everything else discussed in this book, keep your community's needs in mind. Factors like audience reach, user environment, and hardware specs are all pertinent when creating video content.

Web video's potential for reaching a very wide audience very quickly is great. Or not. If your content is worth sharing, posting it to YouTube, Facebook, or any other social sites could potentially be the quickest way to reach hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people in a small amount of time. If the content is boring or, worse yet, posted to a site with an audience whose needs are incongruous with your content, it could languish in the "dozen views or less" category for months. Good, engaging content *always* drives traffic.

Keep in mind as well that your viewers will likely use multiple platforms or devices within multiple environments to access your content. It may be viewed on an office computer, a home laptop, or a smartphone in a crowded subway. With that in mind, make your audio and visuals engaging, easy to understand, and interesting in a way that can be experienced in as many environments as possible.

Medium versus Message

People come to your blog or website looking for specific information. They want the ability to find that information within seconds, which is why search functions within sites that have huge amounts of content are so valuable. The ability to easily find small, specific pieces of data can make or break a user's experience on your site. If possible, take the same approach with your video content: break it into small, manageable per-topic chunks that can be indexed and searched, then give users the choice to peruse what they want.

Figure 13.5 Keep it short and sweet.

You may also have more success with posting shorter videos in a series than one long video. According to blogger Andy Dickinson's site,[4] expectations are that online videos run around 3 minutes or 6 minutes. For videos longer than that, you will need pretty engaging content to keep your audience's attention span.

Taking an even bigger step back, think carefully about when video is relevant for a project and when it isn't.

[4]www.andydickinson.net/2007/03/19/how-long-should-online-video-be

Just because you *can* post that video of your cat drinking from the toilet, does it really mean you should? If the video's going on Funny or Die or College Humor, maybe, but on your company website? Not so much. And on that same note, just because your CEO gave a 2-hour-long presentation to the sales staff doesn't mean the *entire* thing needs to go on YouTube. Seriously.

Great Uses for Online Video

With all these things in mind, here are some situations where effective use of video can make a huge difference in engagement and learning:

- Demonstrating specific tasks or techniques
- Assembling products
- Situation-based learning
- Showcasing features or benefits
- Lectures, keynotes, or presentations
- Stupid human tricks

Inclusion of the last item on this list may seem a little out of place, but, toilet-drinking kitties aside, incorporating unusual or humorous elements into your video content will no doubt help facilitate a spike in traffic due in part to the simple fact that people like to share funny videos with others. Blender maker Blendtec saw a marked increase in sales with its *Will It Blend* video series,[5] in which the company dropped everything from iPods and golf balls to glow sticks and Silly Putty into its industrial-strength blenders and flipped them on. Though it's been referenced hundreds of times in presentations, in other books, and on blogs, Will it Blend is still a great example of viral video marketing at its finest.
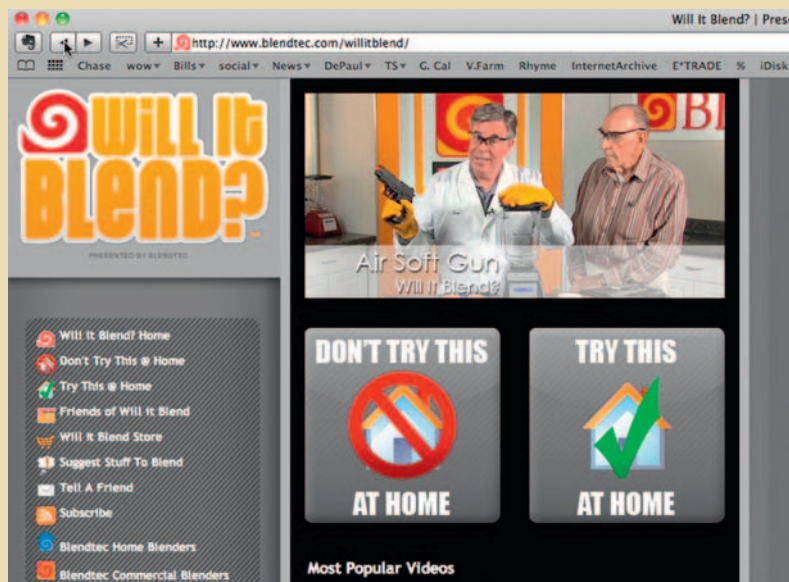
Figure 13.6 The 'Will it Blend' video series in action.

[5]www.blendtec.com/willitbend

Talking Heads

Sometimes a talking head is the quickest, simplest, and often most cost-effective way to get a point across. It can also be the most boring, potentially undermining the engagement factor. If the speaker is effective and the content engaging, the results will, uh, speak for themselves. Apple saw success with this simple approach when it posted videos touting features of the MacBook Air when it was released. The concept was simple: a casually dressed speaker in front of a clean, white background spoke about product features.

Think carefully about whether a talking head is the most effective way to get your message across. Most people without professional training come off as stiff and boring on camera, so think twice before throwing your marketing manager or the intern who has taken a couple college theater classes in front of the camera just because it will save you some money. Strong writing plays a significant role in any video production effort, but it is particularly important for talking head content because the person talking is usually the only thing a viewer has to look at—so that person better have something good to say.

Cut-away shots will get you a lot of mileage in a talking head video as well. They break up the monotony of a single shot and offer more opportunities when editing as well. If possible, shoot your subject from multiple angles or, better yet, with multiple cameras. We'll get to specific production techniques in a bit.

Figure 13.7 More than 10,000,000 views and still fizzy!
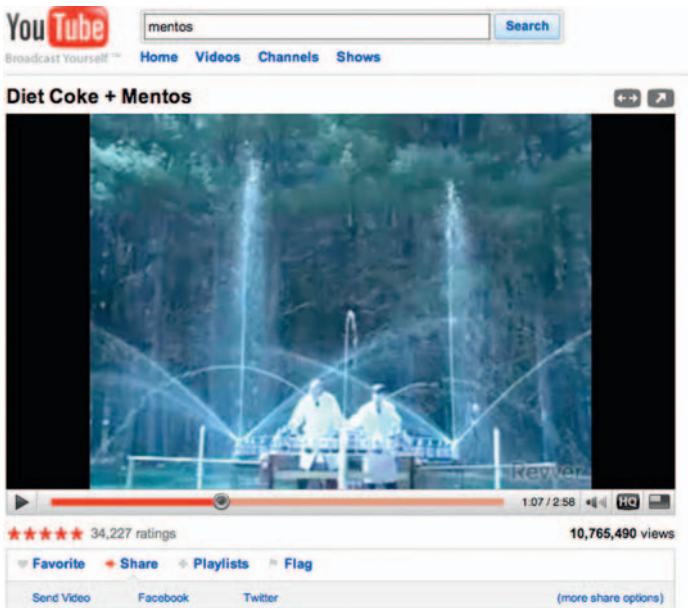
Going Viral

The numbers can be astounding if your video gets the momentum of a viral expansion loop going. If you share a funny video with several hundred Facebook friends, for example, and they in turn each share it with several hundred of their friends, it doesn't take long for the share-fest to reach monumental proportions.

So how, exactly, does one do that? It takes a special breed of content to incite sharing on such a massive scale. Sure, we all would love to have the 10,000,000+ views on YouTube that the EepyBird guys got with

their career-changing Diet Coke and Mentos experiments, but it often takes a dash of luck to provoke such a mass audience response. And though both Diet Coke and Mentos reported spikes in sales after the video experiments were posted to YouTube, promoting those products was not the EepyBird folks' original intent. It was a by-product of their efforts.

Dan Gluckman of the Social Media Experience blog noted that "blatant commercial messages only go viral when viewers are mocking them (not ideal for sales). Instead, viral video marketing works best when it utilizes soft-sell tactics that indirectly pique the viewer's desire for a product by demonstrating a solution to an existing problem." He also suggested that creating an emotional response for viewers is the key to connecting with them, and that is often what incites user action, whether sharing the video, filling out a form, buying a product, or donating to a charity.

Production Techniques

It would be impossible to cover everything there is to know about writing, producing, and editing your own web videos within the space of a single chapter.

Still, there are a number of factors to consider that will help you maintain quality and consistency in your video content. Here is an overview to get you started.

Video Workflow

Every video project is different, and each requires a unique approach to figuring out the best way to convey a message. It's true, sometimes the best web videos come from the simple act of pointing and shooting coupled with incredible timing. Just ask the folks who shot some of the first images of the Miracle on the Hudson. Since we're talking about digital marketing and not citizen journalism, we'll assume that you have chosen a planned approach over spontaneity and actually want to maintain some level of quality control over message and content throughout production.

That said, a typical video workflow consists of some variation on the following steps:

- Plan
- Write
- Shoot
- Capture
- Edit
- Finish
- Compress
- Distribute

We will discuss each of these steps except for the last one, which we'll cover in Chapter 14. Let's get started by breaking these steps down in a bit more detail.

Plan

Good, detailed, up-front planning can make a huge difference in your efforts to stay within budget and timeline parameters. Be sure to allocate appropriate resources from the get-go to manage and keep track of expenses, freelancers, footage, actors, equipment, and so on. Even if you're approaching your video guerilla-style on a shoestring budget with low-end tools and a production team of one or two people, your project will benefit from as much upfront leg work in the planning department as you can give it. Keep in mind that no matter how detailed you are in upfront planning, most likely the scope, timeline, and budget of the project will change, perhaps even several times, before you get a solid understanding of what it will *actually* take to produce. Often it is helpful to double or perhaps even triple initial estimates to get a realistic idea what a video project will cost or how much time it will take.

A Good Plan

The planning phase should cover these crucial steps:

- *Brainstorming.* Give yourself (and, if applicable, your team) plenty of time and creative energy to brainstorm as many creative ideas as possible. Write all ideas down. Leave nothing out.
- *Concept development.* Whittle all your ideas down to the best two or three, and flesh those concepts out. Review with others.
- *Treatment.* Write out a fully developed treatment of your concept.
- *Team.* What human resources will be needed to accomplish the production? Will you outsource it, or do you have the resources to cover it internally?
- *Schedule.* Create a timeline for the entire production with the understanding that you will likely need to change it to meet ever-fluctuating expectations.
- *Casting.* Do you need actors or voice-over talent? What about a cameraperson, lighting expert, or director? How much will that cost? Do they have your potential shoot dates free? Plan accordingly.
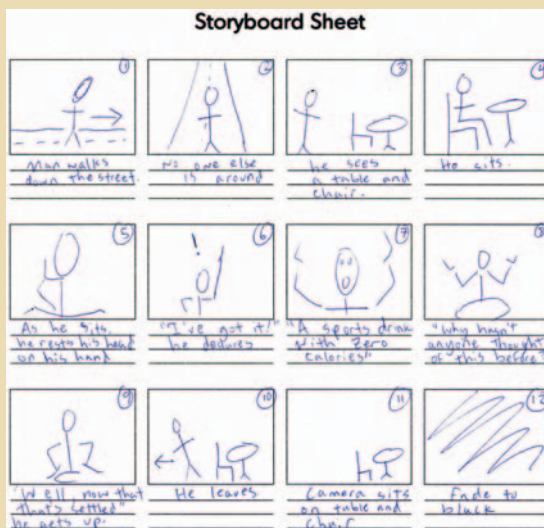
Figure 13.8 Storyboards are invaluable tools for helping to solidify the visual aspects of your video.

- *Storyboards.* At early stages of production, storyboards can be a helpful asset to help multiple parties share the same vision. Just keep in mind that if you don't have illustrative skills yourself, board creation will need to be outsourced—and that, of course, costs money.
- *Production.* Outline all potential details for a shoot. How many cameras will you need? Will you be working in high definition or standard definition? What's the shoot location? How much equipment will you need and what kind? What will rentals cost?
- *Postproduction.* How long will it take to edit and finish the video? How many reviews will you require? Will you need animation, graphics, or original music?
- *Output.* How many target machines or devices will your video need to play on? Is it going on a DVD? Should it play on iPhones? What sites on the web will you post it to? How much time will you need for compression and distribution?
- *Budget.* Put a rough cost estimate for all of these elements together. Then double it. No, better yet, triple it.

Write

Script development for web video should be focused, short, and simple, like the video itself. It also makes sense to follow your site's keyword strategy as well, because you can put transcript information into posted video's description field and metadata. Write in a language and style that are believable, speak to the lowest common denominator of your target users (without insulting others), and sound natural coming from your onscreen talent. And, of course, always keep the engagement factor in mind when writing. If it reads dull and boring on the page, it will likely be equally uninspiring onscreen.

Remember to keep your shots numbered in the script. This will help keep things organized during postproduction.

Figure 13.9 A typical script with shot numbers.

132	Ext. House, Night. WS	Det. Morris: (knocks) Police department
		Morris V.O.: Case load's pretty heavy
		Det. Morris: How you doin' sir. Police. You got a kid missing?
		Morris V.O.: I usually have anywhere from 15-30 open cases
		Det. Morris: Our stuff is free
		Morris V.O.: The first question is, well why are they missing, you know, and it's tricky. When something's not quite right, uh then you have to kind of look twice.
133	Int. Car, Night. MS	Morris V.O. Like this case I'm going on now in the back of the yards neighborhood. They've had a ton of gang related shootings in this area recently.
		Det. Morris: I've got to go to parking school here

Shoot

Assuming you have planned accordingly and are well prepared come shoot day with all the appropriate equipment, cast, crew, and so on, it helps to keep a few easy techniques in mind when shooting.

High Definition for the Masses

In 2008, a small company called Pure Digital released an iPod Nano–sized camera that shot an hour's worth of full-resolution HD video on an internal hard drive, and at less than $200 it was priced affordably. The Mino HD upped the ante for price-to-performance ratio of handheld cameras and many other companies followed suit with similar products. Suddenly students and hobbyists were able to shoot great-looking video at a very low cost, and many professional production facilities were forced (often begrudgingly) to recognize the game-changing nature of these handheld devices.

James Johnston is a project manager at Mightybytes and singer for the Chicago-based funk band Bumpus. He's found that the Mino and its ilk are great for prototyping concepts and offering resource-constrained clients a decent video solution that won't break the bank.

"In the past, video solutions for clients usually involved our Sony EX-1, a lighting rig, a bunch of fancy sound equipment and a full crew," Johnston has said. "The idea of a 'big production' seemed to scare clients into a disconnect with their video content. The introduction of the Mino and other handheld HD technology has narrowed the gap between clients and their content."

The Mightybytes crew uses their Minos to prototype concepts as well. "The Mino has also served us really well as a brainstorming tool," Johnston said. "Recording video ideas for clients now takes minutes instead of hours, and we've incorporated Mino-generated videos in some of our project proposals to share concepts and ideas with potential clients."

Figure 13.10 James Johnston uses his Mino HD for work and artistic growth.

For James Johnston, the Mino's usefulness extends beyond the office as well. He and his Bumpus band members often use it to record practices for reference and improving performance. They also record live shows for sharing with fans and posting to the band's MySpace page.

"Video is important for promotion, but also for artistic growth," he noted. "You need to see what your show looks like, what works and what doesn't. It's no longer a hassle to get 'a video guy' to come in and record the show. At our last show we had a four-camera shoot without formally inviting or hiring anyone to do video production. Four people with their Minos. I've got the performance from every angle."

Figure 13.11 Bumpus uses multiple Minos to record practices and performances for reference and sharing with fans.

For the best quality video in postproduction, record the highest possible quality during the shoot. HD is affordable and practical these days, so consider shooting in some flavor of high definition (see the sidebar) if at all possible. This is especially critical in low-light situations. Depending on the camera, standard-definition DV tends to break apart with compression artifacts in low light. The same goes for footage that will need to be keyed. Green or blue screen footage shot in HD is much more forgiving to key than standard-definition DV.

The Alphabet Soup of Video Standards

High-definition video footage comes in many sizes, formats, resolutions, and frame rates, so how do you figure out which one is best for your project? For web video projects, any flavor of HD will give you better-quality footage than a standard-definition equivalent, and most video-sharing sites support the HD aspect ratio, so the choice seems obvious. In general, cameras that support higher resolutions tend to cost more, so if you're on a budget, using HD with a smaller frame size might be more cost effective.

Figure 13.12 720p footage has a frame size of 1280 × 720 and is progressive scan; 1080i footage is interlaced with a frame size of 1920 × 1080.

Interlaced footage separates the horizontal lines in a video signal into individual fields. This is primarily used for old school broadcast television, so in most web video workflows it is best to shoot progressive scan. Plus, it's easy to export progressive-scan footage to an interlaced equivalent using various compression software applications.

U.S. NTSC video standards require a frame rate of 29.97 frames per second, whereas European PAL standards have a frame rate of 25 frames per second. Most cameras purchased these days will shoot in both formats. Some cameras will

shoot in 24p, which is great if you want to transfer your footage to film for use in a cinematic release. Mixing and matching these various formats and frame rates during a single shoot is not advised.

To further confuse things, standard-definition video is in an aspect ratio of 4:3 (think of an old, boxy TV set), whereas HD video's aspect ratio is 16:9 (think of a more cinematic flat-panel TV or monitor). Most video-sharing sites support both aspect ratios, but again if half your video resides in one and half in another, you will have to do some creative cropping and scaling to get them to match up.

Head spinning yet? The most important rule to remember is if you adopt a specific shooting format, frame rate, and so on, try to stick with it throughout the production process. Though some professional editing applications will support multiple formats, frame rates, and aspect ratios on a single editing timeline, this could potentially short-circuit many free or lower-end editing tools.

Figure 13.13 Two common aspect ratios: 4:3 and 16:9.

Remember the age-old rule of video production: garbage in = garbage out. If you record poor-quality footage during your shoot, all the fancy graphics and animation in the world won't make it look better. Once the footage is compressed for web output, any quality flaws will be exacerbated rather than hidden.

Also consider the following during your shoot:
- Shoot high contrast (dark background/light subject or reverse).
- Always use a tripod. Seriously.
- Avoid jerky camera movements, pans, and tilts.
- Avoid crowds and busy moving backgrounds, if possible.

For onscreen talent:
- If possible, use a teleprompter.
- Avoid bright clothing and busy patterns.
- Disable camera image sharpening settings.
  To record good audio, consider the following:
- Use a lavalier or shotgun microphone.
- Check microphone battery levels before shooting.
- Monitor audio levels with headphones at all times.
- Record at least one minute of room tone/ambient presence for use in postproduction.

To get the best possible image quality during the shoot, consider these suggestions:
- Use a light kit with at *least* two lights, preferably three: a key light, a fill light, and a back light.
- Light evenly, *especially* if shooting green/blue screen.
- Don't underlight. Dark details will be lost in compression.
- Shoot slightly underexposed if necessary.
- Use a graduated neutral density filter if shooting outside.

Capture

Be sure to organize files, folders, bins, and drives based on how your script is organized when capturing footage, as it will save significant amounts of time during editing. If you are using a tape-based workflow, this can be done as clips are captured. If your workflow is tapeless, most of the organization can be done during the shoot. Most editing software allows you to rename clips on import, create bins for clip sets, and add specific notes on each shot.

Also, back up all footage as often as necessary. If you don't have some sort of automated backup system, consider getting one. Otherwise, make regular manual backups part of your workflow. This is especially critical in a tapeless environment, as source footage cards are often erased and reused while shooting. Backing up footage to multiple drives during a tapeless shoot can save a lot of headaches (and lost footage) down the line.
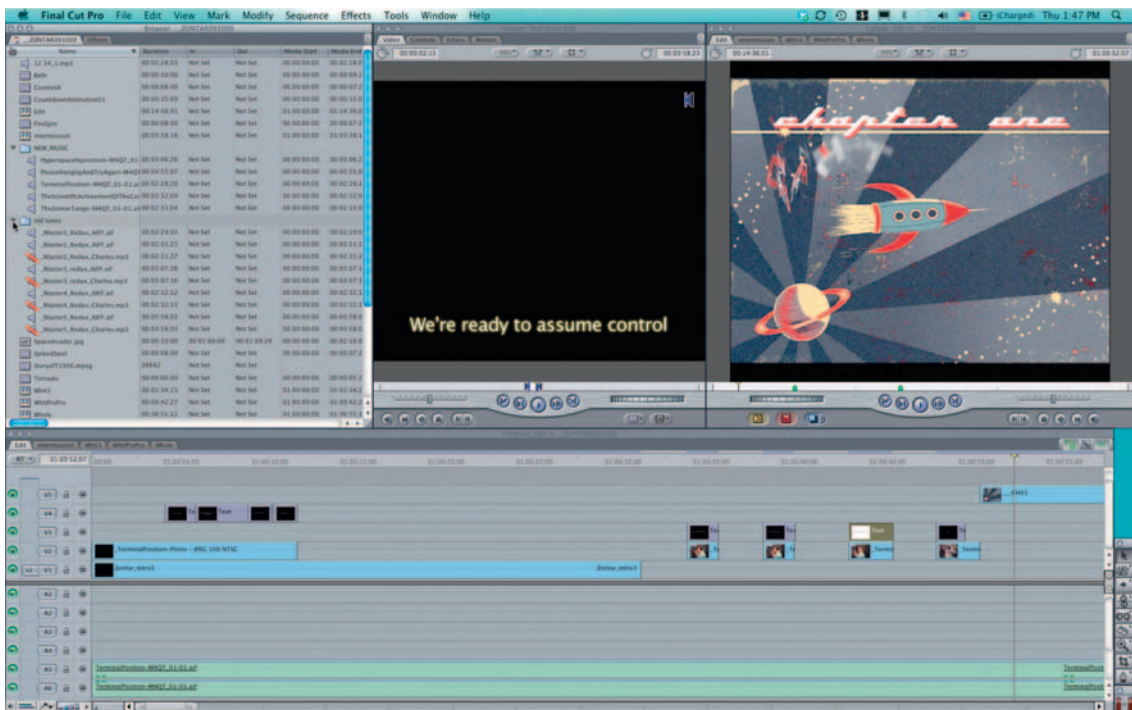
Figure 13.14 Professional applications like Final Cut Pro have built-in tools to help you stay organized during the capture and import process.

Going Tapeless

Tapeless workflows have removed the task of batch capturing footage from tape, a tedious process that's been the bane of any editor's existence since DV revolutionized video production in the 1990s. Most tapeless cameras will allow you to remove bad shots as they are recorded, saving your editor many hours of valuable time during postproduction. Plus, the edit project file is built onsite at the shoot, which means editors can start editing as soon as the shoot is over.
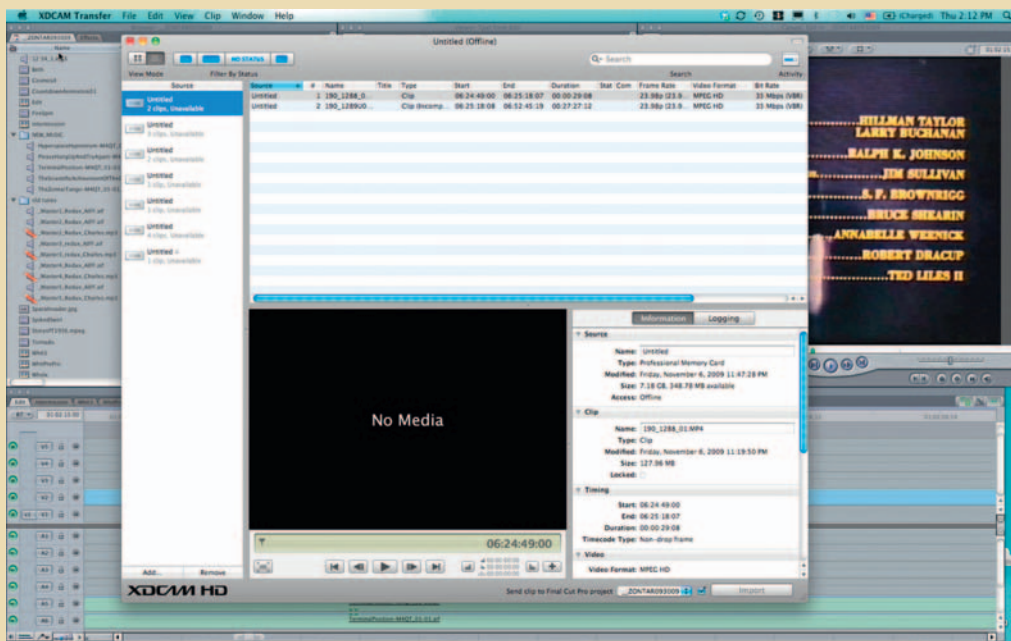
Figure 13.15 Tapeless workflows allow you to start editing while still shooting, saving countless hours of postproduction time.

The Mino HD, for example, captures footage to its own internal hard drive, whereas other models capture footage to removable media. The Sony XDCAM camera series shoots on removable S×S memory cards that fit nicely into the Express Card/34 slots of most new Mac laptops. Bundled capture software integrates with Final Cut Pro to automatically create an organized project file on import.

Just remember to make multiple copies of your footage on different drives, preferably while still on location at the shoot. Hard drives crash, resulting in lost footage. And nobody wants to shoot twice.

Edit

Once the shoot is over and footage has been captured, it's time to begin the process of telling your story. If you plan to produce a lot of videos, it will help to find a set of tools that do more than you need and grow into them. Free applications like Apple's

iMovie and Movie Maker from Microsoft let you edit video without spending a dime on professional tools, but, of course, you get what you pay for. These editing applications are feature-limited compared to something like Final Cut Pro or Avid's suite of tools. It won't be long before you find they don't support a feature that you need to finish your video.

Adobe Premiere Express, an online version of Adobe's flagship video-editing program that runs in browsers via the Flash player, allows anyone to make simple video edits and is offered as a free service on a number of Adobe partner sites, including Photobucket. Adobe Premiere Express can also be licensed so users can edit their own videos on your site, which is great for remix and editing contests. The software supports video, audio, titles, transitions, borders, and graphics.
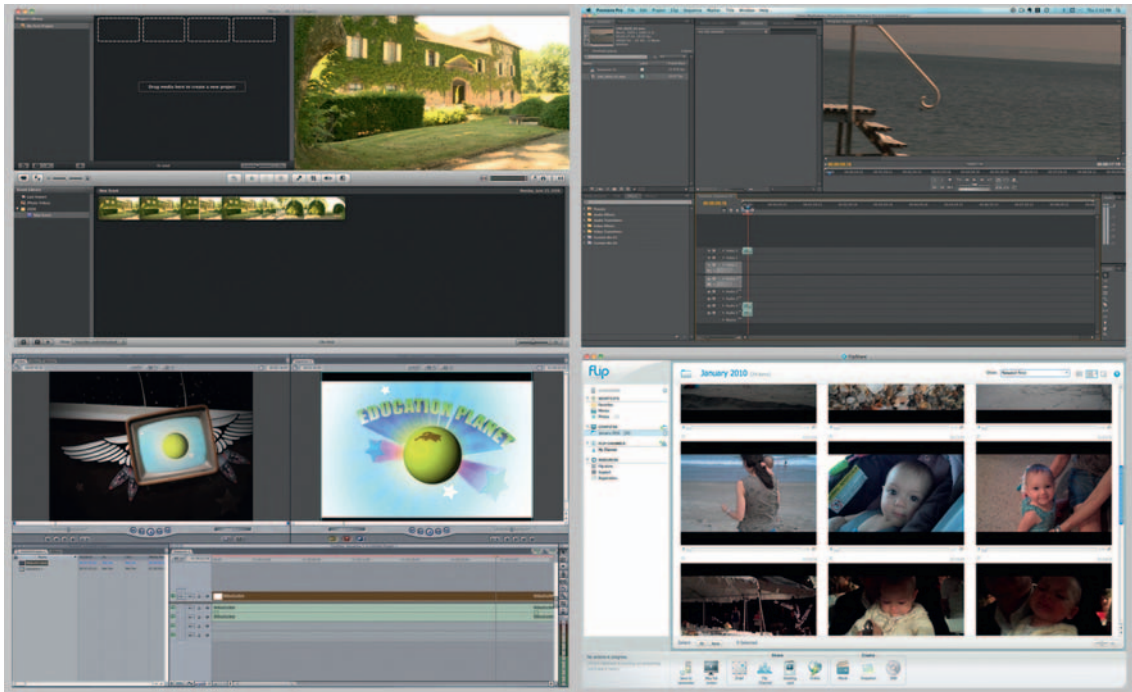
Figure 13.16 There are many options for editing your video. Find an application that serves your needs and budget, preferably one you can grow into.

Whichever tools you choose, the script and storyboards will serve as a solid framework for building your rough cut, a no-frills version of your video that has none of the typical bells and whistles associated with a finished product: graphics, animation, music, sound effects, and so on. This is usually a "cuts-only" draft of the project for team review to ensure that everything is on message, on track, and no key elements or shots are missing.

Finish

Review of your rough cut should result in a set of tangible guidelines for completing the edit. Ask for specific feedback that you need to create a finished video. If you don't require sign-off from a client or boss, ask for objective criticism from coworkers, friends, or even family. There are also numerous online support and user groups that offer forums with the sole purpose of getting and giving objective feedback on projects.
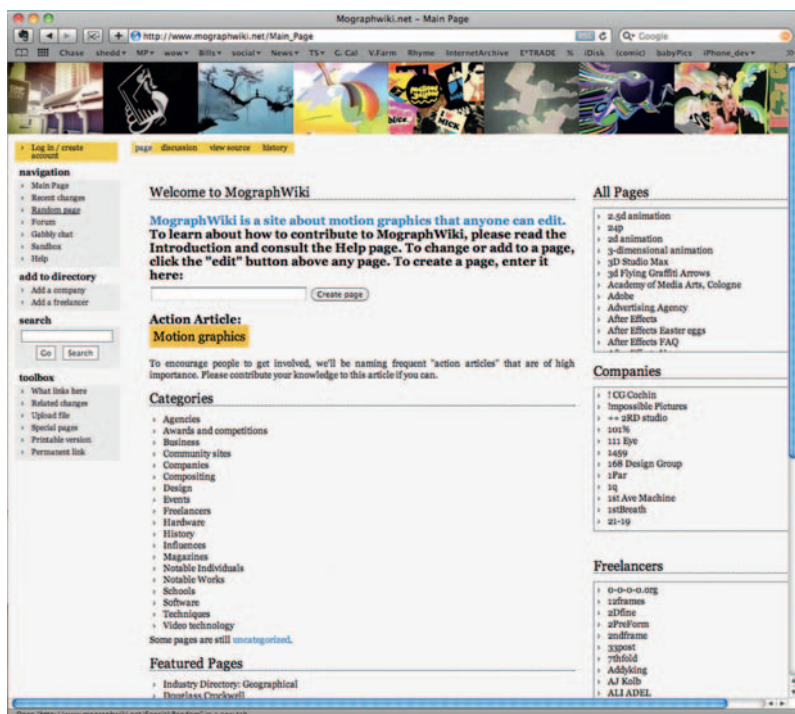
Figure 13.17 There are many online options for getting project feedback. The Mograph Wiki, for example, offers forums for getting feedback on motion graphics projects (www.mographwiki.net).

At the finishing stage, you will tighten up edit points and rearrange clips as necessary to build a final cut of the video. Footage is color corrected for consistency from beginning to end. Graphics, titles, intro animations, music, and sound effects are all added and tweaked for best audiovisual impact. Upon a final review and sign-off, you should have a completed video project ready to export and distribute on the web.

Resolution Conversion Software

Though the garbage in = garbage out rule applies nearly without exception, there are software packages that will compensate for the loss in pixel resolution when converting standard-definition video to HD. Though this is by no means optimal, using one of these software packages could be an option when you have to mix footage of multiple resolutions into a single video clip:

- *Continuum Complete* from Boris FX, Inc., includes a filter called UpRez that is designed to facilitate the resizing of image clips while minimizing data loss associated with media scaling beyond 100%. The plug-in set is available for most popular video-editing and motion graphics applications.

- *Magic Bullet Instant HD* from Red Giant Software also works with most popular editing applications to convert standard DV video into a variety of HD formats.

Compress

Video compression is a trial-and-error process wherein you must find the perfect balance between audiovisual quality and playback performance. Compress a video file too little and it could easily suffer playback hiccups, resulting in a frustrating user experience. Compress a file too much and image quality will suffer, resulting in unreadable text, image banding, and giant blocks of dancing pixels that bear little resemblance to your original footage.

The settings used to export clips from your compressor software or video editing application are often dependent on the file types, frame sizes, and resolutions supported by sites on which you plan to post the clips. Most video sites will recompress your clips to adhere to their own set of video standards. If you have already compressed your footage, this double whammy can often end up in unsatisfactory results with what are known as compression artifacts where portions of your image have degraded significantly.

This is not to say that you can't upload previously compressed video footage to YouTube or

Figure 13.18 Double whammy! If a video site recompresses your already compressed video clip, image quality results could be terrible.

Vimeo, but if image quality is important, then you should monitor supported file specifications for the sites on which you plan to post video. Some sites won't let you post files that exceed a specific size. Others won't let you upload full-quality HD. If possible, export your video at the highest quality and maximum file size supported by the site in order to get the best possible output from the site's built-in compressors. As a general rule, the closer you can get to the original source file size, codec, and format, the better the quality of your results will be on export.

For example, though it has improved greatly over the years, YouTube has long been known for less than adequate video quality. Exporting clips at the highest possible resolution the site supports will ensure you get the best quality once your video is live on-site. As of this writing, the video-sharing giant recommends uploading HD-quality clips at 1920 $\times$ 1080 or 1280 $\times$ 720 using H.264 or MPEG-2 codecs and stereo MP3 or AAC-encoded audio for best playback results.

Compression Tools

There are dozens of video compression tools on the market. Some are free; others will set you back a pretty penny. A Pro version of Apple's QuickTime or the free Windows Media encoder may get you started, but it won't be long before you outgrow those tools and need to upgrade to something that supports more formats, encodes files faster, and more. Here are several popular video-encoding tools, each of which takes a different approach in terms of price, performance, supported formats, and other factors. This is by no means a comprehensive list.

- *Episode Encoder* from Telestream consistently gets great reviews and has a large number of features that video professionals will find essential. Plus, it supports an extensive list of import and export formats. All those formats don't come without a price, however. The Pro version will set you back a thousand bucks and the standard version $500, so if you only have occasional encoding needs, it may not be your most cost-effective option (www.telestream .net/episode/overview.htm).
- *MPEG Streamclip* is a free, easy-to-use video compressor. It has a drag-and-drop interface and a simple menu system, and it supports a large number of import as well as a handful of export formats, including, of course, several flavors of MPEG (www.squared5.com).
- *Hey! Watch* is an online web application that uses a pay-as-you-go credit system for encoding video files uploaded from your desktop. For two-pass encoding, users pay four cents for the first 45 minutes and another four cents for every 15 minutes after that (http://heywatch.com).
- *HandBrake* is a free, open-source video transcoder that supports Mac, Windows, and Linux. From its festive logo to its impressive interface, HandBrake also boasts useful presets and a wide range of supported export formats (http:// handbrake.fr).

Whichever tool you choose, try to make sure it offers *variable bit-rate multipass* encoding. The multiple encoding passes will create better-looking video at smaller file sizes, and the variable bit rate will ensure smoother playback across a wider variety of machines.

Although there are many occasions during the video production process where you can potentially suffer quality losses, exporting and compressing footage are by far the steps during which your video can suffer the most quality degradation. Before doing a final output, run several export tests with a few seconds of footage to compare image and audio quality versus playback smoothness. If your editing software doesn't provide satisfactory results, consider using a dedicated encoding tool. Once you have found custom settings that will work best for your needs, most editing and compression software will let you save those settings so you can apply them to multiple clips down the line.

Streaming versus Progressive Download

When compressing video, there are many options to consider. One that can be somewhat confusing for new videophiles is whether or not to encode your video for streaming or progressive download? Both have unique delivery methods as well as their own pros and cons. Here's the skinny on when to use each:

- *Streaming.* Used frequently in webcasting or broadcasting live events and on-demand content, streaming media has the advantage of starting almost immediately for users, but it has the disadvantage of requiring specific server hardware and software to work properly. Users can skip to content points, pause, and stop video playback without downloading an entire file. Only a small, buffered amount of content is loaded into the playback device at any given time. If the server is bogged down or there is a network bottleneck, video playback can become glitchy, frozen, and audio-video sync may be lost.

- *Progressive download.* Also referred to as HTTP streaming (further adding to the confusion), progressive download videos won't play until enough of the video file is downloaded to your browser, hard drive, or device to ensure smooth playback, which means users may have to potentially wait for your content. On the bright side, these files can be posted to any standard web server. If you plan to post video content to your own server, this is a cost-effective and somewhat efficient route to go. But remember, if your video goes viral and is hosted on a shared server not meant to support serving hundreds or even thousands of simultaneous requests for bandwidth-intensive video files, you could crash the server and have an irate hosting provider on your hands. Because content resides on the user's machine (unlike streaming delivery), publishers who want to monetize their video in a pay-per-view manner wouldn't typically choose progressive download as an option.

Conclusion

We have covered a lot of ground in this chapter regarding options to consider when creating your own video content and preparing it for Internet delivery. In the next chapter we will discuss how to bring that content to a larger audience using online tools for sharing, hosting, and distributing video content.

CASE *study:* Beyond the Pedway

Figure 13.19 Check out Tim Jahn's 'Beyond the Pedway' to see what's happening in Chicago's creative community.

Though educated in multimedia, native Chicagoan Tim Jahn always had a great love for video production. In April 2009 he decided to put those interests to work and started an online video series called *Beyond the Pedway*.

"I was working as a developer, but I've always harbored a passion for video," Tim says. "So after I got back from an inspiring trip to SXSW in 2009 I wanted to find something that would allow me to shoot video, use my existing development skills, and explore my home town's creative community all at the same time."

The Chicago Convergence supplied Tim with just the impetus he needed. A local organization dedicated to showcasing Chicago's creative community, they were looking for exactly the same thing as Tim was and after a few conversations the idea to create a video series that showcased Chicago's talent was born.

Armed with just a tiny tripod and a Mino HD video camera, Tim began weekly interviews with Chicago-based creative

Figure 13.20 Beyond the Pedway's site.

companies to find out what makes them tick and why they like to call Chicago home. (Full disclosure: Mightybytes was the first company interviewed.) Initially, the Chicago Convergence provided Tim with the exposure he needed, sharing his videos with their members and helping to spread the word. Before long, Tim had amassed an extensive collection of clips and realized it was time to build a destination site to house all the content. Thus, BeyondthePedway.com was born.

Video interviews on Beyond the Pedway include discussions with companies like 37 Signals, Groupon, Motion Post, Lakeshore Branding, Chicago Art Department, and many more. The site doesn't just feature digital media or software companies, but any organization that does creative work. Each video clip features music by a Chicago band.

The site also includes video production tips from Tim via an email newsletter and a handy form for getting in touch should you have a web video project to discuss. Visitors can retweet any video entry with a simple click or add comments if they want to talk about what they just watched.

Tim features video content directly on the site's home page with highly visible links to the series' RSS feed, iTunes, and Facebook page front and center in the top navigation. Viewers can post comments beneath each video with Tim's prompt of "What did you think?" Simple, elegant, engaging.

"It started as a handful of short web video clips exploring Chicago's creative community," Tim says. "But it has evolved into more of a destination site, partially because of the amount of content I've been able to include, but also because I've added additional engagement features."

At first the clips were hosted on Vimeo, but after a while Tim moved the series to Blip and finally to Mevio, where he found options to monetize the content through strategic ad placement. Tim also monetizes the site with sponsors and personal recommendations for video equipment that link to an Amazon affiliate account.

"I'm trying to make it a resource for people," Tim notes. "College students who may want to come to Chicago after they graduate, for instance, will find it a great resource to see what their potential employment options are."

In a short period of time, *Beyond the Pedway* has blossomed into a successful online endeavor with dozens of video interviews that have earned Tim a number of job opportunities and support from the Chicago creative community, proving that a little ingenuity, a well-honed set of networking skills, and a minor investment in technology can quickly evolve into a career-changing enterprise.

14

VIDEO SHARING, DISTRIBUTION, AND METADATA

So you have your video shot and edited. Now what? We discussed many production techniques and compression/export settings in Chapter 13. In this chapter we will focus on techniques for sharing, distributing, and hosting your own video content.

Video Landscape Redux

As mentioned in Chapter 13, online video is one of the fastest growing parts of the Internet. The rise of mass market broadband use, coupled with scores of sites where you can post content for free and distribute it quickly to blogs, social media profiles, and websites via simple copy-and-paste embedded codes has resulted in an avalanche of online video content. The number of video-sharing sites continues to rise with new, uh, players coming to the market on a regular basis.

So why don't we all have embedded high-definition video clips playing from every page on our sites? Well, for one thing, the web is not television. As mentioned previously, just because you *can* post videos all over your website doesn't necessarily mean you should. Make sure the message and the medium exist in tandem with one another. But more important, video clips are huge bandwidth hogs, and despite most video-sharing sites being free to use, bandwidth costs money. In an article on DV.com, Dan Rayburn of StreamingMedia.com has said that the problem of widespread online HD acceptance is a business issue rather than a technical one. "Unlike broadcast TV with its one-to-many model," he said, "Web video distributors pay for every viewer they get and how much bandwidth they consume. Offering HD Web video at 3 Mbps instead of 500 kbps SD video means a sixfold increase in bandwidth cost, with no benefits in return. That's why

Figure 14.1 There are many, many video-sharing sites online.

people are generally sticking with SD Web video unless they can make a business case for it."[1]

If you use many of the larger video-sharing sites—YouTube, Daily Motion, Funny or Die, and so on—bandwidth concerns become the problem of the hosting platform. If you plan to host your own videos, however, bandwidth costs are a legitimate concern, especially if your content has the potential for reaching huge audiences. It's one thing to host your demo reel that gets maybe a few dozen hits per month, but it is quite another if one of your videos go viral and reach a million people in a 24-hour period. There are few quicker ways to exceed your monthly bandwidth allotment and bring your website to a screeching halt. Thus, one of the first questions to answer is whether or not you should host your own video content.

To Host or Not to Host?

As with social networking sites, video-sharing sites allow you to post links and metadata alongside each video you upload, thus adding value to your SEO efforts and increasing the number of inbound links to your site. But if you are communicating with a small niche community or charging for your video content, that may not be a priority.

Video Hosting Considerations

To figure out whether or not you should host your own video content, consider the questions that follow. Oftentimes, the answers will depend on the type of video content you create: educational, promotional, conversion video, and so on.

- Is it important that my clips be shared across multiple networks?
- Do I need to maintain a specific brand identity?
- Do I need to monetize my video content?
- Can my budget support high volumes of server traffic?
- Can my server support high volumes of traffic?
- Are my video clips part of a larger structure, such as class curriculum?
- Is my video "For a limited time only!"?
- Will users download my video content?
- Will users need to register to view my video content?
- Will my videos be used for marketing purposes?

If your answer to the last question in this list is yes, then most likely the best solution for you is using social tools to help get the word out about your video content. Or at the very least you may want to consider some hosted/nonhosted hybrid for your video content.

Let's explore some of the pros and cons of both the self-hosted and externally hosted approaches.

[1] www.dv.com/article/91748

Self-Hosted Video

Hosting your own video files gives you a large amount of control over how they are presented, but this approach poses a unique set of challenges as well. Depending on the arrangement you have with your hosting provider, it can be very easy to max out your bandwidth and bring your entire site down. Also, generating traffic can be a challenge unless you take advantage of external promotional avenues or other marketing streams such as via your social media accounts. Here are some pros and cons for hosting your own video content.

Pros

- More control over files, formats, and user experience
- More control over branding and presentation
- Can potentially be monetized as curricula, webinars, and so on
- Reaches a more targeted audience

Cons

- Takes up a lot of bandwidth. Custom servers may be required, especially if clips are streamed.
- Scalability can get expensive.
- Setup is significantly more complicated.

Externally Hosted Video

Using a shared video site like YouTube, Vimeo, or Revver to house your video content also poses its own set of challenges. Here are some pros and cons for using one (or more) of these sites to house your content:

Pros

- Cost effective (usually free)
- Built-in content-sharing tools
- Potential global audience via viral loops
- Word spreads quickly on social sites
- Can be monetized with ads via "partner" agreements

Cons

- Ads put off users.
- There is a less targeted audience.
- Users can be easily distracted away from your content.
- Privacy settings are minimal.
- Third-party branded players.

The decision to host your own video content or share it via social networks should be given serious consideration, as the route you take will directly impact your bottom line in one way or another. Be sure to research all options thoroughly and consider the consequences of each.

Create Your Own Social Video Network
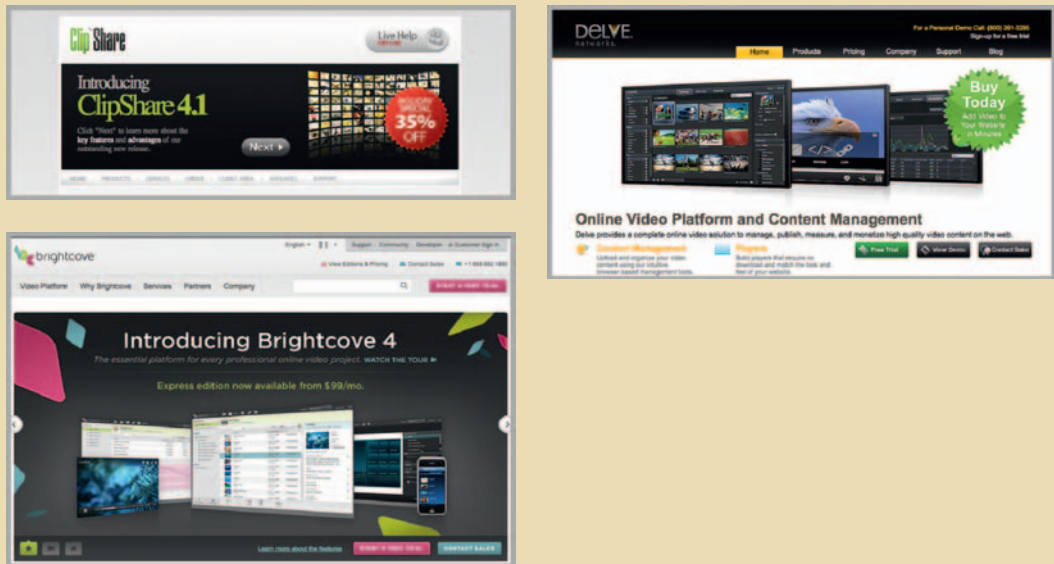
Figure 14.2 Tools like Clip Share, Brightcove, and Delve can help you create your own video-sharing site.

Want to build your own video social network instead of creating a channel on someone else's site? There are a number of options out there with a range of prices and features offered. Here are a few:

- *Delve* from Delve Networks is a video-centric content management system that contains all the tools necessary to publish online video with ease. This hosted service, the priciest of the three options mentioned here, starts at $249 per month and comes in four flavors: Standard, Professional, Premier, and Enterprise. Only pricing for Standard is posted on the site (www.delvenetworks.com).

- *ClipShare* from Envient WebApps comes in several versions and supports many features, including real-time video conversion, an embeddable Flash video player, video and profile rating, RSS feeds, a messaging system, and much more. The same company also offers the MediaShare application suite, a set of tools for creating robust video, audio, and photo-sharing sites. Unlike the other two options, ClipShare is downloadable software for your web server and comes in two versions—Lite and Pro—that are $99 and $199, respectively, making it by far the most cost effective of the three options mentioned here (www.clip-share.com).

- *Brightcove* has a popular video platform that also contains tools for posting, distributing, monetizing, and tracking your own video content. Pricing for this hosted software-as-a-service (SaaS) platform starts at $99 per month (www.brightcove.com).

Though these tools put the power of a video-driven social network in your hands, they can be complex to set up and configure, especially if you are hosting the system yourself. Marketing the destination URL also becomes a challenge, as you will need to reach your target audience one way or another and convince them not only to come to your site but to share their own video content on it as well, a challenge that will require significant engagement efforts. If the fit is right, however, the return on your efforts could be significant.

Distribution

Uploading videos to sharing sites offers many benefits, but, as with any social efforts, to foster true engagement it's also very time consuming. The extensive efforts required to build relationships and comment on relevant clips across dozens of social sites notwithstanding, the time it takes merely to handle production and distribution tasks is significant. First, setting up accounts on dozens of destination sites where your content will end up takes time. Then, the act of uploading video is in itself time consuming. Many sites can take hours to compress and post your clips, which can be particularly challenging if you are uploading a single video clip to dozens of sites at one time. Plus, if you want to compress or distribute dozens of videos at a time, you may need a dedicated machine that does nothing else. This is not only time consuming but costly as well. Thankfully, several online tools are available that will automate at least some of this process for you.

Multisite Distribution
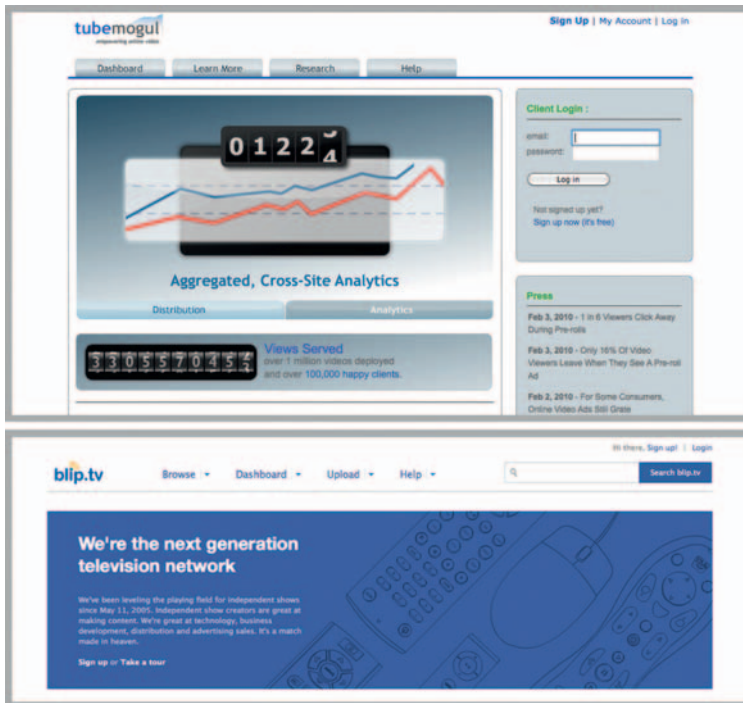
Figure 14.3 TubeMogul and Blip.tv each support dozens of destinations for your video content.

Sites like TubeMogul and Blip.tv can take the guesswork out of uploading video content to multiple destinations. These distribution services allow you to upload once and then take care of posting your file to the video-sharing sites you select. They provide you

with a set of guidelines for clip specifications that will work across supported distribution partner sites, so all you have to do is export once from your video encoding tool or editing application, upload the file, and they will take care of the rest. Whereas TubeMogul and Blip.tv are automated services, companies like SubmitINme and VideoSubmission.com will manually submit your files to numerous video-sharing sites, but, of course, it will cost you. TubeMogul and Blip.tv offer basic services for free, whereas SubmitINme and VideoSubmission.com services cost up to $75 per video clip. TubeMogul also offers PayPerPlay video promotion options and fee-based Business and Gold accounts with more features, including advanced metrics, unlimited upload file size, multiuser capabilities, and more. TubeMogul's free account also offers basic metrics data for how many views your clips have received on partner sites.
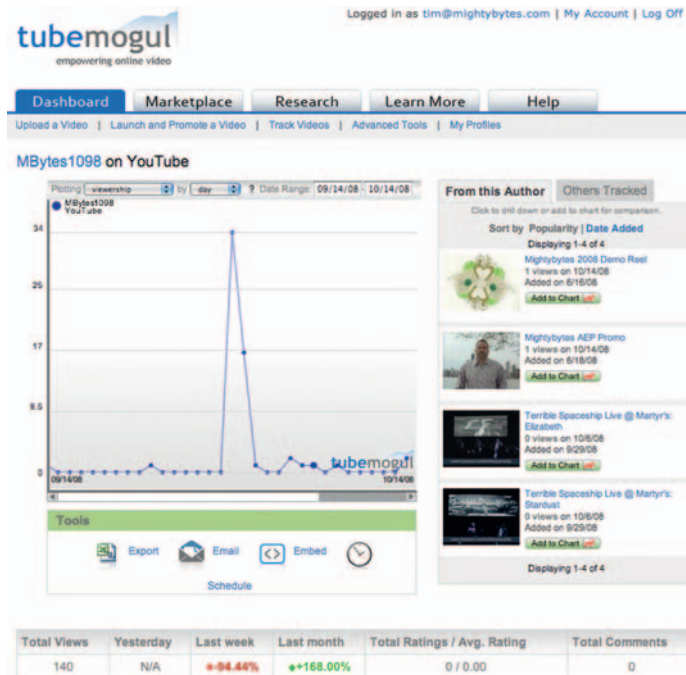
Figure 14.4 TubeMogul lets you check how many views your clips have received across multiple sites.

In addition to standard video-sharing sites, you can use these tools to distribute videos to your blog, general social sites, Twitter accounts, iTunes, and more. Blip.tv claims its videos can be viewed on mobile devices, including iPhones and iPods, as well as on your old-fashioned TV set via distribution through partner companies Verizon, Sony, and TiVo.

Distribution Specs

If you don't want to use tools for mass distribution like Blip.tv or TubeMogul, there are a few things to keep in mind to get pristine results from posting clips to these sites one at a time. In Chapter 13 we discussed details of exporting clips from video editing or encoding software. Before uploading your videos, research the file specs for your targeted destination sites. Each one could have different specs, meaning you may have to export a new copy of your video for each site, which could be a time-consuming endeavor to say the least. Consider researching answers to the following questions for each of the sites on which you plan to post content:

About Uploading

- **Capture and Upload in High Definition!**
- Upload up to 10 videos at a time
- **Best video formats** for YouTube
- Up to 2 GB in size.
- Up to 10 minutes in length.

Need more help? Visit the YouTube Handbook
Want to upload large numbers of videos in the background? Try our Bulk Upload Plugin
Upload problems? Try without the progress bar.

Promote your Videos with Promoted Videos
Create and manage your video channel promotions on YouTube. Your promotion will appear with search results when people look for related content.
Get started now!

Figure 14.5 Is your video file larger than what the site it's being uploaded to supports?

- Does the site have a file size limitation?
- Does the site have video length limits?
- What is the target site's preferred file format, resolution, and codec?
- Does the destination site support the frame rate of your video?
- Will the site support your video clip in its native resolution, or will it stretch the file during compression to fit its player?
- Is there a limit to the number of videos you can post?
- Is the host site's mission in line with your content?

This last question is particularly important, both because a community that is not in line with your needs will be particularly difficult to connect with and because posting unsuitable content can potentially result in a deleted account.

Vimeo, for example, touts itself as a community site for filmmakers and video creators who want to share their creative work. As such, the quality of video on Vimeo is pristine and is meant to be creative, not commercial in nature. The site has repeatedly come under fire, however, for "prejudging the merit of submitted

content"[2] and arbitrarily deciding what constitutes commercial content, much to the chagrin of some rather vocal account holders. Likewise, CollegeHumor.com has a very specific audience. Although your educational video on how to refill printer ink cartridges may certainly be relevant to some, the community that frequents this site will likely not find the humor they were searching for in your clip—unless, of course, your clip is hysterically funny, in which case kudos to you for successfully combining a commercial message with a humorous approach.

Custom Channels

If your video content is serial in nature or you plan to post videos on a somewhat regular basis, consider creating your own custom channel on one or several video-sharing sites. Users who subscribe to your channel will be notified every time you add new video content, and a channel is a great way to connect with other people over common ideas or interests.

Figure 14.6 Channels on YouTube can be customized to match your brand identity.

YouTube in particular not only makes it easy to create a custom channel but gives you the ability to customize its look and feel as well. If your show reflects an existing brand identity, you can customize the channel to match that aesthetic.

[2] http://vjarmy.com/archives/2008/07/vimeo_vs_gamers.php
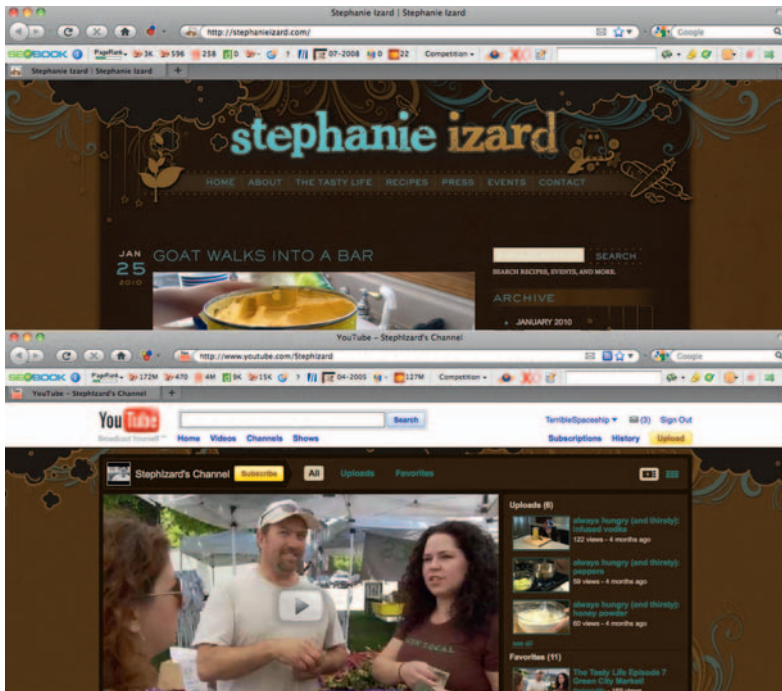
Figure 14.7 Top Chef Stephanie Izard's YouTube channel reflects the brand identity from her site.

Tip: Give Good Thumbnail

Don't underestimate the power of a good thumbnail for your video clips. It's the first thing anyone sees when deciding whether or not to watch your video. Most sharing sites will automatically choose a frame from your video to use as a thumbnail, but they will also give you the option to choose an alternate frame. Pick an image that is visually enticing or at the very least conveys what your video is about.

Stephanie Izard, season 4 winner of the Bravo Network's popular *Top Chef* series, does a great job of this on her YouTube channel, which she uses to share cooking tips, new recipes, event coverage, and other content that may be of interest to her fans. "I think it's important to find ways of using various sites such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook to their fullest potential," Izard said. Custom-designed by Chicago firm Kerosene Creative, the channel reflects the same visual aesthetic that marks her personal website.

Figure 14.8 An image thumbnail is usually the first impression a viewer gets of your video. Make it count.

The Social Element

Even though the simple act of posting videos to sharing sites and creating custom channels will help with SEO, don't forget the engagement factor. As with any social media endeavor, the operative word is *social*. Comment on videos with content similar to yours and use the same community-building concepts we have applied elsewhere in this book to your social video endeavors as well. Subscribe to other people's video feeds, add them as friends, and continue to join their conversations as often as time will allow.

Video Metadata

Although your video content itself is extremely important, what's behind the scenes—the metadata that describe your content to search engines—is equally critical, especially if your own site is rich with video content. Social sites will allow you to associate URLs, tags, categories, and keyword-rich descriptions with your shared video content, but there are several approaches you can take with metadata on your own site that can help search engines better crawl and index your video content.

Indexing Video Metadata

According to Google's Webmaster Central, the search engine can index most types of pages and files, including the following:

- Adobe Portable Document Format (.pdf)
- Adobe PostScript (.ps)
- Atom and RSS feeds (.atom, .rss)
- Autodesk Design Web Format (.dwf)
- Google Earth (.kml, .kmz)
- Lotus 1-2-3 (.wk1, .wk2, .wk3, .wk4, .wk5, .wki, .wks, .wku)
- Lotus WordPro (.lwp)
- MacWrite (.mw)
- Microsoft Excel (.xls)
- Microsoft PowerPoint (.ppt)
- Microsoft Word (.doc)
- Microsoft Works (.wks, .wps, .wdb)
- Microsoft Write (.wri)
- Open Document Format (.odt)
- Rich Text Format (.rtf)
- Shockwave Flash (.swf)
- Text (.ans, .txt)
- Wireless Markup Language (.wml, .wap)

Though this is a lengthy list, you will notice that many popular audio and video formats—FLV, mov, wav, MP3, and so on— are missing. Though the search engines are hard at work trying to create software to index-rich media content (see the box titled

Gaudi), the day when they can seamlessly interpret audiovisual content is a way off yet. In the meantime, using semantic metadata to optimize your audio- and video-centric pages will help search engines to better understand your audio and video content. Let's explore a few way of doing this.

Gaudi

Google Audio Indexing (Gaudi, for short) uses proprietary speech technology to transform spoken words in audio and video clips into text that is then associated with the clips. Gaudi will be used for crawling online audiovisual content and leverages Google's indexing technology to return relevant video results for search engine queries. The returned videos are ranked based—among other things—on the spoken content, the metadata, and how recently they were updated.

As of this writing, the technology was only available for YouTube political channels during the 2008 presidential campaign but will no doubt be expanded to include other YouTube content as well. It remains to be seen how this will affect video content on other sharing sites.

Figure 14.9 Google Audio Indexing (Gaudi) hopes to someday bridge the gap between search engines and audiovisual content.

Video Page Optimization

When working with audio or video, make sure all of the metadata you include with your content is text based, keyword rich, and tagged appropriately. This includes any descriptive metadata within your HTML if the content is hosted on your own site, or content description, categories, tagging, and other taxonomy/folksonomy methods on social sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Revver.

According to Google, if you want the search engine to understand the rich-media content on your site including Flash, Silverlight, audio, and video—put the following best practices into action:

- Use rich media only where it makes sense. HTML should be used for content and navigation.
- Use progressive enhancement techniques (covered in Chapter 7) to provide alternate text or HTML versions of all pages that contain rich media elements.
- Consider using robots.txt to block rich media files so only associated text is crawled. If you provide text versions of content, you may want to consider using robots.txt to block search engine access to rich media versions.

As we will see in the following sections, there are other approaches to take as well.

Resources: Text-to-Speech with Adobe Premiere

Need to create a search engine–friendly alternate page of content for your video file but don't want to send it out to a transcription service? Adobe Premiere Pro and Soundbooth contain tools to convert spoken words into text, giving you editable files that can be used for progressive enhancement techniques and metadata. These functions also allow you to locate times certain words are spoken, which can be used in editing, marketing, advertising, and subtitles.
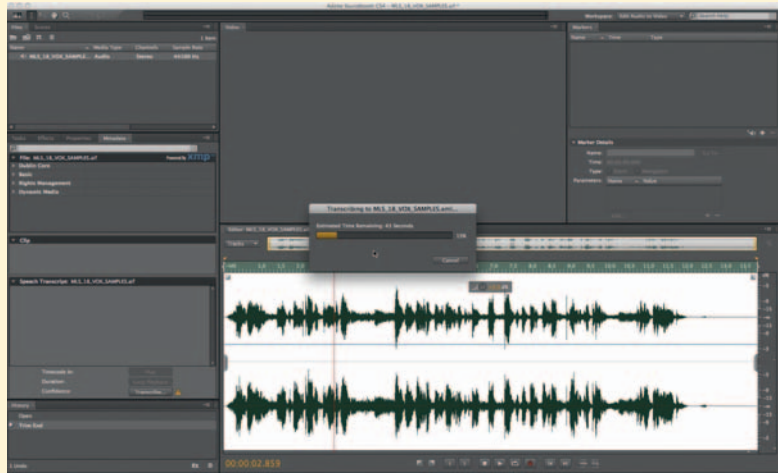
Figure 14.10 Adobe Premiere and Soundbooth contain tools for converting the spoken words in your video files to text.

To transcribe speech, run the speech-to-text tool on the appropriate clip. The spoken words will appear in the transcript section of the application. You can even select unique speakers if you have multiple people in your recording. Though helpful, keep in mind these tools only provide 60% to 70% accuracy rates, so you will no doubt need to tweak the text files they create.

Metadata and Semantic SEO

The semantic web is evolving rapidly with more sites adopting standards set forth by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and other organizations for indexing content in a contextual

manner via metadata rather than merely just words and phrases. Web video is a key area where these practices will prove especially fruitful.

What does this mean for your video content? To date, semantic SEO practices involve incorporating metadata into your video pages. As of this writing, the most widely supported (and currently competing) formats for these metadata are microformats and RDFa, though there are others as well. (For more details on microformats and RDFa, see the section on semantic markup in Chapter 7.)

Here are some specific semantic approaches you can take to help the search engines better understand your video pages.

Rich Snippets

When displaying results, Google typically shows a small "snippet" of site content in a search results page. Historically, this has been text included in the `description` meta tag. In May 2009, the company announced support for Rich Snippets, which Google defines as "a new presentation of snippets that applies Google's algorithms to highlight structured data embedded in web pages."

Rich Snippets are, in essence, short content summaries created for search engines that reside in a page's metadata. Although relevant for all site pages, Rich Snippets are particularly useful for providing important contextual metadata for video files.

> **Tip: DIY Rich Snippets**
>
> How can you build support for Rich Snippets into your own site? Google recommends "annotating your pages with structured data in a standard format." Because Google looks for markup formats, insert additional tags in pages with embedded video. Microformats or RDFa will work well for this.

Figure 14.11 Rich Snippets will work with microformats and RDFa markup.

Google does, however, make a disclaimer for how results may (or may not) show up: "As before, marking up your content does not guarantee that Rich Snippets will be shown for your site. We will continue to expand this feature gradually to ensure a great user experience whenever Rich Snippets are shown in search results."
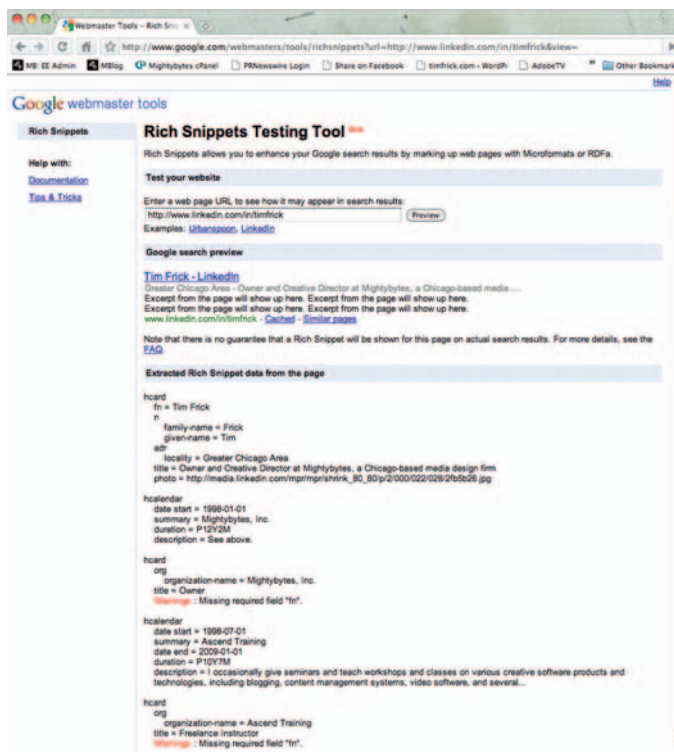
Figure 14.12 Google's Rich Snippets Testing Tool.

In late October 2009, Google released a beta version of its Rich Snippets Testing Tool, which can be used with sites that have semantic metadata (such as RDFa and microformats) to show what the search engine is able to extract and interpret.
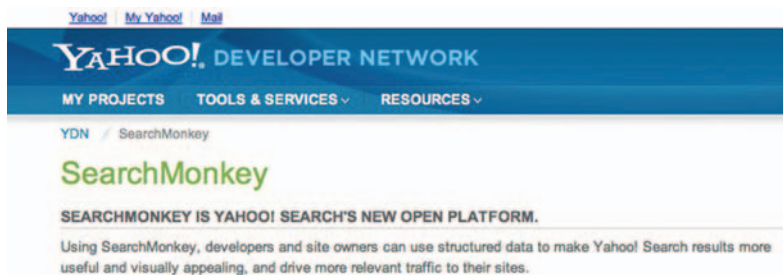
Figure 14.13 Yahoo! SearchMonkey also supports RDFa.

Facebook Share and Yahoo! SearchMonkey RDFa

Like Rich Snippets, Facebook Share and Yahoo! SearchMonkey RDFa are two markup formats that allow you to specify information essential to video indexing—such as title, description, size, contributor, date, media type, and many others—within the HTML (and not executed by Flash or JavaScript) of a video page. These efforts were launched in 2009 to help search engines locate video and rich media content. Let's discuss how to potentially integrate each format into your site.

Figure 14.14 There is a lot going on under the hood when users click the Facebook Share button.

Facebook Share

The Facebook Share widget allows you, using a simple embed code, to add a small "Share" button on your site pages that allows content to easily be posted on Facebook. When users share your content, Facebook looks at your page to find relevant title, image, and media tags that help describe the content and enhance how the item appears on Facebook.

By default, Facebook assumes you want to share an entire page, but you can also add multimedia-specific metadata for sharing audio, video, or Flash content as well. Attributes such as video_height, video_type, audio_src, and others will not only help Facebook properly display your content within its own pages, but this information is now also crawled by Google for video content indexing within search engine results pages (SERPs).

Here is an example of what information Facebook (and Google) recommends for header metadata when displaying a video clip about cute puppies:

```
<head>
<link rel="image_src" href="http://example.com/thumbnail_
preview.jpg"/>
<link rel="video_src" href="http://example.com/video_
object.swf"/>
<meta name="description" content="Cute, adorable puppies
of all shapes in sizes in a single video!"/>
<meta name="title" content="cute puppies"/>
<meta name="video_height" content="296"/>
<meta name="video_width" content="512"/>
<meta name="video_type" content="application/x-shockwave-
flash"/>
</head>
```

RDFa (Yahoo! SearchMonkey)

Likewise, Yahoo! SearchMonkey looks for a set of semantic attributes to better index and categorize video content. This format is supported by Google indexing as well.

Here's an example of what Yahoo! SearchMonkey recommends as included RDFa metadata for the same video. Note that more information is included within the metadata than with Facebook Share.

```
<object width="512" height="296" rel="media:video"
resource="http://example.com/video_object.swf"
xmlns:media="http://search.yahoo.com/searchmonkey/media/"
xmlns:dc="http://purl.org/dc/terms/">
<param name="movie" value="http://example.com/video_
object.swf"/>
<embed src="http://example.com/video_object.swf"
type="application/x-shockwave-flash" width="512"
height="296"></embed>
<a rel="media:thumbnail" href="http://example.com/thumb-
nail_preview.jpg"/>
<a rel="dc:license" href="http://example.com/terms_of_ser-
vice.html"/>
<span property="dc:description" content="Cute, adorable
puppies of all shapes in sizes in a single video!"/>
<span property="media:title" content="cute puppies"/>
<span property="media:width" content="512"/>
<span property="media:height" content="296"/>
<span property="media:type" content="application/
x-shockwave-flash"/>
<span property="media:region" content="us"/>
<span property="media:region" content="uk"/>
</object>
```

Keep in mind that both of the preceding examples are *recommended* approaches. What is *required* for each of these examples is much simpler but potentially less effective.

Facebook Share

```
<head>
<link rel="image_src" href="http://example.com/thumbnail_
preview.jpg"/>
<link rel="video_src" href="http://example.com/video_
object.swf"/>
</head>
```

Yahoo! SearchMonkey

```
<object width="512" height="296" rel="media:video"
resource="http://example.com/video_object.swf"
xmlns:media="http://search.yahoo.com/searchmonkey/media/">
<a rel="media:thumbnail" href="http://example.com/thumb-
nail_preview.jpg"/>
<param name="movie" value="http://example.com/video_
object.swf"/>
<embed src="http://example.com/video_object.
swf" type="application/x-shockwave-flash" width="512"
height="296">
</embed>
</object>
```

Video Sitemaps

If your site includes large amounts of regularly updated video content, you may want to create a video sitemap to help search engines index its content. A video sitemap uses standard sitemap protocol with the addition of video-specific tags to define media clips.

In its simplest form, a video sitemap must include a link to a landing page for a video as well as some essential information required for indexing the video. Even though several fields in the sitemap are optional, they provide useful metadata that can improve the ability to include sitemap video data in search results.

Here is a sample of a video sitemap entry using video-specific tags:

```
<urlset xmlns="http://www.sitemaps.org/schemas/
sitemap/0.9"
   xmlns:video="http://www.google.com/schemas/sitemap-
video/1.1">
   <url>
   <loc>http://www.example.com/videos/some_video_landing_
page.html</loc>
   <video:video>
   <video:content_loc>http://www.site.com/video123.flv
</video:content_loc>
   <video:player_loc allow_embed="yes"
autoplay="ap=1">http://www.site.com/videoplayer.
swf?video=123</video:player_loc>
   <video:thumbnail_loc>http://www.example.com/thumbs/123.
jpg</video:thumbnail_loc>
   <video:title>Grilling steaks for summer</video:title>
   <video:description>Get perfectly done steaks every time
</video:description>
   <video:rating>4.2</video:rating>
   <video:view_count>12345</video:view_count>
   <video:publication_date>2007-11-05T19:20:30+08:00.
</video:publication_date>
   <video:expiration_date>2009-11-05T19:20:30+08:00.
</video:expiration_date>
   <video:tag>steak</video:tag>
   <video:tag>meat</video:tag>
   <video:tag>summer</video:tag>
   <video:category>Grilling</video:category>
   <video:family_friendly>yes</video:family_friendly>
   <video:expiration_date>2009-11-05T19:20:30+08:00
</video:expiration_date>
   <video:duration>600</video:duration>
   </video:video>
   </url>
   </urlset>
```

A complete set of required and optional tag definitions for video sitemaps can be found on the companion site to this book.

Sitemap Recommendations

Google offers the following recommendations for creating video sitemaps:

A video sitemap should contain only URLs that refer to video content. Video content includes web pages that embed video, URLs to players for video, or the URLs of raw video content hosted on your site. If Google cannot discover video content at the URLs you provide, Googlebot will ignore those records.

Because each video is uniquely identified by its content URL (the location of the actual video file) or, if a content URL is not present, a player URL (a URL pointing to a player for the video), you must include either the <video:player_loc> or <video:content_loc> tags. If these tags are omitted and Google can't find this information, it will be unable to index your video.

Each sitemap file that you provide must have no more than 10,000 video items and must be no larger than 10 MB uncompressed. An individual video file or thumbnail (specified in the <video:content_loc> and <video:thumbnail_loc> tags, respectively) can be no larger than 30 MB. If you have more than 10,000 videos, you can submit multiple sitemaps and a sitemap index file.

Google can crawl the following video file types: .mpg, .mpeg, .mp4, .mov, .wmv, .asf, .avi, .ra, .ram, .rm, and .flv. All files must be accessible via HTTP. Metafiles that require a download of the source via streaming protocols are not supported.

The URLs included in the sitemap must have their robots.txt file set appropriately for User-agent "Googlebot."

If you have multiple videos embedded on the same HTML page, use separate <video:video> entries for them with different <video:player_loc> or <video:content_loc> information.

Google web crawlers will verify that the information you include in the <video:title> and <video:description> fields matches your live site. You should view your play pages in a browser such as Lynx to make sure Googlebot will be able to find them.

Once you have created your video sitemap, you can submit it to Google using Webmaster Tools. Although a video sitemap helps Google find content on your site that might not otherwise be discovered, Google doesn't guarantee that all videos included in a sitemap will appear in search results or that all information included in your video sitemap will be used.

Audio/Video + RSS = Podcast

Podcasts are yet another attempt to merge RSS feeds with audio or video content. Specific to Apple's iTunes and typically played only on iPhones and iPods (hence the name), they consist of either an audio or video file coupled with metadata in RSS format. Unfortunately, if you have already created a Media RSS feed for your site's video content, it does not automatically translate to iTunes. Several differentiations in the metadata are needed to successfully post video content and an RSS feed to iTunes, which means you will have to customize your mRSS feed to meet Apple's standards (imagine that).

A comparison table of tags required for mRSS and iTunes can be found at www.w3.org/2005/07/media-and-rss.

Conclusion

The amount of video content online seems only matched by the public's appetite to watch it. Searching and indexing all that content, however, has historically been a challenge for search engines. By adding some semantic metadata to your video content pages and submitting a Media RSS feed or video sitemap, you can give the search engines a boost in better understanding your content, which ultimately will drive more traffic to your videos. Meanwhile, automated distribution tools like TubeMogul and Blip.tv can help get your videos to more online destinations. Once they're posted, social media engagement efforts will help you connect with people potentially interested in your video content, giving you a chance to build community and help the right people find content that will be useful to them.

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THE RETURN

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MEASUREMENT

You have tweaked and optimized your content-managed site. You have set up a blog, produced and posted videos to sharing sites, joined Facebook, LinkedIn, and 20 or 30 other social sites. You are contributing to each regularly. Now what?

If you have done all the above, people are most likely talking about you online and maybe they're even visiting your site, but are they becoming customers and building worthwhile relationships with you? Or are they harming your online reputation? Are you engaging them with conversation that results in mutually beneficial relationships? We have discussed a multitude of potential returns on your engagement efforts in previous chapters—trust, brand loyalty, collaboration, sales, new friends, and so on. In this chapter we will outline how online tools and resources can help make sense of the data that result from these efforts. Using the information these measurement tools provide, you can begin to hone your online efforts accordingly to find people and make connections that really matter.

If you want to find a return on engagement, monitoring your site performance and social media influence will no doubt play a role. Let's start with the online chatter.

Mightybytes Reviews Website Optimization Secrets

Mightybytes has reviewed the Nighthawk book calling it "extremely informative." Tim Frick recommends the book for entire web development teams to help improve their web sites.

"If you're at all involved in website creation or content, you should definitely check this book out. Website Optimization by Andrew B. King is a comprehensive resource that can help web designers and developers build better and speedier sites that engage users and drive traffic. That's the simple truth."

Summary: Tim Frick reviews our Website Optimization book and recommends it to practically anyone involved in creating websites: marketers, developers, conversion boosters, and SEO and PPC practitioners as well.

Figure 15.1 People are talking about you. Are you listening?

Add Comment

The reality is that people *are* talking about you. And if they're not yet, they will be. At some point in time, someone

Figure 15.2 *Six Pixels of Separation.* Mitch Joel. Business Plus. http://www.twistimage.com/book/.

will eventually say something about you online and the search engines will collect that information, index it, store it, and include it in search results that the entire world can see for all eternity. If it hasn't happened to you already, it will, especially if you regularly use social networking tools like Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, blogs, wikis, and forums. The more you participate, the more likely it is that someone's going to start talking. So what are you going to do about it?

The reality is that there is only so much you *can* do. Of course, if someone slanders you, there is legal recompense, but that's time consuming and expensive. If someone posts a legitimate gripe about you or your company, really, if you want to be a good social citizen the best thing you can do is either refute it with tangible evidence to the contrary or offer to fix the problem. As Mitch Joel said in his book *Six Pixels of Separation*, "You can't control the conversation. . . . You can control whether or not you take part."[1]

Results-Oriented

Some time ago, a potential strategic partner contacted Mightybytes about collaborating on future projects together. Before the first meeting, I (naturally) checked out the company's website. It was polished and professional with clean design, clever copy, relevant work samples, and so on. Great.

Then I Googled the company name. The second thing that came up on the first results page was a Merchant Circle review from an angry past client claiming the client had been waiting for a website to be completed by this company for over a year. When I mentioned the review in our first meeting, the company owner had no idea it existed. Despite this red flag, we did pursue a partnership with the company, and we completed several successful projects together, so obviously you shouldn't believe everything you read on the Internet. But the point is that not everyone looking to do business with you will be willing to make that same leap of faith. Staying on top of what's being said about you on the Internet isn't that difficult, and for every potential negative review you may get (because let's face it, you can't please *everyone*), it's possible to counter those with equally positive information about yourself, your company, or both. But first you have to know what people are saying about you.

[1] page 97
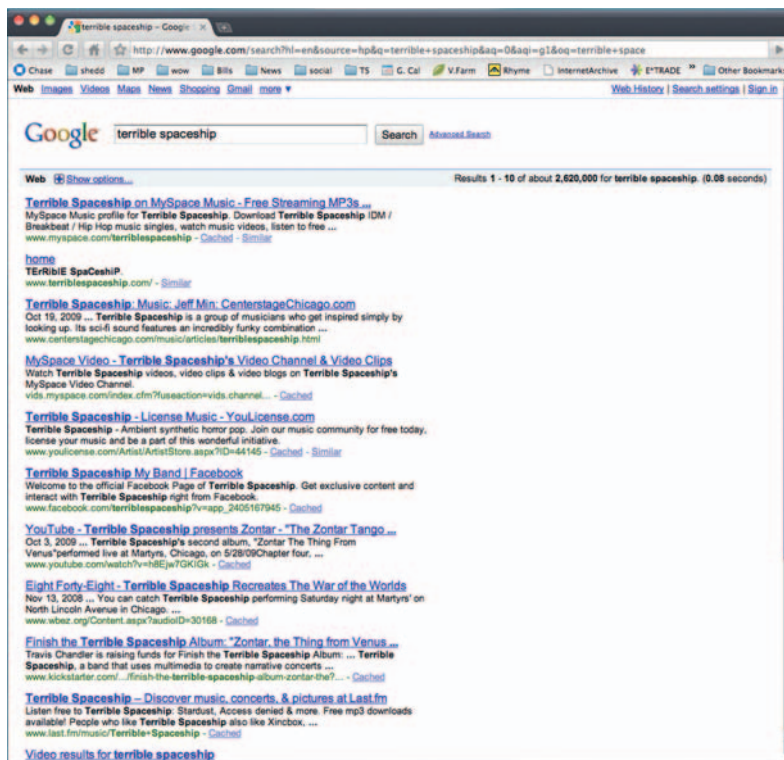
Figure 15.3 The first page of Google results is usually the first place where people find you. This is also often as far as they go.

Sphere of Influence

Mom always used to say, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Unfortunately, that seems to be a hard lesson for many people who use social networking tools to learn. Constructive criticism is one thing, especially if you offer valid ways to improve that which you criticize. Complaining for the sake of complaining, however, doesn't help anyone. Nobody wins. The reality is that there's always going to be someone out there who disagrees with you. Does that give that person free reign to complain about you? Unfortunately, in today's online social culture, it does, which is all the more reason to monitor and track what's being said about you so you can respond quickly and accordingly.

If you put concentrated efforts into maintaining an altruistic yet aggressive approach to your site content and social media endeavors, you will ultimately amass positive social media and search engine results. Tracking those results daily will allow you to interact with them and potentially influence what shows up first when people search on your name.

Figure 15.4 Not all alerts are bad. There are great tools out there for tracking terms and phrases online.

Alerts

There are a number of online tools that allow you to monitor terms, phrases, names, and so on in the online world. The nuances vary from app to app, but the basic premise of tracking information relevant to you is the same. These systems can provide nearly up-to-the-minute tracking capabilities, putting knowledge management at your fingertips, at least when it comes to your online digital footprint.

In addition to monitoring information about yourself or your company, alerts services are also often used to monitor online content relevant to a specific area of expertise. This should be approached carefully, however, because of potential content saturation. If you start tracking the term "politics," for example, you will quickly flood your in-box with all things political. It helps to hone your search terms down to topics most relevant to you, based on qualifiers such as geography, business niche, or a specific product. Also, this is not to be confused with Google Trends, another useful tool that monitors search trends based on topic.

Here's an example of alerts in action: Mightybytes finished a project for global geography specialists Rand McNally, so naturally we posted information about the project to our website upon its completion. Shortly after posting the information—even before we got a chance to alert her to its presence—our client called, asking us to add a few small facts to our copy. She had apparently received an alert within moments of our posting the content to our site. We all should be so tenacious about monitoring what's said about us.
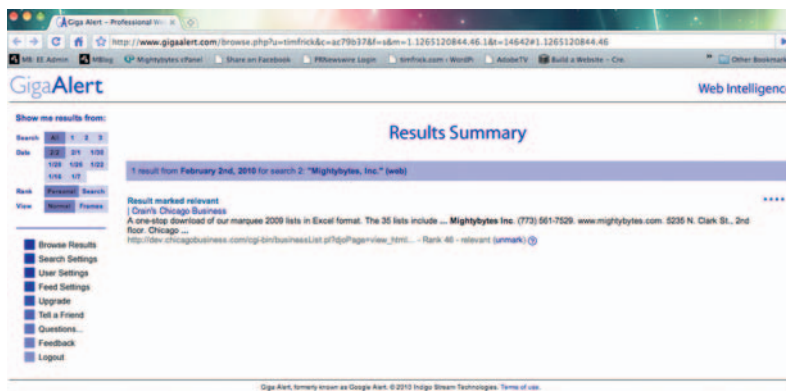
Figure 15.5 Giga Alerts allows you to mark whether something it has found is relevant or irrelevant.

Alerts Tools

There are many tools that offer media monitoring services to help you track relevant phrases, topics, or terms. Although you don't need an account with all of them, it can't hurt to use several, as they often send different results. Most alerts are delivered via email or RSS, but many also offer mobile integration via SMS as well.

- *Giga Alerts* comes in four flavors: personal, premium, professional, and platinum, each of which allows you to track more topics and phrases as you move up the ladder of P's. Over time you can increase the relevancy of the results sent to you by marking them accordingly (www.gigaalert.com).
- *Alerts.com* allows you to track topics of interest to you, including everything from hockey scores to lottery results (www.alerts.com).
- *Google Alerts* are broken down into several categories: news, web, blogs, comprehensive, and groups (http://google.com/alerts).
- *Windows Live Alerts* let you choose from a predetermined list of topics, but it doesn't give you the ability to create custom alerts relevant to a specific topic or keyword (http://alerts.live.com).
- *Yahoo! Alerts* let you search for keywords as well as a number of different topics the service deems relevant, such as missing children, blog feeds, and fantasy sports (http://alerts.yahoo.com).
- *Tweet Alarm* alerts users every time someone tweets about keywords they define. The free service also allows you to ignore tweets from specific users (www.tweetalarm.com).

Other companies offer more specific services as well. For example, CareerBuilder offers a job alerts service and NASDAQ will alert you any time a stock of your choosing goes up or down by a specified number of points.

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it certainly should be enough to get you started monitoring what other people are saying about you or topics that interest you.

Site Analytics

Dozens of site analytics tools are available that offer practical data on how your site performs in terms of traffic, engagement, sales, and in certain social media channels. The data they provide can be interpreted many ways, so it is important to experiment with how you use those data. What, then, do you need to put this data to work and start improving performance?

For starters, revisit some of the questions you asked at the beginning of the book. Does your site successfully convert users into qualified business leads? Does it instantaneously provide them with the information they need? Is your shopping cart easy to use and edit? If you don't know answers to these questions, perhaps adding an analytics package will start you down the path of ensuring the site meets the *right* people's needs. As Bryan and Jeffrey Eisenberg said in their *New York Times* best-selling title *Call to Action*, "Trying to increase sales simply by driving more traffic to a website with a poor customer conversion rate is like trying to keep a leaky bucket full by adding more water instead

Figure 15.6 *Call to Action: Secret Formulas to Improve Online Results.* Bryan & Jeffrey Eisenberg with Lisa T. Davis. Thomas Nelson. http://www.thomasnelson.com/consumer/product_detail.asp?sku=078521965X.

Figure 15.7 Jeffery and Bryan Eisenberg don't want your bucket to leak. Neither should you.

Figure 15.8 You know when you click on stuff? Yeah, they can keep track of that too. It's called a clickstream.

of plugging the holes." What you want is *better* traffic, not necessarily *more* traffic.

Finding better traffic means attracting the right users and then meeting their needs in as simple a manner as possible. An analytics package can help you figure out how best to do that.

Clickstream Data

There are a lot of data associated with your website that can be measured or tracked. Clickstream data include everything from customers requesting information to robots crawling your site indexing content. Basically, any time a person, search engine, or robot accesses something on your site, that interaction goes into the clickstream.

Clickstreams provide a log of what computer users click on while browsing a website or using software. As the user navigates through pages or application functions, each action is logged. Analyzing these data can give site creators or software developers valuable information on how their product actually works and what sort of user experience it provides. Per Wikipedia, "Clickstream analysis is useful for Web activity analysis, software testing, market research, and for analyzing employee productivity."

One of the primary challenges of working with any analytics package is to make sure the data you need to make informed decisions about improving site performance are filtered in a way that is useful to you. For instance, a web log, which typically captures technical information, will track not only user visits but also robot traffic, image requests, page errors, CSS requests, and so on, resulting in an inaccurate overview of actual real human visitors to your site. This may potentially be less useful to you than a careful analysis of actual visitor activity.

Clickstream data can typically be captured through web logs, web beacons, JavaScript tags, and packet sniffing. Web logs capture technical information with little focus on business or marketing data, which makes them helpful for analyzing search engine traffic but perhaps not actual site visitors. Web beacons use transparent 1×1 pixel images to transfer relevant user data back to third-party servers. JavaScript tagging is employed to send important visitor session data to either third-party servers or—in cases where greater control is necessary for privacy, data ownership, and setting cookies—your own server. Many popular analytics packages, such as Lyris and WebTrends, use JavaScript tagging. Packet sniffing uses server hardware or software to capture user information, requests, and so on.

At the end of the day, all these data collection tools live up to their names in that they collect only data, not user perceptions.

Figure 15.9 Sniff My Packet: WebTrends and Lyris both help you analyze traffic patterns using packet-sniffing techniques.

And sometimes the data captured are not 100% accurate for any number of reasons: browser performance, server performance, user behavior, and so on. It is important to remember that privacy should be respected at all costs and that user experience should take precedence over data collection in any case. As we

Beyond the Clickstream

Nuconomy Studio claims to go beyond basic clickstream data and traditional metrics to measure engagement, including rich interactions like Ajax, Flash, and video at the user level. This gives companies the ability to track data based on categories like geography, user registration, and demographic data. Nuconomy also allows customers to define custom data segments based on external sources, such as CRM solutions. Its patented module lets customers "discover which specific pieces of contents, products and media are the most engaging, and easily define, enhance and optimize your site based on this information." For more information, check its website at www.nuconomy.com.

Figure 15.10 Nuconomy Studio claims that its analytics products go well beyond basic clickstream data.

said in Chapter 2, the most important question you can ask in terms of analyzing metrics data for your site is *how well is my site meeting customer needs?*

Google Analytics

Google's very popular set of analytics tools is easy to install and provides a wealth of data about traffic to your site. There are other more robust solutions available, but the ease with which Google's product can be set up and used, coupled with its price point (free!), makes it a viable solution for a wide variety of site needs. Plus, in addition to scores of site performance data, it can help you determine how your site or content performs on mobile devices, set specific tracking goals, via e-mail marketing campaigns, and e-commerce transactions.

Setup and Configuration

As mentioned previously, Google Analytics is a breeze to set up and install. Once you sign up for an account, Google Analytics will provide you with a snippet of JavaScript that needs to be placed before the </body> tag in the footer of all your site pages. If your site uses a CMS, this can typically be done once in the template and will apply to all pages. Otherwise, it will need to be added to every page you want to track individually. After Google Analytics verifies that this step has been taken care of, you are set up and ready to rock.

At first glance, Google Analytics can be rather daunting with all its charts, bar graphs, and data segmentation types. Although we don't have room to cover every feature it offers within the space of this chapter, we will take a look at some of its most often used

Figure 15.11 The price is right. Google Analytics is free and easy to install, making it very popular.

elements, many of which are common to other analytics applications as well.
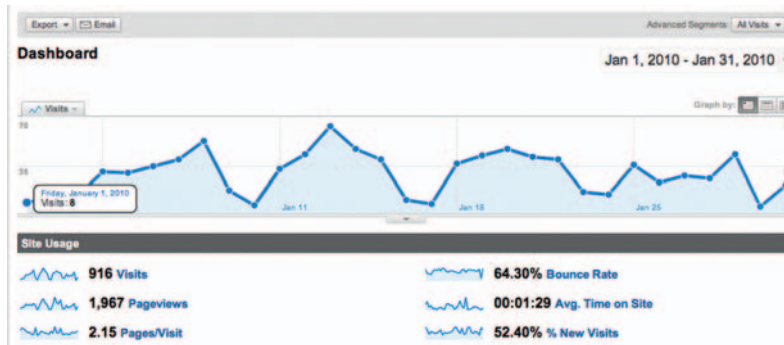
The Dashboard

The Google Analytics dashboard, like a dashboard in most web applications, offers quick access to the software's most common features, such as visits, page views, bounce rates, and so on. A graph at the top of the interface offers a visual reference of site data over time and can be customized to show visits, page views, pages per visit, average time on site, bounce rate, and percentage of new visits. Multiple metrics can also be compared at once via overlays.

Visitors

The Visitors menu has a long list of submenus beneath it with menu options that offer metrics data related, aptly enough, to your site's visitors:

- *Overview.* General information on the site's visitors.
- *Benchmarking.* Compare site data on specific dates for Pageviews, Pages per Visit, Average Time on Site, Bounce Rate, and so on.
- *Map overlay.* Find out where site users are coming from.
- *New versus returning.* Track new visitors versus those who are repeat offenders.
- *Languages.* Compare site visits by language.
- *Visitor trending.* Track visits, absolute unique visitors, Pageviews and averages, amount of time spent on site, and bounce rate.
- *Visitor loyalty.* Track the number of times users visit your site, how recently they did so, and the length and depth of their visits.
- *Browser capabilities.* Break down everything from browsers, operating system, number of screen colors and resolution, which version of Flash visitors have, and whether or not their browser supports Java.
- *Network properties.* Track host names, service providers, connection speeds.
- *Mobile.* Track devices and carriers.

- *User defined.* Track user-defined variables, such as whether or not a visitor is logged in, and so on.
- *Custom variables.* Create reports based on custom variables. Each custom variable is a name-value pair and can be assigned one of three scopes: page, session, or visitor.
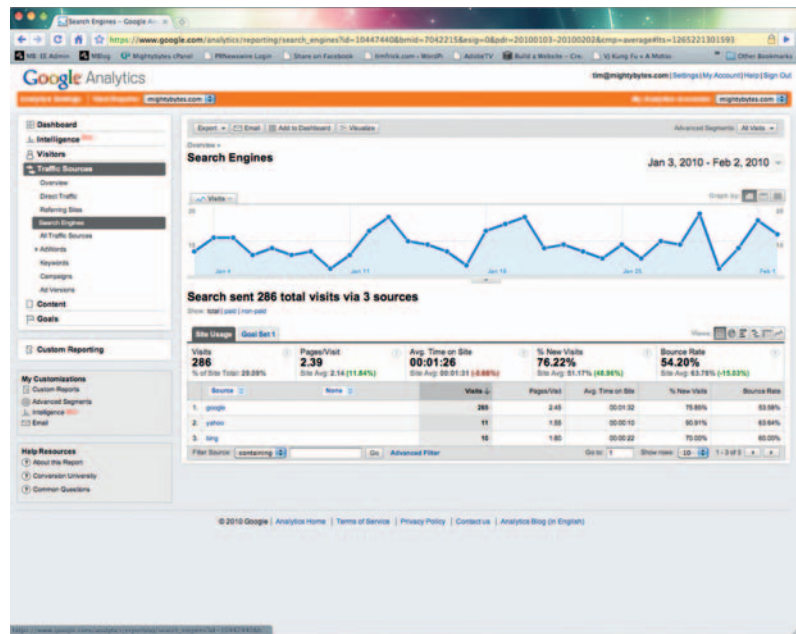
Figure 15.13 Get a report on which search engines sent traffic to your site.

Intelligence

Algorithmic Intelligence

In October 2009, Google added an algorithmic-driven intelligence engine to the Google Analytics product. This feature provides automatic alerts of significant changes in site metrics data patterns and over daily, weekly, and monthly periods. These are configured in the Intelligence tab.
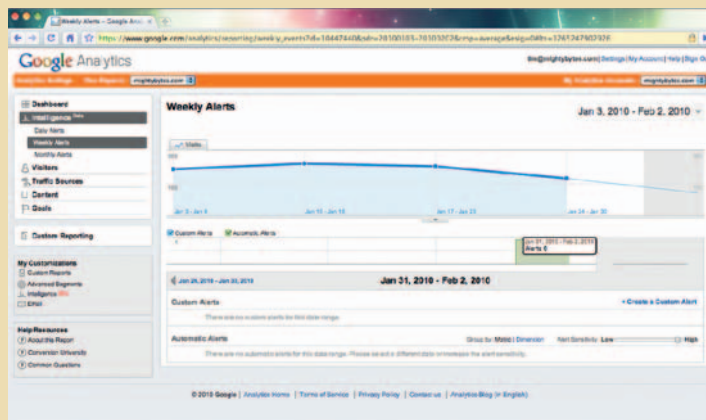
Figure 15.14 The Google Analytics Intelligence screen.
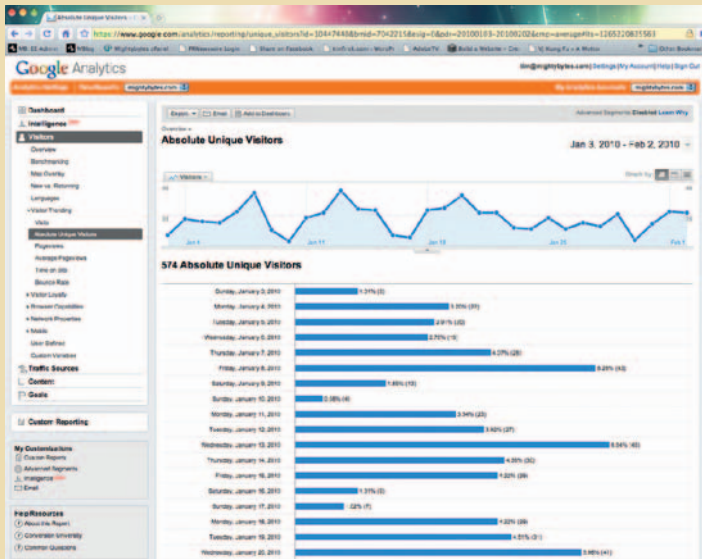
Figure 15.15 Google Analytics Visitors screens.

Traffic Sources

The Traffic Sources tab will tell you all sorts of information about where visitors to your site are coming from, including the following:

- *Overview.* General information on traffic sources.
- *Direct traffic.* Visitors who came directly to your site without a referring link or search engine.

Figure 15.16 Get a summary of how your site content is performing, including a list of the top landing pages.

- *Referring sites.* Sites that referred visitors to your site.
- *Search engines.* Which search engines sent how many visitors to your site?
- *All traffic sources.* A breakdown of each source referring traffic to your site.
- *AdWords.* Get analytics data on Google AdWords campaigns, including keyword positions, TV campaigns, and more.
- *Keywords.* View which keywords sent traffic to your site.
- *Campaigns.* Track ad campaign referrals.
- *Ad versions.* Which versions of what ads sent traffic to your site.

Content

The Content tab breaks down a wealth of information based on how users interact with the content on your site. Submenu options are as follows:

- *Overview.* Shows an overview of site traffic broken down by content, including which content drew the most traffic.
- *Top content.* Breaks pages down in order from most viewed to least viewed and lists the top 10.
- *Content by title.* Breaks down page titles in order from most viewed to least viewed and lists top 10.
- *Content drilldown.* Shows visitor paths through site, including time on pages, whether or not the visitor exited on a specific page, and if the page generated any income.
- *Top landing pages.* Shows top 10 list of pages where visitors entered the site.
- *Top exit pages.* Shows top 10 list of pages where visitors exited the site.
- *Site overlay.* View an overlay of your home page with percentage values for where users clicked.
- *Site search.* If your site has search features, this offers options to track what visitors search for, which results pages they go to, where they began their searches, and so on.
- *Event tracking.* Track specific user actions segmented into categories and organized by labels, values, and counts.

Page View

Page view metrics tend to be given a lot of weight when measuring how a site performs. In reality, Page view simply represents a viewed page. In some cases, such as a "thank you" page that appears after filling out a form or purchasing a product, Page view has the potential to represent a certain level of engagement, but for the most part it simply means a page has been landed upon, nothing more.

Bounce Rate

Your bounce rate measures the number of visitors who land on a page of your site and leave without ever going to another page. The higher this number, the more effort you should consider putting into increasing site engagement. If 75% of your visitors check out a page on your blog and then leave, perhaps you should consider trying a different approach to more effectively engage them.

Analytics Alerts

You can also set up specific daily alerts based on conditional criteria. Alerts can be applied to certain types of visitors, geographic regions, campaigns, keywords, exit paths, or even a specific referral path. Those conditions can then be set to alert you on a second set of conditions, such as a goal conversion rate being reached, revenue streams, percentage of new visits, averages, bounce rates, and more.

Custom Reporting

The software also gives you a robust set of tools for creating custom reports. Users can drag-and-drop criteria on visitors, traffic sources, content, e-commerce (such as product SKUs or categories), and system-level data such as browsers, operating system, Flash and Java support, colors, and so on.

In other words, if I wanted to see how many bounces I got during business hours based on Java support or what version of Flash the user has, I could create that report in just a couple minutes. I could also then export that report to XML, Excel, PDF, or a number of other formats for use elsewhere.

Figure 15.17 Handy drag-and-drop functions let you create custom reports for metrics criteria.

Mobile

Google Analytics also gives you mobile data as well with a variety of metrics, including language, supported number of screen colors, service provider, connection speed, screen resolution,
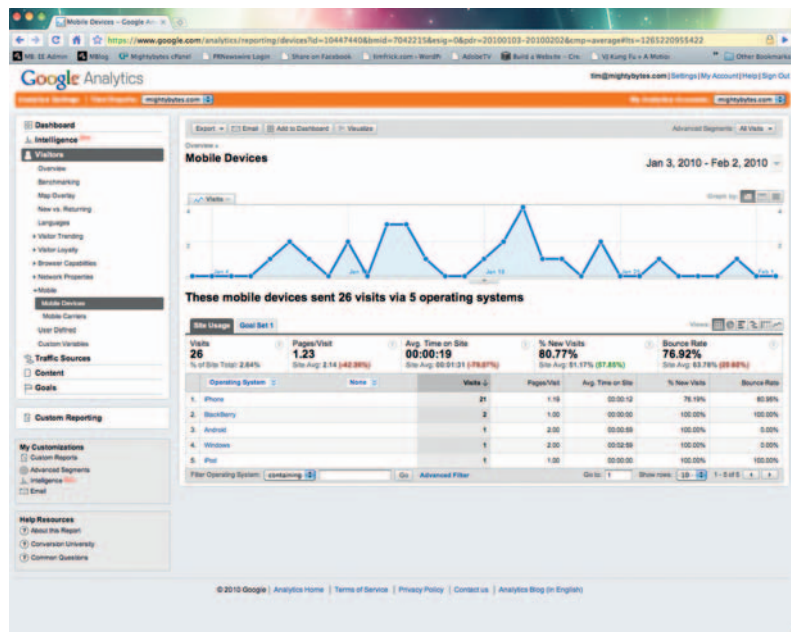
Figure 15.18 You can also track mobile site metrics.

version of Flash, whether or not there is Java support, and several others. These data can be extremely useful if you have created a mobile version of your site that auto-detects mobile devices. They could also be helpful for tracking marketing campaigns and testing games or other rich media content performance on your site.

AdWords Integration

If you are using Google's AdWords product, you can import data from your campaigns. Click Google Analytics in the Reporting tab in AdWords and follow the instructions.

Goals and Funnels

Another important part of using Google Analytics to its fullest potential is setting up goal pages and funnels to track specific user paths through your site. If you are trying to drive visitors to a particular page, like a product purchase or email signup page, for instance, Google Analytics gives you the ability to track this information via goals and funnels. A *goal* is a site page that visitors reach once they have made a purchase or completed another desired action, such as a registration or download. A *funnel* represents the expected path visitors will take in order to reach that goal. Defining these pages allows you to see how frequently visitors abandon goals as well as where they end up going instead and the value of the goal. Each profile can have up to four goals, with a defined funnel for each.
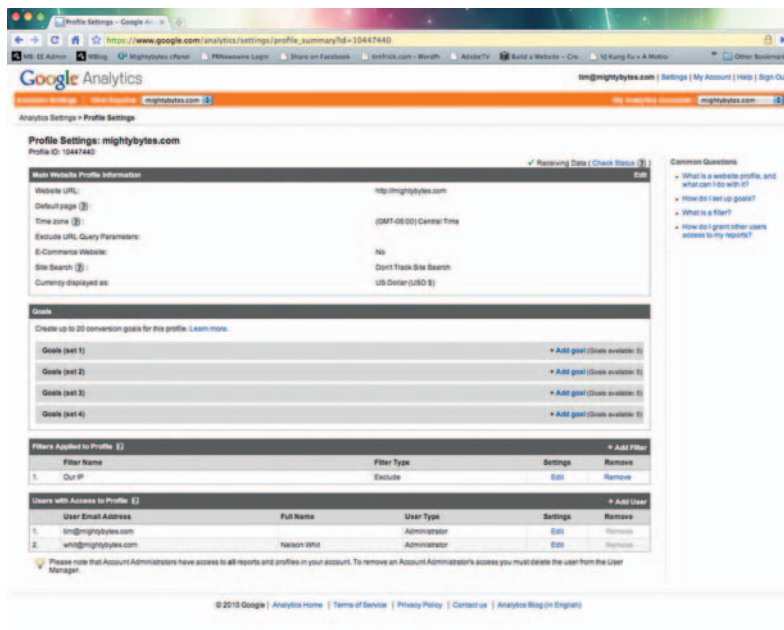
Figure 15.19 Goals and funnels can help you track how site visitors are responding to specific calls to action on your site.

Goals

To create a goal, find the profile for which you will be creating goals in the Analytics Settings, and click Edit:

1. Select one of the four goal slots available for that profile, and click Edit.
2. Enter the Goal URL. Reaching this page marks a successful conversion—for example, a registration confirmation page, a checkout complete page, or a thank you page.
3. Enter the Goal name as it should appear in your Google Analytics account.
4. Turn the goal On or Off. This selection decides whether Google Analytics should track this conversion goal at this time. Generally, you will want to set the Active Goal selection to On.

Funnels

To create a funnel, do the following:

1. Enter the URL of the first page of your conversion funnel. This page should be a page that is common to all users working their way toward your Goal. For example, if you are tracking user flow through your checkout pages, do not include a product page as a step in your funnel.
2. Enter a Name for this step.
3. If this step is a Required step in the conversion process, select the checkbox to the right of the step. If this checkbox is selected, users reaching your goal page without traveling through this funnel page will not be counted as conversions.

4. Continue entering goal steps until your funnel has been completely defined. You may enter up to 10 steps or as few as a single step.

PageRank

Google's PageRank algorithm has historically been used as an important metric to help site owners analyze how their site performs in relation to general traffic patterns indexed by Google. Though its importance has diminished in recent years, it still offers you a good general snapshot of your site's performance.

How It Works

Google's PageRank algorithm (named after Stanford University's Larry Page, who developed it) assigns your site a number from 0 to 10. Your site's assigned number is based on several important criteria, including inbound links to your site, how trustworthy the sites that link to you are deemed by Google, and so on.

When other sites post links to your site they are, in effect, casting a vote for your site. Google tabulates those votes and cross-references them with the other criteria to come up with your rank. In Google's own words:

> PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages important.

Google also says it calculates PageRank by considering "more than 500 million variables and two billion terms" so rather than spending time analyzing math problems, let's talk about what's really important to site owners and digital marketers: what it means for people trying to find your content.

Criteria

A 2009 study[3] by Seattle-based SEOmoz on ranking factors noted that trust or authority of the host domain was the most important element contributing to page rank, but there were others as well. As noted previously, with the dismantling of PageRank, these factors may still figure into search engine performance and are worth examining.

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[3] www.seomoz.org/article/search-ranking-factors

The study listed the top five ranking factors as follows:

1. Keyword-focused anchor text from external links
2. External link popularity (both quantity *and* quality)
3. Diversity of link sources (many unique domains)
4. Keyword use in the title tag
5. Trustworthiness of domain based on link distance from trusted sources.

The study also listed the top five negative ranking factors:

1. Cloaking with malicious or manipulative intent
2. Link acquisition from know link brokers/sellers
3. Links from the page to spam sites/pages
4. Cloaking by user agent
5. Frequent server downtime and site inaccessibility

Finally, the study listed the top five contentious factors as well:

1. Cloaking by cookie detection
2. Cloaking by JavaScript/rich media support detection
3. Hiding text with same/similar colored text/background
4. Cloaking by IP address
5. Cloaking by user agent

Considering the preceding stats, it would make sense that social media could potentially play a role in your site's search engine performance, especially in terms of diversifying link sources, because each social media profile includes a link to your site. That said, there are caveats, not the least of which is that when it comes to site traffic, PageRank is only a small part of the picture in terms of site performance.

The Skinny on PageRank

In October 2009, Google removed PageRank from its Webmaster Tools section, in reference to which Google employee Susan Moskwa noted: "We've been telling people for a long time that they shouldn't focus on PageRank so much; many site owners seem to think it's the most important metric for them to track, which is simply not true."[4]

Google admits that it only updates the PageRank status in its toolbar several times per year and that it is a "respectful hint" that there are "over 200 signals that can affect how your site is crawled, indexed and ranked." That said, keep in mind that things like page content, metadata, and the trust quotient of those linking to you are more relevant than a simple number from 0 to 10. Your site's PageRank should merely be considered a helpful indication of its authority as opposed to the "be-all-end-all" metric to focus on. Consider focusing instead on conversion rates or other metrics provided by analytics tools that will help the relevancy of your site in business terms, each of which is covered in other chapters in this book.

All that aside, social sites—at least those that don't automatically apply a "no-follow" attribute to their links—still provide a great opportunity to drive traffic to your content.

[4] www.sbmteam.com/blog/page-rank

Other Tools

Google Analytics is far from the only player in this market. Compete, Alexia, Woopra, and many other resources offer similar tools that provide important metrics information on your site. Here are some other options:
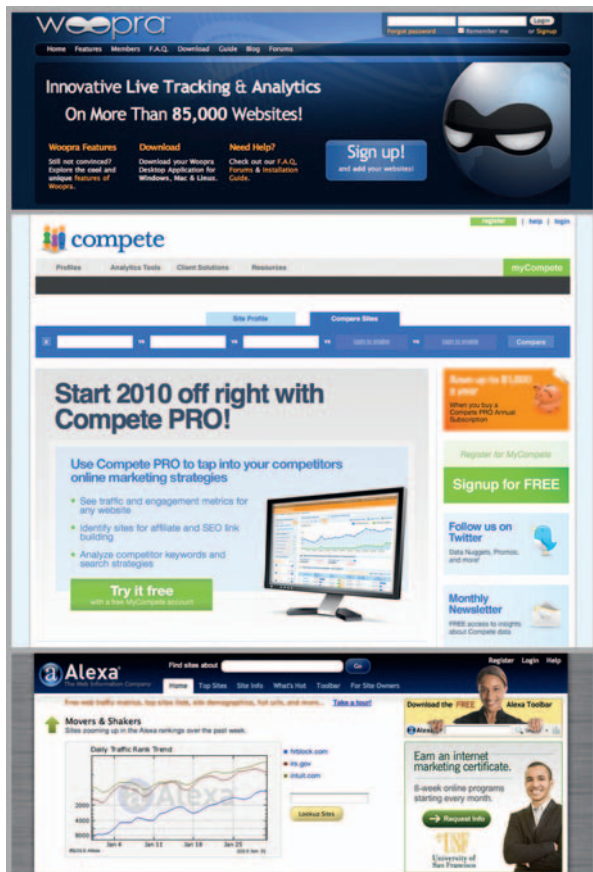
1. *Piwik.* An open-source PHP/MySQL analytics application that has a plug-in architecture for extending capabilities (http://piwik.org).
2. *Grape Web Statistics.* Simple, open-source tool geared toward web developers (www.quate.net/grape).
3. *Snoop.* A desktop-based analytics application (http://report.reinvigorate.net/snoop).
4. *Yahoo! Web Analytics.* Yahoo!'s alternative to Google Analytics (http://web.analytics.yahoo.com).
5. *Clickstream.* A web analytics solution built on a foundation of Active Server Pages (ASP) (www.clickstream.com).
6. *WebTrends.* An enterprise-wide analytics solution meant for large sites (www.webtrends.com).
7. *4Q.* A surveying application focused on improving your traditional numerical web analytics by supplementing it with actual user feedback (http://4q.iperceptions.com/default.aspx?c=en-US).
8. *Mochibot.* Especially designed for Flash content (www.mochibot.com).

A more up-to-date and comprehensive list of analytics tools can be found on the companion site to this book.

Blog Metrics

Many of the aforementioned analytics tools can also be customized to work with blog pages, but with features like comments, trackbacks, and subscriptions, blogs also pose unique challenges. Some of the tools discussed next were developed specifically to track blog performance.

Analytics Apps

Depending on the blog platform you use, most analytics programs can be integrated with your blog just as easily as they can a standard website. Movable Type has a Google Analytics plug-in,
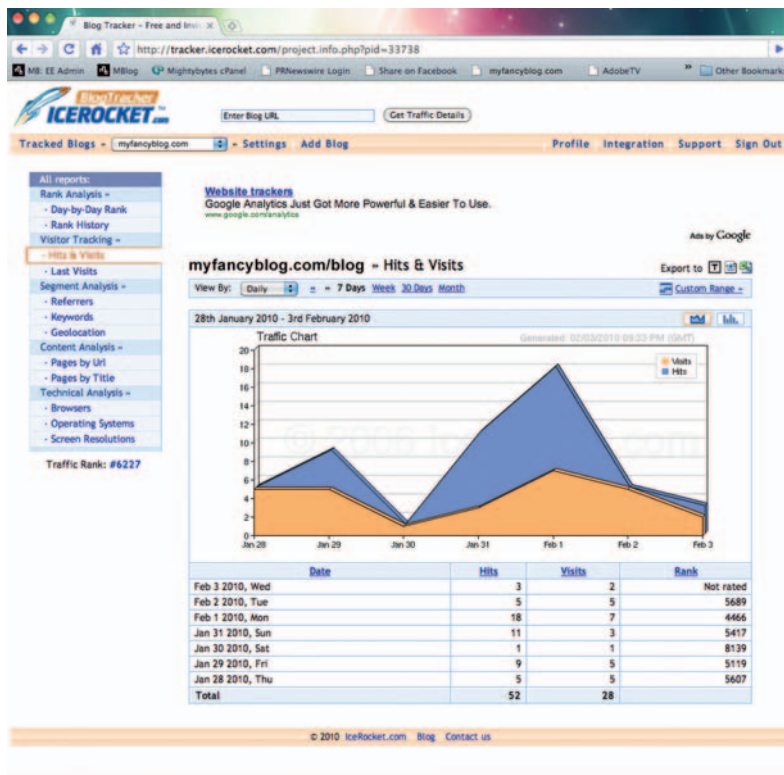
Figure 15.21 IceRocket's Blog Tracker is one of several tools available for tracking your blog's performance.

and as of this writing, a search for WordPress analytics plug-ins returns 152 results on the WordPress site alone, including dozens of Google Analytics plug-ins. Many of these plug-ins will give you access to the same sort of data as the full application does for robust data tracking. Others merely ease the installation process of the external application.

IceRocket and Yahoo!'s MyBlogLog work like typical analytics programs in that you have to paste code into the body of your blog template in order for them to track your blog.

Social Media Measurement

Alerts will tell you what's being said about you on the web. Analytics applications will help you make sense of traffic patterns and levels of engagement on your own site. But what about social media? The jury seems to still be out on the best way to track social media performance. And it's a big jury. Hundreds of companies all seem to have what they call "the best solution" for monitoring your influence across social networking sites and gauging your use of social media.

Social Media Tools

Along with social sites, many of which offer some analytics information as part of your account settings, there are numerous social media metrics tools available to help you find out where you stand in the wide, wide world of social media. Digg.com offers alerts, as does Technorati's Twittorati.com and Socialseek .com. Others include Tweetscan, Viralheat.com, backtweets.com, and more. Here are some others:

- Ken Burbary's *Social Media Monitoring Wiki* offers a wide variety of resources for tracking social media engagement as well. The wiki sorts monitoring tools by company name, platform type, social media types covered, country of origin, whether or not the service is paid or free, and so on (http://wiki.kenburbary.com).

- *Viral Heat* is a low-cost social media monitoring solution that as of this writing tracks more than 200 destinations and includes tools for tracking keywords, names, expressions, or other terms you choose (www.viralheat.com).

- *Xinureturns* provides a great dashboard overview of your website's standing in social media. Run a report and you will receive information on Technorati, Google PageRank, Diggs, and even backlinks to your website (www.xinureturns.com).

- *SocialToo* is a comprehensive tool for creating social surveys and tracking social stats on Facebook or Twitter. It uses
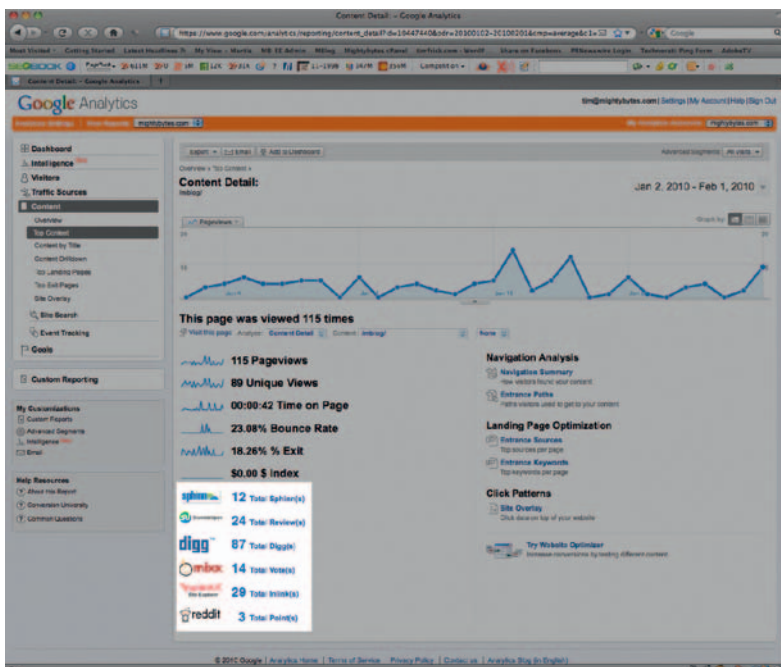
Figure 15.22 The handy Social Media Metrics plug-in helps keep track of Diggs, Stumbles, and more.

your log-in data for either site and will send you daily emails describing follows and unfollows on Twitter (http://socialtoo .com).

- Developer Erik Vold has developed a *Firefox* script that adds social media metrics to Google Analytics. Using this script, you can get specific metrics data for how many times a page on your site has been submitted to Digg, Reddit, Sphinn, and a number of other social sites (http://userscripts.org/scripts/ show/35080).
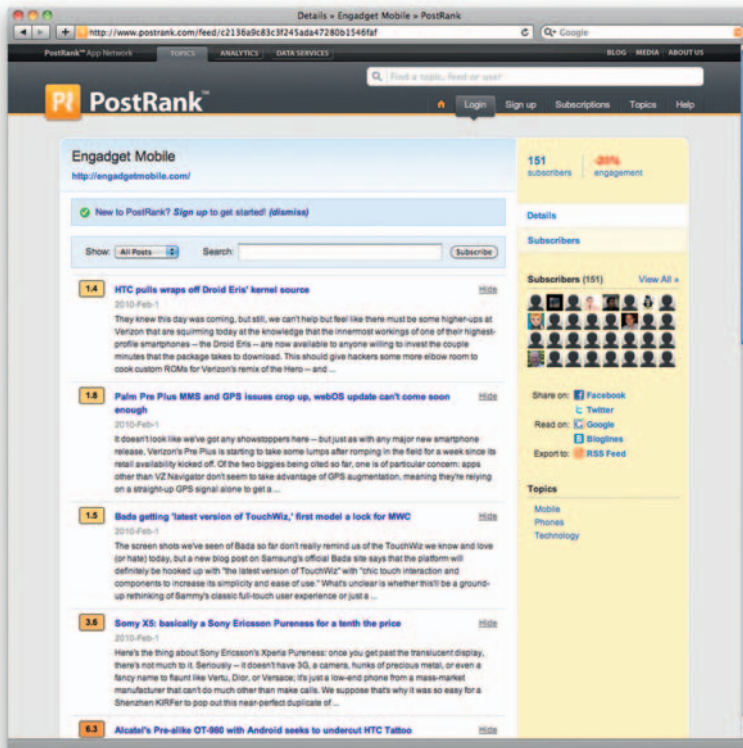
Figure 15.23 PostRank's application plays nicely with others, including Google Analytics.

- Ontario-based *PostRank* monitors and collects social engagement events correlated with online content in real-time across the web. The company offers a series of data services, analytics apps, and data-mining APIs that allow you to discover where audiences are engaging with your content based on a variety of metrics, such as time period, keywords, topics, and level of engagement. Its analytics application can be integrated with Google Analytics and offers real-time conversation monitoring and trend tracking as well (www.postrank.com).

Start Making Sense

So once you have gathered all this information, what do you do with it? It's great that you know how many people have subscribed to your blog or have mentioned you on Twitter, but how do you use this information to affect real changes in how your site performs and how people interact with your social networking content? Well, my friend, the sad reality is that everyone's needs will be different. That may sound like a cop-out, but it's really not. Many of the decisions made around analytics and measurement are at the core of your business and in most cases the best person to answer the questions all these data present is you. Here are some things that will hopefully incite ideas.

Start by experimenting with different content approaches based on the metrics data you receive. Monitor trends regarding how people interact with your content on social sites and how that directly relates to your site traffic through goals and funnels in Google Analytics. Create custom landing pages and drive traffic to those pages through special offers, tweets, or (gasp!) by simply asking friends and connections. Do the pages perform like you expected them to? Did they lead visitors to purchase a product or sign up for an email newsletter? If it doesn't work, make some minor changes to your approach and try again. If that doesn't work, try something completely new.

If possible, aggregate the data collected by these tools in as few places as possible. This will help you stay organized and focused. Plus, it will be easy to generate detailed reports for review if you only have a small handful of tools from which to extract data.

Split Testing

One specific approach to consider is that of split testing for your content. Also referred to as A/B testing or bucket testing, split testing is the practice of using a control sample to test performance on single content variables. This tactic originated in direct mail days and has migrated to the interactive world, where analytics data is used to track the effectiveness of a single site element. The most common use is generating two calls-to-action that direct visitors to a single landing page and tracking which call generates more traffic. The best call-to-action is used, and then the conversion rate of the landing page is tested by creating two versions, each of which is tested for a specific period of time with the same call-to-action. Sometimes this can be as simple as a button saying, "Buy Now!" versus "Download the eBook," but it can generate significant results. The page that performs the most conversions is what eventually prevails. Any number of elements

can be tested with this method, including form effectiveness, copy text, colors, images, and so on.

Again, at the end of the day you're using the tools we have covered in this book to create relationships with people, not data sets, so although goals and funnels will be great to show to the boss, they're still just cold, hard numbers on a web page. Measurement tools can certainly be used to influence your digital marketing decisions, but by all means make sure it's the human element that drives the final decisions.

Conclusion

There are hundreds of tools available to help give you a better idea of how visitors use your site or social media profiles, from whence they came, where they leave, and what the general strengths and weaknesses of your content are. If something isn't working and you can see tangible evidence to that effect in results displayed by your alerts and analytics packages, revise your approach and try something new. If you notice significant increases in sales, traffic patterns, and so on, you can still try experimenting with new approaches. Remember, this is an iterative approach to site content. The data you receive from alerts and analytics packages will help you refine an approach that will work for you.

Volpe is leading successful return on engagement techniques at Hubspot, a company that supplies software solutions for online measurement. He says about the importance of measuring and analytics, "If you are not using your data and analyzing it, you are not going to make any progress or improvement." At Hubspot, he does a monthly review of all data, on and off-domain, blogs, social media, email, and the like. A 50-page report is created and changes are made throughout all online marketing channels in response.

Hubspot offers three free tools from its site for measurement and analysis of data, as well as for-purchase measurement packages in small, medium, and large.

Mike Volpe is vice president of Inbound Marketing for Hubspot and an industry expert and public speaker on digital marketing. You can read his articles and participate in webinars led by Volpe at Hubspot.com and www.mikevolpe.com.

Hubspot's Free Tools

Twitter Grader

This free tool's focus is measurement of the actions in your Twitter community. "What's cool is it grades your Twitter profile against 6 million others. It measures influence and authority of your profile by measuring number of followers, frequency of tweets, the amount you are getting re-tweeted, the amount of your engagement on Twitter," Volpe says.

Facebook Grader

This free Hubspot tool works in much the same way, but it is applicable to Facebook business pages or persona profiles. It too measures the influence and engagement within this particular social media realm, not back to your site, but it does so based on friends or fans, content frequency, amount of activity, and influence.

Figure 15.24 Hubspot's Twitter Grader.

Blog Grader

One of the newer Hubspot free tools, the blog grader measures authority and influence of blog including how often it is mentioned in the blogosphere. Volpe says about Hubspot tools for blog analytics, "What I love is that I can see the amount of visitors, comments and inbound links and measurements for each individual article, not just the blog as a whole."

Hubspot paid measurement services are available in three packages that allow customers to "measure the R in ROI" from on-domain to blog to social media. A summary and highlights of the products overview can be seen at www.hubspot.com/products. Volpe describes the many Hubspot tools, "We can essentially measure traffic, but also leads and sales in social media, and can look at social media channels in aggregate."

Priority, time, and resources for putting measuring and analyzing data into the workflow are important, but they are often left out of busy day-to-day digital marketing efforts. Once you are out there engaging, especially on a scale as big and with as much frequency as Hubspot and Volpe do, how can you make time for metrics? Volpe advises, "Build some sort of cycle into the business to look at metrics and change what you are doing. The ability to improve your business on a regular basis by analyzing metrics is critical to your business."

Volpe offers this best practice advice in regard to measuring data and applying those data. "Take time to look at metrics, at the end of a monthly cycle, for example, and analyze the data. What was good, bad, what should be changed? That influences types of projects slated for next monthly cycle. What is already a fast evolution cycle is going to improve much more rapidly the more you look at your data."

Volpe compares it to studying genetic changes, specifically fruit flies. "They live and die in fast cycles. The same ability to evolve more quickly through lots of generations offers lots of optimization points." He points out that evaluating your marketing data each month gives you a chance to evolve 12 times per year. If you only look at this information deeply each quarter, you are only improving 4 times per year, for example. "Constant optimization gets you the most results," Volpe adds.

The Hubspot blog, a crucial part of content marketing for 3 years now, has adjusted over time based on measuring audience content response. Volpe gives the example that in the past blog posts were about leadership, tips, and advice. Though these performed well, by using measurement and carefully engaging in blog comments and discussions, Hubspot tested the idea of featuring more research-based and data-driven news posts, and content performance improved greatly. This shift in serving up content that audiences are responding to has grown the Hubspot blog. With this much content, there is a lot to watch in the blogosphere. Volpe recommends tools such as Google Alerts for blogs, which he points out has the added benefit, when using it with RSS, of giving some trending data, such as showing the number of stories in the past 30 days. Backtype.com searches only through blog comments in the blogosphere, a great way to watch what customers may be saying and respond. "You can get an email anytime your company name is mentioned," Volpe adds.

Approach to Negative Comments

Engaging customers and potential customers on your blog and social media is key, but what is the best way to engage someone with something negative to say? "You need to remember that you try to approach it by putting yourself in the customer's shoes; acknowledge that their feelings and opinions are valid.

"At the very least, thank the person for the feedback and apologize, even if it is not your fault at all, even if it is way off. Talk about how you are going to fix it. Just jumping in and defending your company is the wrong thing to do," Mike Volpe suggests. Hubspot has tested these techniques, and the results revealed that showing people that you are in the conversation and hearing what they have to say has a better performance outcome than ignoring the comments.

Transparency

On a similar note, Hubspot features a log-in-enabled customer discussion forum on-domain at success.hubspot.com, where customers can discuss with each other and Hubspot can respond and be transparent and honest about it. Hubspot has a traditional "contact us" model with online forms, but the company philosophy is to open a customer-to-customer discussion. As Volpe describes it, "We consider ourselves thought leaders and we have expertise to share, but don't believe we have all the expertise." Hubspot saw that customers would enjoy talking with each other about experiences, tips, and the like and found that the forum is working very well for this. Transparency is kept by not censoring any comments (with the exception of spam or offensive content), and the team at Hubspot responds, advises, solves, and builds on customer relationships in the forum.

Off-site, Volpe and Hubspot are "always running experiments." Looking at social media, he measures what gets re-tweeted the most. Concerning Twitter, he learned that tweets have a short shelf life, so you can tweet frequently to promote lots of different things. Hubspot found that along with tweeting new blog articles, even tweets referring back to older Hubspot blog posts, even some from 3 years earlier that were posted in the pre-tweet era, have a lot relevance and value. This just adds to the constant breadth of valuable content Hubspot has to offer, including more than 800 articles.

In reference to major trend shifts in 2009, Volpe discusses something amplified through social media in the past year. "Everyone has a voice online, so much more of how people find you and make purchasing decisions is based on discussions created in real time." Real-time search results become that much more important. People are using social media as a way to find and choose products and services, based on social community and user-generated content.

Digital Marketing Today

"Startups today have a fantastic opportunity from the ground up to think about marketing in a completely different way and build marketing up from the beginning, the way it should be. Don't put marketing in one silo of the company. Everyone has a responsibility for marketing." Volpe and employees at Hubspot follow this approach successfully, and everyone interacts online, produces content, and is an evangelist of the company. In 2009, 30 Hubspot employees wrote blog articles, and a unique blog just for the company's software developers launched for them to focus on that discussion, to the development community, in its own language.

Marketing Is Not a Megaphone Anymore

Everyone that comes on board for a company not only has a chance to be a company evangelist, but also has an opportunity through all of the content publishing and social media to create a personal brand as well. Volpe notes that his best articles are published on the Hubspot blog, of course, but he has his own site, www.mikevolpe.com, where he publishes digital marketing posts, personal blog posts, and other news.

What do you do if you build up a brand personality and then leave the company?

"When you are employed by company, help that company. The primary job is to help that company's brand. As a side benefit of that, you are going to build your personal brand and your own reputation."

If someone leaves the company, his or her assets stay with the company. Volpe refers to the importance and benefit of not having a marketing silo but rather everyone being on board. "Limiting that risk means, build up lots of these people as opposed to not building them up."

Take-away Tips

Here are a few of the key approaches to successful return on engagement from Mike Volpe and his work with Hubspot:

Be more nimble as a marketer.

Make sure you are a part of the conversation.

It's important that you have an account on all social networks and a blog.

Don't silo your digital marketing with your company. Everyone can be a brand ambassador.

Build marketing the right way. It is so much easier to build it from scratch the right way.

Startups have a huge advantage today.

Everyone should understand the mission and be on board, doing content and marketing.

Every company should have a company blog and social accounts everywhere, because your customers are in those places.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: BOOK OF ODDS

Introduction

Throughout the book, we have discussed digital techniques that range from strategic planning to content creation, from design and video production to code optimization and setting up a blog. In this final chapter, we will discuss bringing these somewhat disparate techniques into a more unified workflow by following a project that successfully integrated most of them with the production process and continues to implement best practices through regular social media engagement, blogging, email marketing, and so on.

Figure 16.1 Kurani Interactive President Dan Kurani.

The Client

Book of Odds, founded by Harvard alumnus Amram Shapiro, is an online publisher of hundreds of thousands of odds statistics. If you want to know the odds of a Powerball entry winning the jackpot, Book of Odds is a great place to go. Book of Odds was exploring the possibility of developing an online user experience to monetize its deep set of data versus going to market with a print version of its publication and using the website as support.

The Project

Book of Odds turned to Kurani Interactive to discuss the potential of bringing its vision of an online odds experience to life. After several meetings, the group determined that it was not only possible to develop a business model that leveraged digital as the focal point but that an engaging experience would likely increase the value and meaning of the data. Thus began the process of creating www.bookofodds.com.

The Team

Kurani Interactive is a New York–based digital agency that creates rich media experiences.

"Our team focuses on creating digital user experiences that engage, impart value, and convert," said President Dan Kurani. "We really enjoy projects that introduce branding and digital product development challenges that open up real problem-solving opportunities. At the end of the day, if we create more end-user value, we've succeeded."

Figure 16.2 The Book of Odds site.

Strategy

The overall business and strategic goal of the site was to introduce a wide variety of audiences to the concept of probability and chance as part of their daily conversations. The idea of calibration through dissemination of everyday life odds—for example, "calibration is a way to understand where you are in the world as relation to others," Dan Kurani, owner of Kurani Interactive, explained. The ability to compile and compare odds on the site is appealing for highly analytical and creative people especially.

From concept to the initial launch, the Book of Odds site was nine months in the making, and the business strategy and site continue to evolve.

> "The original idea for Book of Odds was just that, a book," noted Kurani. "As the design team was thinking about how the look and feel would be created, we always used that as the reference point. Our idea was to imagine it as an extension of an actual book that had its roots in scientific data, clean backgrounds, and simple yet classic typography. We borrowed elements of that approach and matched it with subtle elements of contemporary web design: slight drop shadows and embossing. It would have been easy to create another Web 2.0 look and feel, but we felt that approach wouldn't have given the brand the respect it deserves."

Figure 16.3 Kurani Interactive's logo for Book of Odds.

Design and Branding

Kurani Interactive built the Book of Odds brand around a target that is interested in calibration, statements that are often in a numerator/denominator format, and a community that is fueled by the study of data. The logo mark, with its use of a "You Are Here" map–style red dot, scatter plot inspired dots, and a divisor line, is representative of each of the previously noted concepts.

Targeting

Kurani helped evaluate and refine the target audience to a consistent subculture that exists within many categories—those most interested in calibration, whether it is risk or self-awareness based.

"It is an ongoing process defining target markets. At first, it is based on what you think it is going to be; then the market tells you who they are." Kurani began the process with looking at the Book of Odds categories and looking for what the commonalities across these categories really were as well as gathering feedback during user testing.

This creative approach included drawing all of the content categories as circles on a whiteboard, varying in different positions, and adding another circle that took pieces of those content circles. "Some circles we took big chunks, some took little slices." The common slices began defining the target audience more. These site users are demographically more analytical by nature, interested in statistics, and the Book of Odds calibration experience helps that user in crafting a unique argument or position. This unique type of person is unnamed as of yet; it's a psychographic profile, and the company is now in a stage of surveying the audience to get more data to best answer and offer what that type of site visitor wants.

"We can develop more refined games and content for these users and provide advertisers with tighter demographics," Kurani noted.

Monetization

The Book of Odds is driven by advertising-based revenue, and its focus is on maximizing eyeballs and increased impressions via both on-site and off-site tactics while generating volumes of segmented user data through an engaging user experience. With evolving and increasing traffic flow and a more highly engaged and potentially niche audience, the site stands to benefit more from performance-based advertising revenue.

Figure 16.4 Book of Odds is primarily monetized by advertising.

User Experience

The user experience is aligned with the brand's core values and the intangible benefits of calibration. The "like me" feature and tags profile enhance the data set around a unique record and,

in a way, help users understand where they are in the world. It appeals to an audience made up of people who are not looking to compare themselves to others necessarily but are constantly wondering where they are in the big picture. The site experience compels the user through a process of not only registering for an account, email signup, commerce, and submitting odds statements, but also in picking the "like me" odds that tag the user's profile with rich data on the fly throughout the experience.

"Our client, Book of Odds, was in the brainchild of this. Visual browse is a way to explore things that naturally appeal to you. [The Book of Odds] recommended a visual history of what people are looking at," Dan Kurani said. "You realize how original you are in some aspects, and how alike you are in other ways."

Content

Key to developing interesting features and a successful site is providing engaging and relevant content with personalization and research capabilities for the audience. The Book of Odds content is updated daily via an EZ Publish CMS. Many timely articles and odds data are created to bring traffic to the site. Content is written for humans but is keyword rich to serve as "spider food" for Google bots to crawl. Typical best practices were followed in keyword development, but with an important drive of creating content that is syndication worthy.

Stickiness and Conversion

Giving registered users the ability to customize and create their own Book of Odds was key to creating site stickiness. Other factors included making the product continually better, incorporating more relevant odd statements, being able to find content through search, adding more breadth to the product, including searchable content.

Kurani Interactive employed heat-mapping techniques during production using Crazy Egg software that tracked x/y coordinates of user clicks onscreen while testers interacted with the site. This data proved helpful in identifying potential barriers to conversion during development and ongoing delivery of features where combinations of data across categories give users new perspectives on their odds.

The learning from this effort was applied to key pages, including the home page, looking at conversion. Kurani also used Google Analytics data, but looked at what types of content users

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Unique Features

The site is peppered with other unique custom features as well, including the following:

Visual Search and Browse. A Flash-based app that displays data and makes connections with related odds statements.

My Account. A dashboard with a place to save a personalized Book of Odds and "like me" features (future ability to print an on-demand book of your odds).

Mobile Experience. Core features delivered via a least common denominator mobile version http://m.bookofodds.com.

Widget API. Allows development of applications that leverage Book of Odds' data (roll of dice, baseball hit streaks, etc.).

were viewing. They tracked if people were getting lost, and if so where, and what types of content are more interesting overall. This process built up to informing the design process.

Rich Media

The site features a significant amount of rich media content, particularly Flash. "There are three main uses of Flash on the site," Kurani said. "It is used on the home page in the middle well for promotional space. It is used for the Visual Browse system and for an animated Odds statement visualization."
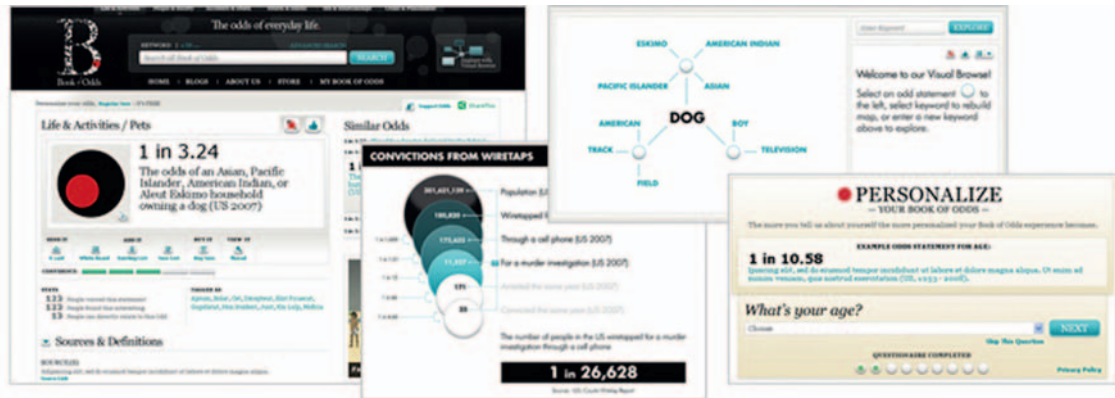
Figure 16.5 The Book of Odds Flash-based promo panel. The home page uses a straightforward multipanel promotional area that operates like a slideshow and is used to promote articles, features, user feedback, and so on.
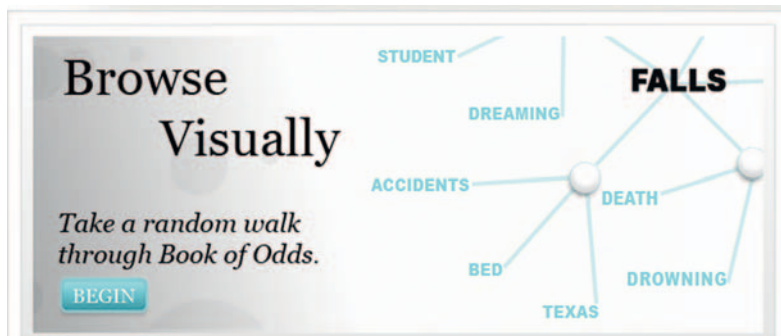
Figure 16.6 The Book of Odds visual browse feature. The visual browse is a bit more complex in that it dynamically generates odds statements and tags using XML that is fed to the Flash-based interface based on what a user searches for.

Figure 16.7 The Book of Odds statement visualization tool.

The odds statement visualization tool presented the greatest challenge in integrating dynamic content. Each odds statement's probability (1 in 2.34, 1 in 235,984, etc.) is mapped to a data visualization element represented by the red circle (1) and black circle (in x). As odds change from a database of more than 300,000 statements, the info graphic adapts dynamically and scales accordingly.

Kurani Interactive deemed using Flash the right choice because it can provide dynamic content and also be integrated into the site's CMS and database via XML.

Video

Video plays a small role on the current site and exists mostly as a support item for editorial content. The current video is material supplied by the client, Book of Odds. The CMS has the ability to embed video directly. Kurani Interactive is currently working with Book of Odds to incorporate video on the home page as an educational tool that will set the context of what the site is all about.

Advertising

Like any new and unknown product, driving traffic to the early stages of the Book of Odds site has primarily been done via public relations. In addition to PR, Book of Odds is using a combination of organic search results for generic terms, like "odds," exchange of house ads, and syndicating content to drive early traffic. Over time, Book of Odds will likely increase the aforementioned efforts while introducing new tactics like pay-per-click (PPC) and leveraging display

exchanges to proactively drive traffic. The process of measuring and learning what best attracts and engages audiences is still an ongoing process as the advertising model evolves.

Advertising On-Domain

On the site, as mentioned earlier, the engaged audience and customer data that allow really targeted advertising offer great potential for more performance-based advertising. Using Doubleclick's ad server, there are direct sales of display ads, network ads, sponsorship packages, and a model where packages of content can be syndicated.

Kurani noted that in its approach to advertising, the company is always cognizant of not taking away user experience as a primary goal.

Information Architecture

Kurani Interactive approached the Book of Odds architecture as it would approach any information architecture project: it started with the very essence of what a site user would be most engaged with and went from there. "A lot of the IA decisions were driven by some of the persona work, based on personas that were developed as archetypes. These user types were created before usability testing specifically to help with the IA process," noted Kurani. From that, they gleaned more on how to categorize and chunk content and how it flowed from there.

Initial thinking focused on primary site elements as outlined by the client. Working with Book of Odds in a collaborative manner on those requirements, the Kurani team honed in on core functionality, grouping similar items and applying best practices in information architecture to present content in an easy-to-understand manner.

Prototyping

Once the IA and wire frames were completed and visual design was approved, Kurani Interactive created seven scenario-based prototypes that were tested in a 16-person, one-on-one usability test spread over the course of 2 weeks. The process was iterative in that the initial prototypes were tested, feedback received, tweaks made, and then everything was retested against the same scorecard. In the second round of testing, the desired results were achieved, and the project moved forward with a larger beta-testing audience.

The IA went through three rounds of revisions and the wire frames (interaction design) went through four rounds of

revisions, so there was evolution of architecture from the beginning. Because so much went into planning process, not much was needed to evolve from concept through initial launch aside from some minor tweaks that were addressed during usability testing.

"As with any site project, there were many design challenges to overcome," Kurani said. "The biggest one was taking an abstract unfamiliar concept and making it fun, educational, and easily comprehensible."

Tag Clouds

An interesting challenge that tag clouds helped solve was that of building a digital product with more than 300,000 odds statements. "We can't show the user 300,000 statements simultaneously, so the way we helped demonstrate the scale of what is in the database was to offer a combination of functionality that when used together would demonstrate the enormity of the data while helping the user find relevant results. That functionality included tag clouds, filtering with total results in search, visual browse, and a number of other tools like related odd statements" explained Kurani.

Content Management System

The site was built with an open source, enterprise-level PHP/MySQL-based content management system called eZ Publish (www.ez.no) and custom workflow for internal editorial approval levels/flow.

Figure 16.8 eZ Publish was Kurani's go-to CMS for the Book of Odds Project.

"eZ Publish has been our go-to CMS for several years," Kurani said. "We've found it be a solid open-source platform with a well-structured and well-maintained code base and an active user community. After evaluating several expensive enterprise-level content management systems for various clients over the years,

we found that we could gain all or nearly all of the same functionality for a fraction of the startup costs using eZ Publish. Since we have experience and confidence in the system, it was a natural jump-off point for Book of Odds."

Further, the company built the site in a clustered/load-balanced environment and tested with Gomez. Kurani chose Gomez because it is a premiere testing company and the credibility to results is so important. "We worked with Gomez to put simultaneous traffic pressure on the site to assess and rectify bottlenecks before it went live," he said. Because the site is so rich in fresh content, the CMS choice was important to daily content calendar planning.

Custom CMS extensions were developed to facilitate "social-networking" type functionality, including the ability to flag odds statements such as "Like Me" and "Interesting," the ability to save articles and odds statements, and the ability to comment on articles and odds statements.

Kurani also integrated with third-party tools such as a customer relationship management (CRM) system (Salesforce.com and Soffront), an email marketing campaign provider (ExactTarget), and Social Networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Custom import scripts were developed to facilitate easy and automated import of odds statements and other supplementary data from exports generated by the back-end semantic data store.

Search and Browse

With a site so plentiful in content, the search and browse abilities are integral to its success. The search engine is based on the bundled eZ Publish search engine, eZ Find, which uses the Apache Solr project as its back-end. With tweaks to the Solr schema to best index and search Book of Odds proprietary content, and a few changes to the eZ Find code, Kurani Interactive implemented a search that is fast and accurate with real-time results boosting on key values and a faceted filtering system for drill-down on Book of Odds' core demographic values. The visual browse function also utilized the search engine on the back-end to build tag lists and randomize content into the Flash-based front-end. A custom search feature uses an optimized algorithm for best results.

The successful approach to search functionality is at the core: get the users the results they are looking for. Kurani Interactive adds rich metadata, writes searchable statements, tweaks algorithms, and allows users to filter it down easily. The filter aspect of the site allows the user to get into it more quickly and drill down, and it shows the user the depth and breadth of what is available by filtering categories and content type.

Blog

Book of Odds features two primary blogs—one from the founder, Amram Shapiro, and a staff blog—which offer a variety of content from various staffers. All blog functionality is a custom

built extension built on top of the core eZ Publish CMS. This allows the system to remain integrated and for content editors to use a single interface for adding all content to the website. The blog includes an RSS feed and click-throughs for RSS feeds are tracked with Google Analytics. Google backlinks are checked often to track feedback in the blogosphere. Standard log-file analyzing is available to provide more detailed data on RSS access. Book of Odds has added several featured guest blogs since launch, including one directly from a member of the USA Olympic Team who blogged during the games.

Alerts/Analytics and Site Performance

Dynamic segmentation is used to distinguish visitors based on content viewed or conversion events such as e-newsletter signup, My Book of Odds registration, RSS subscription, comments, send to a friend, and so on. Google Analytics is used with event tracking.

SEO

The team standardized SEO guidelines for Book of Odds by creating keyword-rich subdirectories and naming conventions, meta content such as page titles, descriptions and keywords that adhere to SEO best practices, and recommendations for keyword/topic placement (e.g., article title, first sentence of the first paragraph, last sentence of the last paragraph, and so on). The site has been crawled repeatedly and receives one third of its traffic from the four major search engines: Google, Yahoo!, Bing, and Ask.com.

Email Marketing

Email is utilized in combination with daily RSS feeds for off-site marketing. ExactTarget is used for weekly e-newsletters with category-specific segmentation and content. Email segmentation, templates, and auto-responders include user preference based with a central user record. Kurani chose ExactTarget for deliverability citing the capability of their delivery experts.

Social Media

Book of Odds' content works great in social media, as it can be customized, is short and sweet, and users like to share and refer

customized content. Key in the off-site strategy is the founders' blog that contains musings from Amram Shapiro.

The Book of Odds site uses social media for return on engagement through key social media outlets: Facebook and Twitter, primarily. On Facebook, it's the fans, comments, likes, and referrals to the Book of Odds site that work well to extend the brand. On Twitter, odds-related tweets are fed into the site, with replies and referrals to the main site. Daily content posts to social media accounts keep users engaged. A ShareThis feature and sharing links on Facebook, StumbledUpon, Digg, and Twitter make user distribution of content easy. A syndication widget allows the Book of Odds team to set up partnerships with a customizable widget that can be embedded via a single line of code.

Mobile

Consideration for mobile devices did play a role in site development, though it was a smaller role than the main site. The Kurani Interactive approach to developing a mobile experience is to make it an extension of how a user would interact with the brand in mobile-specific instances. For example, the mobile version of a restaurant website would put focus on elements that are most important to users in a mobile environment, such as menu, location, and possibly reservations, while giving less important items such as history or owner information a secondary focus. This approach was taken with Book of Odds as well.

The mobile version is stripped down to core functions of searching for and returning odds statements. Mobile devices are automatically directed to a subdomain to ensure optimized performance. The site is designed to be viewable on all devices with Internet browsing capabilities. The decision to support mobile

Figure 16.9 A Kurani team member debugs the mobile version of Book of Odds.

Return on Engagement

Book of Odds noticed a significant return on its efforts in a relatively short period of time:

Within 15 days of launch, the site received press from the *New York Times,* the *Wall Street Journal,* Mashable, NPR, and many other notable outlets.

The first day of launch, Book of Odds was number 12 on Google Trends.

The site boasts an 8%+ conversion rate.

Many of its users enhance their profiles with demographic and psychographic information simply by interacting with the site in a way that increases value for them.

Today, Book of Odds is being compared to Wikipedia, the dictionary, and the like.

A complete case study of the Book of Odds project can be found at http://kurani.com/Work/Book-of-Odds.

Hopefully this step-by-step breakdown of Kurani Interactive's Book of Odds project has been helpful to show the real-world implementation of many techniques outlined herein. For more information, consult the companion site to this book.

was based on the fact that new devices are entering the market on a weekly basis, so to design specifically instead of broadly would be a mistake.

Consider this quote from Mashable: "One thing is certain: in a world where you have some amazing sources of knowledge such as Wikipedia and Wolfram Alpha, the Book of Odds manages to create another great resource, offering you tons of data you won't easily find anywhere else."

Conclusion

Kurani Interactive maintains a long-term commitment to Book of Odds. "As the site's business and audience grow, we will continue to survey and address the needs of visitors while proactively delivering functionality that increases overall engagement with the Book of Odds brand both on and off domain," Kurani said.

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