

Adventures in Modern Marketing

By David Maister

A few months ago, I was having dinner with an acquaintance, a world-famous professor at one of the most eminent business schools, who asked me: “What’s a blog?”

I was, at first, surprised. But then I realized that it was really only nine months or so since *I* had first learned the term. The world is moving fast, and we all have to both learn and teach simultaneously, doing both at an ever-increasing speed!

(My professor friend is now up and blogging, but as a possible service to others, I will include a few definitions in this article to assist those exploring the topics for the first time.

Two features set apart a blog, or web log, from other kinds of websites: ease of publishing and reader interaction. Blog software is designed so that people with no computer experience can easily put their writing online, in their own blog or by adding comments to those of other people.

The conversations that arise can be both lively and informative. If you aren’t familiar with blogs yet, you can start by taking a look at the blog on my website, at www.davidmaister.com/blog.)

This article is about some of the lessons I have learned (or relearned) about marketing in an Internet world, through my own recent marketing activities. I hope others will benefit from my experiences at what (for me, at least) feels like the frontier.

Among the topics I will address are:

- Helping busy people search

- Online tracking systems
- Nurturing the core community
- Helping people help you
- Gathering input
- Becoming a more valuable resource
- Word of mouth
- Website navigation
- Serving multiple constituencies
- Participating in the broader marketplace
- The role of traditional off-line marketing

The Question

Along with every other enterprise, I face the challenge of creating awareness of my activities. I often describe my reputation as being like the measles – spots of great inflammation, surrounded by vast areas of untouched territory.

A large part of trying to build my reputation is thinking through how to bring my *free* materials – articles, podcasts, videos and blog – to the attention of a broader audience who might find them useful.

(Podcasts take their name from a combination of iPod + broadcast. They are audio broadcasts available online. Typically, you can download individual episodes or subscribe to a complete

podcast series with software (such as [iTunes](#)) that will download new episodes for you automatically.

While some podcast fans listen to podcasts on iPods, many people listen to them right on their computers, or burn them to a CD to listen to on a car stereo during their work commute. If you aren't familiar with podcasts, you can listen to an episode right on my podcast page -- davidmaister.com/podcasts/ -- without installing any special software.)

Since I'm not selling these things, and I'm a consultant who gives marketing advice anyway, it should all be obvious and easy, right? Not necessarily.

As my experience in past years with published books proved, you can know a lot about how to get hired as a consultant for many thousands of dollars, and still know absolutely zero about how to get people to part with \$20 for a hardbound book. Even though I've had some big sellers, I still don't know how to market books. I'm not sure anyone does!

Having put a lot of effort into making my resources available online in a variety of formats (so that people would have a choice as to how *they* preferred to access new ideas and information) I still had the task of making busy people (many of whom were not heavy Internet users) aware that all these new resources existed.

So, I wrote about this on my blog, asking: "Many of you 'discovered' my work somehow. The question now is how to make it easier for others to do so. Are there things I can do to encourage people -- and make it easier -- to tell more of their friends about my materials? Advice, please. What's an effective, but classy, way to do this?"

Within a very few days, I had a flood of comments from readers including clients, competitors and professional marketing advisors, all offering insight,

lessons and practical advice. (My original query and all the comments may still be found on my blog.)

Helping Busy People Search

Jeff Merrifield, who works at a global accounting firm, helped me grasp the first key point: "Unfortunately, most people are just too overwhelmed with electronic input and filter out everything that is not urgent or from a trusted source."

This perspective was reaffirmed by someone who identified himself only as 'Peter,' who observed: "Your topical (important and urgent) blog posts are my favorites."

Topical, important and urgent! Of course! Suddenly, the core task of modern marketing became a lot clearer.

We don't best communicate information when *we* want to convey it. Instead, communication is most effective when we ensure that what we have to offer is accessible and useful right at the point when someone in need starts *looking* for it.

We tend to assume that people will search for what we have to offer. They will, but only if we make it really easy for them to find things!

For me, as for organizations of all kinds, the single most important marketing topic that exists is understanding, implementing and taking advantage of new Internet search tools that enable clients, customers and other audience members to seek out our information and materials.

And the topic extends much more deeply than the much-discussed "search engine optimization" which attempts to ensure that people seeking information find our websites.

I learned through STRESSLIMITDESIGN (the company that designs and implements my online presence) that having a well-indexed and navigable search system within a website not only helps people find what they were seeking once they were on a site, but is also one of the essential ingredients in attracting traffic to the site through external search engines.

I discovered that I had work to do here. I have always been averse to ‘pushing’ things on to people, so I had not wanted to try to ‘cross-sell’ my various offerings. However, it was now clear that I had leaned way too far in the opposite direction.

STRESSLIMITDESIGN had argued forcefully that I should invest in a sophisticated “traffic tracking system,” which allowed them to monitor activity on my site in fine, granular detail. I’m glad I approved this investment, because it proved invaluable.

(Website traffic systems can deliver a range of information, including: how many unique visitors your site receives per day, where they come from, and how often they visit; which keywords people use to find your site through search engines; and which external websites refer visitors to your site. By monitoring, for example, which links readers click on, and where they exit the site, we are able to identify the most popular site areas, and the under-used pages that need more support from navigation, indexing, and cross-promotions.)

Among other things, my traffic statistics showed that many people who visited my blog, never ventured to the rest of my site and were unaware that the site also contains, for example, related videos or audio podcasts. The same was true in reverse: my podcast audience was not necessarily aware of my other materials.

I also had not quite appreciated what a high percentage of executives, professionals and other business people are barely active in accessing the web as part of doing business.

Even long-term clients, who had opted in to receive regular email communications from me, had never been to my website (or hadn’t done so in six months or more) and had no idea what I had on offer there.

I realized that if I was to serve my community, I needed to make it easier for people to discover other relevant materials.

When I actually did change my website to allow people to navigate and search by topic, even avid fans told me they discovered things on my website they had never known existed.

In all of this, I had to make sure that my team understood that even though they were working for me, their task was to make things easier for my audience.

Since I was their client they sometimes (especially at the beginning of our relationship) slipped into a thought process of “Let’s make David look good here.” I, too, had to beware of the same trap (“Let me show off a little here.”)

We all had to keep each other honest and remind ourselves (and it took conscious effort and vigilance) that it would only serve the business if it served the audience first!

Next, I had to make it easy for people to subscribe to my various offerings. This wasn’t just about ‘cross-selling.’ It was about trying to remove the frustrations of having to register three times to sign up for my articles, blog or podcasts.

Why not make it easy for people to choose how much of my material they want to receive, and in what format?

Right now, my site presents the following options to readers and listeners:

1. They can come to my site, making use of the resources there, including listening to the podcasts right on my podcast page.
2. They can "save materials for later," by printing out blog posts and articles, or downloading articles or podcast episodes -- so they can use materials later, disconnected from the website.
3. They can sign up to receive articles and blog posts by email, so that information can be delivered to their inbox without returning to the website. They can also sign up to receive email notification of new comments on a blog post discussion that they want to follow.
4. They can subscribe to my blog and podcast RSS feeds so that information can be delivered to their desktop without needing to return to the website.

(RSS feeds allow you to see when sites from all over the internet have added new content, so you can get the latest headlines and articles (or even audio files, photographs or video) in one place, as soon as they are published, without having to remember to visit each site every day. Subscribing to your favorite RSS feeds takes the hassle out of staying up-to-date, and can be a real time-saver and productivity-booster.)

The goal is to make it easier for a broad range of readers to enjoy content in the way that *they* like best, removing

readership obstacles, and thereby reaching a broader audience.

Putting all of the subscription options in one place is important but is quite a complex technical task. As of the time of writing it is still a work in progress, but I began to get my technical team working on it as a high priority.

Nurturing the Community

Many of my correspondents reminded me of the same marketing principles I have long advocated in the "real" world: begin by working on current relationships, avoid the temptation to reach for "quick hits" and implement a strategy of patiently building new relationships and reputation by a focus on helping.

For example, Joseph Thornley (ProPR.ca), a leading PR counselor in Canada and an active blogger, had this to say: "A passionate core community can help you achieve your objective. For example, I recommend your books to others, buy them for my employees and frequently link to your blog."

Charles Tippett went further. He said, "You should ask us (on a regular basis) whom we've shared your work with. You provide a lot of material on your site for free and we, as subscribers, should feel some obligation to give back. We just need to be told what's expected of us. This is a slower growth strategy but, like your books that never hit the best seller list, it might be the better approach in the long term."

Karen Love (pkftexas.com) suggested that some people would consider it a privilege to be a part of an inner circle (she used the term 'Maister Advocates') and that I should think of ways of

formalizing (or at least structuring) membership in my community.

Now, I'm not so foolish as to think that everyone who knows me and my work feels this way, or even perhaps a majority, but it finally sunk in that *some* people feel this way, and that the core of my 'marketing' (or whatever word you want to use) would need to be nurturing this group.

The notion that many people would welcome the feeling of association that comes from being part of a community is not new. Decades ago, American Express ran a hugely successful campaign using the slogan "Membership has its benefits." Many marketing authors have commented on (and suggested that other businesses learn from) the loyalty of Harley-Davidson owners.

However, what was becoming clear to me, was that I did not appreciate enough before, was that it could apply to me. It turned, out, to my wonderment, that there were people out there who *wanted* to help *me*!

The power of community (and the role that blogging could play in creating it) was further noted by Duncan Bucknell (DuncanBucknell.com) who asked: "Isn't it interesting that of all of the interesting, thoughtful (amazingly useful) blogs you have posted, the one which attracted the most comments and dialogue is the one in which you asked for help?"

He's spotted something that I wrote about in my article "Young Professionals: Cultivate the Habits of Friendship." As I reported there, my wife, Kathy, has found that people are often friendlier when you ask them for

help than when you are trying to help them!

Some of my long-standing clients are regular volunteers who read and critique the early drafts of my articles. I always feel like they are doing me a huge favor, but apparently, some of them do not see it as a burden, but as a compliment (or more) that I give them the chance to influence my work.

I am still working on developing additional ways to 'reward' my most loyal readers, blog contributors and subscribers. I do try to thank readers publicly for their comments and trackbacks, but now realize I must go further. I am contemplating such approaches as special advance access to materials, invitations to private meetings and conferences, and honored guest memberships.

While I must be careful to do things in this area with some taste, I must not take for granted those who are (or are willing to be) evangelists for my work. I must figure out some way to recognize their support.

Gordon Gray (gordongray.info) pointed out that, with today's technology tools, it is possible to make it much easier for people to help me (and help their friends) by passing on the word about my work.

It wasn't just a matter of using links and hints like "print this," "email to a friend," "tag in del.icio.us," and so on. I also needed to provide options to provide feedback, to rate my podcasts, and to help evangelize for me.

del.icio.us is a free, web-based system for storing and sharing bookmarks for individual web pages. By saving and 'tagging' links to your favorite websites / articles / podcasts in del.icio.us or other social bookmark systems, you are helping bring that material to the

attention of other people looking for the same kinds of information – a great way to help out your favorite authors and websites.)

Gathering Input

In order to preserve, nurture and build my community, Joe Thornley urged me to “be even more proactive in understanding your community.” He recommended that I conduct regular and systematic surveys of the current subscribers to my articles, blog and podcast series, which, as I have learned, are not always the same people.

Joe suggested that I needed to work to understand better why they subscribed, what they are looking for and how they would like me to evolve and adapt my content and the features of my website.

Once again, this is not new news. The tools for collecting information on those who access and use my material may have been transformed by the development of Internet tools, but it still comes down to the simple statement about clients’ needs that I have fervently preached for years: never speculate when you can ask!

The feedback I had asked for was so helpful, and people were so generous, that I vowed to find more ways to do this.

Becoming More Valuable

Bill Peper suggested that I could serve my community by expanding the materials on my website beyond those I had authored myself. For example, if I really wanted to serve the audience’s interests, I could usefully review other people’s books in related fields and provide guidance and links to other websites and blogs that I thought my audience would like.

What Bill and others were saying was that with a little more thought and effort, I could truly be more useful as a guide through the disorganized mess that is the Internet and the blogosphere.

I have plans under way to implement his advice, but it’s really nothing more than what we all should be doing in the real world.

If you want the world to think you or your organization is a helpful expert in your subject, then you must always try to act as a filter, facilitator and advisor on the best, most relevant and most timely information of value to your audience. In fact, I seem to remember co-authoring a book on this very topic: how to be *The Trusted Advisor* (!).

What the Internet allows us to do, with its links and search capabilities, is to work toward this goal more easily, more thoroughly and at a cheaper cost.

Word of Mouth

Many of my correspondents referred to the first time they had discovered my work. Some had first seen a book, an article, a blog post, an in-house speech or a public seminar. But by far, most people had first encountered me and my work by being told about it by another person. “Word-of-mouth marketing” may be a hot topic right now, but the phenomenon itself is not new.

One marketing director in a UK law firm reported that my materials were already “successfully being passed from one person to another without too much effort on your part, it seems. I don’t think there is a better way than word of mouth and doing all the things you are already doing.”

David Lorenzo (careerintensity.com) offered the similar view that “positive

word of mouth – is the most effective and powerful form of advertising a business or a person will ever have.”

He was careful to stress, however, that word of mouth derives principally from offering a service or product that users can and do feel passionate about and are moved to tell others about because of the value they derive from it. No amount of marketing (ancient or modern) can substitute for the reality of serving one’s audience.

Word-of-Mouth marketing may actually not be a marketing concept at all, but an operational one. Word of mouth occurs when you give your clients, customers or audience such a good experience that they go away and talk about you. The outcome may be a marketing benefit, but the activity is operational – enhance the experience!

What’s the Message?

One of the biggest (and most embarrassing) lessons to come from asking for the feedback was receiving some candid opinions about how I appeared to others.

Lou Brothers (LouBrothers.com) said: “Your marketing message is somewhat lacking. The overall site structure of your website really doesn’t *lead* a reader to any particular theme or message. You cover a lot of ground in your writing, and there are ways to handle that effectively, but unfortunately you don’t do it so well.”

Shaula Evans, a member of my tech team, brought the message home to me, when she said: “Mr. Brothers’ point is valid. The website has been designed to (generously) share a huge amount of free resources with readers. But ultimately, the focus of your website is still about you and your work. We need to make it

about your audience. What does the website do for them?”

(Why does the shoemaker’s child always go unshod? Why did it take the web technical expert to have to instruct the management consultant on these ideas?)

What these comments made me realize was that, even if I wasn’t trying to sell anything, I still lacked a “customer focus.” I write about a variety of topics, but I had not paused to think about the different needs and interests of the different people who encountered my work. As individuals, each of them would probably be interested in parts of what I had to offer. Sad to say, but maybe only I was likely to be interested in all of it.

As a result of all this, we redesigned the search and navigation system around my website (and associated materials) so that a person interested in just one perspective would find it easier to follow that thread and line of enquiry.

We have begun to put ourselves in the shoes of different audience members and ask, “What kinds of needs would they have, and what specific kind of information might they be looking for?”

It all seems so basic in retrospect, but originally I had organized my materials by type of media, as in “Go here for my articles, go here for my videos.” We changed that to “Go here if you’re interested in marketing, go here if you’re interested in managing.”

As the subsequent tracking of the site statistics showed, the resulting topic-driven resource libraries were immediately popular and intensely used.

Getting Out and About

Many of my contributors reaffirmed the advice I had received when I interviewed

Steve Rubel (“Setting Knowledge Free,” 2006). He, and many others, had pointed out that in today’s blogging world, the way you build attention is not just to focus on your own materials (e.g., your own blog) but to seek out other hyperspace conversations that are taking place, and join in those *other* conversations.

One more time, this turns out to be merely a minor translation of a real-world lesson: if you want people to be interested in you, you don’t succeed best by trying to force them to come to you. (“Yoo-hoo! I’m over here!”) Instead, you first go where they are, get to meet them, and join in their conversations.

By making it easier for people to converse across the Internet about your topic, using trackbacks and linking you in, you’ll draw their traffic, in part, when they find you interesting. That’s a sure way to broaden an audience.

(Trackbacks are a courteous practice peculiar to the blog world that makes a conversational link between blogs, similar to comments. When bloggers link to another blog, they can send that blog an alert saying, “Look! I’m talking about your ideas and linking to your site.” The blogger who receives the trackback can publish it on his or her site so readers can follow a conversation as it moves from one blog to another.)

On simple reflection, this is nothing more than the real-world tactic of attending a client’s industry meeting and finding out what they are already talking about. The effectiveness of the tactic hasn’t changed. It’s just that nowadays, attending a client meeting can be as simple as finding other people’s blogs and joining in their conversation, letting people judge your worth and merit by the quality of what you have to say. My tech advisor has been trying to get me to

do more of that from the beginning, and she’s right!

Other Recommendations

My readers made many other intriguing, specific marketing suggestions worth passing on to others.

Duncan Bucknell said (DuncanBucknell.com): “My suggestion is to look for high-quality channels, online and offline, that will distribute your content to the audience you want to reach. You may have to pay for some of this distribution, but I strongly suspect it will be worthwhile.”

There is great wisdom in this. When I have been asked how start-up companies can attract people to their ‘real-world’ seminars, I have always recommended that they find established organizations that hold regular meetings and offer your services. They are usually hungry for speakers, and as long as you don’t engage in a hard-sell, they would be delighted to offer their platform if you can provide value to their audience.

It is clearly cheaper and more effective to use established channels than build from scratch. Using other channels lends the credibility of a third-party endorsement to readers finding your work for the first time. So, as always, I have to apply my own lessons to myself here in hyperspace!

Many people extended this thought and suggested I apply the marketing concept of “co-branding” – joining in with others to help each other and take advantage of each other’s network. This could be as simple as inviting another blogger to “guest” for me when I am away, or teaming up with a client to distribute an article of mine to their audience in such a way that it serves all concerned.

As other people do, I am considering hosting webinars (online seminars) or conducting interviews with other prominent people in my field, so that I can serve my audience by bringing additional insights to them.

Lou Brothers had an intriguing and powerful idea: “By offering PDF downloadable books as well as providing excerpts and related articles on your site you reinforce your ideas. ‘Here’s an article on XYZ – and here’s a 100-page treatment for \$10 on the same topic that brings together several articles with additional commentary and detail – click here to buy it right now.’ By providing context and immediacy you allow your readers who want more information to get it (and to your benefit).”

(PDF stands for “portable document format.” Unlike other file formats, PDF files preserve layout and formatting information so that a document looks exactly the same no matter what computer you view it on, or where you print it. Therefore, it has become a popular format for downloadable books, also called “e-books.” For example, I always make articles like this one available on my website in a downloadable, PDF version.)

Among many other ideas, Bill Peper recommended that I help readers find their way through the plentiful handouts and questionnaires already on my website by highlighting a different form (or video) every week, and providing a “leader’s guide”—an explanation of what purpose it serves and how to use it effectively.

The marketing director of an elite UK law firm stressed the importance of ‘repackaging’ material to serve the needs of different, specific audiences.

To a large extent, this is what I have tried to do with my new resource libraries discussed earlier, as well as

with my podcasts. So far, I have completed two multipart series of 20-minute podcasts (one on marketing, one on managing) and am in the middle of releasing my third series on strategy.

These podcasts are, in the main, derived from chapters of my books and my articles. For me, part of the challenge and the fun of putting my podcast series together has been the chance to reorganize material into what I hope is an internally consistent sequence of thoughts and advice. It’s kind of like creating a record album of “David’s best dance tracks” or “David’s best slow ballads.”

So, in addition to serving those who like to listen rather than read, the new podcast series also create a new way, not previously available, of obtaining all my ideas on a related subject all in one package. My tracking statistics (and feedback devices) are letting me know that the material has found a new, much broader audience.

Going Offline

Many of my readers reminded me that no amount of online marketing can exist in a vacuum. If my goal was, for example, to drive people to visit my website so that they could sample my wares, I had to include in my targeting people who did not regularly use or visit the web, and try and tempt them to do so.

Mark Gould said, “The best way to communicate the message (that your thoughts and materials are available to top executives) is surely to step into their world - the journals that they read and the conferences they attend.”

Jean-Claude Brunner made a similar point: “Your core audience of CEOs or managing partners has, in my opinion,

not really discovered the value of the Internet. (You should) enlist quality print media by writing op-ed columns with a blog byline.”

These remarks reminded me that no one marketing approach ever works in marketing and creating awareness. There are many online and offline actions that must be managed as a portfolio, all working together. I’ve been including in my speeches and consulting for literally decades the metaphor that you build relationships by inviting people to take one small, next step toward you. This can be both effective and tasteful – “If you like what you’ve seen so far, here’s a low-risk next thing you can do.”

Of course, figuring out the sequence of activities can be a little frustrating if one’s thinking is too linear.

When I wrote a book and asked “How to I promote it?” the answer came back, “Build a website.” But then I had to ask, “How do I get people to my website?” They said: “Give lots of speeches.” “But how do I get on the speakers’ circuit?” “Write a book, of course!”

While annoyance at the interconnections is understandable, it has always been the case in creating awareness (as in all relationship building) that impatiently aiming for an immediate home run with only one approach will almost certainly fail. What was, is, and always will be needed will be a well-balanced, interconnected package of activities.

In my 1993 book *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, I offered the view that the best single ‘broadcasting’ tactics included collecting and publishing data of interest to your audience, seminars, speeches and article writing. The relative effectiveness of these broadcasting tactics remains

roughly the same. It’s just that, nowadays, you can and should do BOTH the online and real world versions as part of your mix.

Moving Forward

As will have been seen, many of the sensible, powerful initiatives recommended to me are merely translations of old concepts into a new world: you succeed by patiently building relationships, focusing first on serving the interests and needs of those you hope to attract to you, soliciting feedback from your loyalist customers and acting on it, and keeping the faith that you will attract a response from that subset of the world that likes what you have to offer.

You may not appeal to everybody – not even everybody you would have liked to form a relationship with – but when your community forms, it can be an immensely powerful (and gratifying) outcome. It certainly has been so far in my case.

The good news is that this ‘conversational marketing’ works very well on the web, in the sense that there are many tools to support it. The less great news is that it doesn’t scale up very quickly, and it takes a significant investment of time and energy to nurture those relationships.

None of that is new. What’s newly emerging are the tools to be able to pull it all off! These new tools may appear simple, but making them work effectively has proven to be a matter not only of creativity, but of hard work and finely-judged timing.

The online culture is truly a ‘culture’ and my support team has invested a great deal of research time in understanding the optimum form and appearance of my website, and the right moment to use

various web marketing tools to try and catch the attention of a fast-moving and busy audience.

I am also pleased to report that I am seeing the implementation of these strategies pay off.

Since renewing and committing to my web presence in January 2006, site traffic and downloads have been growing and the results have been quite exciting. For example, by the end of July 2006 (i.e. in six months) visitors will have downloaded a terabyte (1000 gigabytes) of resources from my site.

In plain, non-jargon English, that's the equivalent of 42,000 videos, or 74,898 podcast episodes, or 6,168,094 PDF articles (although, realistically, it's actually a mix of each of those).

I appreciate the contribution of my blog readers and their generous advice to this success.

It's all a work-in-progress, but that's the report so far. I hope you got something out of it! Watch this space!

David Maister is the author of [*Managing the Professional Service Firm*](#) (1993), [*True Professionalism*](#) (1997), [*The Trusted Advisor*](#) (2000) (coauthor), [*Practice What You Preach*](#) (2001) and [*First Among Equals*](#) (2002) (coauthor).

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