

Think Strategy, before Technology



*12 Bad traps to avoid and 12 key strategies to adopt
for the professional web publisher*

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Chapter 1

Are You Going To Jam Or To Direct An Orchestra?

Individuals and organizations rush to the Internet with thousands of new ideas and projects to realize but with little awareness of the key factors that are going to affect the most their final, long-term results.

As soon as they start hearing the "music playing" (they understand and see how easy it is to publish online), they gradually lose perspective on what they want to communicate and for what final purpose. They just want to get "on-stage" and start publishing.

And since they have yet no music score... they start to jam.

Like the music score for an orchestra brings together separate instruments to play as one seamless whole, having a clear communication strategy allows to bring together in a harmonious fashion all the needed tools, skills, tactics and resources needed to achieve a specific communication goal.

In music, individual instruments can all perform great melodies but they are nothing when compared to the results they can achieve when they are integrated into an orchestra. Like magic, the synergy and

interactions among orchestra instruments creates opportunities for sounds, harmonies and musical arrangements otherwise impossible to create for any musical instrument alone.

Professional online publishing is very much like great orchestra music. It is not about being a master at the piano, or a talented violinist. It is about finding the best, most effective road to effectively communicate a certain story or message while making the best possible use of all the instruments available. Not just the ones you happen to have available or know best.

Furthermore it is certainly not the quantity of notes or the number of musical instruments being used that determines a good musical performance, but rather how well the musicians know their part and how well they can play it together.

But when it comes to our online communication efforts we often forget, this simple truth and we add more instruments, more musicians and more notes to play.

We attempt to balance out our limited ability to compose music by adding extra stuff in the hope that the richness, volume and quantity of music generated could help overcome our music scoring inexperience. But as you can imagine, the type of music that is the result of this way of approaching things, often sounds more like noise than real music.

So it is not the adding up of new technology features, nor the increase in the number of articles or videos you publish that can help you or your organization become more effective in communicating, training or marketing online. What makes a difference between any improv web publisher and a successful one, is their vision. The improvised one can only see three steps ahead, while the "pro" knows the whole circuit like his pockets and has a plan about how to distribute its energies during the race.

Just like for other complex sciences, disciplines or arts, effective communication requires more thinking than tools to achieve its best results. And for however obvious this may seem to you, it is what most would-be pro publishers and talented communicators seem to miss.



Chapter 2

The Invisible Problem

Why is it, that the very people who approach online communication, miss to realize the critical importance of having a comprehensive, organic approach to online communication?

Though many have the experience, the know-how and the education to see the writing on the wall, they seem somewhat blinded.

They blame it on Google, on technical issues, on the software they use, on their webmaster, on the time available... they get stuck in their own "reefs", and even in the face of evidence they seem to completely miss the real reasons preventing them from achieving better and more tangible results.

What's their problem?

Most web publishers, once they learn how to publish content online feel so empowered by their newly acquired skills that they lose perspective on how and for what purpose they are doing this.

They lose awareness of how important it is to have a road to follow rather than just driving somewhere. They mix-up their presence on the web, their ability to post, hack, design or sell something online with the

goal itself. They rapidly forget where they are trying to go by missing the opportunity to stop and design a strategy that takes them there.

They rapidly get lost into tech issues, hacks, design and layout problems that they never get to see exactly where they are going and what is happening all around them. In fact they are not going anywhere. They are just moving.

...and after an exciting start... things start not to materialize anymore... traffic doesn't increase... sales go down... Google drops their pages from the top results...

Why?

They focus too much on playing the music, and too little on thinking what kind of music score they really want to perform and why.

They lose themselves into "patching up" an online communication strategy by gradually adding what they discover and learn but failing to ever capture a full picture of the road ahead and the destination they want to reach.

They hijack new media to do for the most part what they were already doing before without realizing that these new online communication channels require a completely new approach and philosophy of use to be put to good use.

Their comfort is that their patched-up communication approach, at least allows them the opportunity to say they are doing something... that they have tried.

But by moving in this rather improvised direction, most end up quite distant from where they thought they were going to get and:

- a) They gradually lose awareness of the extraordinary opportunity that the Internet makes available to them, and gradually take a more conservative position thinking that the Internet is not really all that it promised to be,
- b) They miss the forest for the trees by getting lost in the nitty-gritty of the web publishing workflow rather than in the design of their communication strategy.
- c) They end up somewhere different from where they thought they were going to and someone else gets where they wanted to be, before they do.



Chapter 3

The Twelve Traps

The sad thing is that I have quite a few very dear friends, with great talent, energy and ideas, who are themselves in this very problematic situation, and seem not to be able to get out of it by alone.

Most focus only on one or two aspects of their online communication strategy while overlooking other key critical components.

Some of them know everything about Wordpress, HTML, php, Flash, or have some strong SEO skills. But this means nothing when the factors that determine the success of their online project are generally based on fundamentally faulty assumptions about the audience being served, or on editorial communication mistakes.

One thing is being able to publish content on the web, or having thousands of page views per day, which is what most publishers are after, and one other is to build a passionate community of followers that listens and acts according to your advice.

Seeing that so few people understand this, gets me very frustrated.

I hate to see such great potential being wasted for no reason at all, and while I can't help each one individually, I have decided to at least

contribute the little something I know to help people avoid the typical traps they tend to fall into when approaching their first online communication projects.

By making these traps more visible, I want to help some of these people realize the tremendous potential that is STILL available to them on the Web.

This document wants to provide a very basic first-aid kit to these people, helping them first recognize the popularity and cause of their own frustration and suggesting then specific approaches to approach their communication goals in a more strategic way.

In this chapter, based on my own experience, I have listed the twelve most common traps that both individuals and organizations typically fall into when wanting to realize an online communication project.

1. The Technology Loop



These are the majority of nerds, geeks and technology lovers who fall in love with the new digital publishing tools and who get into an endless loop in trying to setup their ideal system.

Unconsciously, they try to extract communication results and ideas out of their tech mastery, instead of utilizing their technology skills to help them achieve their communication goals.

They love hacking their web publishing system, customizing their site to the last detail, adding new plug-ins and scripts to make sure their sites are as cool as those of the popular geeks they admire.

If the goal is to communicate, persuade, educate or market, knowing which communication approach to take or editorial strategy to follow next is immensely more important than being a topgun PHP coder, CSS designer or HTML expert (as all these technologies will rapidly change).

Technology is only a mean to an end.

2. The Big Fat Lie

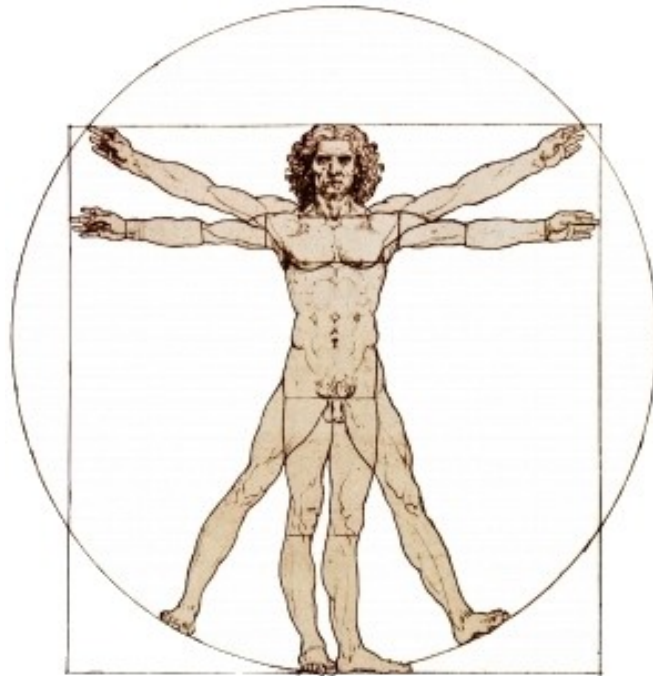


These are the people who fall into the trap of buying into some product, service or tool that tells them "that it is easy" and "that they can do it too".

The product is generally a course or a "system" promising how to become a "successful" web publisher by adopting a number of "secret" techniques and learning how to use a dedicated software. The offer is always too good to be true and the way it is put together makes it very hard for a non-expert prospective buyer to fall into the trap.

The problem with these offers is that they either sell you the whole strategy without ever showing how to implement it or they give you the tools but not a strategy to build a successful project. It's like having all of the fishing gear but not really knowing how to fish.

3. The Leonardo Syndrome



Digital technologies have created a huge illusion. People mistake the ability to "publish" something online with their ability to communicate a message, to increase their credibility and authority and to grow an online community of raving fans.

This is the age of "I click", therefore "I am". Anything has become just a click away. You take out Photoshop, open a nice photo, click here and apply a filter there and you are suddenly a new Leonardo of our times. I am clearly exaggerating, but the idea is essentially this one.

No-one in education today spends serious time explaining people that creating communication artifacts like web pages, images, or videos, does not mean you are communicating effectively anything to anyone.

By having at their disposal incredibly powerful communication technologies people tend to forget how important is the need not to mix up the skill to operate a technology with the ability to really know how to design, communicate or engage.

And so many often get lost into how to use an effect, a technology feature or a new glitzy new font, while forgetting altogether to understand how communication really works.

4. The No Stats, Only Guts



Another group of people and organizations let themselves fall victim of their own supposed expertise, experience or intuition, relying almost exclusively on it, without ever checking in a more analytic way the progress and results of their actions.

These are the ones who feel they have an extra sensitivity that helps them understand what is better to do without ever the need to verify or test it. They just know "by heart".

It could be said that these individuals proceed empirically, looking at superficial results but without ever taking an in-depth analytical and critical look at their available data and statistics.

Their fault is one of not knowing how powerful and illuminating statistical data can be.

They confuse looking at superficial traffic and link data with the notion of monitoring and critically questioning their direction. And they end up mixing up volume for direction, or traffic for real interest.

5. The Caveman Approach



These are the people and organizations who work in isolation. They do not expose their work and ideas to external parties, they do not share, question or analyze critically their own work with others.

Some of these people refrain from openly asking for feedback or criticism on how to improve their own work. For them it's much easier to go on with an established routine than to question whether there are better or more effective ways to achieve ambiguously stated goals. In some cases it is a stubborn attitude, in some other a veiled fear of not being approved or being wrong.

No matter what the cause, keeping the doors closed on exchanging, questioning and reviewing one's own work publicly, with different people, is generally a self-penalizing behaviour. If their work must be enjoyed, understood, used or bought by other people, it is to these very people that they need to repeatedly go to and ask for feedback.

Too often instead the review and feedback doors are open only to the internal team, precluding effectively good criticism and market-driven ideas to ever reach those who need them most.

6. The Do-It-Myself



These people focus too much on themselves and their own ideas and lose touch with what their audiences really want. They start strong and then they gradually lose their steam. They start to blame external dark forces, and while arming themselves to fight back they forget to look at their own mistakes.

Some of them love the idea of doing everything by themselves, from setting up the site, to doing HTML coding and design, adding new features and facilities, to writing and editing content to be published. By doing so, they learn lots of valuable things but in the process they create unusable, clunky and poor-looking web sites because they have spent all of their time placing bricks and cement instead of designing the house they wanted to have.

While it is wise to know as much as possible about how things do actually work, unless one is uniquely gifted with both technical and editorial skills, a professional online publisher should focus on driving its communication project to success and not on being a 360° webmaster, coder, editor and writer at once.

7. The Money Dream



These are the people who have bought into the idea that web traffic and readers can be squeezed, jut like lemons, to extract easy revenues.

They think like an airport owner and not as a restaurant chef or as the maitre of a prestigious hotel.

They see readers as "numbers" while missing completely the idea that each one of them could become a new friend, partner or collaborator.

That's why the "I'm going to monetize" approach falls on itself from the moment they consider it. It falls on itself because this approach is all about them taking advantage of their audience, and their audience returning the favor. It's a vicious negative loop.

Customers and prospective ones are not lemons to be squeezed. They are individuals with which to build long-lasting personal relationships.

8. Excessive Isolation



These are the people who isolate themselves from others and especially from the opportunity to learn from passionate, like-minded people working on projects similar to theirs. These are the people, who for lack of contacts or initiative, fail to join groups of like-minded passionate publishers and online communicators with whom to exchange periodically.

Interacting and exchanging directly with other people ideas and experiences is something that cannot be replaced by however good quality readings and interesting video tutorials.

Like for the caveman trap, those who isolate themselves too much from others doing similar things tend to lose touch with reality and with the new discoveries and realizations that others are making. Working in isolation can be extremely effective to increase concentration but it can be a great impairment when one needs to explore new grounds, test new ideas and get valuable feedback from others: all key ingredients of today emerging communication paradigm.

And as I have discovered on my own, there is a great deal of difference between learning by oneself or learning together with other people deeply interested in learning the same stuff.

9. Traffic Addiction



All of us have made this mistake. The mistake is electing traffic stats as the key success metric for evaluating an online communication project.

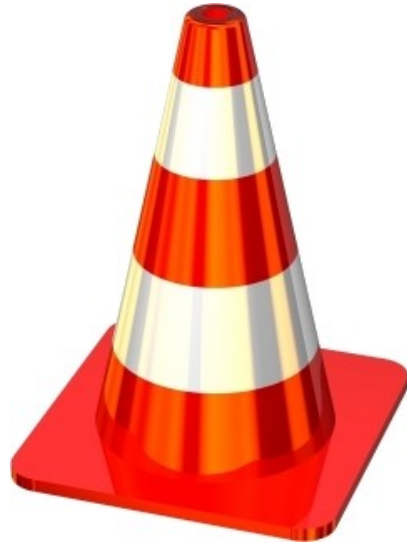
Traffic stats are worth zero. What really counts is how many new contacts and relationships you are building and what you are doing to make sure that these do not dissolve in the arc of a few hours.

Traffic says nothing about the value you are providing to your audience, nor whether your audience likes what you are giving to it.

Getting lost in the game of running after ever increasing traffic stats is a common addiction. Only when you start measuring seriously your progress against your designed goals then you start seeing traffic numbers for what they really are.

By focusing on traffic, page views and not looking at what is needed to gradually build a strong and active community of fans, many publishers lose track of one of their most critical potential asset remaining prey of search engine traffic and other factors outside of their direct control.

10. Chronic Impasse



These are people who stay fixed for too long with an idea or an approach, even when circumstances warrant a change in style or method.

They resist changing, revising or modifying their established approach and prefer to stay put rather than investing time in experimenting and testing new solutions.

Often, these are the same people who have a tendency of not measuring their new attempts, missing therefore the opportunity to act and decide according to logic. Conservative resistance is the name of their game.

11. Broadcast Station



The "broadcasters" are those who, while exposing themselves to the current technologies and trends, keep communicating only as traditional broadcasters did in a rigid, one-way communication style.

They often focus on their own achievements, and spend more time promoting and marketing their own stuff than in contributing and sharing valuable info, news and resources they themselves use to keep themselves updated.

Many a publisher fail to really engage and build an ongoing open dialog with their audiences, limiting their interaction to comment replies and little more.

Look at your brochure. At the newsletter you send out, at your site. What are these? Invitations and open gates for your audience to join and participate or the staples of a distant past where you broadcast and everyone else has to listen?

12. Too Big a Dream



These are people who start with super-ambitious goals that are wonderful to tell others but which are very difficult to realize. These people dream up hard to reach, complex scenarios and spend incredible resources and time in picturing and convincing themselves of how powerful and effective their idea is.

These underestimate many of the requirements and obstacles they need to face to realize their project and realize way too late into building their dream that it is too difficult for them to do so.

Often the super-ambitious ideas rely on many participating partners and networks of people doing a critical part in making their project a reality. But heavy reliance on a large group of people who are not part of a strong, tight and loyal community provides always unhappy surprises.

The super-ambitious get too excited about the opportunity of easily building their own online idea without first asking their audience what they want and then learning humbly the rules of business and communication required to serve them just that.



Chapter 4

The Common Threat

The common denominator of these twelve traps is a lack of "vision". A too narrow-focused approach that way too easily misses the the forest for the trees.

For these people and organizations, it looks like that the key thing is doing something, rather than having a direction and a set of goals to reach.

In all twelve cases, what systematically appears to be missing is a full awareness of the mission being executed, of its specific objectives, and of the steps required to achieve them.

Adopting the latest version of a web publishing platform, installing the latest plugins or simply posting more and more content becomes for these people the name of the game.

The process of communicating online, via email, blog posts, facebook and twitter has replaced, or better yet, overshadowed, the reason and the awareness for doing it.

Too few realize how much more important is to have a strong and active community than having tens of thousands of visitors on their site.

Loyal readers, supporters and fans are a never ending resource of ideas, suggestions and feedback. They also represent the most effective distributed marketing force, a publisher could ever have.

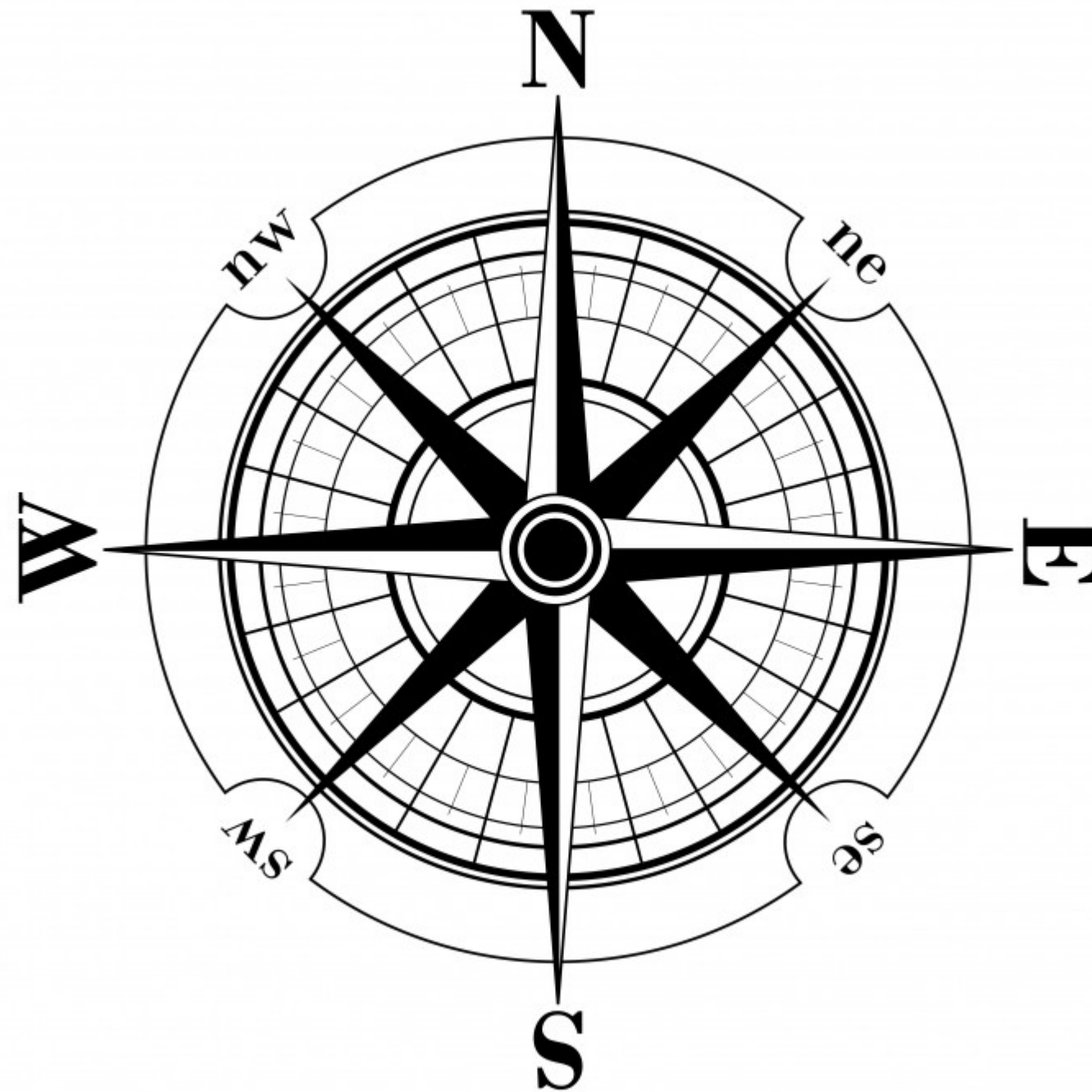
The realization that their key goal should be mastering their ability to transform published content into an effective community-building value-creation effort, turning readers and subscribers into true loyal fans, never strikes most.

For all these people, friends and organizations who have trapped themselves somewhere in one of these holes, I would like to suggest a few simple steps to take, to help them out of their temporary impasse. I think that there is a way out and that it starts from the simple things.

But don't buy my advice at face value: test and verify it.

Chapter 5

HOW TO THINK STRATEGY BEFORE TECHNOLOGY



1. Make It Easy For Anyone To Instantly Understand What You Do



Define your communication project so precisely that it can be explained in one minute to anyone. One minute.

Making your project so clearly defined helps you stay on track while characterizing your offering in a way that allows word-of-mouth to spread rapidly.

If it takes five minutes for you to explain what your magazine, site, product or service are all about, then you can be sure you are going to be in trouble.

Use all strategies and tactics available to convey one, unique, memorable message about who you are and why you are relevant.

2. Make a Plan



Define a plan for your project and set out a strategy to achieve it. Don't improvise. Don't patch up a strategy as you go along. Don't let the river take you where it wants to. If you are serious about getting somewhere, make a plan.

Decide your objectives and goals. Question the why and make it transparent to others.

Define a mission.

Select a destination to reach and draw a route on the map. How are you going to get there?

Don't rush it. Don't let your enthusiasm make you lose perspective. Make a plan.

3. Create Value



When communicating, marketing, doing PR or selling: Give. Give out something truly valuable to your customers before asking anything in return.

Add value and usefulness to what you create or publish.

Do not fake it, do not cut corners, do not compromise on it. Steer clear of quick methods to produce content, products or anything else. Go always for the value.

Ask yourself: Is there a real, unique value you are offering to your audience which they cannot get anywhere else? If the answer is yes, keep going that way.

4. Listen To Your Audience



Build what your customers really desire. Not, what you think they would want.

To find out you need to ask them! Do not interpret, speculate or predict: go out and use the web to find out directly from them. Do not assume that you can guess their needs and invent products that will satisfy what they want. Let them tell you.

Do not build what YOU think may be the next coolest service, product or content site online. Place a specific customer need at the center of your plan and go after it. Build something valuable with the goal of serving a true purpose.

5. Test Your Ideas



Find out how to systematically TEST all of your technical, design, logistical and business solutions using approaches that allow you to learn from reality and not by trusting exclusively your intuition, or someone else expert advice.

Stop building ideas you have conceived entirely in your head hoping that they will work. Stop speculating, guessing or trying to predict the future.

Thanks to the Internet, for the first time in human history, you can test out any idea at next to zero-costs. Tracking and monitoring tools allow for understanding precisely what people prefer when given any option.

Test the hell out of everything you think could work. And then build what DOES work.

6. Measure Progress



The secret to greater insight is to measure as much and as broadly as possible your performance.

From traffic to page views, time on site, revenue and CTR, the more you know about what is happening, then the more you can correct, fix and change your course of action before it is too late.

Measuring allows you to compare past and present performance, to catch trends you wouldn't otherwise see, and to understand what among alternative options may work best.

Get some stats running and start looking at where you can make some serious improvements. The rest is only talk.

7. Stop Thinking Traffic



Traffic is worth zero!

What has great value are the individual relationships you build with your audience: your readers, viewers and potential customers.

Google sends you thousands of people, who for the large part, pick up what they need from your site, and then leave without even knowing where they have been. Most never even return.

If Google ceases to exist, where are you going to be sitting tomorrow?

Traffic-based strategies make your site act like an airport where people pass through to get somewhere else. Your goal should be one of replacing the airport with a party-place, a great restaurant or ballroom where people enjoy themselves, find what they like and want to come back for more.

8. Stop Thinking Ads



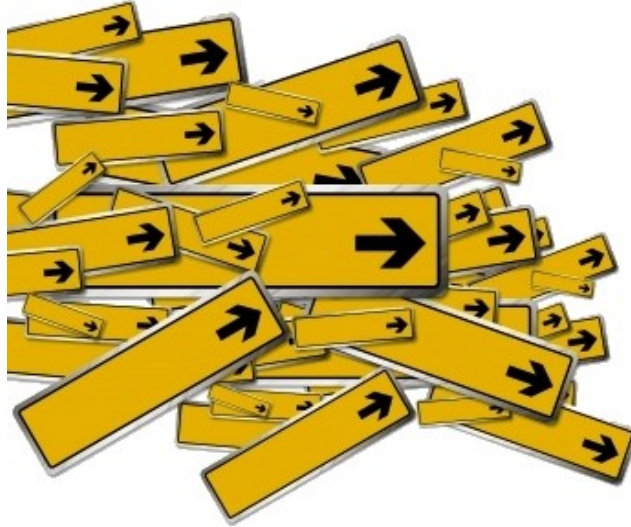
Stop thinking that advertising is the only way to create an online revenue. That's just plain false. Advertising is only but one, of the many online business models available to you.

Display and banner advertising are interruptive and intrusive forms of advertising that audiences have learned to live with. They have never been something audiences wanted.

Ads as we know them are a relic of the past, not a resource for the future. Marketing communications are becoming conversations and, truthfulness, credibility and trust are now more important than glamorous, glitzy, spectacular content.

As a matter of fact there are over 35 different business models that can be used online. Advertising is only one. Stop thinking ads, find and customize your own personal business model.

9. Become a Master At Community-Building



Find out what it takes to grow a strong and active community of followers and fans and go at it.

Beyond web traffic illusory numbers, it is the strength of your audience that is going to make the biggest difference in the future.

Building an active, engaged and passionate community is by far the most important asset any individual or organization can invest its time on.

Making yourself useful to others is a good strategy to help a community form while helping your credibility and trustworthiness grow.

Build a forum or a conversational place where you share and provide advice to those asking. Learn how to be a social nurse. Help others reach their own goals and people will flock to you, while telling others as well.

Community building is the name of the game. Start now or you are going to be late.

10. Start Collaborating



Share, discuss, ask, brainstorm, listen. Get early and frequent feedback from others as you progress on new grounds. Work openly, expose your early results, ask for criticism and feedback.

Avoid trying to do everything by yourself while in a secret cave.

How much of your work is done in isolation rather than in collaboration with others? Getting your ideas, doubts and fears into an open circulation loop with your team-mates is the very best way to find always new solutions and ideas to any one problem you may run into.

Learn how to work with a virtual team. Check out what bioteaming is all about and integrate it in your way of working. Grow a network of partners and collaborators that converges and naturally synergizes around your objectives.

11. Decide With Your Own Head



Think with your own head. Verify and question your assumptions, ideas and planned next steps. Do not take anything for granted simply because someone popular says it is so.

Stop buying into someone else ideas and ready-made solutions. Nobody has a clue on how you can be successful at what you are working on, but you.

Believing that there are "successful" strategies and techniques that wherever applied guarantee positive results is a marketing illusion.

Analyze, compare, test, evaluate, ask your trusted friends, check what others are saying... then decide... with your own head.

12. Invest In Learning



The future is all about change and the way to remain competent, informed and capable of making the right decisions is a lifelong learning attitude.

Asking questions, remaining curious and open-minded are key requirements for those who want to keep on understanding how to communicate effectively with other people and seeking like-minded people who have strong affinity with your interests and who are eager to provide valuable feedback, alternative viewpoints, criticism is of the essence.

Learning is an act of collaborative exploration and without good friends it is a much harder path. Collaborative learning with others can not be replaced by any amount of reading and private study. In my experience, when learning with other passionate explorers one can understand and master new skills at ten times the speed of a book learner.

Nurturing a high-quality learning network composed of passionate individuals, inspiring models and skilled guides could be one of the best and most useful investment one could make today.

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