Chapter 15: Promoting Your Work

> In a nutshell, the hard part of building most things isn't actually building the thing that you're trying to build, it's getting people to use it, getting people to care, getting people to come to your website when they have literally a hundred billion other websites that they could choose from at any moment in time. Why are they going to come to yours? — *Courtland Allen*

Writing good content is critical to getting people to read your work. However, no one will read it if they cannot find it. Your publisher should be putting in just as much effort to promote your work as their other content, but nothing makes an editor happier than if you, independently, can make a hit post and direct thousands of interested readers to their site. If you are self-publishing, whether for free on a blog or as an information product, how you promote your work will be a primary factor in its success.

> I'll admit that when I was a younger engineer, I was also heavily skeptical of the value of marketing, PR, and sales. I think it is a bug in the engineering community that we're so institutionally skeptical of all of these things. We build things that make the world a better place. Given that we build things that make the world a better place, it's our professional responsibility as engineers to actually get them adopted or we are not maximizing for the aggregate impact of the things that we have built. — *Patrick McKenzie*

Posting on major platforms, distributing via email newsletters, and speaking at conferences and meetups are all active methods of promoting your content. You can also use an array of search engine optimization tactics to gather organic hits. You do not have

to promote everything on every channel; experiment until you find reliable success and stick with that approach. Regardless of how you promote your work, use metrics to analyze the effectiveness of the approach.

15.1 Platforms

Your publisher (or your own website) hosts your content, but you still need third-party platforms to give it reach and discoverability beyond your original audience. Regardless of the platform, it is important to develop an understanding of what its users want and tailor your submissions to each community rather than treating each one like a uniform RSS feed. Diving into any large online community can be overwhelming.

> Now, in 2020, I think we're seeing the impact of every human being being online and every human being sharing their opinions about stuff—it can be quite terrifying in aggregate. First of all you're overpowered. If a thousand people tell you what they think, there's just no sane way to process that information. No human being, in the history of human beings, has really talked to a thousand people in one day in a meaningful way. I mean that was essentially impossible, even if you wanted to, but now it's the norm. —*Jeff Atwood*

When promoting your work, act like it is the early 2000s and *surf* the web; stay on top of the wave of views. You will have to try a lot of things knowing that not all of them will work out, and failures can feel very public. Success can be even scarier when your work is being viewed by thousands of people in short order. Either way, it is part of the process of maximizing your work's impact.

15.1.1 Hacker News

Hacker News is the number one source of high quality traffic of software developers and related professionals available on the internet today. It is the sort of place where, if Stripe posts a product announcement that makes it to the front page, one of the founders will respond to comments from their longstanding personal accounts. Getting to the top of Hacker News is worth, depending on the headline, 5,000 and up (and I mean way up) page views from interested professionals. Even bottom-of-the-front-page posts (hit top 25 but not top 5) get one or two thousand views. Patrick McKenzie, writing from the handle patio11, has been a Hacker News user since its early days and remains near the top of its all-time leaderboard.

> At one point I was the number two user on Hacker News. I might have slipped down to number three.... I think that people underrate Hacker News massively. I think there is a meme in the community that Hacker News threads are populated by toxic commenters and that it is a ceaselessly negative place such that the world would be better without Hacker News in it. I think unequivocally Hacker News is an extraordinary venue for value creation throughout the world, largely by bringing together technologists who would not have otherwise met each other. There are people who make lifelong relationships from that site. I met my former co-founders there; Thomas Ptacek is one of my best friends for life; and it feels extremely unlikely that I would have my current job but for Hacker News. I think you could say that for many people who are nowhere close to being quote-unquote on the leaderboard.

Hacker News helps disseminate ideas, like my ideas on sales and engineering career optimization and the body of practice that is dealing with venture funding, both from the startup side of the fence and from the investor side of the fence. These things would be difficult to get access to unless you had a high-quality social network that already had an expert about them in it. It is basically one step short of miraculous that you could find George Grellas, who is an expert Silicon Valley lawyer practicing for thirty years, and have George Grellas patiently walk you through the impacts of the changes in the independent contractor classification in the wake of Microsoft abuses in the 1990s. By the way, George Grellas was a practicing lawyer for Microsoft. That I could read that as a person who was newly an independent contractor working in central Japan in the late 2000s/early 2010s is one step short of miraculous.

I'll acknowledge that there are certain threads that are generally low quality, mostly things that are removed from the core interests of the technology industry. It's not a particularly great watering hole to talk about politics, for example. But, for the things it does well, Hacker News does them better than plausibly any place in the world.... I wish more people who could get value out of Hacker News were active there. — *Patrick McKenzie*

The Hacker News moderators recognize the value of this resource. Do not be fooled by the simple interface; the platform runs sophisticated and secretive anti-spam technology to protect against spurious submissions and vote rigging. I would recommend browsing the site for a few days and participating in a few

comments sections before posting your own content to get a sense of the community and what practices are acceptable.

Articles and tutorials are best submitted as general link submissions, but if you have created a product or something more substantial that people can interact with, use the "Show HN" tag to be listed on a secondary page with much less competition. Show HN submissions can still make it onto the main page with sufficient upvotes. Regardless of how you submit your work, leave a comment on your own post that provides additional context that might be of specific interest to the Hacker News audience. Do not summarize or rephrase the post. Instead, focus on providing additional value and kickstarting a discussion, as discussion is very useful for helping your post survive the transfer from the "New" tab to the main ranking.

The Hacker News audience can be famously critical of most work. Do not let pointed comments get to you; the majority of comments on an honest submission should be constructive. Engage in good faith with people offering genuine feedback and ignore other comment threads.

15.1.2 Reddit

Reddit is a content aggregation and commenting platform divided into countless subreddits, or communities dedicated to specific topics. These subreddits vary from a few hundred to several million subscribers, though the larger technical subreddits generally operate in the hundreds of thousands range. The most important factor for finding success with a Reddit post is only putting it in the one or two most relevant active communities, even if they are not the largest. It is better to get moderate sustained, interested traffic than a brief spike of disinterested browsers.

Across the entire site, Reddit has significantly more users than Hacker News. However, Reddit traffic tends to be more casual in nature. Furthermore, Reddit as a community tends to look down on people who only promote their own content on the site. If you are going to post your articles, you should probably also make an effort to join the discussion on other articles of interest on the forum. Many subreddits explicitly ban self-promotion of any kind, so be sure to check each subreddit's rules before posting to it.

15.1.3 LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a professional platform for maintaining a network designed to represent users' real-world connections and help them to develop new contacts. It is also a popular platform for promoting content, but in my experience skews more toward business and introductory technical articles. Your feed will depend substantially on your network. I know many of my connections and followers on LinkedIn, and I have a correspondingly high engagement rate on my content; it is not only interesting to my connections on its own merits, but also because I wrote it. I check LinkedIn regularly to see what my connections are posting because I find interest there for the same reasons.

LinkedIn distinguishes between connections and followers. When you connect with someone, you automatically also follow each other, meaning you will see each other's posts on your feed. However, you can follow or be followed by someone without connecting with them, and you can unfollow people you are connected to without losing that connection. Depending on the size of your network and the degree of connection between you and someone seeing your post, LinkedIn might present that reader with either the option to ask for a connection or a button to follow your

account. Thus, I have had to rely mostly on connections to build up a modest readership of a few hundred people on LinkedIn.

15.1.4 Twitter

Twitter is a very popular platform among developers for promoting products, open-source projects, and technical content. I have not personally had much success with wide reach or engagement on Twitter, though admittedly I have not yet invested substantial effort in creating an audience on the platform. Fortunately for us, Daniel Vassallo has made that investment, increasing his audience from 150 to 24,000 followers in 14 months.

> The value of Twitter is mostly to share a journey as it is happening. I think it's a very different type of storytelling than when you're writing a blog post, which tends to be a retrospective. The typical blog post is "This Year in Review;" we tend to fall into lots of hindsight bias. I think the magic of Twitter, what makes it work, is that for both the writer and the consumer you are sharing as it happens. This is a habit I formed: pretty much every day close to the end of the day is my Twitter time. I try to reflect on what's happened that day and think of things that my audience might find interesting, and I share them. I think they like following something as it is happening if it has some interesting aspects to it.
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> Some tweets go a bit viral, and they end up bringing with them new followers, which causes spikes. I don't intentionally try for viral tweets—mostly I'm just sharing without expectations. I'm trying to imagine what my audience would find interesting....My strategy has been mostly just to keep it simple—not to over-optimize it, just to share. — *Daniel Vassallo*

15.1.5 Niche Platforms

There is a long tail of aggregators, chatrooms, Facebook groups, and forums in niche interests that can bring modest but highly engaged traffic. Like dealing with subreddits, it is important to develop an understanding of which platforms and communities will find your work interesting. With niche communities, having a good understanding of how the platform operates and community rules is essential to making a post that attracts audience interest rather than administrator action. Go narrow. Go deep. People who care about your domain will find your work.

> [Curators] I work with and I are familiar with the top blogs and the better sources of news for certain areas, and we go to those and we keep an eye on them. It's as simple as that. It's like you with Django for example. You're probably going to know what the most interesting Django sites are and who the people are in the scene. You keep on top of that—it's easy peasy. The next level is social bookmarking and social sites. There are people on Twitter who always like the right stuff or retweet the right stuff or sites like Hacker News or Reddit—there're lots of similar kinds of places, including tech sites like lobste.rs for example.... We're not just looking at stories but also going into the comments because a lot of stuff gets surfaced there that people don't notice if you just stick to the front page of things. There's a lot of reading to do, but that's another way of finding content. — *Peter Cooper*

15.2 Email Lists

> I ran a Ruby blog called Ruby Inside that became really popular in the mid-2000s and so I had many contacts. I saw what was going on in the industry with email,

> especially with things like Groupon. Everyone was just getting interested in email as a way of delivering notifications, and I thought, "What if I could do my Ruby news, but do it via email? Someone else is going to do this, so let's do it first." — *Peter Cooper*

A few years ago, I would have opened this section with "you may be surprised, but..." Now, it is widely known that email newsletters offer some of the highest rates of engagement of any form of promotion. When people sign up for your email list, they are doing so with the expectation that you will provide valuable content for free with the occasional sales pitch mixed in. Unlike a platform on social media, you own your distribution with your email list. You will not lose readers due to a change in someone else's algorithm.

> With email, for me, it's the engagement that really sells me on it. That's what got me initially with it: I could send an email to 1,000 people and then I could see that 500 of them clicked on a site that we link to or that we write.... Email commands higher CPMs and because you get that engagement, it's as simple as that. — *Peter Cooper*

15.3 In Person

As I am writing this, every in-person conference, user group, and meetup that I know of has been cancelled or delayed until further notice due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the interest of writing something that will still be useful in a few years, I will not focus on the present or try to predict the future. Instead, consider this section as an explanation of how this kind of promotion worked through February 2020, and then apply its lessons to

whatever version of the world you find yourself living in when you read it.

The basics of conferences and meetups are similar and vary mostly in scale. A bunch of people, 10 to 10,000, get together in an appropriately sized room. Some of these people are designated as speakers and give prepared talks at specified times. As a conference attendee, you have the opportunity to talk to people in your industry who you might not otherwise get the chance to meet, but this benefit multiples substantially if you have convinced the conference organizers to invite you to be one of the speakers and have put in the effort to create a useful talk.

> Conference speaking was probably one of the best things I did for promoting my books. It was good because I was able to continue to work on my voice. I was able to travel, which was really awesome, by speaking at these conferences. I was able to test out my material. Some material that is in the books was actually tested as conference talks first. I gave a talk at about ten or so conferences before I actually started writing the book.

> Getting on stage was really terrifying for me because I actually suffer from no small amount of social anxiety, something that is significantly better now that I'm used to speaking on stage. The initial few times I spoke on stage were absolutely terrifying and very much out of my comfort zone. It was such a great way to share the stuff that I'd done, to bring the books to conferences, to talk to people in person, and to test material that I'm glad that I pushed through my fear to become a conference speaker. — *Tracy Osborn*

Going out in person and engaging with the community will help you increase your profile and find out what people actually want to learn about, improving your work and your ability to sell it.

15.4 Metrics

Without accurate measurement on meaningful figures, there is no way for you to know if your promotional efforts are working. If you are writing for a publisher, they will have their own metrics and may or may not share how well your article performed. If you are the publisher, setting up analytics on your site is an essential step.

Before setting anything up, consider what you want to measure. This will mostly depend on your monetization model. Everyone needs to measure the essentials like page views, time on page, and traffic origin. Advertising-based sites, and to a lesser extent sponsorship-based sites, generally want to collect more data on their users, a controversial practice to say the least. However, many advertising-based technical publishers sell advertisers on interest-based information about their content, not their readership. Subscription sites care about paying subscriber counts, signups, visitor conversion rates (what percent of visitors turn into paying customers), and subscriber churn (what percent of subscribers unsubscribe over a given period of time). Content marketing operations care about the same, but with a degree of separation as they have to analyze how their content affects these metrics on their actual product, and the content is only one factor in each metric.

Free and featureful, Google Analytics is the most common analytics platform. With minimal configuration, it can give any site basic insights into any of the above metrics. You and your users pay for this service with your data and privacy. As such, many users run extensions to block trackers like Google Analytics, which reduces the accuracy of your measurements. Once you have the revenue to

justify the expenditure, depending on your needs and site architecture, you may want to integrate one of dozens of paid analytics solutions. If you do so, I would encourage you to choose one with a focus on user privacy.

15.5 Search Engine Optimization

The only reliable way to be ranked high on a fair search, regardless of the algorithm used, is to provide a quality response that is relevant to the query. Google is certainly a gameable system, and there are a number of techniques you can use to subtly boost your chances. In general, the best long-term move is to write excellent content that people like to read.

> For Scotch, we did a lot of SEO work, and really SEO starts with great content. At the end of the day we're just lucky that Google is sending us traffic. If Google changed their algorithms, which they have a few times over the last few years, traffic could drop and that would be everything.
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> In our business, SEO is absolutely king. Ninety percent of Scotch traffic does come from Google. — *Chris on Code*

When promoting what you made, do not lose sight of why you made it in the first place. A focus on good content over SEO will keep you moving toward your goals.

> The only person that you really need to satisfy is yourself and that's surprisingly difficult to do. Most people spend the rest of their lives trying to understand how to actually satisfy themselves. It's a difficult job to be fair. But, if you start out with that intention—I'm doing this for me, if anybody reads it, great, but I'm doing this for me

because it's something that I need to do—then I think that's the strategy that you should have. It's a winning strategy because it's being true to yourself. In the long run that's all there is. —*Jeff Atwood*

//TODO

1. Write down three platforms where you would like to promote your work. Try to include at least one niche forum.
2. Ask your publisher what they do to promote your work. Also ask if they are willing to share page views and other metrics on your articles.
3. If you publish any of your content yourself, develop a plan to build your own audience over time.