

Will Post for Money

Just a Thought from 22 September 2006

about: Blogging, Internet, JPG Magazine, Technology

Or: Consumer-Made Media and the Almighty Buck

Jason Calacanis is the P.T. Barnum of the weblog world. Barnum took a hirsute woman and turned her into The Bearded Lady. Calacanis took something as banal as paying writers to write and turned it into An Issue That Must Be Discussed. And I'm glad, because it is.

If you don't know the story, here's a recap. Calacanis sold Weblogs Inc, a network of topical blogs, to AOL for a staggering amount of money. Then he was put in charge of netscape.com, another AOL purchase, which was once the most visited site on the web but had since been micromanaged into a wasted wreck of pointless marketing nonsense. Calacanis announced that he was simply going to clone the tech news darling Digg. And then he did.

The new Netscape differentiated itself from Digg in three key ways: It was uglier, it worked against its own bottoms-up process by pegging stories approved by staffers at the top of the page, and they started paying the top contributors.

I'll leave the first two differentiators alone for now, as they're pretty subjective. But the payment thing captured the attention of the blogosphere, showing once again Calacanis's Barnum-like knack for drawing a crowd.

Let's be frank about something: writers, all over the world, at this very moment, are getting paid to put one word in front of the other. Just because you're not getting paid to write your site, and I don't get paid to write this, doesn't mean that paying people to write is a novel thing (apologies for the pun).

What makes all this worth talking about, besides the fact that it's been talked about, is that I see it as part of a larger trend, and a critical part of the new, collaborative web (that, and we discussed it this week at *Knock Knock*, so it's fresh in my mind).

Media, more and more, is becoming participatory. Call it user-generated content, authentic media, or whatever term ultimately comes to mean talented amateurs coming together to author media—Woo! TACTAM! Will it stick? You decide! Ultimately, it's not a question of if media will be made this way in the future, it's only a question of when it will overtake traditional media.

I strongly believe this, and it's one of the core reasons we started 8020 Publishing. Even if you don't agree that media will be made by its consumers in the future, there's no denying that there are more and more places to use your voice online.

In the late 90s, every site you signed up with gave you an email address. The late 00s equivalent is the free blog. Every site asks me what I think, gives me a chance to have my say, to post, vote, and comment.

And let me just say, Amen! This is the web I've always believed in, and always wanted. It's going to raise a generation of people who expect to be able to talk back to their media. They'll look at us fogies and wonder how we could have ever stared at all those televisions and read all those newspapers with nary a chance to respond.

But in a mediasphere that is increasingly consumer-made, how do we consumers decide where to make media? For example, I'm writing this on a train speeding through Denmark at sunset (romantic, eh?). When I'm done, where should I post it? My site, naturally. But I could also post it to any number of sites clamoring for my contributions. Newsvine? Vox? TypePad? LiveJournal? MySpace? Blogger? All of 'em?

The more consumer-made media there is, the more valuable our contributions become. And when that value reaches a certain level—a level I believe we're nearing—the competition among media outlets will result in some of us getting paid. That's just supply and demand.

Netscape isn't alone in offering up the booty. Newsvine and Squidoo both promise a cut of the ad revenue generated from your pages (which feels good, until you realize how little that amounts to for most people). Threadless brags about its payout in allcaps. And, of course, 8020's newly relaunched *JPG Magazine* is going to pay photographers—not for contributing to the website, but for allowing us to publish their photos in the magazine.

For us at *JPG*, the decision was simple—if we make money selling a magazine with your photos in it, you deserve some, too. But note that we're not paying people to add their photos to the website. There are lots of different kinds of payment, and we think having a stylish place to showcase your photos, while not unique on the web, is still pretty good payment for participating (and we've got other ideas on how to make it worth your while, just you wait and see).

But as soon as a photo makes the jump out of one medium (the web) and into another (sweet, sweet print), that's a horse of a different color. In that case, your work made it through a very public screening process and came out on top, and you're letting us print it in another medium, so you deserve to be paid.

Netscape has no multi-media aspect, nor does Digg. So why does Netscape need to pay while the far more successful Digg does not? It could be that Netscape doesn't really need to pay, and this is just clever PR (in which case, score one for Calacanis, because it worked). It could also be that Calacanis was just in the mood to spend some of AOL's money, which I'd respect. That's what corporate overlords are for.

But I have a different theory, and it has more to do with differentiators one and two up there.

Netscape is a poisoned brand. Once the darling of the web world, its fall from grace was public and powerful. For us oldtimers, Netscape's failure was personal. It was our failure. And for the newtimers, it's just been completely off the radar. Netscape.com has been a has-been so long, why would anyone want to contribute to it if they weren't getting paid?

The secret to success with consumer-generated media is that the community has to feel wanted, important, engaged, and a little in love. For it to work, participants have to feel ownership. And you generally don't feel ownership of something that pays you. When you get paid, you're the one getting owned.

I think it's different for *JPG* and Threadless because we're not paying you for participation, we're paying you for letting us make real products from your work. The difference is subtle, but important, because the participation is still rewarded by all those great humanistic rewards that are more important than money.

The bottom line is, when you found a relationship on getting paid, it never goes farther than that. And the moment the money runs out, it's over. You knew what this was.

I just hope that when that happens, the stain doesn't spread to all paid-for consumer-created media (TACTAM!), because I really do believe the time has come. The designers who give Threadless something to sell deserve the money. The photographers who give *JPG Magazine* something to print deserve to get paid. Maybe someday I'll even get paid to write stuff like this (hey, a guy can dream).

But when it comes to posting a link and writing a witty sentence, Digg's got it right: pay your contributors with respect, attention, awesome social features, and an elegant interface. Then just let your competitors spend themselves to death trying to compete. ✖