



Give Your Fans the Power to Speak Up

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By Seth Godin

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Flipping the Funnel

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In a book called *eMarketing*, which I wrote in 1995, I said something like “There are only four kinds of people: prospects, customers, loyal customers, and former customers.” The book was ahead of its time, and I was wrong.

For a book called *Permission Marketing*, which I wrote in 1998, the subtitle was “Turning strangers into friends and friends into customers.” My timing was better, the book was a bestseller, but I was still wrong. Or at least incomplete.

Flipping the Funnel finishes the sentence. Now, I might just be right:

Turn strangers into friends.

 Turn friends into donors

 And then... do the most important job:

 Turn your donors into fundraisers.

The math is compelling. Most of the people in the world are not your donors. They haven’t even heard of you, actually. And while many of these people are not qualified buyers or aren’t interested in supporting your organization, many of them might—if they only knew you existed, if they could only be persuaded that your offering is worth investing time and energy and passion and money into.

But how on earth are you going to get them to know about you?

We’re living in the most cluttered marketplace in history. Whether you are curing cancer, encouraging faith or educating people in need, people are better at ignoring you than ever before. You don’t have enough time to get your message out.

Not only that, but you can't afford to interrupt all the people you need to reach. The cost of running an ad that gets seen or an ad that gets clicked on or a direct mail campaign that gets opened is higher than it has ever been. You just don't have enough money to get your message to all the people who need to hear it.

And not only *that*, but you don't have enough people. Your fundraising team isn't as big as you'd like it to be, and all of your best volunteers are funning flat out—without succeeding as much as you'd like.

But wait.

You have assets that are underused: your friends and your supporters.

I define your “friends” as the prospects you've earned permission to talk with—even though they haven't turned into donors or volunteers yet. And your donors have crossed the Rubicon; they've been converted from total strangers to interested friends, and then all the way to dedicated supporters of your cause.

And there's a bunch of them.

You've certainly got more donors than fundraisers (at least I hope so). And your list of permission-based friends probably dramatically exceeds your list of donors.



The Funnel

Marketing is a funnel. You put undifferentiated prospects into the top. Some of them hop out, unimpressed with what you have to offer. Others learn about you and your organization, hear from their peers, compare offerings, and eventually come out the bottom, as patrons, converts and supporters.

If you're like most marketers, you've been spending a lot of time trying to shovel more and more attention into the top of the funnel. After all, if you can expose your idea to enough people, you can afford to buy more attention, to run more ads, to put more people into the top.

As we've seen, though, the amount of time and money you need to keep that funnel filled can explode your budget pretty quickly.

Here's a quick example. The chart at right compares Web traffic at diabetes.org (which is supported by more than a million dollars' worth of advertising and in-kind support every year) with Squidoo.com, a brand new community-driven site. Squidoo is in blue. (Click the chart to enlarge it.)

Flip the Funnel

Here's a different idea:



What if we flip the funnel and turn it into a megaphone?

What if you could figure out how to use the Internet to empower the people who like you, who respect you, who have a vested interest in your success? I call this group of people—your friends and prospects and customers who are willing to do this—your *fan club*.

A new set of online tools makes this approach not just a possibility, but also an imperative for any organization hoping to grow. Give your fan club a megaphone and get out of the way.

They Don't Care (They Don't Have To)

Most of your friends and supporters don't talk about you.

In many cases, it's because they're unimpressed. Somewhere along the way, your organization put fundraising or bureaucracy ahead of relationships. Or you created something that was just fine, but not remarkable. Or you're in a sector where the customers just don't care that much. (When was the last time you talked about the Junior League?)

But what about those members that are impressed? Whom do they tell? Do they do it often? Do they do it with leverage, or do their goodwill and good words get dissipated quickly?

The challenge you face is that people don't care about you. They care about themselves, which is pretty natural. So someone is unlikely to expend a lot of time and energy and personal branding effort to promote your cause—it's too much work and there's nothing in it for them (at least not yet).

Even then, once you overcome those hurdles, your fan club's meager efforts on your behalf (which seem huge) rarely catch fire. Not loud enough, not often enough, too short-lived.

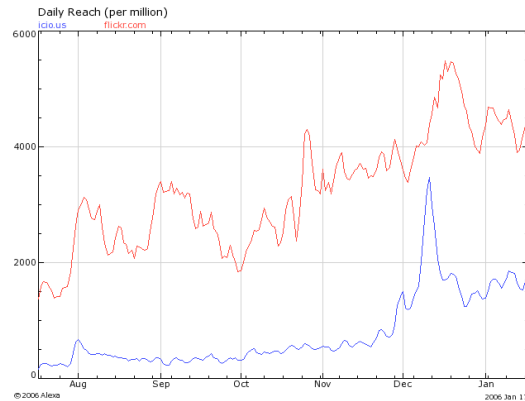
Then Came the Net

Thanks to Al Gore, the Internet changes everything. Now, one person armed with a keyboard can reach millions. One person with a video camera can tell a story that travels around the world. And one person with a blog can sell a lot of computers.

The trick is this: you need to give your fan club some leverage, an amplifier—a megaphone.

Your former patrons, the aggrieved ones, the critics—they've already found the Web. They're the ones who have managed to post play-by-play accounts of your misdeeds and missteps. They're motivated and they're already embracing this medium.

A diligent marketer, however, can make it easy for your fan club to get the word out as well. And to do it in an authentic, uncontrolled, honest way.



It's astonishing to see how quickly this idea has become popular. Two of the most successful information-sharing sites have been growing at an amazing clip. (Click to enlarge the graph.)

The easiest way to grasp this is through examples. I'm going to describe three online services that have been around for a year or more, and then a new one that I developed and that launched at the end of 2005. All of them are free, effective, and easy to use.

Del.icio.us

Tricky name, simple idea. The del.icio.us site makes it easy for anyone to “tag” Web pages. A tag is just a simple set of keywords that people can use to mark a page or an item. Del.icio.us gives its registered users a tool that, in just a click or two, permits them to bookmark and tag a site.

I did a search on “diabetes” because I wanted to find some detailed information on a health issue. The bookmarks that had been tagged led me to a site filled with white papers—all written by passionate advocates that wanted to support (and spread) their point of view.

No, it's not an earth-shattering discovery. But the chance of that site surfacing in Google is slim—yet, because eight people (not a computer) had tagged this page, it rose in popularity and got noticed.

What happens to your site when a dozen of your biggest fans start tagging your pages? The Acumen Fund has hundreds of pages on its site—yet most of them are essentially invisible. If the organization made it easy for donors and supporters to start tagging pages, the most important messages would rise to the top.

The same thing is true for art museums, religious groups and the ACLU. In every case, there are pages, buried and doomed to decay into obscurity. But if a few surfers tagged the pages appropriately, though, other surfers would find it. And the word would spread.

The big secret of del.icio.us is that the percentage of users who do the tagging is tiny. Most of the traffic to the site is looking for the tagging done by a tiny minority. This is the essence of online leverage.

ACTION ITEM: Figure out who the happiest members of your fan club are (I'm assuming you've already done that). Then teach them about del.icio.us and get out of the way. Sure, some of the tags will point out your lame products or offerings. Some will be more blunt than you'd like. Learn from those, but understand that it's part of the deal.

Blogging (Blogger, TypePad, etc.)

My guess is that if you're reading this, you know about blogging. (If you want my free ebook on the topic, it's right [here](#).) Although 80,000 *new* blogs get built every day, it's likely that most of those don't last very long—good thing, too. Faced with a semi-blank page, most people write stuff that is either boring, selfish, or indecipherable. Most bloggers quickly lose interest and their blogs wither away.

But if you give people a template, you'll discover that they can thrive. Give them a hole to fill, and fill it they will.

Imagine creating a customer blog where every one of your supporters is invited to post a comment. Your post could be as simple as “Today we built a school in Sri Lanka. Comment below and let us know what you think of it.”

Yes, you can edit the comments on your blog, but no, you shouldn't delete the negative ones. Get rid of the profanity, the anonymous heckling, and the juvenile, but if you're going to give your users a megaphone, you need to let them use it. If you don't, no one will bother reading.

The real power of blogs comes from the fact that they can be as specific as you like. It's easy to imagine a blog about the quest to create a new pricing model for adopting dogs from your animal shelter, or to enable a discussion about a particularly contentious AJAX coding convention at your open-source software group. Most of these blogs will be ignored, but some (perhaps more than some) will gain a following and help spread the word about your work.

Obviously, in addition to allowing comments on your blog, the big win comes when fan club members build their own blogs (or when you convert bloggers into fan club members!). The tools are now available to do just that.

Flickr

Flickr is a photo-sharing site. It is incredibly easy to post digital photos and tag them. Photos of what? How about the families that benefit from your work or the scene at the closing banquet of your convention? What if you sent digital cameras to teachers using your materials... I have no idea what masses of people will want to take pictures of (or look at) but it's pretty clear that people enjoy expressing themselves.

This phenomenon is moving beyond photos. Google is now hosting videos. The Beastie Boys recently gave 50 video cameras to fans and had them all videotape the same concert. Then all that footage was edited into one film.

In each case, the idea is the same. By making it easy for people to use pictures, you allow a massively parallel publishing operation to take place, spreading the word in ways you could never execute on your own.

Your first instinct will be to upload the photos yourself, to somehow control the dissemination of information. But that just won't work—not on Flickr or on any of these other services, either. The community is too large and too powerful. You can't outperform them; you must join them.

Thinking about the United Way

Once the mightiest of the retail charities in the United States, the United Way has disappointed over the last decade or so. Some would blame it on management mistakes. I think it's something different than that.

The United Way is a classic top-down approach. By creating arrangements with the Fortune 500, they were able to do payroll deduction on millions of paychecks. That, all by itself, was the key to their scale.

But what happens when those relationships aren't as important?

Because people rarely talk about the United Way and its work, the word of their great efforts doesn't spread as far and as fast as it might. As a result, it's hard for them to catch up when the payroll-deduction approach loses juice.

Compare this to the brilliant peer-to-peer gimmick embraced by Nike and Lance Armstrong. No, I'm not proposing that one dollar bracelets can replace multi-million dollar community-based giving. What I do believe, though, is that the Armstrong LiveStrong idea spread so far, so fast precisely because of their side-to-side, not top down approach.

In our ever faster, ever more selfish world, the chances of growing a non-profit with a top down approach are tiny. It's just too hard, we're too busy and you don't have enough time or money.

That's why I was compelled to create a team to build Squidoo. It's a platform that enables people to point to the products, services, and ideas that matter to them. Squidoo is unashamedly action-based because our world is action based.

Squidoo is not social networking. It's social databasing. Here's what we're trying to do.

Squidoo

Squidoo is an all-purpose platform for user-generated content. It's designed to make it easy for each member of your fan club to build a page that highlights the best of what you have to offer.

A Squidoo page contains links—links to products for sale, to reviews, to pictures, to videos, to RSS feeds, and to blogs. A Squidoo page, which is called a *lens*, is one person's take on one topic.

A lens on Lupus, for example, could include links to the latest research, to books for sale on the topic at Amazon, to local doctors doing cutting edge work and to your organization. A lens designed to support the Red Cross, on the other hand, might have nothing on it at all about emergencies—just products you could buy, with royalties earmarked for earthquake relief.

The only thing the pages have in common is that they are built by real people, for real people. Squidoo pages form a social database—a human index of the best stuff on a given topic.

Every lens generates royalty income. Royalties from affiliate income (a Netflix membership, an Amazon sale, an eBay auction...) as well as from ad revenue. *And you can establish an account for your non-profit so that the income from every single lens your fans build will default to your charity.*

The magic of Squidoo comes from the proximity effect. Every lens is next to every other lens, so the serendipity of exploration kicks in. Squidoo attracts traffic from across the Web—people find a lens they are interested in, and it leads them to another lens, or to a product or a service they didn't know about. The person coming to a lens is exploring—looking for new ideas and solutions—which is exactly where *you* want to be.

The biggest difference between Squidoo and the other social services is that Squidoo adds value by juxtaposing ideas so they coalesce into useful meaning. A Flickr picture becomes popular because it's clever or funny. A blog posting gains an audience when other bloggers decide it's useful enough to refer to on their blogs. But a Squidoo lens works when it presents important information as part of a whole—when it's a piece of the big picture of meaning.

Imagine, for instance, if the New York Philharmonic made it easy for three thousand of its supporters to build Squidoo lenses about dressing their kids for winter. A lens that included links to just the good stuff—the right clothes, fashions, sleds, and outdoor gear—would save a mom a huge amount of time and trouble in online selection. The value comes from each lenses' selection and the presentation of the ideas inside. Now imagine that each of these supporters told 10 or 20 friends... who bought clothes from LL Bean or Backcountry.com. That's 30,000 or more transactions, with a royalty from each one supporting the Philharmonic.

A more sophisticated example: Presenting links to articles on obesity. Those articles have been on a non-profit's website all along, but only by presenting them together, along with a narrative that makes it all clear, can the lensmaster offer a page that's worth looking at.

Here are four ways I can see using Squidoo to give your fans a megaphone:

- a. A charity (take JDRCF, for example) encourages its network of donors and supporters to view its lens highlighting current research and projects, thus surfacing the important new stuff for new readers. That lens drives traffic to their site, which increases donations, which leads to more lens traffic, and on and on.
- b. A non-profit supporting native people by enabling them to sell crafts and handmade work online makes it easy for customers to build lenses in which they each profile the items they've purchased, including links to various objects and auctions and photos from Flickr. If only 1% of the customer base (well-connected crafts fans!) take them up on this, they've increased web exposure by a factor of one thousand. For free.
- c. A site with an online content strategy uses lenses to expose that content. So, for example, a yoga center could build a lens about various forms of meditation making it far easier for someone who is not already a yoga fan to discover content she didn't even know she was looking for.
- d. A corporation "adopts" a non-profit and challenges its customers and employees to build lenses on a wide variety of topics—with all the proceeds* benefiting the charity.
- e. (and a bonus): Think hard about this one, please, and don't keep reading until you can give me a good reason why you shouldn't do it: Every non-profit goes to its donors, but instead of asking for money, just gives each donor a link and asks them to build a lens. That lens earns a penny, a nickel, a dollar a day for the non-profit. And spreads the word as well. Suddenly, donors can help *not* by digging deeper, but by sharing their passion.

*Proceeds? Yes, there are proceeds. Every lens earns a royalty for a charity or its creator. The royalties come from a share of the ads that run on the site, as well as from directly earned affiliate revenue. An example? If a movie lover builds a site that refers to Netflix, and Netflix records a new member as a result, the person who built the site—the lensmaster—earns as much as \$10. Build enough lenses and drive enough traffic, and it can add up.

For more Squidoo, check out this ebook and this lens: ([Everyone's an Expert](#) and [Working with Squidoo](#)).

On Commitment and Investment

The thing about these flipped-funnel techniques is that they don't cost you any money (in fact, they could generate revenue). As a result, many 501 3(c) organizations, skeptical of things that are new and inexpensive, don't take swift action. They may assign a junior person, or dabble around with something in their spare time and see what happens. We've seen this movie before—it's hard to take action when you have the biggest opportunity, but seemingly a lot easier when it involves investing millions to catch up.

What a shame.

Watch a company that's intending to advertise during the Super Bowl. The \$3 million for airtime is a fraction of the expense and effort they put into the commercial. The company and its agency will spend months planning a commercial. They'll hire a fancy director and Equity actors and build a set in South Beach with waves crashing in the background. The sales force will be prepped, brochures will be created. The company will probably even build a hospitality tent at the game itself, flying in big buyers from around the country—on a private jet.

All so the company can spend millions on an ad that probably won't work.

Watch a non-profit in search of a big grant. They'll drop everything to follow the format and meet the deadlines. All for a longshot with no real positive side effects if it fails.

Funnel flipping is a bit different. Different in that it clearly works and that it doesn't cost much. *But* it takes even more commitment. It takes a substantial emotional investment at the top (hence this ebook—feel free to forward it around), as well as consistent, measured effort by everyone involved.

The first time you invite fans to install the del.icio.us toolbar, they might not do it. The first time you email people a link to build a Squidoo lens, they might ignore you. And the first time you read a comment on your blog that embarrasses you, you'll be tempted to quit.

All good reasons to keep going.

The fact that it isn't trivially easy for big organizations (or small ones) to embrace this approach is exactly why it's working. Being first matters. Being first in a substantial way, with a real online presence, matters even more.

I'm confident that over the next nine months, one organization after another will empower its fan club to speak up, to be noticed, and to spread the word. The question that remains is: Who will go first and create a lasting impression, and who will be timid and fall behind, perhaps permanently?

Isn't This (just) a Clever Spin on Word of Mouth?

A recent article in *The New York Times* reported on the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) and their recent convention in Orlando. The theme of the article (not surprising, since it ran in their Advertising

column) was that somehow, WOM was a replacement for advertising. The article implied that frustrated advertisers could see an end to their troubles because word of mouth was here to save the day.

I don't think most marketers have a clue about how word of mouth can help them. They think they need to *use* word of mouth, to manipulate it, to pay for it and put it to work.

I may be in the minority, but I think it's a lot more organic than that. I think consumers of all kinds are too smart. They're not going to get fooled into shilling for a company—even a well-intentioned non-profit—that manipulates them into it. When the megaphone becomes a shortsighted corporate initiative, it's gotta fail.

The alternative lies in being authentic. In creating services that are genuinely worth talking about. In going out of your way to invest in experiences that people choose to share. Then, yes, by all means, make the tools available. Amplify the happiest fans. But without the kernel of truth, you've got nothing but a short-lived packaged-goods campaign.

What Now?

It starts with this big idea: *Can you buy into the fact that you can empower your fans to speak up?*

Once you are willing to make that commitment, the tactics are simple and straightforward. You can publicize the tools, build the affiliate links, create the RSS feeds, and start down the road to embracing your biggest supporters.

Of course, after you do that, you'll need to deliver ever-more-remarkable products and services—so your fans have something to talk about.