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Brand Tags' Noah Brier: How My Website Took Off

From Late-Night Idea to 3 Million Page Views, Some Tips for Agencies and Clients

By Noah Brier

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Noah Brier

About six months ago, in the middle of the night, I had a very simple idea: If brands exist in people's heads, as I believe they do, then shouldn't you be able to ask a whole bunch of people what they think of a brand and then use tag clouds to display the results? After flipping the idea around in my brain for a few minutes, I decided it was a good enough reason to jump out of bed and make it happen.

Now, it should be noted that I'm no programming wizard. Only a few weeks before, I had started to teach myself PHP, a not-quite-programming language that allows you to build web applications, and MySQL, an open-source database software. What I did not have is years of building websites and apps, though that didn't matter much, as I quickly discovered through the rapid growth of Brand Tags, as this site would be called.

An hour and a half after buying the domain BrandTags.net (the dot-com version was taken), I had a working prototype with nine brands loaded in. It worked just as I had planned: A random logo popped up on the screen and asked you to type in the first word or phrase that popped into your head. After you hit submit, another logo would pop onscreen.

Quiet before the storm

I showed a few people, but mostly I let it sit collecting digital dust. I talked to a few folks about doing some design work on it or adding features, but mostly it simply sat there in its lonely corner of

cyberspace, an idea that might or might not see the light of day.

Then May rolled around, and I was feeling guilty for not having written anything on my blog for a while. Rather than spend time finding something to write about, I decided I would release this little experiment as is. I wrote up a post in about five minutes and followed it by sending the brandtags.net link to a few friends as well. And, of course, I announced it on Twitter. This was all on a Friday.

Within minutes, the comments started to roll in. Over the weekend, I followed the momentum and continued to make adjustments and add features (including a backward guessing game dreamed up by my girlfriend and user profiles so that I could capture e-mail addresses for follow-up contact). The site was seeing some good traffic, and the tags were piling up. Then, late on Sunday evening, MetaFilter, a super-geeky community/group blog I'm a member of, picked it up. From there it spread quickly, getting picked up by big-time bloggers like Seth Godin and Kottke (the latter of which had always been a kind of secret nerd goal of mine) as well as the ad press. Even the mainstream press got in on the action, with one of the very first mentions showing up on a blog on the Wall Street Journal's website.

The momentum only continued from there. Over a single month, the site attracted about 200,000 visitors, totaling around 3 million page views and 1 million tags. For an idea that took me an hour and a half to build, it was an unmitigated success, and I have some fun plans for where to take it moving forward.

With that way-more-lengthy-than-I-originally-planned intro behind me, here are a few things I've learned, in no specific order:

It's a lot of work: I don't think people realize just how much work it is to actually live the launch-and-iterate mentality. Over the course of a month and a half, I have probably answered 5,000 Brand Tags-related e-mails, made hundreds of small and large changes to the site and commented on about a hundred blogs that wrote about the site. If I didn't have complete autonomy to make any changes or to represent the brand on a moment's notice, I have no idea if the site would have been as successful as it has been. In other words, if you're planning something like this, make sure you and your client have clear communication lines.

Nothing beats personal contact: I don't have any proof at all to back this up, but I believe in my heart that Brand Tags wouldn't have taken off if I hadn't responded to each and every e-mail I got. Those e-mails have been from people at agencies, brands, media outlets and everywhere else under the sun. They have been requests to add logos, ideas for new features or just friendly congratulations. My attitude is that if someone takes the time to e-mail me, I should take the time to e-mail them back. It's not always timely and it's definitely not scalable, but it just feels right. After all, without these people I wouldn't have gotten more than 1,000 blog links, nor would I have more than 600 brands in the system (most of them were sent in by people from brands or agencies who found the site).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noah Brier is head of planning and strategy at Barbarian Group. He blogs at NoahBrier.com.

Teach yourself some code: I recently read an article that suggested knowledge of code would be the

literacy of the 21st century. I agree. Being able to get a computer to do what you want it to is an amazing strength. All of a sudden you're not reliant on others to bring your ideas to life. And it's really not that hard -- I taught myself in a few weeks without the help of books. As a friend of mine said to me a few years ago, if there's one thing the web knows, it's how to make the web. Any question you have has likely been answered and well documented on one of the thousands (millions?) of sites by and for the people who make the web. Plus, you don't have to be an expert, you just have to be able to bring your ideas to life.

Be ready for spam: If there's a way to game the system, people will find it. In the case of Brand Tags, spam is not that big a deal because at the moment it's just for fun (and in a way, tag clouds handle spam very well, because the things said most seldom appear the smallest). However, as I have moved forward I've had to work hard to think about ways to keep the results in as good shape as possible. If you're a brand, this should definitely be something you're considering. What are your contingency plans?

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