

The Universal Traffic Engine: A Growth Strategy for Small Businesses and Startups



Lesson One: Avatar and Message

by Dan Thies

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¹ The first thing I ever sold on the Internet was a pepperoni pizza, to a user in a Lynx "browser" at the University of Washington. I was paid 50 cents for it.

I'll explain what the Universal Traffic Engine is all about – but first, I want to make sure you're in the right place.

Who Should Read This

The Universal Traffic Engine training has been specifically developed to serve the needs of three audiences:

- Small Business Owners or partners in a startup
- In House Marketers in a small business or startup
- Consultants and Service Providers who work with...

Small Businesses and Startups!

I hope I've made my point. While you will see large businesses following some of the same strategies you'll see here, they have something that you probably don't: a very large budget.

What can you do with a large budget?

A lot... you can hire people full time to do one little job. You can spend big money developing original content. You can ignore a lot of the inefficiencies in your marketing, because your voice is loud enough for everyone to hear.

And if you are one of those folks with a big budget, the people reading this are going to eat your lunch... in fact, they're going to get you to buy it for them.

Growth Hacking? Maybe.

Someone called this a “growth hacking strategy.” I don't know about that – to me, “growth hacking” has become almost synonymous with black hat, gray hat, and generally obnoxious marketing tactics like spamming people on LinkedIn.

We're not into that – and you don't need to engage in that kind of stuff to grow. What we are into is growth – of two kinds:

- Event-Driven Growth: where we run some kind of large scale, coordinated promotion to acquire a large number of customers in a short time, and leverage the attention generated by that event to drive long term growth.
- Long-Term Growth: where we build our ongoing “base” of revenue, and create selling systems (think “funnels”) that continue to acquire new customers for us, day in and day out.

That's it – and when it comes to marketing, you don't need anything else.

Growth is Good – But HOW?

Okay – we all agree that growth is good, and that we need both kinds – but how are we going to get there?

You've probably tried more than one method – some of them have probably even worked – but if you were satisfied with your current rate of growth, you wouldn't be here.

The Universal Traffic Engine will allow you to:

- Understand what isn't working, determine if it can be fixed, and see how to fix it.
- Amplify the effects of what **is** working – so that you can get more out of it.
- Combine multiple tactics and campaigns into an overall strategy to drive growth.

Now, that's a bold claim, and it's not going to be true if you don't understand why it is true, so let's cover the bases on a few key concepts today, and get you started down the right path.

#1: All Marketing is Message Delivery

All marketing boils down to delivering a message to someone, in the hope of generating a response. Whether it's a television ad for car insurance, or a “news” article on the supposed benefits of coral calcium, a message is being delivered.

The key to turning potential buyers into actual buyers is to deliver the right message at the right time. In fact, it really takes a chain of messages (and they don't all have to come from you²) to make a sale, get a sign-up, or whatever your business does.

BUYERS (n): No matter what you're selling, even if you're not “selling” anything, I'm going to refer to the people who take you up on your offer as BUYERS.

If your message is delivered to the wrong person, it won't work. If your message doesn't ever persuade them to take the next step, it's the wrong message... but sometimes they need to hear your message more than once.

This is important – it's why we used to laugh at companies that ran one ad a year, during the Super Bowl – because delivering your message once and only once is about the WORST idea you could ever have as a marketer.

² As an example, when someone buys a weight loss product, YOU didn't tell them they looked overweight... but someone else probably did. (I bet they didn't like that feeling.)

#2: Reach Tells, But Frequency Sells

Speaking of television advertising, there are two key metrics that advertisers use to decide if they're getting their money's worth – Reach and Frequency.

Reach (n): this is the total audience – how many people saw your ad or message

Frequency (n): this is how many times the average person saw your message.

It's a little more complicated than that, but not really...

Obviously, reaching 1000 highly qualified prospects is different than reaching 100,000 unqualified people, but for now, let's assume that you could reach as many people as you want who are equally qualified³.

Qualified (adj): this means that they would be ready, willing, and able to buy from you, if they only understood your message

If I told you that you had to sell a new bowling ball to 100 bowlers, and you got to talk to each one once, for 30 seconds, how many do you think you would sell?

What if I only let you talk to 50 people, but you got to talk to them all twice? You'd sell more that way – and that's the value of Frequency.

On the other hand, if I let you ask all 100 a single question, and then spend as much time as you wanted talking to anyone who gave you the answer you were looking for?

That's Called Qualifying.

Imagine what would happen if you asked all 100 people a question like: "would you be interested in buying a new bowling ball that spins 30% faster than normal balls?"

Some of them would say "no, I don't want my ball to spin that much." Others would say something along the lines of "tell me more," and if you're lucky, one of them will just whip out their wallet and stuff cash into your hand.

Once you knew who was interested in a faster-spinning ball (and willing to say so), it made sense to spend more time talking to those people, right?

Now riddle me this: how many of your marketing campaigns (aside from SEO and paid search of course) do any kind of qualifying? Well, if they work at all, I bet they do – either intentionally or unintentionally... but sometimes we invest a lot in talking to someone before we even know if they're interested.

³ Let's assume this, because it's true. Don't worry about how you're going to reach them – worry about who they are and what message(s) they should receive.

Let's Think This Through...

One of the reasons why I am talking about bowling balls is that a friend of mine had this brilliant idea for a bowling ball that you can steer with an app. Hollow out the ball, put in an accelerometer, a flywheel, a gyroscope thingy, and a Bluetooth enabled controller, and boom. Amaze your friends. At the bowling alley.

But before he went off and actually spent a bunch of time inventing the thing, he wanted to do a little research. So he spent some money on a survey campaign, targeting people who “like” bowling on Facebook.

The first question on the survey was... “Do you bowl?”

70% of them said no. He didn't need to ask them the second question... because he knew what he needed to know from those people – which is that they were not Qualified to answer any of the other questions.

He also learned that 70% of the “Reach” he could get from Facebook interest targeting was wasted... but he still had to pay to reach them. That's either a problem, or an opportunity.

The Economics of Inbound Marketing

Now, let's pretend that this wannabe inventor actually, you know, bought a bunch of power tools and electronic junk, got out in the garage, and figured out how to make a bowling ball that you can steer with an app.

Let's say that he wanted to sell them to people. He can do a lot of things. He can write guest posts for bowling blogs, buy advertising in a variety of channels, make some cool videos of the bowling ball chasing cats and post those everywhere, or whatever.

Maybe he'll focus on paid traffic, maybe he'll work on “free” traffic... hopefully he'll do both... but everything costs. If it doesn't cost money, it costs time.

Time = Money (fact): From now on, when I say “money” feel free to think “time” if you like, but remember that you can't spend the same dollar (or hour) twice.

Either way, you'd better be looking for ways to make your time and money go farther.

Reach x Frequency x Targeting = \$

Let's go back to “reach and frequency” for a minute. If you can reach more people with your message, and reach them more often, you win, right? Well, almost.

Because if 70% of the people you're Reaching are completely unqualified to buy, and that's soaking up budget (in time or money) that could be used to increase the Frequency, you're going to have to find a way to improve the Targeting.

We'll get back to that – but if I showed you a way that you could:

- Increase Reach – without paying more to get it
- Increase Frequency – without paying more to get it
- Improve Targeting – without paying more to get it

You would have a way to significantly improve the results of every marketing campaign you ever run. That's definitely not a bad thing.

That's Why We're Here – But First...

We have to figure out who you're selling to.

I know that you have some idea – in fact, you probably know EXACTLY who your ideal customer is... at least, you feel like you do.

But here's the thing – even if you know who you're selling to, the process I'm going to take you through will help you understand (and actually write down):

- How your customers would describe themselves
- What they get out of using your product in practical terms
- How using your product (or an alternative) affects them emotionally
- How not using your product would affect them (negatively)
- Why they are afraid to do business with you (and others)
- Interest triggers: things you could use to get their attention
- Motivation triggers: things you could use to convince them to buy

We're going to write down as much of that as we can (I will give you an example), and then in the training video for this lesson, I'm going to explain how we work that into Messages that can be delivered, one at a time, to find, engage with, and convert prospects no matter where you find them.

Do The Exercise. Watch The Video.

If you don't have time to do the exercise, or can't get everyone you need together to do it, watch the video anyway, because our example will give you a better picture of what you're trying to accomplish.

I don't care what order you do them in – only that you do them. The future of your business – or your client's business – may hang in the balance.

Avatar Worksheet – Example

Universal Traffic Engine: Avatar Worksheet



Identity - Who They Are		
Self-Identity Inbound Marketer (formerly "SEO")	Demographic Gender Neutral Age 25-60+	Where & When Work in Agency Work at Home "Doing Marketing"
Triggers - Attention & Interest		
Emotional Scary Change Criticism of Beliefs People are Talking	Rational Case Studies Breaking News Tools, Tips & Tech	Repellent Spammy/Salesy "Bait & Switch" Inaccurate
Triggers - Persuasion & Conversion		
Emotional "Cutting Edge" Recognition Community	Rational How/Why It Works How to Explain It Improves Metrics	Critical Convince Deciders Getting Results Better Than ___
Who/What Has Their Attention?		
Trusted Moz.com Inbound.org Peers	Aware Industry News Agency Blogs Official Blogs	Involved Co-Workers Clients (Family)

Understanding the Example

My example here is from the campaign that we're running to launch our new marketing automation software, ResultFlow.

This doesn't need a whole lot of setup – so I'll just give you the briefest of details for now. You'll hear more about that campaign in the “behind the scenes” videos that come with each lesson in the Universal Traffic Engine training.

Because ResultFlow is an ideal complement to any kind of “inbound marketing” – especially content marketing and SEO – inbound marketers are a pretty important audience of people who we want to reach.

Identity – Who They Are

We start out with a very rough sketch of who we're talking to. A lot of people will encourage you to “think of one person” and we'll come back to that when we work on messaging, but that's actually a really stupid idea if you want to understand a market.

- **Self Identity:** What do they call themselves? How do they think about themselves? We don't need to know everything here – what matters is how it relates to your product.
- **Demographics:** Age, Gender, and Income might matter a lot or a little. In this case, age and gender mean next to nothing, and income might be a factor for buyers, but most people aren't buying this for fun, they're buying it for business.
- **Where & When:** Where are they when they use your product or service? When do they need it? What will they be doing when they use it? This might not seem important, but think about it, because it can make a difference later on.

Triggers – Attention & Interest

I haven't gone into detail on the “selling system” (funnels) aspect of the Universal Traffic Engine yet, but like all funnels, it follows the universally true pattern of “Attention, Interest, Desire, Action.”

That starts with getting attention and capturing the interest of your prospect, so we need to have some idea of what would get their attention.

- **Emotional:** What are the emotional triggers that would get their attention? Sometimes this is negative – they don't like it – but as long as our message agrees with their viewpoint, we can talk about it.

For inbound marketers, the biggies are Scary Change (Google replaces organic listings with Knowledge Boxes), Criticism of Beliefs (some blogger says that all SEO is spam), and “whatever everyone is talking about right now” – because if everyone is talking it must be important⁴.

- **Rational:** Rational triggers are things that get our attention because they matter for practical reasons. For inbound marketers / SEOs, breaking news (if it matters to what they do), case studies (which can help them do a better job), and tips/tools/techniques (likewise) all fall into this category.
- **Repellent:** Repellent messages, ideas, and topics are things that you want to avoid when talking to your avatar. Inbound marketers react strongly (and negatively) to spammy, hypey, and inaccurate information. It produces an emotional reaction, but not one that will help you make friends with them.

Triggers – Persuasion & Conversion

Once you have their attention, and you’ve determined that your prospect is interested (this is actually when they become a Prospect), your message changes to reflect the fact that you are now in a position to persuade them.

Note: sometimes, this transition happens very quickly, and sometimes it takes a while (and a lot of messages) to persuade and convert. Right now, we’re just worried about what the triggers are – what are the key messages they need to or want to receive, before they can make a decision to buy from you.

- **Emotional:** what are the emotional reasons why they would buy? What do they (would they) want to feel as a result of buying?

Inbound marketers like to feel like we’re on the cutting edge, we value recognition (from bosses, clients and peers), and we like to feel connected to a community... which can be difficult when what you do is not well understood by many people.

- **Rational:** what are the rational reasons why they would buy from you? These are the building blocks for your “selling argument” – the reasons why they should buy, and the ones they will cite after they buy, even if a large part of their buying decision was emotional.

For inbound marketers, we’re going to have to construct a pretty ironclad case

⁴ The Universal Traffic Engine approach is especially powerful in markets where there’s always a conversation going on – this isn’t a requirement, but it is very helpful.

that our software will help them get the results they're after, clearly enough that they can explain how it works to clients, peers, and employers – because the keys to the budget are not always in the marketer's hands.

- **Critical:** What are the things that they “have to” have? This is a checklist of “deal breakers” and deal makers.

To get inbound marketers to buy our software, we're going to have to convince them that they can confidently sell it to their decision-makers, that it will actually “do what is says on the tin” and that it's better than the alternatives they might have (like doing everything by hand).

These things do not have to be difficult to persuade people about – I mean it can't be all that hard if they're true - but you do need to know what they need to know, hear, and believe, so that you can get the messaging right.

Who/What Has Their Attention?

You were probably wondering when we were going to get around to Targeting – and we're getting close. If you're wondering how you're going to target people so you can deliver a message to them, it helps to think about who is already talking to them.

In a lot of markets (probably most markets), the answers in this section will be very useful in targeting, but in every case they will be useful in crafting a compelling set of messages for your prospects.

- **Trusted:** Means exactly what it says – who do they trust? What magazines do they read, what podcasts do they listen to, who do they get their information from?

For inbound marketers, this one is easy – it's Moz, Inbound, and whatever network of peers and thought leaders they follow – and there are a lot of them.

- **Aware:** Are there sources of information, or influence, that the prospect doesn't necessarily have any special affinity or trust for, but that they DO pay attention to? If there are, list them here.

Inbound marketers follow (and are aware of) a lot of sources, from industry news sites to official blogs from Google, Facebook, and others.

- **Involved:** Who else might be involved in their decision making and thought process? Depending on what you sell, spouses, bosses, co-workers, or even their kids can have a huge influence on their thinking.