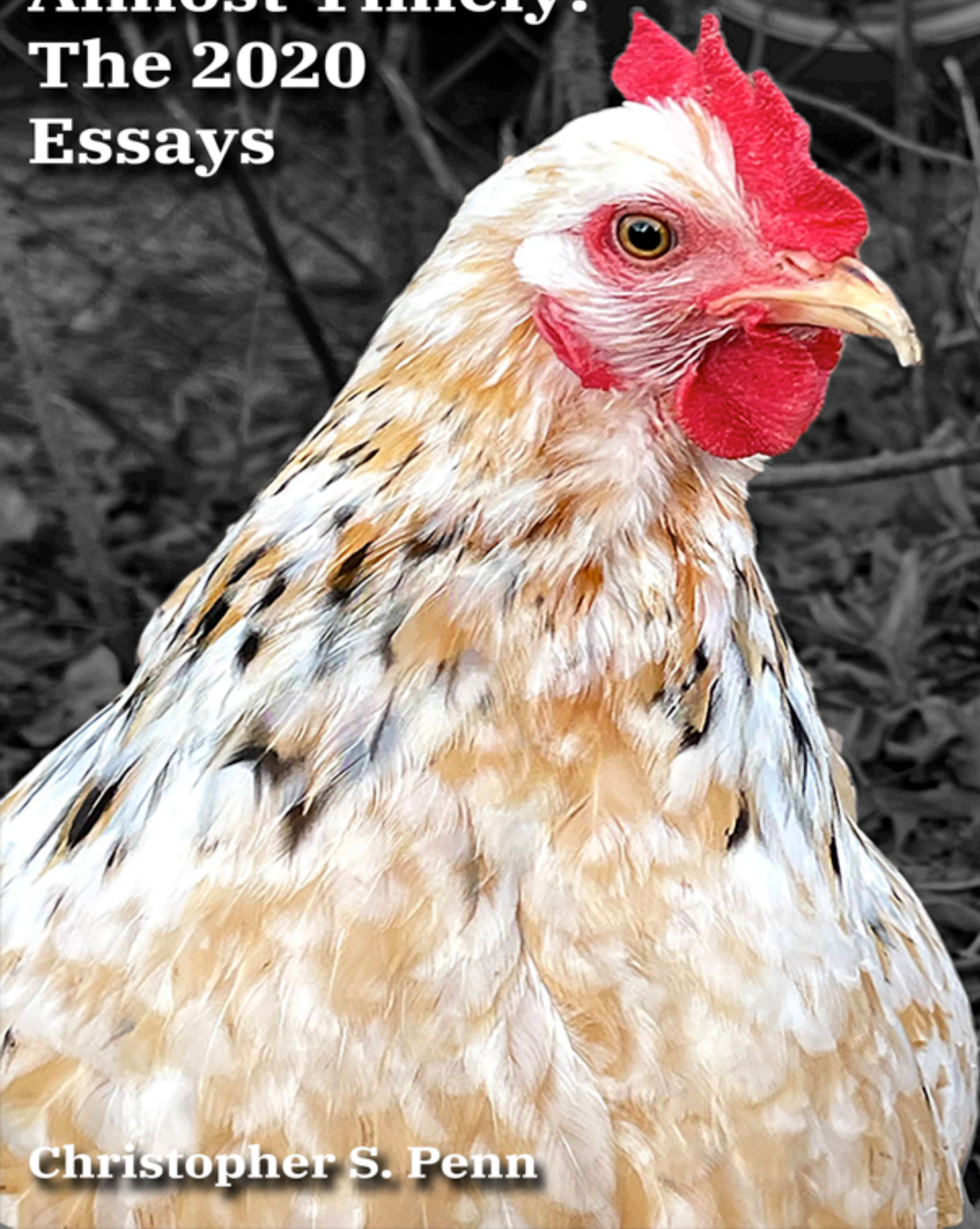# Almost Timely:
The 2020
Essays

Christopher S. Penn

Introduction

Welcome to Almost Timely: The 2020 Essays. At the beginning of every weekly newsletter, I start with an essay. Usually it's something on my mind from the previous week - current events, a client meeting's outcomes, a question someone asked - that becomes the cold open to every Almost Timely newsletter. At the end of the year, it's sort of a journal, a way to look back on the year that was.

This year's Essays reflect... well, the craziness that was 2020. From March 8 onward ("Preparing for a Pandemic") you'll see how the events of the year influenced what I had to share with you, ways to help you prepare for the year ahead.

Essays aren't just limited to marketing, either. Some are meditations, thought exercises for you to try out as you read through them, things to think about in your personal and professional life.

Oh, and as to why there's a chicken on the cover? That's symbolic of the year that was. In 2020, knowing we were going nowhere, we took the money we'd saved for a big vacation and instead spent it on a chicken coop and some chickens in early April. They've since grown up and are laying eggs every day, so I figured there was little better to symbolize the year than the nesting of a chicken, staying at home.

Thank you for being part of my community, for reading Almost Timely, and I hope this retrospective look at the essays of 2020 still helps make your marketing and life better in the months and years to come.

Stay safe, stay well, and stay scrappy.

Christopher S. Penn

December 29, 2020

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Are You Subscribed?

Are You Subscribed?

This book comes from my weekly newsletter, Almost Timely. Each week, I publish original essays, curated news about marketing, analytics, data science, AI, social media, content marketing, media and PR, plus other interesting things, along with videos and podcast episodes to enjoy. It's a way to get caught up on the week's news quickly and easily.

If you've received a copy of this eBook and you're NOT subscribed to Almost Timely, you'll probably have to wait a year to read the next set of essays, so why not beat the wait and get the essays as they're published?

Subscribe today to Almost Timely. It publishes on Sundays, is free of cost, and will keep you up to date on what's happening in marketing.

Subscribe at https://www.christopherspenn.com/newsletter today.

Data Without Decisions

January 5, 2020

Data, with no decisions, is distraction.

[*Print that out and hang that on your office wall*](). Make it part of your marketing data science and data analytics mantra for this year.

What does it mean?

We're swimming in data. We've got enough of it (though the quality may be questionable).

And yet... 60% of CMOs don't use data to make decisions in their companies. We spend about 8 cents on the dollar on data and analytics, yet leveraging data in your marketing delivers higher returns than social media and mobile marketing combined. (August 2019 CMO Survey)

Why aren't we doing more with data? The problem, most of the time, isn't data. *It's everything else around the data.*

Imagine data was an uncommon foodstuff, like bulgur. Suppose you had some bulgur, and you weren't sure what to do with it. Maybe you've never seen it before, or heard of it, but you know you need to do something with it. Is the solution to your problem to put another barrel of bulgur in your pantry? Maybe an entire truckload?

No! That's ridiculous, isn't it? The problem is that we don't know what it is or what outcome we should be aiming for. We don't have recipes. We don't have the right pots and pans. We don't have photos of what it should look like. We've never tasted it in a dish. The solution is to improve our knowledge, not dump more bulgur in the

kitchen.

Yet... that's EXACTLY what we do with data, and data tools, isn't it? Oh, your analytics aren't working? Add more data! Your dashboards aren't insightful? Here are 5 new dashboard tools, each more confusing than the last! We add more, we buy more, we throw more stuff on the pile without ever addressing the underlying problem, and then we wonder why we're overwhelmed.

The answer to your data problems is identical to the bulgur problem: learn what to do with it, how to process it, how to make something useful from it. Gather recipes. Gather outcomes. Then address your knowledge gap to make more of the data you already have, rather than throwing more on top of the pile.

Beware of Gurus

January 12, 2020

People love to use words like guru, master, etc. in many different applications:

- 615,148 people on LinkedIn use the word expert in their profile title
- 576,420 use master
- 114,447 people use guru
- 5,250 people use ninja
- 1,458 people use Jedi

That's a lot of people who are claiming mastery, in one form or another. But what does that mastery mean?

As someone who has been practicing the martial arts for 30 years - and is still not a master of anything - I'd submit that mastery isn't necessarily being good at something. Lots of people are good at lots of things, and that's desirable. You want people who are proficient, creative, and competent.

But when I think of the masters I know - my teachers and their teachers - it isn't their ability to do something right that defines them as masters. It's their ability to know and flow with a situation when things go wrong that defines their mastery. When a technique comes apart, when an attacker does something unpredictable, when a second or third attacker enters the fray, these master practitioners simply go with the flow, adapt, and prevail.

This quality of mastery, the ability to deal with the unexpected and the incorrect, is also what separates us from robots and AI. Today, robots and AI can do tasks very proficiently as long as the task is

repetitive and predictable. When things go off the rails, they fail - badly. In the AI world, this is know as an adversarial attack, when you feed an AI bad data and the model falls apart.

How does one achieve such mastery? By practicing and screwing up a whole bunch, over years or even decades.

What do you do with this knowledge? First, **be cautious about the title you claim** on LinkedIn, in social media, in your own marketing and personal brand. Better to be specific about your competencies than the overly broad 'expert' claim.

Second, when interviewing people who claim such lofty titles, consider **pivoting your interview questions to focus on scenarios where things go wrong**, and ascertain how valid their answers are. For example, if someone claims they're a Google Analytics expert, ask them how they'd deal with an attribution model that runs contrary to the data you see in your CRM. You'll very quickly separate the real experts from the fluff.

Third and finally, **set yourself on a path to mastery** by putting in the hours and the effort to learn your tools, techniques, tactics, and strategies - and focus on what's likely to go wrong and how you'll recover. That's what will build durable skills and thinking for your future.

Disbelieving Data

January 19, 2020

"I don't want to believe your data."

A friend said this to me recently, in a non-work context, but it stuck with me. I don't want to believe your data - a way of saying, I don't want to believe this set of facts, because it disagrees with my current worldview.

On the surface, it seems relatively harmless, especially since the conversation was not about work. Nothing's on the line, no harm will come if this person does or does not believe in the data I was showing. So why did it bother me?

It bothers me because this attitude is incredibly damaging to how effective we can be. Leaving aside society and politics (where this attitude is astonishingly prevalent), we still see this mindset all the time in business and marketing. You make a presentation to the top dogs in your organization with data, analysis, and insights, maybe even a recommended course of action, and then one of them says, "Well, that's nice, but that's not how I feel, so we'll do it my way." We've all been in that situation before.

When I was younger and more idealistic, I thought that with a change in messaging, a change in technique, a change in framing that you could persuade someone to alter their worldview and look at things from a different perspective. But over the years, I've come to realize that this isn't true for the most part. People tend to fall into either the category of someone who has the mental flexibility and agility to accept multiple perspectives, or someone who doesn't - and these attributes typically are baked into the personality of the person.

Those who can be persuaded, and those who cannot. Very often, those who cannot approach their worldview with a rigidity that borders on religious zeal, and there's no changing that.

So, how do we deal with this situation? We can't, after all, just quit or change jobs every time we run into a fact-resistant person. My answer comes from the martial arts. **We can't change what our opponent does. We can only change what we do, and we can only work with what we're given.** Sometimes, we can clash head-on, if we are in a position of significant advantage. Most of the time, we have to figure out how to blend with their perspective, morph and disguise what we're doing to fit the person we're working with. If we understand someone's motivations and beliefs, like the parent hiding vegetables in the dinner, we can stay true to our commitment to facts, data, and analytics and still deliver impact.

If you're a data-minded marketer - and you probably are - practice for this kind of challenge. How do you restructure what you're doing so that it aligns with how someone else feels and believes - but ultimately you get your way?

Data As Advantage

January 26, 2020

A lesson in patience. The other night, I was continuing my coding and investigation of B2B influencers, and the most recent challenge was extracting data from the Twitter API for things like basic account data and photos. Twitter is understandably a little stingy when it comes to API data; you can ask for data 180 accounts at a time, but limited to every 15 minutes. Got a thousand accounts to analyze? The data pull will take 83 minutes. Now, extend that out to thousands or even tens of thousands of data points, and you're talking a really long wait.

These data limitations mean a lot of waiting around and/or doing other things while you wait. This is the part of data science that none of the books, videos, courses, articles, etc. ever talk about. A lot of data science is gathering and preparing the data. The algorithms, the techniques, the sexy stuff is a tiny fraction of the overall process and is arguably the easiest. It takes just a few minutes to run most of the major data science and machine learning algorithms. It's getting the data ready - the ingredients - that takes the longest.

Imagine you owned a farm and a restaurant, a real farm-to-table enterprise where you serve everything from the farm. To serve even a basic dish like boiled rice would take months from the planting of the seeds to harvesting and preparing the food. That analogy transfers well to data science. You have to find or create the data, extract it, clean it, and prepare it before you can ever begin to cook with it. The sooner you start farming, the sooner your crops will be ready.

This is also why early adopters of data science and machine learning have a significant strategic advantage. Continuing the farm analogy, if you start early, your first harvest is ready while others are just

planting their crops, and like nature, there are limits to how fast you can make that process go. Competitors either have to buy your crops (data) or wait until theirs matures. That's why data hegemonies like Google, Facebook, Amazon, etc. have such an insurmountable advantage to competitors. They have literal decades of data to work with, and their data science and machine learning practices are equally advanced. A real competitor, a true challenger to their businesses will need its own data compete with them. The only likely way they'll be disrupted is either collapse from rot within, or a massive change in consumer behavior that suddenly disadvantages them.

The takeaway here is that the sooner you start collecting clean, usable data, the greater your competitive advantage, especially if your competition hasn't started yet.O

Paying Attention

February 2, 2020

Pay attention.

You've heard that a thousand times. So have I, from parents to teachers to coworkers. Pay attention. Which is a really funny expression, because unlike other forms of currency, we don't ever really pay, do we? It's not a tangible thing we can hand to someone else. We more or less just direct our attention.

Yet the expression is quite apt. When we pay attention, we are indeed paying - with our time, with our energy, with our mindshare - to something else. We give space in our thoughts to someone else.

Does this matter?

In the Buddhist tradition I practice, thought becomes word. Word becomes action. What we think, how we think, directly becomes a part of how we interact with the world, the choices we make, the things we fight for or against.

Those decisions become the true forms of payment, don't they? If we claim to support climate change, but our actions run opposite to that by the vehicle we drive, the place we live, the vendors we shop from, then we don't live up to our claims. That failure to live up begins with our thoughts, with what we pay attention to. We pay less attention to our climate impact and more attention to our convenience or comfort. We paid the wrong people. If we claim to support equality of a certain group, but we dine at establishments that donate to oppose that group and vote for legislators who make life for that group harder, it's because we're paying - in some cases literally - to the

wrong things.

As marketers, we strive to have customers pay attention to us. What have we done to earn that space in their minds, and how can we expand on the thoughts they've given us? The sustainable way to do that is by giving them value disproportionate to what they're paying. Yet, when you look at most marketing materials, the opposite is true. We as consumers get garbage and are asked by our fellow marketers to pay for it.

As citizens, what do you pay attention to? Who do you pay, and are they spending what you've given them on things you want to see more of in the world? If the answer is no, then stop paying them and pay someone else your attention, your speech, and your actions.

We've all heard the cliche "you get what you pay for". It's 100% true - and it begins with what you pay attention to.

Blatant Ad: Trust Insights Marketing Strategic Audit

Blatant Ad: Trust Insights Marketing Strategic Audit

Every year, Scott Brinker and company diagram out the number of companies and vendors in the marketing technology space, and every year, the universe of marketing technology gets bigger and bigger. As of 2020, there were over 8,000 vendors to sell you point solutions for nearly any marketing problem.

The challenge is, tools are just 25% of the puzzle. We also need to integrate with the people we work with, the processes we use to get results, and the purpose of our marketing - and no software will fix those.

My company, Trust Insights, specializes in identifying and fixing your biggest marketing problems, starting with the tools you use, the processes you've got in place to get answers from your software, the skills of the people you work with and for, and how well aligned your marketing is to your business goals.

If you've been struggling to get answers out of your marketing technology...

If you've hit a wall on results generated because of skills gaps...

If you're working longer and harder without more results to show for it...

If the powers that be don't understand the value of what you do...

Let us help you solve these problems. From figuring out what's gone wrong in your marketing technology to helping you transition to new ways, better ways of running your marketing, we'll help you set up for success in 2021 and beyond.

Schedule a free 30 minute consultation with the Trust Insights team today:

http://trustinsights.ai/booknow

Privilege

Privilege

February 9, 2020

What is privilege?

One of the things on my mind recently was figuring out how to reconcile the concept of privilege with the concept of individual performance. Broadly, **privilege means that you have advantageous circumstances, often beyond your control, that give you a head start in a given situation**. Common types of privilege are based on race, gender, religion, etc. Whether it's customers responding more to your ads based on the skin color of the people who appear in them to whether or not you get the job because the interviewer has a bias towards or against you, privilege is a part of life.

Likewise, **individual performance, skills, and effort matter**. Someone from an advantageous background can still be a dud. Someone who strives their mightiest towards a goal can meet or exceed it despite the odds being stacked against them. When my partner and CEO Katie Robbert and I were starting Trust Insights, we courted investors for a brief period of time to see if we could obtain funding. Two of the seven investors we spoke to said to our faces that *they refused to fund a firm that had a woman CEO*, an example of the odds being against you from the start, but succeeding anyway.

So, **how do we reconcile people who succeed against the odds versus people who succeed with the odds in their favor?** The closest analogy I can come up with is to imagine you have two flower pots. One is filled with rich soil, the other with sand. You take a large packet of seeds and scatter half in each pot. One pot is clearly more advantageous for growth, but that won't guarantee a robust crop - some of the seeds will still be duds no matter what. The pot that is

poor soil may still grow some healthy plants despite the disadvantage, too. But if you had a choice about which pot you'd want to grow life-sustaining food in, I can't imagine anyone who would willingly choose the second pot.

How do you create a more equitable environment for your seeds? You could, perhaps, mix the two soils together, but then you have mediocrity all around. You could transplant the seeds that survive in the poor soil into the rich soil, but you'd eventually run out of room. The long-term, sustainable answer if you want to maximize growth for all your seeds is to build up the soil in the second pot so that it's as healthful as the first pot.

How do we make this happen? In the context of business, it means **ensuring your employees truly have equal opportunities within the organization**, and that everyone's in the same pot, metaphorically. The only discriminating criteria for anything like promotions, bonuses, etc. should be performance towards objectives, and any two people in the same role should have the same business objectives. In the context of marketing, it means **removing as many non-relevant obstacles as possible to allow your customers to buy from you**. For example, if you have sales staff, monitor them to ensure they treat every customer identically, with the same civility and willingness to help, regardless of surface characteristics. The only color that matters in business is the color of money; if a customer wants to buy, sell to them.

Finally, in the context of being a human being, **it means confronting your biases**. Some of them will be painful to admit, even if it's just to yourself, because they will conflict with your self-image, an image that we all have that we are fundamentally good people. If you want to believe in equality, but secretly, in your heart, you believe that one group of people defined on a surface characteristic is superior to another, that admission will be painful - but if you don't confront it, your bias will show up in your actions. Admitting that bias and then beginning to tackle it by diving into what scares you will heal that very deep wound in your heart and mind, making you happier and

also profoundly more effective in business. Your fear will no longer be your jailor.

The good news is that it's easier than ever to do this. As much as tools like social media can spread distrust and hate, they can also foster new connections and new understanding. You and I just have to make the effort to use the tools for good, for bettering ourselves.

We have a vested self-interest in seeing every flower pot be filled with rich soil, so that we can enjoy healthful experiences together. It's the only sustainable way to maximize growth, profits, and our happiness.

February 16, 2020

Teach me how to do that!

I was discussing recently with some friends online about how I do my link shortening and content curation. I got really tired of manually curating content and built a system that does it for me, much of which you see in this newsletter and in my social media feeds. When my friends heard of this, they said the above - teach me how to do that.

The challenge is, there isn't a "that" to teach. A system like the one I described is a confluence of many different skills - database management, coding, domain expertise, statistical computation, even operating system utilities. It's not a discrete skill that can be taught, like teaching someone how to paint daisies or cook a French omelette. To teach someone how to build their own system, I'd have to teach them the individual skills that make up the system. Off the top of my head, they'd need to learn:

- SQL database administration
- RSS/XML parsing in a scripting language like R or PHP
- Database connectivity in code
- Natural language processing in R or Python
- Tagging and classification in R or Python
- SQL database upserts in R or Python
- Writing data from a database into Markdown
- Parsing Markdown to CSV or HTML files

As you can see, it's a mishmash of different skills. It's impossible to

teach it in isolation - you have to learn all the supporting skills as well.

So, what's the point of this story, if you can't learn to build my system as a discrete skill? Because this is an amalgamation of a variety of different skills I've picked up along the way, **it's a difficult system to replicate**. That makes it something of a competitive advantage, and therein lies the takeaway for you. Consider your own life experiences, your own skills you've acquired along the way. What combinations of those skills could you put together to create a system that would be nearly unassailable? How could you combine all that you are and all that you know such that a competitor couldn't dissect your outcomes easily, if at all?

Your skills combinations don't have to be technical in nature; someone with a command of anthropology, art, and creative writing could create a system of building compelling content that very few others could successfully imitate, because you wouldn't overtly see the machinery that creates the outcomes - just that this person's writing seems to be really powerful and influential. Someone with a command of psychology, management skills, and finance could create an employee compensation system that achieved remarkable levels of performance from staff in ways that others could only poorly imitate if they didn't have the underlying skills and talents.

So ask yourself: what can you combine to build a system with better outputs than anyone else, a system that they'll drive themselves crazy trying to imitate? That's your ace in the hole - **bet big on your unique combination of talents**.

The Role of Expertise

February 23, 2020

At one of the webinars I did last week on data science, someone asked, "*What do you do if you don't want to become a data scientist? Is there still a place for me in the new world?*"

The answer is yes. Yes, there's a place for people who aren't data experts, as long as you're expert in something. Data science and its cousins, data analytics, data engineering, machine learning, artificial intelligence, etc. are all horizontal professions, meaning they can apply to any industry - just like marketing, finance, law, etc.

Thus, because it's a horizontal, someone who's a data scientist may not have domain expertise in your area, your industry, your niche. Over the past few weeks, I've been toying around with the analytical code published by major universities like Johns Hopkins University's Infectious Disease Detection group. They're scientists dealing with real life-or-death matters like determining just how deadly the new COVID19 coronavirus is. I picked up their R code and even though I am a proficient coder in the R statistical programming language, it took me a few minutes to read their code and I'll be blunt: I still don't understand some of it. I understand the math in they're doing, but not the reasons why.

Why? *Because I have no domain expertise in epidemiology and infectious diseases*. Without that domain expertise, I can read and run their code, but not sensibly modify, improve, or adapt their code to anything meaningful. I'd need some background in epidemiology before I could understand the choices they were making in their software.

This, then, is the inspiring message for everyone: **there's a place for**

expertise of every kind in a machine learning and AI world. People building algorithms and artificial intelligence still need domain expertise on tap to build - and question - assumptions that the machines will be making on our behalf. You can't simply take data from a discipline, toss it to a machine, apply some standard best practices with no customization, and expect great results. I saw one charlatan running a machine learning competition to build better coronavirus detection software using AI rather than the methods being used by the top disease experts in the world. Much as I encourage people to dabble, to experiment, to try new things, this competition was ridiculous. Without knowing how disease works, how it spreads, and how a virus can have varying transmissibility, you'd be building a machine learning model that will make questionable choices at best.

Questionable choices are fine when you're allocating pay-per-click marketing dollars on one set of keywords or another. **Questionable choices are unacceptable when it's literally someone's life or death.**

So, **whatever your expertise is, keep honing it**. As you partner with data scientists and machine learning engineers, you'll leverage that expertise to not only create new algorithms faster, but deliver much higher quality than the machines guessing on their own.

Show Yourself

March 1, 2020

I've become a bit of a Frozen 2 fanatic the last few weeks, since finally seeing the film. For those unfamiliar, it was 2019's sequel to the 2013 hit, Frozen. I'll skip past all the reasons I loved it and go to the point.

There's a line in one of the songs from the movie that has stuck with me every day since. When one of the protagonists, Elsa, goes in search of the source of her magical powers, she sings, "*Here I am, I've come so far. You are the answer I've waited for all of my life*". Shortly thereafter, the mystical source of her power sings back, "*Show yourself! Step into your power. Grow yourself into something new. You are the one you've been waiting for all of your life!*"

The mystical source says, in short - your magic comes from you. It's not from somewhere else. It's not some magical third party bestowing it on you. It's you.

I love this rather musical lesson because it applies to all of us. Too many of us, in marketing, in business, in life, are expecting something else, something external to make magic happen. We look for a third party to do it for us, from spirits of the earth to deities in the sky to artificial intelligences.

That's not where your power comes from, not the power you use every day to make your life better, your work better. Your power comes from you, from your willingness to grow into something new. Statistics and analytics prowess won't magically appear in your head overnight. Excellence at marketing (or anything) is never an accident.

The next time you wonder what's next, what to pay attention to,

what's going to generate the results you're looking for, don't start by looking outside. Look within you.

As the song goes, you are the one you've been waiting for all of your life. Show yourself what you can do!

Preparing for a Pandemic

March 8, 2020

How bad will it get?

Let's talk business and marketing as it relates to the COVID19 pandemic and inevitable recession. Many people have said that there's no way to tell what will happen, and I used to believe that until I learned about Event 201. Last fall, Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security put on a symposium simulating a global pandemic from a coronavirus to model, with some of the brightest professionals in the field, the likely impacts and outcomes of a pandemic. [It was called Event 201 (watch part of the video here)](). In this highly realistic simulation of a coronavirus pandemic, how bad did leading experts see things getting?

Event 201 forecasted a planetary GDP decline of -11% in year 1 of the pandemic, and -25% in year 2, spurred by supply chain issues and a lack of movement due to travel restrictions. The economic impact was likened to the Great Depression.

Go ahead and grab that bottle of wine/beer for a sec. I did when I watched the video linked above. I said a couple of weeks ago that March was make or break month, especially in the United States, but also in Europe and the Middle East. It's going to be rough seas for a while; at least a year, possibly much longer. Some experts said the effects may linger up to a decade.

So the next question is, what do you do about it?

Pay attention to human behavior. People panic. We've seen this the past few weeks in nations around the world. People panic and they do

crazy stuff, like hoarding toilet paper. (I still can't figure that one out - why not hoard something more useful, like food?) You and I, being folks who believe in data, are probably more rational than most. So, what will the irrational moves be that people will make, and how can we get ahead of them?

Here's a simple example: if you have financial responsibility for a business, **open a business line of credit right now**. Today. Apply online for one, and get it locked in ASAP. When the panic hits lending, you don't want to be without a lifeline. Get a business line of credit - remembering that you pay nothing until you use it - so that if you find, 9 months from now, you have to make payroll and the receivables aren't there, that you have a last line of defense to draw on. The moment the panic hits lending, credit availability will be gone faster than hand sanitizer.

Think about your marketing. What will people do when they panic? For sure, purchase intent will go down. Willingness to commit, to sign contracts will vanish. People will become crazy risk-averse. What can you do to prepare for that, from locking in contracts with customers now to getting prepayments on receivables?

Pandemic Projections

Pandemic Projections

March 15, 2020

There are two questions about the pandemic right now: **when will it be over, and how bad will it be?**

[NeherLab at the University of Basel has an outstanding scenario modeler](#) based on the latest data to help model the outbreak. When I ran the current scenario earlier today, we see a **peak at the end of May**, with a decline through the summer and then the majority of the pandemic over by the fall. With current actions and policies, the United States loses about 1.76M citizens to the pandemic. Try the simulation for your country if available, or put in your country's demographic data.
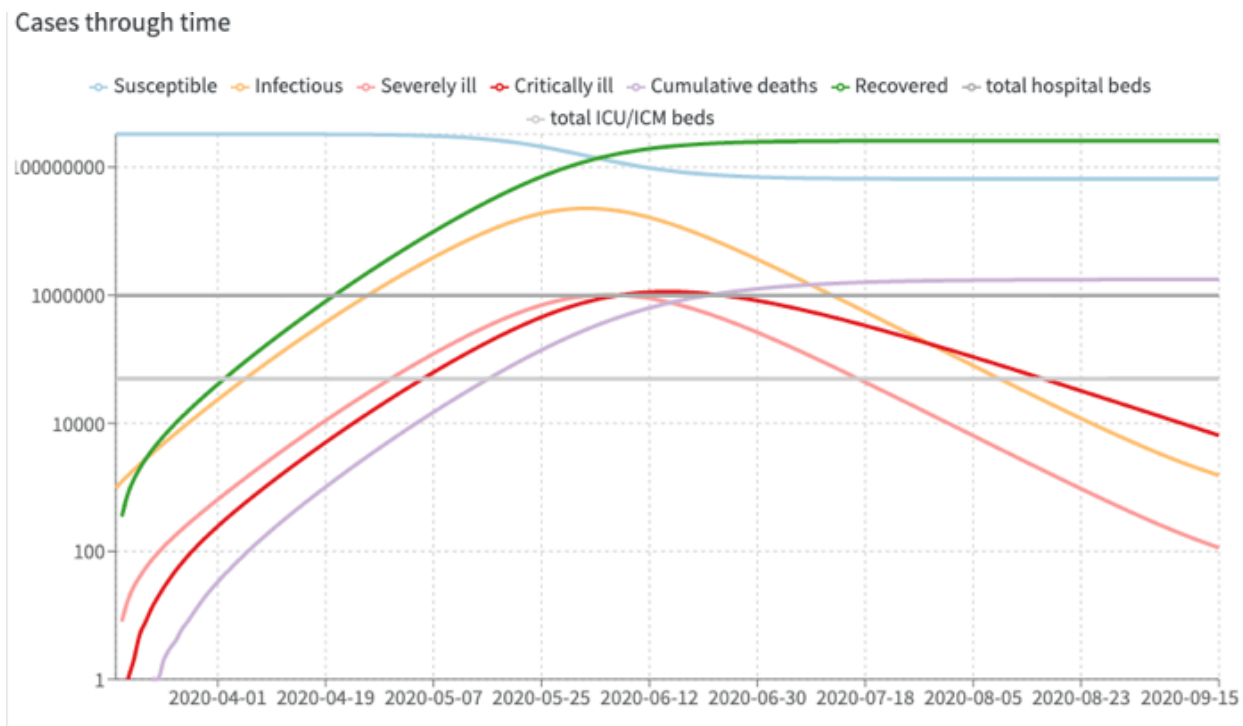
The economic effects will last longer than that, especially for

consumer goods. The reason is that while demand will become stored, some demand isn't elastic - some demand either happens or not, without deferral. For example, if you can't go to your favorite sandwich shop for lunch until after the pandemic, what will happen once it's over? You will go back to your favorite sandwich shop and start eating sandwiches. But you won't buy two month's worth of sandwiches on that first day. The demand that was lost during the pandemic isn't recovered.

Thus, businesses will find themselves in a crunch and struggling to recover even after consumer spending recovers. The net effect of this will be drastic swings in unemployment, for the worse.

So, what does this mean for you? What should you do about it? If you're an employee of a company, **now is the time to be aggressively networking**, polishing your LinkedIn profile, getting interview-ready, and preparing for the inevitable belt-tightening that will come after the pandemic is over. Build your support network now, while people are virtual and willing to sit down over video chat for coffees, lunches, etc. Prepare, prepare, prepare for the economic turmoil as readily as you prepared for the pandemic itself.

If you're an owner, **shore up your finances as best as possible** by pulling the two levers you have: reduce costs, increase revenues. Find as many opportunities to earn customers as possible. During the pandemic period itself, be of public service however you can be, grow your audience, build your lists, and position yourself to take advantage of demand when it does resume.

Late 2020 edit: thankfully, Neherlab's initial projections were off, by a decent margin. The transmissibility rate of SARS-CoV-2 turned out to be much lower outside of the lab than initially thought, which meant that it spread more slowly. We could theoretically still end up with the total number of fatalities if it mutates substantially, but as of late 2020, with vaccines in deployment, it's fortunately looking like we will have far fewer losses than initially projected. The long term effects are still unknown.

Leading Indicators

March 22, 2020

There are three types of indicators: **leading, actual, and trailing** - before, now, and after. In marketing, these are metrics that tell us what's likely to happen, what's happening now, and what happened.

Very often, **we are measured on trailing indicators** because they tend to be the consequences we care about most. Sales. Revenue. Customers. These are consequences of our actions and they can take a long time to happen. This, we tend to measure **intermediary metrics** like leads or shopping carts or feet in the store. These are metrics that have a high probability of achieving the trailing metric we care about.

What leads to those intermediary metrics are **leading indicators**. Brand searches, website traffic, email list subscriptions are examples of these leading indicators. The chain of evidence is weaker still but in many cases correlated to the intermediary metrics, which are in turn correlated to the ultimate outcomes. We measure them for forecasting purposes, to determine what is likely to happen. If website traffic is down, chances are leads will be down in time, sales will go down, and revenue will go down.

When I heard that major cities in the United States are stopping testing for COVID-19, I thought it was - is - insanity. Why? Because testing and finding cases is your leading indicator of the disease. It's how you forecast, because in 2-3 weeks, 20% of those who tested positive will need hospital care, and 2-3% will die. By giving up on a leading indicator, we will only have hospital admissions and deaths to judge the impact - and instead of flattening the curve, we are fattening the curve. Hospitals in turn have no advance warning to

forecast how many beds they will need, and thus they will be more easily overwhelmed.

Can you imagine running your business with no insights on website traffic, email signups, or form fills? Can you imagine trying to run marketing with visibility only into the middle and bottom of the funnel? Now imagine that's literally life for death and you see where we are at this critical time.

What can you do about it? From your couch (#stayhome), fire up your device of choice and contact your national, state/province, and local representatives of whatever nation you reside in, urging INCREASED testing, not decreased. Stopping testing for the disease is essentially surrendering to it, waving the white flag on the field of battle. Invoke whatever patriotic imagery and prose that strikes you, but urge them to keep testing no matter what.

Countries like South Korea are winning the war with data, analytics, insights, and strategy. Everyone else has the same potential, but only if we use the tools and data we have available to us.

And please, in your own business and marketing, develop and get clear on what your leading, actual, and lagging indicators are - and measure the daylights out of them. It's how you'll get through the economic downturn that is starting now.

Fighting Boredom

March 29, 2020

I'm astonished at the number of people who've said that during this crisis. [I totally understand afraid. Anxious. Fearful. Angry. Despondent. Depressed. Circumstances warrant those and more.](#) But bored?

Here's the good news, if you know someone who's bored. The device you're reading this on is the gateway to nearly limitless knowledge, entertainment, and exploration. The only thing it doesn't supply is motivation to overcome that boredom.

Boredom isn't lack of opportunity, but lack of vision. We became comfortable in our boundaries, in our routines, in our social circles. We put on blinders to filter out so much of the information flying at our heads every day, but in doing so cut ourselves off from possibilities and serendipity online, getting our fill of that in the physical world. Now that the physical world is substantially restricted, *we forget how to create serendipity in the virtual world* - especially when algorithms are constantly trying to give us more of what we're already comfortable with. So, how do we break the algorithmic hold, take off our algorithmic blinders? We go with the powers of random and now.

1. **Explore**. Fire up [Google Earth](#). Hit the I'm Feeling Lucky button on the left side, that looks like a die. You'll find new, interesting, and exciting places around the world to explore, many in simulated 3-D, all from the comfort of your couch. Go places you'd never be able to afford to go. Go visit the Maldives, or see Singapore, or visit a remote village in Africa.

2. **Read**. Feel like reading outside the lines? Take your favorite franchise - movie, video game, TV series, etc. - and hit up sites like FanFiction.net or Archive Of Our Own. Search for your favorite franchise and sort by reviews or ratings in descending order, and you'll find a treasure trove of amazing writing (and plenty of duds, too - it's the Internet) by people who love that universe just as much as you, and want to put your favorite characters in new and different settings.

3. **Watch live**. Go to places like YouTube's Live Now, Instagram, or Twitch and see what's happening around the world. Take your pick of nearly any genre and watch live what other people are doing. Pick something you wouldn't normally watch.

4. **Learn**. When you've reached your saturation point for entertainment, you have literally endless amounts of education available. Learn yoga with Down Dog (free until the end of April), meditation, another language, how to cook - you name it, you can learn it from a credible source. During this crisis, more content creators than ever are giving away their materials for free. Pick something you wouldn't normally learn. If you're in marketing, watch anything BUT marketing. If you love to cook, watch some music performance.

5. **Connect**. Drop in on a friend with the video or audio conferencing software of your choice. Here's an easy way to find a conversation you probably haven't had recently. Look at current or upcoming friends' birthdays on Facebook/Twitter/ etc. and see whose birthday is soon. Pick someone from that list (assuming you actually know them) and ping them for a call. On Instagram, go to your profile, then tap on the number of accounts you're following. You'll see two categories - least interacted with and most shown in feed. Choose least interacted with and pick someone in there that you're following, that you have a personal relationship with, and drop them a line.

This is how we break out of the ruts we create for ourselves. Embrace a bit of random to bust boredom and open your mind to new possibilities. The world is but a tap or two away.

Finding Happiness

April 5, 2020

Where does your happiness come from?

Over the past few weeks, as more and more of the world has entered quarantines to slow down the spread of COVID-19, I've seen more friends express their unhappiness than ever before at the change in circumstances. To be sure, these are not happy times. Millions of infections, tens of thousands of deaths, job losses, and a political class in many nations that seems content to fiddle while the world burns. These are certainly not circumstances that beget happiness, so to insist that anyone pretend to be happy is absurd.

But that's not what I was pondering, and maybe you might want to ponder, too. Where does your happiness come from? When times are good, what makes you happy?

There's a lot to be missed from the world that was, yes. **But how much of that was truly essential to our happiness?**

There's a lot left to be desired about the world that is, now. **But how much of it is truly damaging to our happiness?**

In some ways, this is a magical time for anyone who wants to understand themselves, because so much of what is "normal" has been stripped away, leaving us only with the essentials: ourselves. What is left when everything else is taken away is closer to who we really are. Just as wildlife returns to our cities when we are quiet, our true natures return to us when we are quiet.

I remember a quote from the very old TV series, Kung Fu, that has stuck with me over the decades: *"If I tell you that you are not within a*

prison, but the prison is within you, can you believe that?"

We may be in the situation we're in for some time; our lockdown for the good of everyone can start to feel like imprisonment. So, consider that quote carefully. Are you within the prison, or is the prison within you? If you're able to, identify the things that make you happy, and see how much of that comes from within. If you dig deep and find what makes you happy inside of yourself (as opposed to what's outside in the world), you may be able to find that same happiness in any situation - and the prison mindset will vanish, even if you are physically confined to where you are.

Again, this is not to say we ignore reality. Some very close friends have lost their health, their jobs, their livelihoods, and they are right and natural to be unhappy. But even in the middle of all that, could you still find happiness inside yourself in some way?

If you could, imagine how much more powerful you will be when the world starts back up. **You will have found happiness without leaning on the world to provide it, and that is freedom.**

I hope you find your freedom.

Inside vs Outside

Inside vs. Outside

April 12, 2020

Which world are you in?

There are fundamentally two worlds we can exist in. There's the **outside world** - which, as you've noticed, is kind of a hot mess right now. Then there's the **inside world**, the world that exists in your mind.

The outside world is largely **outside of your control**. That's the best way to describe it - all the things beyond your control, all the things that are external to you. They exist, they influence you, they impact you; it'd be the height of foolishness to claim that they don't.

The inside world is largely **under your control**. It's who you are, what you think, how you feel, your entire existence.

The outside world is **difficult to change**. We do it, by participating in the world, but for most of us, it's not something we ever have a massive impact on. Only a handful of people in every generation out of the millions born have massive impact on the outside world at an individual level.

The inside world can **change in a single thought**. You've experienced these changes inside your world - the moment you fell in love. The moment someone broke your heart. The moment a child was born. The moment a loved one died. We even have cliches for these events - they rocked your world, for good or bad. That's the inside world, changing as fast as our minds.

Here's the great news. The outside world is, as mentioned, a royally hot mess at the moment. For many of us, it - and our withdrawal from

it - is a source of great pain. We're sheltering in place from it, and for good reason.

The inside world is where we need to spend our time, and we have far more control over it than ever before. When you dive into a great book, how easy is it to lose yourself in the world the author created? When you binge watch a series on Hulu or Netflix, how easily do you lose track of the hours? When you cook a favorite dish, cuddle with a beloved pet, start singing songs from your adolescent years, perform some yoga, relax with meditation - all these are triggers for your inside world, control mechanisms you have at your fingertips to change that inside world to what you want to feel.

People will often describe those experiences as losing themselves - lose yourself in a great book, for example. That's exactly what you're doing. For a brief period of time, the subjective you vanishes from your mind as you change worlds. Your conscious you lives most of the time in the outside world, but can go inside when directed to do so, like with a great book.

If you want to lessen the pain that the outside world inflicts on you, give some more time and focus to your inside world. Seize control over it, change the channel, take charge of it, and live in a world that gives you joy. It's your world, literally, so do whatever you can to make it a joyful one. The more you own your world, the happier you'll be.

Creating Change

April 19, 2020

Different comes from change.

One of the oldest saws in sales and marketing is the unique selling proposition. You've heard this a million different ways - what's unique, what's special, what's different about our product or service compared to every other product or service offered in our space. Entire consulting firms exist to help others determine what that unique selling proposition is - and yet, when we line up all the usual suspects in a space, what do we get?

"We are the only flexible, scalable, agile turnkey solution provider…"

"Our unique value is our most important asset: our people…"

Tropes, the lot of them. Business tropes, as opposed to entertainment tropes, but still tropes. I could feel your eyes rolling just now, as you read them and probably threw up in your mouth a little. They still all sound the same, and all fail the white label test. If you scraped the logo off your marketing, could it accurately describe your direct competitors? "Brewed for those who love coffee." Which coffee chain does this describe? Which coffee chain could it describe? All of them. "Inspire the world, change the future", from a major technology company. Which one? Again, all of them, really.

So, how do we create different? **We have to change**. We have to force ourselves to do something very, very different to break out of the patterns we're already in, and that means making ourselves uncomfortable, going places we're not accustomed to, doing things differently. Some of us have had that experience recently; the

pandemic certainly has changed how we do business, and even how we communicate. You've seen more of your colleagues' houses and lives than you ever realistically expected to see in the last 6 weeks, haven't you?

I'll give you a couple personal examples. I'm teaching myself Adobe After Effects, the post-production video software, at the moment. I'm really bad at it. REALLY bad. Like, until recently, "open the application and stare in muted horror for a moment until I get my bearings" bad. I imagine this is how people feel when they open R Studio or IBM Watson Studio. After a few basic projects and YouTube tutorials, that sense of horror has faded to uncomfortable familiarity, like the second or third time you met your significant other's family. You still look for the exit more than you probably should, but you can deal with it better.

But my experiences with Adobe After Effects are opening me up to new ways of thinking about how I do video, from recording to editing to how it should look. It changed my eyes, too. When I watch other people's videos, I see the little tricks they've used in post-production much more easily, like how you see a magician differently once you know how the trick is done. That will change what I do, how I do things, and help me make things that are truly different.

I've dipped my toe into writing fiction, as well. It's been eye-opening for me. I used to think I was a decent writer. Not the best, for sure, but good enough to communicate what was running through my mind. Until I started to describe what a character was thinking or feeling - and I realized just how incredibly limited my vocabulary is, especially around anything metaphorical and EVERYTHING emotional. I've also used RelatedWords.org more times in the last two weeks than in my entire professional life, because there's only so many times you can repeatedly write "she said" before it's more monotonous than a dentist's drill.

I've experienced something writing fiction that has never once happened writing business copy, even when I write to you like this -

when it feels like a character starts to speak, think, and talk on their own. I have a plot outline and in one recent example, I swear the character I was working with said, "Nope, that's not what I'm going to do. I'm going to do this instead" and that's what I wrote, as though they were an actual person making their own decisions. But that tells me that there's so much more for me to learn and experience - and it's changing how I write business and marketing copy, too. What if our marketing writing sprang to life in the same way?

This is how I'll eventually make my marketing even more different and unique - because I'll have changed myself, who I am, how I think, what I do. When you change, when you grow, you automatically become different - different from the person you were yesterday, and different from every competitor that isn't doing the unique combination of things that you're pursuing.

If you want different, change you.

Blatant Ad: Free LinkedIn Job Hunters Class

Blatant Ad: Free LinkedIn Job Hunters Class

You're working hard, whether in your current position or seeking a new one. Is your LinkedIn profile working just as hard as you are? In this 45 minute masterclass with Katie Robbert, CEO of Trust Insights and Christopher Penn, Chief Data Scientist, you'll learn:

- How to tune up your profile to capture attention

- What activities you MUST do to be seen by LinkedIn's algorithms

- Which matters more, recommendations or endorsements?

- Right and wrong ways to network with others (hint: "I'd like to add you to my professional network" is wrong)

- How to measure your efforts

Note that this is all about helping you promote yourself as a professional; this is not a class on how to market your company/product/services on LinkedIn.

[Take the class for free](https://www.trustinsights.ai/resources/thought-leadership/webinars-events/power-up-your-linkedin-job-hunting-efforts/):

https://www.trustinsights.ai/resources/thought-leadership/webinars-events/power-up-your-linkedin-job-hunting-efforts/

How High Are Your Walls?
April 26, 2020

"I'm sorry, my dogs are barking."

"I'm sorry, my kids are in the next room playing."

"I'm sorry, my three-year old is crying."

Do these refrains sound familiar? These are three things said on video calls this week from colleagues around the world. One is a respected CEO. Another is a world-class lawyer. A third is a manager at a massive corporation.

How did they make you feel, when you read them?

I know I am in the minority of people who are enjoying the silver linings of the pandemic - and to be clear, **I absolutely would prefer there be no pandemic, no global crisis, no loss of life or livelihood beyond what is normal**. The silver lining is just that - finding something good amidst the bad.

One of those silver linings is getting to know your friends, colleagues, and associates as human beings, as real people, rather than as the corporate personas many of us are forced to display.

Who you are at a work and who you are at home is a bit more blurred now, and that's okay. Certainly, we still should keep some boundaries between work and home, to avoid one bleeding into the other. However, if the walls are too high, we incur a higher switching cost.

We incur switching costs when we have to change mindsets.

You've felt this many times, as an interruption changes you from one activity to the next. A notification on your phone disrupts the writing you were doing. An email disrupts the spreadsheet you were working on. The cost of the switch is a loss of focus, a loss of productivity. It's one of the reasons time management pros advocate we block specific periods of time on our calendar so that no one else can interrupt us during those times.

When we keep our walls between personal and professional so high that we feel like we're different people entirely, we penalize ourselves with massive switching costs, **costs that manifest as stress, anxiety, and worry**. We feel like we can't be ourselves in either environment - and we're not. Something is missing. In a normal environment, things like commute times give us the chance to make those extremely expensive transitions. We don't have that in a work from home environment unless we consciously do it - one of the reasons to keep routines like getting professionally dressed and having a cup of coffee before jumping into work.

One of the opportunities presented by the current situation is to think about how high the walls need to be between personal and professional. During the crisis, grant yourself and others grace, grace and understanding that their walls may be much higher normally, and the crumbling of them is a source of serious anxiety. If you feel that way, **question how high your walls need to be**. You may find that the smaller the walls are, the more whole you feel as a person in both contexts.

Job Market Volatility

May 3, 2020

With more than 30 million jobs in the United States lost in the last 6 weeks due to the pandemic, there's no doubt the pandemic is causing a massive employment dislocation. This is just as true in the marketing space as any other industry. The question is, if you're looking, **how frequently are you looking**?

I've been doing weekly analysis of the number of job postings on Indeed.com for about a month now as part of the [Trust Insights newsletter](#) and [Analytics for Marketers Slack group](#), and what's surprised me the most is how fast the various marketing job postings are changing. Companies that are hiring hundreds one week aren't hiring at all the following week, and other companies come out of nowhere and start hiring by the hundreds. What's even more interesting is that despite the downturn, plenty of companies are hiring more in the last 14 days than they were previously, for marketing roles.

The key message here is that the job listings right now in the marketing space are volatile. They're changing daily, which means if you're looking, hit the major exchanges like Indeed.com every single day. Look for companies doing lots of hiring in general; even if a position isn't listed that's a good fit for you, if a company is hiring tons right now (like Deloitte, they spiked from almost no hiring three weeks ago to over 400 marketing-related positions), there may be even more stuff not listed, including a position for you.

If you're interested, I post fresh weekly listings as a CSV/Excel file in the Analytics for Marketers Slack group every Wednesday. [Join it for](#)

[free and take a gander](#).

One other thing - if you're an email marketer, plan to validate and scrub your entire email list in about 3-4 weeks, once the massive wave of layoffs has subsided a bit - and expect your email marketing bounce rates and performance to decline for a while. With unemployment now effectively at about 15-20% (at least in the United States), your list has probably decayed just as much.

Tool or Technique

May 10, 2020

Which is more important, tool or technique?

This has been on my mind recently, looking at the many, many marketing job postings I collect each week for the [Trust Insights newsletter](#). Here are just a few:

- Proficiency in marketing automation and blogging software in order to generate traffic, convert visitors into leads, and then nurture them (using dynamic workflows) into converted customers
- Salesforce, Call Tracking Metrics, Monday, Google Drive
- Experience with Facebook Business Manager, Facebook Ad Manager, Google Analytics, Google AdWords
- Proficient in Adobe creative cloud (Premiere Pro, After Effects, Illustrator, Photoshop for Graphic Design)
- Experience with HubSpot

Do you see what I see? Companies are so narrowly focused on the tools. You need to be able to use X or Y or Z. In many of these listings, it looks like a miniature version of Scott Brinker's MarTech 8000 lumascape, name after name of vendor after vendor.

Can you imagine similar listings for a line cook? I can guarantee there will be no list of tools you must know like frying pans, ovens, etc. in those job ads. What will be in them will be the outcomes and techniques instead that you're expected to know. Prior experience in a pizzeria. Prior experience in a high-volume kitchen. OSHA or state

food safety certification.

Why do we do this in marketing? Why do we focus on the tools, when it's the techniques and their outcomes that we really want? Part of the reason is **specialization**; the more specialized a set of tasks, the harder it is to hire for that specialty from a recruiting standpoint. It's easier to say "Must know Ahrefs SEO software" than it is to say "Must know how topic clustering impacts search results" in a job ad. The person doing HR can't honestly evaluate an answer to the second question because the knowledge is too specialized. They can absolutely check yes or no in a box for the first question.

The second reason is our terrible assumption that **tool equals technique**. Knowing how to use a tool doesn't mean you use it well. Just because you can navigate the basics of Facebook Ads or Google Analytics doesn't mean you can make it sing. It's the difference between someone who took a year of piano lessons versus someone who has spent fifty years of their life as a piano maestro. Both people could check the box "Yes, knows piano". But you will get very different outcomes from each person. By focusing on the tool, we ignore the importance of technique - and it's technique that separates the mediocre from the excellent.

This past week at IBM THINK 2020, I sat in on an advanced session on propensity modeling. I don't know any propensity modeling techniques yet, but the session opened my eyes to the possibilities. The tools are irrelevant for right now - I have to first teach myself the theory and basics, then start learning the basic techniques. I know that in doing so, I'll learn a ton of other useful tips, tricks, and tools that I can repurpose elsewhere, but I first have to start with the basic techniques. It will take longer - MUCH longer - than being able to say, "I know how to use IBM Watson Studio", but at this point, that's not the payoff. The payoff is the technique and the results it can generate.

What's the key takeaway here? **Focus on learning techniques, and the tools will take care of themselves**. What if you learned multi-

touch attribution as a technique? You'd have to learn Google Analytics. You'd have to learn CRM analytics and marketing automation analytics. You'd have to learn Shapley game theory or Markov chain modeling. You'd have to learn statistical software. Mastering the technique of multi-touch attribution will also check the box on so many different tools. Focus on technique if you want to vastly grow what you're capable of - and what someone could hire you for.

Innovation

May 17, 2020

When you think of innovation, what comes to mind?

Innovation, you may recall, comes from Latin, *innovare*, to renew. Literally, make into new. One of the silver linings of current conditions is that it's forced innovation on so many things, so many ways we've done business. A recent article on TMZ is titled "Priest Uses Squirt Gun Drive Through to Blast Parishioners With Holy Water" - and it's exactly what it sounds like. Catholic priest Father Tim Pelc blesses parishioners at a safe distance with a water gun filled with holy water (why didn't Van Helsing think of that?) to allow him to do his work while keeping himself and his church safe and healthy.

That's innovation. Take an outcome you know you have to achieve, and find a way to do it within the constraints we're given. We're seeing more examples of innovation now than we have in the last hundred years, and that's not hyperbole. We've never stopped the entire world before. We've never pressed the power button on the planetary economy ever, not even during world wars.

What I hope we remember from this time period is how widespread innovation became. Some things were simple, like Zoom video calls for... pretty much everything. Other things required more ingenuity. Drive-by graduation parties. Contactless delivery and curbside pickup. Working from home and having your kid/dog/ whatever in the shot the entire time - and everyone being okay with it. Buying industrial-size toilet paper and getting out a power drill, mixing whisk, and scotch tape to re-roll used rolls of toilet paper.

Learning to cook our favorite foods because the restaurant we usually got them from is closed.

A meme spreading on Facebook earlier today was "show me the last picture you took when things were normal". I strongly dislike that meme. Why? Because it makes people long for something that doesn't exist any more, and *it denies our brilliance and resilience for what we've done since then*. No, every day isn't wine and roses. No one's saying it is. But what I am saying is that we've all had to figure out things we never thought we'd need to figure out, and we should take some pride in that.

Take a moment to think about what you've done - all you've done - since the crisis began, and how it has changed you for the better. Think of it like a kind of gratitude meditation, except that it's also a congratulations meditation. **Congratulate yourself on how you've innovated**, and consider what it will take for you to keep innovating, to keep finding new ways to achieve what you need to achieve. When we look back, this might well be the start of the greatest period of innovation in our lives, if we embrace it as such.

Make yourself into someone new.

Contrast

Contrast

May 24, 2020

Think about what contrast means to you. What is contrast?

From a scientific perspective, contrast is the difference in luminance or color that makes an object distinguishable. If an object has no contrast with its background, you can't see it. Generally, it means to differ strikingly.

I read an article earlier today that highlighted a lack of contrast, on why people are behaving so differently, in some cases selfishly, during this time of crisis compared to other periods in history. I suspect a lot of that has to do with a lack of contrast. A pandemic is especially difficult to contrast, because disease itself is invisible (even if the consequences are not). You can tell something bad has happened when a bomb explodes, when a hurricane makes landfall, when a massive wildfire breaks out. There's immediate, obvious damage everywhere - a big contrast. On a sunny spring day, however, standing in your yard or at your window, you can't see the difference. You can't contrast a world ridden with disease from a world that isn't. You could if you saw enemy bombers flying overhead, or black plumes of smoke across the land. So some people wonder what the big deal is, why we have to take necessary steps to protect ourselves and our loved ones from an invisible enemy.

Without contrast, we can't tell the difference between things. The greater the contrast, the easier the difference. When I earned my [first black belt in ninjutsu](#), my test was an awful, eye-opening experience (in a good way). For a period of time that could have been seconds, minutes, or hours, I had to defend myself, in the dark, against my

seniors. There was no way at all to win, just to keep going and not give up even if every part of me wanted to do so. The memory of that test, of that experience, sticks with me even today, more than 15 years later, because it's such an incredible contrast to everyday life. Any time I face a tough situation, I compare and contrast to that. Are four people about to start punching my face in? No? It's just a client meeting over video chat? There's tremendous contrast - and that creates perspective, which gives me a chance to put things in context.

Do the same for yourself. What are the lowest points in your life? How does any given situation compare to the times when you were most frightened, most afraid, at your worst? Hopefully those times are in the rearview mirror for you, but are not forgotten because they provide you contrast. When I had loved ones attempt suicide, I had enough perspective to keep my head on straight long enough to get done what needed to get done to protect life and health, and now those experiences are part of my ability to contrast as well. **Your worst times give you the power of contrast - use it to keep perspective!**

Think about this in terms of your marketing, too. How much contrast is there between you and your competitors? If you're both flexible, scalable, agile, industry-leading turn-key solutions... then you have no contrast at all, which means no one can tell the difference between you. Every business cliche and trope exists because they dampen contrast. "Our most valuable asset is our people", "We're thought leaders", "We're innovative"... the list goes on.

Cliches kill contrast. Focus on what's really different about you, and market that.

Is Privilege Bad?

May 31, 2020

Let's talk privilege for a moment, because it's a word being used quite a bit these days. What is privilege? The dictionary definition: "a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group." If you have a certain color skin, body type, language, culture, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, origin, etc. that gives you some kind of advantage, you have privilege. In the context of current events, you have privilege if you're unaffected by them, or can mitigate them in a way others can't. That may mean you kept your job while someone else didn't because of the group you belong to. That may mean you can get access to healthcare easier, or access to better healthcare, because of the group you belong to. That may mean for a substantial part of the population of the country I live in, you may be statistically less likely to be injured or killed by law enforcement.

Privilege, like so many things, isn't inherently bad. No one should feel guilty about belonging to a group that has privilege (especially if it's by birth/circumstance), just as no one should be made to feel ashamed about belonging to a group that lacks privilege. I'm not tall. Yao Ming is. By virtue of genetics, he has substantial privilege in the realm of basketball. Should he feel bad about that? Not at all. Privilege becomes bad when we use it to benefit ourselves at the expense of others. Privilege is neutral when we use it to benefit ourselves, but don't harm others. Privilege is good when we use it to benefit ourselves and others, doubly so if we put others first.

The bigger question you and I have to tackle is, **what do we do with the privilege we have**? As Uncle Ben said to Peter Parker, with great

power comes great responsibility. How are you using your advantages to make the world a better place, to share privilege with those who lack it or to remove obstacles intentionally put in the way of others to harm them? How are you using your privilege for good?

By virtue of circumstance, I got to grow up in a home that allowed me to develop my talents and a way of thinking that others find valuable. What do I do to use that privilege to help others? It's not at all sexy or bold or made-for-Hollywood, but I crunch data for causes I care about. For example, in this week's video below, one of the things I look at are laws against hate crimes in the United States. Some states are better than others at enforcing them, but almost half of the states have no requirement to provide data or reporting on them. As we know from business, you can't manage what you can't measure - so one of my personal crusades is to identify and advocate for better reporting of hate crimes of all stripes. Why? If we have visibility into the real situation, we can have a more honest discussion about how bad the problem is.

You have a talent. You have a skillset. You have a superpower. What is it, and how are you using it to benefit those with less?

On the flip side, do you understand how life is for those without privilege? [To gain some insight, I urge you in the strongest possible terms to watch this video clip with Trevor Noah of the Daily Show in its entirety](). It opened my eyes, and I hope it gives you similar insights.

I look forward to seeing how you transmute privilege into public good.

Talent Pools
June 7, 2020

The pandemic changed many things, but one of the things it changed most for white-collar office workers was disabuse companies of the notion that working from home was an impossibility. We have proven that it is possible for business to get done using only virtual tools. It may not be as efficient, and it may not be as friendly or as warm, but work got done.

There are obvious implications of this change - companies can suddenly consider employees not geographically located for those jobs, save money on commercial real estate, relocate out of large, expensive cities, etc. because they have proof now that work can be done anywhere for many office jobs.

But in the backdrop of the protests in America and around the world for the end of racial injustice, this pandemic change also creates a new opportunity for companies to think about.

When you see a company post about its commitment to diversity, then check that company's executive leadership page and see an uncomfortable lack of diversity, it's fair to question whether the company believes in it or not. Prior to the pandemic, the argument was that companies often reflected the communities they were based in; how could you find, for example, qualified African-American executives if you were headquartered in a place where very, very few lived?

You see how the pandemic has changed that argument, right? If we've established that office jobs generally don't need to be colocated together, then **your talent pool is now global**. The excuse that no one

of a specific background is available in your city is now invalid.

This is a golden opportunity for companies like ours. Our talent pool is global. We have the ability to recruit the best of the best and we've proven we can work from anywhere. I hope we take advantage of this moment, this time, to change the composition of our leadership teams. Not diversity for diversity's sake alone, but because we can now hire the best of the best AND achieve our diversity objectives as well, wherever they are, whatever they look like.

How Bad Are Our Biases?

June 14, 2020

Suppose you had a car, and that car's steering was permanently off. Not a lot, not enough to be obviously dangerous. Not enough that you'd immediately sell or trade in the car. But just enough that you can't take your hands off the wheel for more than a couple of seconds before the car starts to drift. I had a car like that, my very first car - it was a 1997 Honda Civic in a humiliating shade of seafoam green, but it did the job.

Except for that one time I took my hands off the wheel a little too long and plowed into a plastic traffic cone. Not the little rubbery ones, the big ol' orange and white ones that are basically orange-painted plastic barrels. Oops. That left a dent in the hood, but thankfully nothing else. After that very clear, very sharp lesson, I kept my hands on the wheel the whole time until I finally traded that car in.

The thing is, at least my crappy Honda's steering problem was predictable. I knew, for a fact, that it would veer to the left after a little while. So as long as I was constantly correcting it, it drove in a straight line and got me where I needed to go. You might call that steering malfunction... a bias.

You and I have shared a lot the last few issues about things like bias and discrimination. When we tackle the question of "well, how do I deal with a bias I know I have?", we hear a lot of different answers. The one answer I don't hear enough in debate on the topic is the answer for driving my old car: constantly correct for it.

If you know you have a bias against, say, Black women, then you will be extra vigilant in monitoring yourself in your interactions with

them. Are you judging too quickly? Are you speaking without listening first? Are you behaving fairly? Part of correcting implicit bias is forcing your decisions to be wholly conscious; in [Daniel Kahneman's landmark *Thinking Fast and Slow*](#), one of the things we do by forcing our decisions to be fully conscious is to take them away from built-in habits, away from System 1's fast, unconscious, emotional decision-making and force them into System 2's slower, more deliberate, more logical processes.

The challenge is that we need to know how bad our biases are. Just as we can't correct the steering of the car if we don't know how much it veers and in which direction, we can't correct the steering of our minds if we don't know how strong our biases are. [To that end, I strongly encourage you to take Harvard University's Implicit Bias tests](#). The answers may make you uncomfortable, but they're a powerful first step in knowing what you have to correct for.

Once you know, you can constantly correct the steering of your mind and proudly be part of the solution, rather than reinforcing the problem.

Recycling Content

June 21, 2020

Recycle, recycle, recycle.

In the wake of this week's webinar and AMA on content marketing and AI, one of the persistent questions folks have is, "well, what if I don't have access to sophisticated AI tools to generate content at scale? How can I compete?". This is a perfectly valid question, and the answer is recycling.

You and I sit on vast reserves of content we don't use. We make stuff all the time, but it never reaches its full potential. Back in 2008, my friend and former boss Todd Defren coined the term content atomization, the exploding of content into component pieces. That strategy has itself been recycled many times over the years by many different social media and content marketing experts, but the gist of it is:

Turn your content into other content.

Have you ever been a guest on a podcast? Podcasts are great for building awareness in new audiences, but not so great if you want that content indexed by search engines because it's all audio. But get that episode transcribed and put on your blog? Suddenly you've got a massive amount of scannable, searchable text.

Do you make videos? Get them transcribed. Every day, I post videos on my blog and the [automated transcripts that go with them, courtesy of Otter.ai (try it for free)](). A single 10-minute video turns into about 1,500 words.

Do you have audio? [Turn that audio into animated video for Instagram or full-length video with a tool like Headliner (also try for free)](). I cut 1-minute video snippets out of our [In-Ear Insights podcast]() episodes for promotion on Instagram.

Do you have text? Consider using something like [Amazon Polly]() to have it automatically read aloud - and the use that audio with Headliner to turn it into video.

Whatever content you've got, make liberal re-use of it by turning it into many different formats. You don't have to create net new content for every channel- just atomize your best stuff everywhere.

Add a Knob

June 28, 2020

There's a volume control on my computer. It has about 10 settings, from what I can tell, from off to blaringly loud, and for most cases, that's okay. But some days, when I'm doing something that requires more concentration, there's just not quite a comfortable spot between settings 2 and 3. 3 is too loud, 2 is too quiet.

Fortunately, the headset I use also has a volume control knob. With it, I can slice any volume setting on my computer into tiny pieces. I can have 2.25, or 2.1, or 2.7 - things the computer's volume control can't do, but the combination of the two allows me to do it. It eliminates the binary choice of either 2 or 3.

This combination is so powerful because it permits subtlety. Nuance. Granularity. And these are things which are in dreadfully short supply today, in everything from marketing to business to social good. "You're with us or you're against us" binary thinking - an on/off switch with no possibilities between. The irony is that even as we become more and more binary in our thinking, our machines are becoming less binary. Quantum computing will permit our machines to think in shades of grey rather than black and white.

The danger of binary thinking is it creates a win/lose mentality. For me to win, you must lose. For you to win, I must lose. There's no possibility, no scenario in which we both get what we want, or enough of what we want. Without that mindset, the idea that there are more possibilities than the ones in front of us, we are left to brute force our way through obstacles.

For example, in a discussion today about why people might not wear

masks, I acknowledged that cloth masks sometimes suck. They're hard to breathe through - by design. But rather than fight the mask/no mask argument, what are the other possibilities? The panic buying from months ago is largely over, which means that respirators, even full-face respirators, are once again available on the market. Instead of a flimsy cloth mask, you could wear something that leaves your nose and mouth unobstructed, like a [3M 6800 facepiece](#) - and with the right filters, offers top-shelf protection against almost every environmental hazard you're likely to encounter.

But that requires looking for more options than the ones in front of you. How do we do that? We start by being open to the possibility that more choices exist - and that requires emotional self-control. When we feel that flinch, that knee-jerk response to argue, pause and consider. What are the possibilities? Is there a way to get what you want while blending with the energy the world is sending your way, rather than fighting it head-on?

Once you've added a second volume knob to what you're getting from the world, life becomes a whole lot more interesting and satisfying.

Live Music and Mistakes

July 5, 2020

Why do we like live music?

That's a serious question. I wasn't sure why. After all, I'm the sort of person who dislikes crowds, and live music generally involves some level of being around others. (I was human-averse long before COVID-19) As I was watching "Into the Unknown: The Making of Frozen 2" this past weekend, I was stunned at one point. The production crew had mapped out the entire score flawlessly in Logic Pro, and layered the vocals on top of it. It sounded beautiful. Perfect.

Then they took the score and brought it to their in-house orchestra to play.

Imagine that: you have a huge score completely assembled in one of the best music production software packages in the world, one of the gold standards (along with Cubase) that every production house in Hollywood uses. Just hitting the render button will create a perfect, flawless soundtrack for your film.

And you don't use it.

Why?

The answer to this question came when I was sitting in my backyard this weekend. One of our neighbors had hired a local Brazilian band to play music for a backyard party, and my family and I were sitting outside enjoying it as well. When I said that they'd hired a band, my wife said, "This sounds recorded to me." Then the guitar player flubbed something and created a quick burst of feedback, and my

wife said, "Oh, I guess they really are live!"

That's why we like live music. We like the authenticity, the unpredictability. We like knowing it's being played right in front of us.

We like the mistakes.

Even the best orchestra in the world will play with tiny, detectable flaws in their music. The local band was indistinguishable to someone's ear until they made a mistake. The mistakes are what set apart live from rehearsed. It's one of the reasons we love live streams for video, why we like the question and answer period of a talk or webinar better than the talk itself.

So, here's the challenging question for you. When we talk about "authenticity" and "being authentic" in marketing, yet we refuse to permit ourselves mistakes, are we being authentic? From the backyard band to the world's most polished entertainment powerhouse, the answer would seem to be no. The mistakes are what we're looking for.

If you want to be authentic, invite your mistakes.

I Don't Know

I Don't Know

July 12, 2020

Three little words could change everything.

While "I love you" might be the first thing that springs to mind, I'm talking about a much more important phrase.

"I don't know."

This is one of the most difficult phrases to embrace, because just as nature abhors a vacuum, so too do we abhor not knowing something - and that's a trend which has gotten much worse over the past few decades. The advent of the Internet and the smartphone, combined with increasingly short-sighted perspectives in the business world and a demand that everything be instantaneously gratifying, has made it challenging for knowledge workers like you and me to say "I don't know" and have that answer be accepted.

The reality is, just as an atom is 99.99% empty space, we have probably 0.0000000000001% of the sum total of human knowledge in our heads. We don't know far, far more than we know. Even in our domains of expertise, what we don't know still probably outweighs what we know by several orders of magnitude.

The dogged insistence that we know, that we have an answer (even if the answer is completely wrong), has led to unfortunate consequences. Politicians, afraid of looking foolish, simply make things up - and such decisions can cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Business professionals, afraid of disappointing investors or boards, take actions that are questionable at best and outright illegal

at worst, all to cover up the fact that they don't know something.

But most of all, the most destructive consequence of demonizing "I don't know", is that **we cut ourselves off from curiosity**. When we admit that we don't know something, we open the door to the opportunity of learning. We don't know, but we could find out. We don't know, but we could research or experiment. We don't know, but we would like to.

Instead, we pretend we know. We fake it, hoping that someone else will make it, make the knowledge available to us.

Think about how destructive rejecting "I don't know" as an answer could be in your life. If you don't permit yourself to say "I don't know", then you might never get to know your soulmate. If you don't permit yourself to say "I don't know", you shun the innovation that could change your career. If your workplace doesn't permit you to say "I don't know", then they could embark on a terrible plan that will ruin the company.

Learn how to say "I don't know". Learn to be comfortable saying it. Coach others around you to accept it as an answer, to accept not knowing as something that's okay, so that you can begin your learning journey.

Game Changers

Game Changers

July 19, 2020

Every so often, you see something that you know changes things. Perhaps changes everything. Certainly something that has massive implications for the work you do, the world you live in, what you know to be true. We have all collectively had one of those revelations with the pandemic, to be sure, so the sensation should be familiar to everyone at this point.

In this specific instance, I'm talking about a new natural language processing model, OpenAI's GPT3. Like its forebears, GPT and GPT2, GPT3 offers a significant leap forward in terms of what machines are capable of doing. To reassure you, it's still no closer to sentience or sapience. At the end of the day, it's still fundamentally a mathematical model using math to predict sequences of words.

However, what it can do? Incredible. Here's an example researchers published, telling it to write Harry Potter, but in the style of Ernest Hemingway:

"It was a cold day on Privet Drive. A child cried. Harry felt nothing. He was dryer than dust. He had been silent too long. He had not felt love. He had scarcely felt hate. Yet the Dementor's Kiss killed nothing. Death didn't leave him less dead than he had been a second before. It wasn't about living or dying really. It wasn't about death. It was about the Dark Lord, his creator, his engenderer. He was not resurrected. He was created again. He was whole again in the courtyard of Malfoy Manor. He was one with the endless night of Malfoy Manor. Voldemort wasn't happy. Voldemort wanted something. But what?

He had a purpose. He wanted to destroy all of creation. He wanted to end it

all. He could have that. He would have that. He didn't know yet that he could have it. Voldemort had created Harry. Voldemort had never really destroyed Harry. Harry would always be there, a vampire, a parasite, a monster in the kitchen, a drain on the household, a waste on the planet. Harry would never be real. That was what Voldemort wanted. That was what Voldemort wanted to feel. He would have that. He would have everything."

Hemingway's style is simple prose. Punchy, short, powerful - and that's what GPT3 captured well in the example above.

What does this mean for us? We've been saying for a while that the days of content farms are numbered - workplaces where people are paid to simply churn out more and more content (sometimes at shamefully low wages), often for SEO purposes - because of AI. We're a significant step closer today. For us as marketers, the ability to give an AI a prompt and have it generate usable copy faster, better, more cleanly will benefit us substantially in the short-term.

What this sort of technology creates is a challenging competitive advantage. Those companies who adopt it quickly and proficiently will thrive. Those companies who compete against such a company will find themselves at a wide and growing disadvantage.

What should we do about it? Keep an eye on it and as soon as it's commercially available, adopt it and get working with it. Start a pilot with it. Give it a use case and an appropriate priming/training text, and see what it does.

My friend and former CEO Todd Defren is fond of saying that companies thrive on three factors: **first, best, only**. One out of three gives you a fighting chance at success. Two out of three lets you be in the top of your field. All three? As long as you retain the advantage, you are invincible. Technologies like GPT3 give you and I a shot at being all three in our respective industries.

Don't miss your shot.

Probability

Probability

July 26, 2020

If there's an area of thinking that we've collectively failed at most that the current pandemic has illustrated best, it's understanding probability. I was talking with a friend the other day who made the blunt statement that they didn't understand what the big deal was about COVID-19. They'd had it, their immediate family had it, and while it sucked, they got over it, and we should just open up everything because it's not that bad. This is two problems in one; first, a general lack of understanding of probability, and second, a cognitive bias known as sample size insensitivity.

Sample size insensitivity is fancy for extrapolating a big conclusion from a very small sample size. It's the law of small numbers, the idea that a tiny sample can represent a massive population. This person's personal experience with COVID-19 is extrapolated into their mind into what every person's experience would be, and that creates their mistaken belief that it's not a big deal.

When we look at the probabilities behind COVID-19, they work out to roughly:

- 80% of people who contract the disease have a mild experience with it

- 20% of people who contract the disease have a severe experience with it requiring hospitalization

    - Of those 20% of people, approximately 1/4 (5% of the whole population) have a critically severe experience requiring intensive care

- ○ Of those 5% of people, approximately 1 in 5 (1% of the whole population) are likely to die

What my friend did was effectively this conclusion:

- 3 people in my household contracted COVID-19 with a mild experience
- Therefore 100% of people who contract COVID-19 will have a mild experience

This is a failure to understand probability due to sample size insensitivity. Their experience has blinded them to the probabilities of the disease, and the conclusion they reached (just go back to normal) would be disastrous because of the actual probabilities.

What about marketing? We have this problem all the time. When the boss says, "I like blue, my wife likes blue, therefore make the buttons on the landing page blue because everyone likes blue", the boss is experiencing sample size insensitivity. When we see search volume for our favorite keyword in SEO drop, we assume everything is dropping. When an email does badly, we assume all emails are doing badly. Hop into any group or community about marketing and listen to the number of people saying, "Wow, Facebook sucks, my numbers this month were terrible". That's sample size insensitivity.

How do we cure this? With data and testing. We may have a hypothesis that everyone likes blue buttons on a website, but we can't know that until we test it and prove that to be the case. In the case of my friend, helping them understand the actual data and that they're lucky they emerged relatively unscathed is the way forward in that particular situation.

Beware the many cognitive biases lurking in our data and analytics. The erroneous conclusions we may leap to will feel good, feel right based on our experiences, but we are an incredibly small sample size

compared to the audiences we serve.

Perturbation

August 2, 2020

Let's talk about perturbation.

Yes, the 12-year old inside you giggled. So did I. Now that we've gotten that out of the way, what is perturbation?

In the context of analytics and machine learning, it's the act of **introducing randomness** into our data and algorithms so that we arrive not only at faster solutions, but more diverse and representative solutions. Perturbation allows us to automatically test new ideas as well as avoid the dreaded optimization trap. Let's walk through a couple of examples.

First, you might remember that a few years ago, Target got into a little hot water because its predictive algorithms recognized the purchase patterns of a customer as being those correlated with a pregnant woman. They began sending promotions to that customer for maternity items, which turned out to be a bit of a kerfuffle because the customer was a teenager. The teen's father was understandably irate at the store until it was discovered that she was, in fact, pregnant. The algorithm had predicted correctly, but a little too obviously. Thereafter, Target introduced perturbation to their algorithm; a small sample of totally random items would make it into the promotions to make it somewhat less obvious how accurate the targeting was.

Second, there's a concept first explained to me by Tom Webster of Edison Research known as the optimization trap. Suppose you run an A/B test and A clearly wins at 60% of the customer base. You pivot your marketing to A, ignoring B. The next test you send, we'll call a C/

D test. Let's say C wins at 60% as well. You do that once more with an E/F test and E wins with 60% of the customer base. What percentage of your customer base have you made happy? It's not 60% - because you've ignored the wishes of B, D, and F at least once.

If we sent A/B to 1,000 people, A comprised 600 people. We assume their preferences are universal by choosing A as the winner. With C/D, we are now starting with a happy pool of 600 customers (B is still unhappy at 400 customers). We now make 360 people (60% of 600) happy and ignore the wishes of 240 people. With E/F, we start with 360 people whose preferences we chose (A and C), and we're now down to 216 people. So out of 1,000 people, we've made 216 deliriously happy with us... and irritated 784 by ignoring their preferences at least once.

That's the optimization trap. There are two ways out of that trap. First, we create segments out of the 'losing' portion of the test and give them what they want. Second, we use perturbation at each test to include up to 20% getting something totally different than A or B. That helps us to detect when neither A or B is really what customers want.

Perturbation testing should be in play any time we want to make sure we're not locked into using only our previous data or assumptions. For example, suppose you're hiring for a new marketing associate. Perturbation testing would take the list of prospective candidates and inject 5-20% new, different resumes that aren't exact matches for your hiring criteria as a way to get different talent in the door. This is especially important if things like diversity and inclusion are part of your hiring requirements. In social media advertising, it would show your ads to 5-20% different audiences than you've targeted, in the hopes of finding non-traditional customers that might outperform your targeting.

What do you do with this information? Whether you're building your own marketing technology or using vendors, **perturbation should be**

an essential part of every system that involves testing or selecting new data based on old data. Ask your vendors, ask your developers, and ask your marketing technologists how they're using perturbation to ensure that you're not solely using the rear view mirror to drive.

Blatant Ad: Data Science 101 for Marketers Master Class

Value

Value

August 9, 2020

What's the value you provide?

Driving around today, I was having a discussion with my family after my son asked why people eat at restaurants, remarking that it seemed silly to sit out in the hot sun just to do so, when you could eat at home with air conditioning and wi-fi (he's 10). In our area, restaurants are providing outdoor service for the most part; some locations do offer dining room experiences, but not universally.

I said, "At a restaurant, someone else brings you your food and then someone cleans up after you, and in exchange for that service, you pay them between 20-25% of the cost of the meal. Compare that to takeout, where you get the food yourself and you clean up after yourself." After a brief review of percentages, he said, "So you pay that much more just to have someone bring you stuff? Why would anyone do that?"

Why indeed? Some will say it's the atmosphere, the change of scenery from where you normally dine; certainly during the pandemic, many people have longed for a change of scenery. For others, it is the added service, the lack of cleanup that they find appealing (my parents in particular appreciate that part). The question is, are these attributes worth the additional premium? When you order takeout, are you only getting 80% of the experience? If so, is 80% good enough?

For me personally, the added risk of being around other humans who are likely lax in their vigilance against the pandemic completely negates any added value of a dining experience. It pushes it well into

negative territory; until an effective vaccine is available and my loved ones are vaccinated, I don't foresee any of us dining out besides takeout. So if a business is counting on atmosphere or service as their value proposition for the in-restaurant dining experience, that won't be enough to win back my attendance in person (though I happily patronize their takeout options).

In these {adjective of your choice} times, every business and especially every marketer should be questioning what value you provide and whether something is undermining that value. Are you?

This is the key: **Your value isn't necessarily the product or service you sell**.

Restaurants sell food and service as their products, and experiences (atmosphere, service, ambiance, other patrons) as their value. Right now I see great value in their product (food) but no value in their experience (unacceptably high risk of infection). Thus, if they're trying to sell me their overall value, the dining experience, I'm not going to buy.

What's the product or service you sell? What is its value? Are there factors in your prospects minds that are reducing or negating that value - and if so, do you know what they are? If not, find out - quickly. Survey prospective customers. Hire secret shoppers. QA test everything. Find out whether your value is being undermined as fast as you're creating it - and what you can do to mitigate the impact.

Decay

Decay

August 16, 2020

Decay happens fast.

Everything decays, but in digital marketing, much of what we do every day decays a little. You experience it on a daily basis; every email campaign that goes out has a few more non-working addresses. Every social media account gains and loses followers. Every piece of code and software grows a little more stale every day if it's not regularly maintained.

We like to disguise that word, decay, with more pleasant euphemisms like churn, but there's something much more visceral about decay. It's a concept we understand without explanation because everything in life decays in some way without constant maintenance. Fallow a field for a season and entropy sets in. Leave your house for a month and come back to all sorts of chaos.

I was working on some code tonight, code that powers part of this newsletter, and in reviewing it, I saw how quickly some pieces had become outdated. They still technically worked, but they were suboptimal (to put it nicely). After a few fixes, the code was back in good working order - decay undone. While I was there, I made a few small improvements. Not only did I undo the decay, I moved the code forward a little, made it just a tiny bit more advanced.

The antidote to decay is not only maintenance, but the injection of new energy, new blood. An email list can be regularly maintained, but if you're not adding new subscribers, it will continue to shrink over time until it's a pale shadow of itself. The same is true of your social accounts, your CRM, your marketing automation software,

everything.

Growth is the only antidote to decay.

As we press through the dog days of summer and look at the last third of the year, ask yourself in your meetings, plans, strategies, and forecasts how you will grow. What will be the KPI that will be your north star for growth in the weeks and months to come, despite everything going on in the world? What CAN you realistically grow, even if other things are a train wreck?

Here's a hint, if you're struggling for an answer: **the one sure-fire thing you can always grow is your own professional development**. You always have the option to improve yourself, even if everything else around you is on fire. Think of something you want to work on and hit up YouTube, Google, the Slack and Discord communities you can find, and start growing you.

Virtual Events

August 23, 2020

One of the topics making the rounds recently is how to make virtual conferences and events better. For starters, perhaps we should stop calling them conferences. They're not, not in any meaningful sense of the word. What happens at a conference? In the time before the pandemic, dozens, hundreds, or thousands of people with a common interest would leave their lives behind for a day, maybe even a week, and immerse themselves in an experience. Whether it's wandering the streets of San Francisco for IBM THINK or wandering the halls of the Gaylord Convention Center for MarketingProfs B2B Forum, the overall concept was the same: get people out of their daily routines and focused on a very different way of living.

You could say the same of college. It's a totally different learning environment when you leave everything familiar behind, meet lots of new people all at once in a similar environment, and live very differently than you normally do.

How much of that happens at a digital event? The answer is: **none of it.** We don't leave our regular lives behind - in fact, our regular lives go on mostly uninterrupted. We eat dinner at the same table, we sit at the same desk, we see the same sights. We don't meet new people under very different circumstances; if we do meet new people, it's in the exact same settings - working from home, behind a webcam, etc. And that's as it should be for now - a global pandemic that has killed more than 800,000 people and sickened millions more is not something to take lightly.

So, **what of the conference experience is left in a digital event?**

None, really. Even for speakers, it's a radically different environment. There's no crowd feedback, no ability to read the room - even the talk itself is different, because in the old days, you could give a talk in San Diego and give the exact same talk in Buenos Aires, and the chances of anyone seeing that same talk would be relatively low. When everyone's at a desk and can sign up for any virtual event, the chances of being seen as a repeat, a rerun, are very high if you aren't constantly creating and sharing new material.

So, what are we to do? How do we turn virtual events into something more than "yet another webinar"? I'm seeing some events hosting "table talks" - very small, limited gatherings of people, 6-8 at most, in a videoconference room, to discuss among each other, to recreate a little of that serendipity. I think that's a smart idea. I've seen more elite gatherings send out things like wine tasting kits to provide a shared, common, tangible experience of some kind, something different.

The bigger question I have is - **should we be trying to shoehorn a conference into a format that is suboptimal, or should we play to the strengths of the media we have?** We have livestreaming, private communities like Slack, outstanding digital courseware software, and always-on smartphones at our disposal. Instead of trying to create an "event", perhaps we should be working towards a sustained, beneficial experience. I've gotten more value out of Slack and Discord during this pandemic than any event, hands down, from learning and sharing to emotional support and having a place to vent.

I'm not sure the conference format works digitally for now. I'd love to be proven wrong and see some really innovative experiments that replicate some of those core features, like meeting someone new while standing in line for a buffet of hotel chicken, or staying up late in the hotel lobby with drinks and a new friend debating the news of the day. But until then, I'd suggest giving other channels and strategies a look for building the kind of tight-knit community you

want.

Habit

Habit

August 30, 2020

Habit is the key ingredient for progress. Unless you have goals that can be achieved in a single step, chances are you will need to devote time and energy towards your goals in regular, frequent amounts. And, human nature being what it is, we often lose motivation and drive when the journey before us is arduous.

How do we keep going when we don't want to? **Habit**.

Over the past 7 weeks I've been leading a small group of friends on the hundred push-up challenge. The goals are simple: first, to be able to do one hundred pushups at all, within the same day, and then to be able to do one hundred pushups without stopping. The key ingredient to success in this challenge is the habit of doing the required number of pushups every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, without exception.

In the beginning, there were some folks who couldn't manage more than two pushups, period. After 7 weeks, everyone has crossed the line of doing one hundred pushups in a day. I have no doubt we'll reach the stretch goal of being able to do one hundred pushups without stopping, too.

What made this transformation possible was the habit of doing pushups and someone to hold you accountable for doing so. I've had to be equal parts helping hand and butt kicker to keep the group moving forward, but we did it - and the reward has been people expressing amazement at their accomplishments, people who never thought they'd be able to do anything like that.

Some folks needed to just get into the habit of doing an exercise routine regularly and frequently. Other folks had to make room in their daily lives and even give something up to accommodate the new habit, but they did it - and they've achieved goals beyond what they imagined possible.

There's so much right now in the world that isn't under our control. We have little control over the macro issues of the day, from natural disasters to pandemics and more. **But we do have control over our habits, and what we make time and commitment for**.

What goals are you working towards right now, even with everything going on?

What habits do you have that reinforce your progress towards your goals?

What habits do you have that are undermining your progress towards your goals?

Representation

September 6, 2020

What is representation?

You've likely heard this term a lot in recent times as people have talked about increasing or improving representation of minorities in entertainment, business, and culture. What does it mean?

Representation is fancy for showing that a person can succeed in a given environment. When we see Chadwick Boseman headlining a major motion picture successfully, Black folks have an example, a model to look to. When Barack Obama was elected President, he served as a model for his community. When Ming-Na Wen and Chloe Bennet headlined in Agents of SHIELD, they served as examples to their community that success was possible. When Ruby Rose headlined Batwoman, they showed that success for openly LGBTQIA+ people was possible.

Representation is a living case study. How many of us, when we evaluate vendors, ask for case studies? What are we saying when we ask for a case study? Show me that this has been done before. Show me that I can succeed. Show me that someone else has walked this path before me. Show me there is a process that leads to success.

How much do we trust vendors who have no case studies, no testimonials? What happens to a vendor if we ask for references and we're told, "Sorry, you can't have any?" We walk away from that vendor, probably. We need examples of success to reassure ourselves and those we report to that success is possible.

Talking about equality, about rights, about diversity and inclusion is

nice and good. It's important. But what happens when someone like me - a Korean-American - goes to your executive team page and I see no one who looks like me or has a similar background?

I see no case studies.

I see no examples that I could succeed working at your company.

In fact, I might even see that success isn't possible even as a customer of your company.

This is why every business needs representation. **Every business needs case studies to show that success is possible for customers, for partners, for employees**. If you believe in case studies, then extending that belief to representation should be fairly straightforward. When you don't show key parts of the population case studies that success is possible, expect key parts of the population to not do business with you. Can you afford fewer customers? Can you afford decreased access to vital talent? If you can't, it's time to take a hard, cold look at your hiring, your marketing, your business and dramatically change how you work.

Vertical or Horizontal

September 13, 2020

Are you more vertical or horizontal?

In business, we tend to classify ourselves (and most especially our prospects) into either vertical or horizontal roles.

Vertical roles typically are based on companies or industries. Someone has experience in healthcare, financial services, SaaS companies, etc.

A vertical expert knows a ton about their industry. They know the regulatory challenges unique to that industry, who the big players are, how business gets done.

Horizontal roles tend to be functional. Someone is a marketer, a financial analyst, an HR person. They know their profession well and are current on all the major techniques and strategies.

A horizontal expert knows their role and team incredibly well. If something needs to be done in marketing, they can probably pinch hit for many of the needed skills. They may not make the best as creative or most beautiful email marketing prose, but what they do produce is usually good enough. When you hear the expression "T-shaped", this is usually what it's in reference to - someone who is a strong specialist in one aspect of the horizontal with broad skills in the rest.

Here's the catch: **to be effective, you must grow both aspects of your career**. How many people do you know who have become vertical experts but let their marketing skills stagnate? I see this a

ton, especially in fast moving disciplines like SEO, where the operating knowledge base can turn over almost entirely in a year. A person grows in the organization, but their operational knowledge gets more and more stale every year.

Or, do you know someone who is talented at marketing but flits around like a butterfly from company to company, never building any in-depth knowledge of an industry? Their LinkedIn profile is like a who's who of different companies, but when you talk to them, their knowledge of their vertical is very thin?

Now, nothing says you can't change jobs or industries, nor learn about an industry you don't work in. There are and shouldn't be limits on curiosity. But when it comes to growing your career, are you growing in both directions?

Where are you weakest right now, horizontal or vertical? Where are you strongest?

What's your plan to mitigate your weaknesses in the coming year, even as you double down on your strengths?

Fishbowls

Fishbowls

September 20, 2020

Let's talk **fishbowls**.

I recently started volunteering with one of the political campaigns in here in the United States, calling voters in battleground states to encourage them to vote early and by mail (which is the best way to vote in a pandemic). Why did I do this?

Posting on social media, or even in an email list like this one, only reaches the audience who knows me. It's within the fishbowl, as it were. If I wanted to make a difference in this election, I'd need to step outside the sphere of people who know me to reach the people who don't know me, and that means doing things like working with direct outreach methods - calling, texting, etc. Even if I had a massive amount of reach, if I stayed within the fishbowl, I wouldn't reach anyone I didn't know.

And there's a bias. You wouldn't be reading this if you weren't connected to me in some way - attended an event I spoke at, signed up for the newsletter, downloaded one of my papers, etc. Thus, there's a whole population of people who I don't reach, who don't see what I have to say, but are still vitally important on the particular topic of the upcoming election.

So what, you may ask? The reason this matters isn't because of politics. **It's because your marketing functions in exactly the same way**. Think about all the channels you have access to, and ask yourself: which reach existing audiences, and which reach new audiences?

- Email? Existing audiences.
- Unpaid social media? Existing audiences.
- Remarketing/retargeting? Existing audiences.
- Organic and paid search? New audiences.
- Paid social media not to your followers? New audiences.
- Public relations and broad advertising? New audiences.

It's not a question of inbound or outbound; those are last decade's concepts. It's a question of whether you are serving the people who already know you, or reaching out to people who might want to know you. You need a blend, a balance of both, if you want to create both loyalty and growth.

Where is your marketing budget? Is it entirely within one fishbowl? If so, it's time to spread it out a little.

The Next Big Thing

September 27, 2020

You already know the next big thing.

I was watching a pre-recorded conference session earlier today on a specific machine learning technique (Markov chain models), and the presenter said, "Oh yeah, and you can use this for X too" as a throwaway segue into the next section of the lecture. The presenter gave no thought to it, but the idea exploded in my mind brighter than a Fourth of July firework.

It was so OBVIOUS. And yet, it had never once occurred to me to try using this particular technique on a different kind of data. I feel kind of silly even writing that now, because... well, it's so obvious in retrospect. Of course, an idea is just a dream until given form, until built - but still, the idea is much more than I had when I started my Sunday morning.

This is what I mean when I say you already know the next big thing. Chances are there's an idea - a strategy, a tactic, a technique - in your mental inventory that is proven, that works, that's been battle-tested. You know it, you rely on it, you live it - but you haven't moved it around to a new domain, to a new area of application.

For example, this week, LinkedIn debuted its own Stories feature. I know how to make Instagram Stories. I know how to make Tiktok Stories. It's trivial from a technique perspective to make LinkedIn Stories because I already have the experience and knowledge that I can simply move over to the new platform.

What are your bread and butter techniques, tactics, and strategies?

Which ones have you tried to move into a new problem domain recently?

Chances are, if you haven't, you've got many opportunities to take what works and make it work somewhere else. **You already know the next big thing.**

Process or Product?

October 4, 2020

Which do you want, the process or the product?

How many people know how to bake a pie from scratch? Not pick up a box in the freezer section, but "you've got a pile of flour and other ingredients in front of you, go!" scratch.

Not many. Certainly not many without having to Google it and then spend a whole lot of time on trial and error before baking something that vaguely resembles a pie. That's the process.

Now, how many people know how to eat and enjoy a pie?

Probably a lot more. That's the product.

Do you need to know how to make a pie from scratch?

If you're a bakery **you absolutely need to know how to make a pie from scratch**.

If you're someone who is concerned about the ingredients in their food or you have a specific, severe allergy (but you love pie) then you also need to know how to make a pie from scratch.

But if you're hosting a dinner party, **you don't need to know how to make a pie from scratch**. You just need to know how to use it - when to serve it, what temperature it should be at, what to serve with it.

If you're contributing to your office pot-luck, you don't need to know how to make a pie from scratch. You pop by the store, pick one up,

and enjoy.

Do you see the difference? Process is about knowing the intimate innards of the pie and every aspect of how it works. Product is about making use of the pie in a broader context.

This is how to think about AI and machine learning. In the case of the bakery, the pie is a core part of their services. In the case of the dinner party, the pie is just an add-on to enhance the experience.

AI is the same. Is the use of AI part of your business core competency? Is it part of the secret sauce? Then you'd better know how AI works, the ins and the outs, how to build a model from scratch, the works - the process.

If AI is just being used to improve some processes, then you don't need to build it from scratch. You just need to know - like pie - what constitutes good or bad AI, how to tell good vendors from bad vendors, and how to use the AI once you've acquired the technology and software from the vendor - the product.

That differentiation governs who you should hire, too. You don't need to hire a baker if making pie from scratch isn't part of your mandate. You don't need to hire a dozen AI engineers and data scientists if making AI from scratch isn't part of your mandate.

So, which do you want? Which do you need? **The process or the product?**

Customer Experience Failures

Customer Experience Failures

October 11, 2020

I've been in the market the last few days for a vendor. Specifically, a tree removal service, because a storm knocked over a great big tree into my yard. If you've never had large-scale yardwork done, it's not inexpensive; a service like this can cost you anywhere from US$1,000 - US$3,000 depending on the type of work and where in the world you are.

The purchasing process followed the standard customer journey: awareness, consideration, evaluation, purchase, and it went something like this.

Awareness: Google for tree removal service near me. See a list of a dozen vendors.

Consideration: With my wife looking over my shoulder, three vendors immediately lose consideration. Why? She points out two of them drive too fast down our road consistently, disrespecting the community. One of them we had a dissatisfactory experience with in the past. Six of them don't have websites where we can check to see if they offer emergency tree removal service. That leaves three vendors.

Evaluation: I make two initial calls, one to a vendor whose name we recognized and one to a vendor that has EMERGENCY TREE SERVICE prominently featured on their website and leave voicemails. Vendor 1 calls back right away and says they can come out to make an estimate later in the morning. Nothing from Vendor 2.

Later that morning, Vendor 1 calls back and says - sounding very

much off-kilter - that the morning got away from them and could they give me a call back tomorrow? I said fine, sure.

No word from Vendor 2. So on a lark, I call Vendor 3. They pick up on the second ring, and with somewhat broken English tell me their crew is nearby and can they come by for an estimate in 30 minutes? I say yes, and true to their word, they pull up 30 minutes later and present the estimate. I let them know I'm waiting on two other callbacks and I'll have an answer by the next morning.

Purchase: The next morning comes and Vendor 1 doesn't call back. Still nothing from Vendor 2, so I call back Vendor 3 and sign the agreement. They won the business - and it's almost US$3,000 worth of work.

Out of 12 vendors, only one made it to the final round. Let's unpack what happened and where these companies' marketing failed them:

- **Speed matters**. Vendor 3, while not in the initial consideration set, was the fastest to get the process rolling and was what ultimately won them the business.
- **Digital presence matters**. 6 of the 12 vendors had no websites, and websites are the fastest way for the customer to check if you can solve their problem. Vendor 3's website wasn't pretty. In fact, it was downright ugly, one step above a Geocities website. But it did its job perfectly: I had a problem, and they presented that they solved that problem.
- **Responsiveness matters**. Vendors 1 and 2 dropped the ball; Vendor 1 worst of all by promising something and not fulfilling it, while Vendor 2 just didn't bother to return the call.
- **Reputation matters**. 3 vendors got knocked out because of how they conducted themselves long before I was a buyer. Something as simple as driving too fast down my road was enough to give a negative brand impression to my wife, and that meant they had no chance of being considered.

Now, evaluate your own marketing and sales processes.

Are you the fastest to return a call to the customer? The fastest to get them an answer?

Does your website clearly state the problems you solve? You'll note that despite this being a large purchase, I didn't bother looking for testimonials, case studies, or white papers about tree removal. I looked for whether a vendor could solve the problem at all.

When you promise something, do you fulfill it? Vendor 1 burned themselves because they couldn't keep a promise even in the sales cycle, which meant they definitely wouldn't deliver good service after purchase.

What is your brand doing to build a solid reputation for itself? Little things matter!

These lessons are basic and near-universal. If you get them right, your sales and marketing will be difficult to beat.

Entitlement

October 18, 2020

I observed a few interesting interactions this week:

- I watched a prominent politician complain they weren't getting the limelight, getting all the press they thought they deserved.
- I listened to a brand manager express bewilderment that no one paid any attention to their latest announcement.
- I heard an online personality bemoan that with so many webinars and livestreams, no one was tuning in.
- I received a scathing message on LinkedIn from someone who said they were entitled to a response to an unsolicited message from someone I'd never heard of.

The last message was the one that resonated most with me, that truly highlighted the common problem: **an entitlement mindset**. Entitlement is a symptom of the "build it and they will come" belief, driven by ego and amplified by social media marketing. If we're there, our audiences should be as well. If we're putting in the effort, we should automatically be rewarded.

No one is entitled to anything beyond basic human rights or things we have committed to in a contractual agreements.

We must earn attention every day, every moment, every interaction. If we don't deliver value, our audiences are in no way obligated to deliver anything to us in return.

I get it - we put a lot of effort into our work. **But effort isn't value**. Just because we invest heavily in something does not automatically mean it's something other people want. I've written 22 marketing books over the last 20 years. Only two of them have done well. Did I work

hard on them? Every one. Did I deserve more downloads, more sales, more attention?

Nope. Because as hard as that is to stomach, I didn't deliver the value that my audiences wanted.

The only way to earn attention is to deliver unquestionable value. The only way to deliver value is to find out what our audiences want and give it to them.

That's something I'm working on every day, and if you want the attention your marketing needs, make it a focal point as well. It's not cheap or easy - well-done research never is - but it's the only long-term pathway to success.

- Are you happy with the answers you're getting out of Google Analytics today?

- Are you confident in the decisions you're making from Google Analytics?

- Are you secure in the knowledge that you're set up properly to benefit from Google Analytics 4?

We're winding down 2020 (thank goodness) and on the horizon are some big changes, including the newly-released Google Analytics 4, a completely new way to do your marketing analytics. **If you answered no to any of the questions above, let's take some time to get your analytics in shape.** 2021's going to be a BIG year for Google Analytics, and to benefit from it, your analytics infrastructure needs to be ready to go.

So I'm offering you a Google Analytics overhaul with my company, Trust Insights. Before the end of 2020, we'll help you:

- Get your existing Google Analytics account in shape with proper goals, tracking cleanup, and best practices

- Identify key issues that will block your ability to use Google Analytics 4 and help resolve them

- Help you set an analytics strategy for 2021 that focuses on answers, decisions, and growth rather than pouring more data

in your inbox

- Build you a migration plan for Google Analytics 4, including Google Tag Manager and Google Data Studio

[Ready? Click here to order an overhaul](https://www.trustinsights.ai/services/google-analytics-4-readiness-audit/):

https://www.trustinsights.ai/services/google-analytics-4-readiness-audit/

Why We're Not Data-Driven

Why We're Not Data-Driven
October 25, 2020

When people ask, "Why aren't more organizations data-driven?" the usual panoply of stodgy business school answers come up:

- We don't have a data-immersive culture
- We don't treat data as a business asset
- Data lives in separate silos
- Data is a cost center

There's also a simpler, more personal answer: **sometimes, being data-driven hurts.**

I'll give you an example. When my parents asked what my holiday plans were, I had to tell my parents that it's unsafe to travel for the upcoming holidays due to the pandemic. They're almost 80, so they're in the highest-risk category, and the data right now is going in ALL the wrong directions. More cases. More hospitalizations. More deaths.

They were really, *really* upset with that answer. And who could blame them? We've spent the majority of 2020 isolated from each other, from normal activities, from friends and family. Some folks have endured loss of jobs, others loss of health and even life. If disease were something sentient to be negotiated with, this would be the time of year to do it, right?

But it's not. [And the data - and credible experts say, more than ever, it's not](#).

So if we believe in science, if we believe in data, if we believe in facts, then we have to endure the pain of answers we don't like at all.

You'll see this pattern in any organization as part of its adoption of data. You'll get that first campaign whose data shows a very different answer than the emotional perception of it. You'll butt heads with people who deem it a qualitative success even though it was a quantitative failure - especially if a project was someone's pet project.

At a personal, human level, this is why becoming data-driven is difficult. So why would we do it? Many don't. Many resist it. But for those of us like you and me, it means the foundation we stand on is rock solid. When we propose something, when we launch something, when we do our daily jobs, we stand on solid ground. We can prove, beyond reasonable doubt, that what we did either worked or did not work, and from there we launch ourselves to more and greater successes over time.

If you're on a mission to become more data-driven, be prepared to deal with answers you don't like. **Get comfortable being uncomfortable**. That one soft skill will pave the way for more success with data than any other.

Google Analytics 4 Value Proposition
November 1, 2020

I've been spending a ton of time recently answering questions about the new Google Analytics 4, but I've been surprised at the one question I've been asking that no one else has asked.

What is the value proposition of Google Analytics 4?

The official blurb from Google's blog says this:

"To help you get better ROI from your marketing for the long term, we're creating a new, more intelligent Google Analytics that builds on the foundation of the App + Web property we introduced in beta last year. It has machine learning at its core to automatically surface helpful insights and gives you a complete understanding of your customers across devices and platforms. It's privacy-centric by design, so you can rely on Analytics even as industry changes like restrictions on cookies and identifiers create gaps in your data. The new Google Analytics will give you the essential insights you need to be ready for what's next."

I don't know about you but… that's kind of vague to me. What exactly does that mean?

Here's what we do know, what is tangible:

- Google Analytics 4 allows you to combine your data from your own mobile app and website together, which is valuable for companies that have both
- Google Analytics 4 boils everything down to the event level, which means mixing and matching different dimensions and metrics is easier

- For data nerds, Google Analytics 4 gives you all your raw data in a BigQuery database, which in turn allows you to do advanced analysis on it

All this comes at a price, unsurprisingly: a completely different interface, new measurement methods, and a total change in your analytics infrastructure to accommodate it.

The value proposition for advanced marketers who are comfortable working with Big Data, data science/machine learning, and performing robust analysis is clear. Google Analytics 4 gives us everything we've been asking about for years. Raw data. Advanced analysis. Granular tracking. Advanced marketers should get up and running sooner rather than later and reap the rewards.

The value proposition for non-advanced marketers is much, much less clear. Google Analytics 4 doesn't just move your cheese, it replaces your chese entirely. You went to bed with a block of cheddar and woke up with a cow next to your bed. Yes, in some ways, cheese is still possible but it's a lot more complicated than it used to be.

The good news is for non-advanced marketers, there isn't an urgent reason to switch right away. You should still get it up and running in parallel with what you have now (because with all things Google, nothing is ever retroactive), but beyond that, I'm not convinced there's a strong enough value proposition right now to necessitate sinking a ton of time into it - yet. The value may become more clear as the software matures and as advanced marketers build use cases for it, but right now it's not clear.

Thus, if you feel like you don't get what all the hubbub is about, or you feel like you're being left behind, or even maybe you feel stupid for not being enthusiastic about Google Analytics 4 - don't be. It isn't you. **It's that the value to you (and many marketers) of switching isn't clear yet, and that's not your problem - it's Google's.**

Oh, and if you want to see what I've covered on the topic so far, [this is my Google Analytics 4 YouTube playlist](#).

Forecasting Elections

November 8, 2020

Why can't we forecast elections?

One of the major questions that came out of the last week's US election was why various polls and forecasts were unable to predict the outcome.

For clarity, there are three general kinds of predictions when we are talking about elections: opinion polls, exit polls, and forecasts. Opinion polls are run by a variety of organizations in the run up to an election. Exit polls are run by Edison Research and the National Election Pool and occur during voting. Forecasts are mathematical models various groups assemble based on differing datasets to attempt predicting the outcome.

In this election, as in previous elections, the exit polls were correct. Opinion polls varied in correctness, and forecasts were generally incorrect.

Why? Why can't something as time-bound and important be accurately forecasted?

Here's the simple explanation and a golden rule of predictive analytics: **you cannot forecast something that has never happened**. All models and forecasts require previous data, and the more regular and frequent that data, the better the forecast.

Elections fail on both counts. Elections are very infrequent, compared to things like e-commerce transactions. Elections are also highly irregular. Why? Elections may happen regularly in America,

but what's being voted on varies wildly from election to election. Each candidate is different - even if the same candidate is running for re-election.

Imagine trying to forecast how two movies will perform against each other, but it's a new and different set of movies every time. A rom com vs a sci-fi movie. A documentary vs a horror film. It's never the same lineup, so it's very difficult to forecast.

Now imagine trying to do the same thing, but the movie theater moves around. One year it's in New York City, the next year it's in Peoria. Will Captain America play better in one location than another? What about Fifty Shades of Grey? That's what has been happening in American elections as the population changes. The America that voted last week is not the same America that voted in 2018, or the same America that voted in 2016.

Add onto that all the hidden inputs that normally mess with models, from differing marketing tactics to foreign interference to social networks, and suddenly we have an insurmountable amount of relevant data we'd need to forecast an election.

And then add a pandemic. Is it any wonder forecasts and models failed to predict the outcome?

Here's the lesson we must learn from this as marketers: you can't forecast what has never happened. If you're in the throes of 2021 planning right now, you're probably looking back at past data and trying to project it forward. Beware! The world you operate in right now is very different than the world in November of 2019 - completely different. This is a new world, a new operating environment where the customer does fundamentally different things than they did 12 months ago. **Forecasts and models built on last year's data will be wrong**.

What should we do instead? **Rely heavily on near-realtime data**. Look at trends that are recent, rather than pre-pandemic. If we're

trying to forecast something new - a product or service we haven't ever launched, the tenure of a new executive, etc. - we should expect our forecasts to potentially be radically wrong.

And be doubly cautious of vendors promising they can reliably forecast the future. No one can reliably do that now for any substantial time horizon. It's a brave new world for all of us, and nothing is guaranteed now. Focus not on what could happen, but what's happening right now.

Syncing Audiences

November 15, 2020

How often are you syncing up your audiences?

We as consumers have no shortage of platforms to choose from. As marketers and brands, we have to be as many places as our audiences are. One of the consequences of this strategy is that our audiences end up scattered all over the Internet. Someone who follows you on Twitter may not know you have a YouTube channel. Someone on your email list may not know about your podcast. And that sucks, because you're working hard to push content out on all these different platorms and it's not being seen by as many people as possible.

For example, did you know I publish a newsletter every Wednesday that has fresh, unique marketing data, like Instagram TV stats, number of republished links, and all sorts of other marketing data? [It's called In the Headlights, and it's an excellent complement to this newsletter](#).

If you didn't know that, then that perfectly illustrates my point. We don't do enough to sync up our media properties and help our audiences know what's where. I have a whole block a little further down in this newsletter called Social Sync that shares more of what I have, where, so that you can find the things you're looking for. I also maintain a [welcome page with similar information on my website](#) as an easy way to introduce people to the different media I produce.

So the takeaway and question is - **are you doing this with your media properties?** Are you letting people know what's where, with clear descriptions so people know WHY they should follow you in one

place or another? If you're not, consider the following tactics:

- A regular blurb like this one in your email newsletters
- A page on your website you share on social media frequently
- A section in your newsletters with common links
- Shared links in your blog pointing to your other properties
- Promotional resources (like a welcome/tour video on YouTube)

Don't put a ton of effort into creating media without spending just as much effort distributing and promoting it! It's better for you, and it helps you serve your audience better by helping them find what they want, where they want it.

Living in Snapshots

Living in Snapshots

November 22, 2020

Stop living in snapshots.

Almost everyone I know uses data in snapshots, and it's almost completely the wrong way to use data.

By snapshots, I mean looking at your data once in a while, peeking at it, opening up a dashboard, whatever. We look using snapshots of data rather than seeing our data as a living, breathing entity - and then we're taken by surprise when our occasional glances at our data reveal something we didn't expect.

You know these snapshots well. They're your monthly report, your quarterly board review, your occasional deep dive into Google Analytics. Is living in snapshots better than not looking at your data at all? Sure. But it's substantially worse than having your data be part of your routine, of your life. When you live in snapshots, you miss trends and changes in your data.

For example, I watch COVID-19 data daily as part of my [daily pandemic newsletter](). Every day I see what's happening with three KPIs: new cases, new hospitalizations, and new deaths - and because I have my finger on the pulse of the data, I can more accurately predict what's going to happen. When the third surge began at the start of October, I knew we were headed for lockdowns because the surge was so much bigger and faster than the previous two surges.

What did I do? You'll remember my newsletter a month ago when I said how it hurt to tell my parents we weren't coming for the holidays. They didn't see what I saw in the data. Fast forward a month and

every government official and scientist is telling us the same - stay home for the holidays.

I restocked everything that needed restocking six weeks ago (and told my newsletter readers to do the same). Go ahead, ask me how much toilet paper I have in my basement. Fast forward to today? Headlines in the news about panic buying and shortages again as lockdowns commence (that same [toilet paper](#) I bought six weeks ago is out of stock on Amazon).

When you live in the data, you are a part of its story and you can see where the story is going.

How do you make data part of your life instead of living in snapshots? Make it someplace you go regularly. If there are marketing metrics that are critical to you, put them on a Google Data Studio dashboard and make that the start page of your browser, so that every time you go to post a rant on Facebook or mindlessly watch cat videos on YouTube, your data is the first thing you see.

Once you build the habit of seeing your data as often as you see other things important to you in your life, you'll make better decisions and faster decisions with it.

Click Traps

November 29, 2020

Do you have a click trap set up in your emails?

I do.

One of the questions folks ask when they're looking at email marketing results is how reliable/trustworthy the results are. It's a well-established fact, especially in B2B email marketing, that some corporate email systems scan our email marketing messages and *click on every single link* to determine whether a link contains malware or other threats.

Naturally, in discussions about the impact of email marketing, these spurious clicks come up, especially if someone wants to argue against the value of email marketing. "Email marketing analytics can't be relied on," they'll argue as they sip their stale, bitter coffee, "bots are clicking on everything!"

What is the savvy email marketer to do? Set up click traps so that you know how many invalid clicks there are in every marketing message you send out.

Somewhere in this newsletter, I've set up a single punctuation mark is linked to a tracking link. I've made it to a URL that exists, but with special Google Analytics tracking codes so I can disregard that traffic - it's clearly being done by bots and not humans, because the likelihood that you'll even know to look for it (well, you do now, but you didn't in previous weeks) is so small that clicking on it is highly unlikely.

https://twitter.com/cspenn	138	77
https://www.christopherspenn.com	346	234
https://www.christopherspenn.com/welcome-aboard/#check?utm_source=checker&utm_medium=email	25	17
https://www.linkedin.com/in/cspenn	127	76
https://www.marketingovercoffee.com	321	222
https://www.trustinsights.ai	334	227
https://www.trustinsights.ai/analyticsformarketers	49	24
https://www.trustinsights.ai/blog/2020/11/podcast-in-ear-insights-2021-marketing-trends/	359	245
https://www.trustinsights.ai/resources/in-ear-insights-the-trust-insights-podcast/	131	75

Bot clicks

What do we do with this data?

First, we know out of every send, **how many clicks to discount**. If I have 2,000 clicks in a newsletter on 20 links (so 100 clicks per link), but my click trap shows 5 clicks, then I know I only have 95 clicks per link in reality.

Second, I know **which subscribers have firewalls that are clicking on everything**. That helps me understand what percentage of my list is behind such firewalls. Typically, big corporations and highly-regulated companies have such detection mechanisms, so that may be a useful proxy for certain kinds of companies and professionals on my list.

Third, I know **which traffic to discount in Google Analytics** - and how much of it. I can, in my Google Analytics exports, remove or filter traffic with my specific click tracking campaign to get a true understanding of how much traffic to discount as bot traffic if Google Analytics doesn't already catch it with its built-in bot filters.

Knowing how much traffic in any given email is junk is a powerful, useful thing to know. Consider implementing click traps in your email marketing to diagnose how many of your clicks aren't valid.

Forecasting Failures

December 13, 2020

At the end of a livestream I was doing last week, a viewer questioned the advice I was giving out about not using pre-pandemic data to forecast the next year, since the world is fundamentally different.

They asked, "*Can you make reliable strategic decisions based on a short window of data (daily), compared to year over year? Do seasonal differences not matter right now because the world is so different?*"

This is a really good question. The way I'm thinking about the world right now is like holiday driving, back when we used to travel for holidays. Holiday traffic was always a series of snarls that required a lot of agility and Google Maps. Traffic jam? Accident? Lane closure? Bad weather? You had to route around traffic jams, somethings preemptively if you know the area well, all while making progress towards your destination.

You couldn't rely on long-term forecasts for long drives. If you're driving from Boston to New York, you can't look at traffic in New York City now while you're just leaving your house in Boston - by the time you get there, the situation will totally have changed.

Some things remain relatively constant - you know that certain roads are ALWAYS a mess, even on good days. You know that people generally stop to eat at certain times. So even though the specific details are obscured, experience plus great data let you navigate the issues and get to your destination.

That's how I feel about forecasting right now. It's fine to set goals, just as it's fine to put a destination in Google Maps. You kind of have to if

you want to get where you're going. But you have to be able to adapt, adapt, adapt - and quickly - to deal with exceptionally uncertain circumstances. The way you've done things in the past doesn't necessarily apply, so **be ready to make significant changes while still driving towards your goals**.

And like driving in holiday traffic, to the best of your ability, try to enjoy what you can of the journey as you drive towards your goals in the year ahead. We know it's not going to be a smooth ride. We know that we're in for some rough spots. But that shouldn't preclude us from enjoying ourselves when we're not in those sticky spots, just like we can still make the most of bad traffic and sing along to our favorite playlists when no one's listening.

B2B Predictions for 2021

December 20, 2020

My friend Lee Odden was asking about my predictions for B2B content marketing in 2021. I have no idea what to predict for 2021 - and neither does anyone else, if we're honest. So little about the world is predictable right now beyond the basics.

But I can tell you what's happening now and how I'm interpreting the data I have right now. The last few issues of the newsletter, I've asked you to fill out a survey - and thank you to everyone who did - asking what your challenges are going into 2021.

The top challenge? **Screen fatigue**. No one wants more podcasts, more videos, more livestreams, more time on their devices. Literally no one - even though for the first six months of 2021, that will continue to be the way we communicate with others the majority of the time. I actually find it somewhat ironic that people responded that screen fatigue was a problem and then immediately had "getting audiences to pay attention to all our new content" as the next challenge.

So all the marketers who pivoted in 2020 to making podcasts, videos, livestreams, etc. are facing substantially diminished audience interest. We as marketers adapted to the new reality and in doing so, flooded the world with content at the same time everyone else flooded the world.

Given a choice between my livestream and The Mandalorian, where will you invest your time? The only reason you watch at all is because you can't binge watch your favorite shows at work and still call it work. Heck, given a choice between my livestream and The

Mandalorian, *I* might watch The Mandalorian.

So what do our audiences want? **Faster content**. I was talking to a friend this week who said they listen to my podcast at 1.5x speed; I already talk fast and then said 2x was too fast. They wanted the information - just faster. Why do people love services like Vine, Tiktok, and Instagram Reels? You know your commitment to any one piece of content will be under 10 seconds.

How do we make content faster? For anything audio or video, provide transcripts. Folks can read up to 400 words per minute; we speak at roughly 150 words per minute. The audience can consume our content 2.67 times faster with a transcript.

The cliche "a meeting that could have been an email" applies even more today, to every format. Do you need a livestream? Do you need a podcast? Do you need a YouTube channel? Or could you convey the same information in an email newsletter? Some things, like screencast tutorials, absolutely require video. Other things, like a talking head? That can be an email or a blog post.

Cut out the fat. We all know and despise those cooking recipes online where you have to scroll through 44 pages about the author's life history, how their grandmother was a homesteader, the can of possum stew they ate as a kid that gave them their inspiration, and so on before we actually get to what we came for - the recipe. People have written Chrome extensions explicitly to trim out all the crap and just get to the recipe.

When people write software to bypass your content, it's too long.

Ask yourself this question going into 2021. When attention is scarce and at a premium, **how can you make your content as fast as possible?**

Polling Tricks in Emails

December 27, 2020

Last week, I asked you a one-question poll to start the newsletter, about which format you'd prefer content from me in. The results were interesting:

Page		Pageviews ▼	Pageviews
		406 % of Total: 9.79% (4,148)	406 % of Total: 9.79% (4,148)
1.	/thanks-for-taking-the-poll/?answer=email&utm_keyword=email	121	29.80%
2.	/thanks-for-taking-the-poll/?answer=textblogs&utm_keyword=textblogs	90	22.17%
3.	/thanks-for-taking-the-poll/?answer=video&utm_keyword=video	78	19.21%
4.	/thanks-for-taking-the-poll/?answer=audio&utm_keyword=audio	65	16.01%
5.	/thanks-for-taking-the-poll/?answer=livestream&utm_keyword=livestream	52	12.81%

Email came in a solid first place, followed by text blogs, then video, then audio. Dead last by a considerable margin was live streaming. This is unsurprising; we spoke a couple weeks ago about the need to make content faster, to let audiences consume our information faster so they can move onto the next thing in their lives. It's absolutely no surprise that you don't want more appointment-based content, needing to show up at a specific date and time to receive the content. Who has time for that any more?

Email, of course, is not only the fastest form of content in terms of the medium (text), it's also the least amount of effort for the audience because it arrives to you directly. You don't need to remember to go anywhere - it comes to you.

The other thing the poll generated was interest in how it works. It's very straightforward, if you look at the underlying code behind the scenes:

```
## 1-Click Poll

Please take this one-click poll and click on the answer you prefer best.

What content format would you like me to make more content in 2021?
- [More email &raquo;](https://www.christopherspenn.com/thanks-for-
taking-the-poll/?answer=email&utm_keyword=email)
- [More text blog posts &raquo;](https://www.christopherspenn.com/thanks-
for-taking-the-poll/?answer=textblogs&utm_keyword=textblogs)
- [More audio &raquo;](https://www.christopherspenn.com/thanks-for-
taking-the-poll/?answer=audio&utm_keyword=audio)
- [More video &raquo;](https://www.christopherspenn.com/thanks-for-
taking-the-poll/?answer=video&utm_keyword=video)
- [More livestream content &raquo;]
(https://www.christopherspenn.com/thanks-for-taking-the-poll/?
answer=livestream&utm_keyword=livestream)
```

Each of the links in the poll goes to the same thank you page, but each is tagged with an arbitrary value (the answer) as well as the same data in a Google Analytics UTM tag. The results above are directly from my Google Analytics account. This accomplishes a few different things.

First, it makes the traffic **trackable in my system of record** - I don't need a second piece of software added to my technology stack.

Second, it's a **sanity check** on my email marketing software. Are the numbers close, or are there a ton more clicks in email than people who actually showed up to my website?

Third, if this were a mission-critical product, something I really cared about, I would be able to enroll people who clicked on a specific answer into a **retargeting audience** to encourage them to purchase at a later date. I've obviously had no need to do that with this poll, but by using the technologies already built into things like Google Analytics and Google Ads, I could accomplish quite a lot from a single

click.

I encourage you to use similar tech tricks in your own email communications to better analyze the needs of your audience without adding to your tech stack's budget or complexity.

In the new year, I'm going to take your guidance as part of my overall content plan, so thank you for those who took the poll. If you've got some additional thoughts about content in the new year, I'd love to hear them. [Pop on by my free Slack community, Analytics for Marketers, and say hello](#).

Stay in Touch

Stay in Touch

Let's make sure we're connected in the places it suits you best. Here's where you can find different content:

- [My blog](#) - daily videos, blog posts, and podcast episodes

- [My YouTube channel](#) - daily videos, conference talks, and all things video

- [My company, Trust Insights](#) - marketing analytics help

- [My podcast, Marketing over Coffee](#) - weekly episodes of what's worth noting in marketing

- [My second podcast, In-Ear Insights](#) - the Trust Insights weekly podcast focused on data and analytics

- [On Twitter](#) - multiple daily updates of marketing news

- [On LinkedIn](#) - daily videos and news

- [On Instagram, mostly personal photos](#) - personal photos and travel

- [My free Slack discussion forum, Analytics for Marketers](#) - open conversations about marketing and analytics

Required FTC Disclosures

Required FTC Disclosures

Events with links have purchased sponsorships in this newsletter and as a result, I receive direct financial compensation for promoting them.

Advertisements in this newsletter have paid to be promoted, and as a result, I receive direct financial compensation for promoting them.

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