

How to Make Your Content Stand Out and Dominate in a Crowded Niche

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In the summer of 2013, I did something most people would consider stupid. I entered the self-help niche.

The self-help space, of course, was overflowing with competition. Everywhere you looked there were blogs with thousands of articles, YouTube channels serving millions of people, entire categories in bookstores stocked to the brim with life guides and manuals.

Clearly, it would take me *years* to break through the noise and build any kind of substantial following.

Right?

It took less than three months to hit one million pageviews.

And by the end of that year? I was doing one million pageviews *per month*.

Now I know what you're thinking, "Holy shit, what's the secret sauce man? And can you give me some?"

Well, yes... Yes, I can.

My Story

First, let me be honest.

It's not like I had just magically started a blog and it was successful.

In fact, I had been working at blogging and breaking through to readers in other niches for close to five years before I had my big break out success.

The first blog I ever started was in 2007. It was a small personal blog on BlogSpot (now defunct) that I began because my roommates had blogs and told me I was a total loser for not having one.

(Score one for peer pressure.)

So I started one with a default midnight blue theme and started writing. About what, I couldn't even tell you. I just went with it. I didn't figure anyone would actually read it anyway.

In 2008, I started one of my first internet businesses selling dating advice online. And after struggling to get readers and sales, I came to the conclusion that a blog could be a nice way to generate traffic and maybe make enough money to buy a mayonnaise sandwich.

I spent the next two years writing articles. Three a week. Sometimes more. The articles were short and crappy, of course, as that's what you were supposed to do in those days – spam crappy short articles to build up your Google SEO rankings.

Throughout 2009 and 2010 I wrote and wrote, fighting for the scraps of traffic gifted to me from Google. And slowly, I built a very modest readership of maybe a couple hundred visitors per day.

But I burnt myself out.

By 2010, I was fed up with the niche. I felt like I was just repeating myself over and over, and not saying anything new or interesting that distinguished me from the dozens and dozens of other blogs out there. On top of that, and the dating advice out there for men, was often incredibly toxic, objectifying women and encouraging them to basically do anything to get laid, as if they were walking penises with no brains.

Put simply, I wanted to hang it up. I didn't enjoy the niche anymore, and as the years went by, it got more and more crowded while my site's traffic stagnated and remained small.

But before I quit, I decided to try one last thing... one thing would eventually change everything.

I decided, if I was going to ditch the business and move on to something else, I might as well come out and say what I'm *actually* thinking – about all the sleazy advice out there, about how unhealthy it is for people to want them to change themselves to fit somebody else's standards, how people should improve their dating lives through nurturing greater self-respect, honesty and investing in their own well-being first, rather than simply trying to memorize lines or tactics to make a man or woman interested in them.

I began to write about all of this, openly and shamelessly. I expected my readers to abandon the site, to give up and go find what they were looking for (more lines and tactics). I expected hate mail and angry comments.

But to my amazement, my traffic doubled within a few months. So I kept writing. More fervently and violently than ever. 3,000 word articles. 4,000 word articles. Fuck, a whole guide to your entire emotional life mapped out: 10,000 words!

Then a few months later, traffic doubled again.

In less than a year, my site's traffic had suddenly jumped up to over 1,000 unique visitors each day. A 500% increase.

In 2011, I shut down my other websites and decided to focus on this dating advice blog-type thing full-time. After years of effort, writing seemed like the only thing I was actually good at.

I started experimenting with newer, deeper topics – topics I had found through research and my own experience to be important in dating, but never saw talked about elsewhere – things like self-esteem, beliefs about gender roles, accepting and dealing with rejection, and identity.

These new deeper pieces made me stand out in my niche, and before I knew it, what had begun as a cheesy dating advice blog offering people tips on where to go on a first date, had turned into a full-blown self-help site diving deep into emotional issues of worthiness and intimacy.

Traffic ballooned in 2012 to over 2,500 visitors per day. I had an email list in the tens of thousands. And for the first time in my adult life, I could afford as many mayonnaise sandwiches as I wanted.

But then things plateaued again. I wrote more and more but things stayed the same. And by the beginning of 2013 it felt like nothing I did could make the business grow.

After a few months of thinking about it, it became clear why:

My branding.

The branding was severely out of date for the content. It was still a primarily male-focused site with a high emphasis on dating advice, yet some of my most popular articles and most important topics were

universal: they applied to women, married people, people from all walks of life.

I realized that I had outgrown my initial niche. I was no longer a dating advice blogger, I was a life advice blogger, and I needed to change the site to reflect that.

In July of 2013, I rebranded the site to simply my name, markmanson.net and announced to the world that I would write “personal development advice that doesn’t suck.”

And I never looked back...

5 Steps to Create Content that Dominates Any Niche

As you can now see, when I dived head-first into the personal development and self-help space, I wasn’t a newbie.

In fact, I had already been blogging for almost six years. And I had already learned a lot of important lessons about creating content from my days and successes in the dating advice realm.

So when I re-branded the site, I didn’t just change the design or the name.

I had a plan of attack.

I sat down and started asking myself specific questions that I believe led to the incredible growth in traffic and engagement I would experience over the next year.

And those questions I’ve crystallized into the five steps below, to help you come to dominate whatever niche you are in or would like to get

into. To help you grow your traffic and develop a huge platform for your own ideas.

I would love to tell you to just follow these five steps and everything will take care of itself. But as you'll see, these steps are hard. Many of them will take years to accomplish, or at least to accomplish to the degree that they will change everything for you.

But as long as you keep these five principles focused in the front of your mind, I have no doubt your site will succeed.

Step 1: Let's be honest here, what niche are you *actually* in?

This may sound stupid, but of the hundreds of content creators I've come across and talked to, I've noticed that many of them aren't clear on what niche they're actually in.

Who are they trying to appeal to? What's their core message? What's their true benefit?

If you can't answer these questions immediately and clearly, then you have a problem.

I ran into this problem both when I started out in dating advice and later on as well. When I started out, I was basically just writing the same kind of garbage I saw on other dating advice blogs. There was nothing clear or unique about what I was doing and as a result, I had no clear audience that I was trying to appeal to. As a result, my site floundered in mediocrity for two years.

Similarly, later on, after building a loyal dating advice following and branching out into deeper topics, I had a phase where I was writing about all sorts of topics on what was still branded as a male-oriented dating site. So I'd have an article on travel, and article on culture, an

article on identity and self-esteem and an article on sex, all in the same month.

As a result, the site was sort of a mess. It wasn't until I rebranded with a clear theme that tied everything together that everything took off.

So get clear about *who* you're actually writing to and *what* you're actually writing.

I see a lot of sites that are like a travel tips/lifestyle blog with entrepreneurial stories and life hacks with a bunch of other stuff randomly thrown in like the best apps to download on your phone or how to get really good at playing poker.

I see these sites and have no clue what I'm looking at.

And *that's* the problem.

Get clear on your message. Sure, these subjects can all be talked about on the same blog, *but only if they share some sort of underlying core theme that ties them all together.*

I used to write about travel and family issues and relationships and sex and it didn't work because they had no clear connection to the theme of my blog.

But as soon as I clarified the core theme of the blog as personal development with an attitude, suddenly all of these topics made sense in how they fit together.

And once the readers could fit them together easily, they knew immediately what I was offering.

Step 2: What do people need to hear that's not being said?

At the beginning of his book *Zero to One*, Paypal co-founder and initial Facebook investor Peter Thiel says there is one question that he asks all of the start-up founders he interviews:

“What do you believe to be true that most people do not?”

This is such a brilliant question for so many reasons.

For one, it *forces you* to become contrarian, to start questioning all of the major assumptions within your industry or niche and to innovate better solutions.

This question sums up what this step is all about – what needs to be said in your niche that is currently not being said by anyone else?

Back when I focused primarily on men’s dating advice, what needed to be said was that a man can become most attractive through self-improvement and honesty, not through manipulating or memorizing techniques.

Nobody was saying this.

But because I stood up and said it well, I reaped the benefits, and changed the entire course of the industry behind me.

When I entered the self-help niche, I said that positivity and chasing success can often hurt you just as much as it helps you. I said that pain and failure are necessary and often even *good*.

Nobody else was saying this.

And as because nobody else was, again, I reaped the benefits.

In both cases, I was going *against the grain* of the conventional wisdom in my industry. And in both cases, I stood out and defined myself that much more clearly because of it.

Now, this doesn't mean you can just disagree with everything and be an asshole for the sake of being contrarian.

You need to have solid reasons and arguments to back up your disagreements here, otherwise people will just look at you as a cheap opportunist.

That's why you need to think hard about this – to seek out and understand what may be an unpopular opinion. And then leverage it to steer a niche in your direction.

Step 3: Where are your ideal readers hanging out?

Once you have clarified who you're trying to appeal to, and once you've nailed down a unique message that goes against what most people consider conventional wisdom, the next logical step is figuring out where these ideal readers of yours are hanging out.

I'm often surprised at how overlooked this is. But some platforms work great for some niches and horrible for others.

When I was in dating advice, Facebook and Twitter were dead to me. Nobody wants to share posts about their dating life struggles to their entire social network.

And *especially* men.

Men, in general, are shamed and ridiculed if they struggle with women.

So admitting such a thing to their family and friends in a very public way would be akin to committing social media seppuku – i.e., not a good for social media marketing.

No, dating advice people hang out privately (and often secretly) with other dating advice people on forums, and more recently, on Reddit.

In fact, Reddit was largely responsible for the success of my dating advice blog. A number of articles got posted there (not by me) and were upvoted. I then did a few IAmA sessions (basically what Redditors call open Q&A's) and things blew up.

When I switched to personal development topics, things changed. People aren't afraid to share an article on happiness or goals on Facebook.

In fact, a lot of people love sharing that type of stuff on Facebook. So once I switched over to the new brand, social media became my primary focus.

Some niches are going to do best by optimizing for SEO (selling car parts or discussing the differences in various types of insurance, for instance). Other niches will do best through video (make up and/or skincare for example). Other niches may benefit most from podcasting.

Figure out where your ideal audience hangs out and cater your content to that.

An acquaintance of mine started a business that helps troubleshoot and fix Wordpress websites. It's no coincidence then that he marketed his business by creating a blog full of big, beautiful posts with tons of images about the ups and downs of his business. It was exactly the kind of content and the exact *medium* that his ideal customers would consume. It worked great.

A friend of mine's father has a business selling do-it-yourself car repair tools and manuals. Outside of car enthusiast Facebook groups, they get no traction on any social media. Very few people get excited to post to their friends and family about the carburetor that they just installed. Instead, they've found the most success through SEO (tons of people googling about problems with their cars) and car forums.

Think about where your readers/viewers/customers are and then cater your platform to travel best through those avenues.

Step 4: Bring your personality to your business

There's a sexy new buzzword lately called "Relationship marketing" and the principle idea behind it is that because so much crap is available on the internet 24/7, people are naturally going to gravitate towards buying and consuming from producers that they believe they have a personal relationship with.

This is why it's usually positive ROI to respond to as many of your emails as possible, to make personal comments to people on social media and so on.

But it also means that people should be more bold about exposing their real personality through their content.

If you curse a lot in real life, then start dropping F-bombs in your posts.

If you like to nerd out to technical specifications, then implement that into your videos.

If you have a tendency to go on long hilarious rants, capture that in your podcasts.

Yes, you will piss and annoy a lot of people. But you will generate a much stronger connection with the people who like you.

You'll go from a thousand people who are relatively indifferent to you, to 500 who love you and 500 who can't stand you, and either way, all of those people will start talking about you, thus spreading your message further.

Or put another way, Dan Kennedy used to say, “If you haven’t pissed somebody off by noon, then you probably aren’t making much money.”

Step 5: Out-work the competition

And finally, we get to the cliché advice that you have heard a million times, but nobody *really knows* what the fuck it means.

Out-work your competition.

While they’re sleeping, you’re working. While they’re bathing, you’re working. While they’re brushing their teeth and flossing, you’re working.

Yada, yada, so on and so forth...

But here’s the problem: working harder doesn’t necessarily mean just putting in more hours.

I mean, if you’re a really bad writer, then working harder can just mean write more and more crap, filling up a website with tons and tons of content that nobody wants to read.

When people chastise you telling you to work harder, there’s an important element of self-critique and quality control that should be present in that advice that often does not get expressed.

So here’s a better way to put it: work enough to be just that much better than the competition.

We’re interested in results here, after all.

If most of the videos in your niche have poor production value, create some high production value videos.

If no one in your fitness niche is backing up their claims with studies, slap the studies together (or at least links to them) to lend yourself more credibility.

If other consultants are marketing themselves with 2-minute videos with zero actionable content, that means you put together a 20-minute video of mind-blowing advice that leads them directly into a brain-melting sales pitch.

The best proof and credibility of your expertise on your particular subjects comes through the care you put into the details of your business.

I realized early on that most self-help sites looked like shit. I love design and feel as though I'm fairly good at it, so I invested a ton of time and energy into developing a smooth, beautiful website that people would enjoy reading on. I chose not to clutter it with a million share buttons and ads and promotions, but instead honed in on a single pitch on each page (either a sign up form or a book or course).

This helped me stand out.

Within a year, I was alerted to three sites (Yes, THREE) that copy/pasted my design onto their own blogs with minor changes. And since then, many more self-help blogs have redesigned their sites with many of the same design features as mine.

Did these copycats piss me off?

Not really.

Because look, if a guy thinks he can just copy a successful blog design and that it will work just as well for him – he doesn't get it.

It means he didn't go through Steps 1-4.

Someone who copies a site design has not established a unique message or thought hard about where their ideal readers are. He isn't bringing his unique personality to his work and he is certainly NOT out-working his competition.

Within another year, those copycat blogs all shut down and/or moved on to other things.

Step 5 – that is, busting your ass and working like a world champ – only works if you have the first four steps straight. If you aren't clear on your niche or your audience or what makes you stand out, then all of that extra work will just cause you to run in place. All hustle and no progress.

Some of the best advice my dad gave me was, “In business, most people get good at finding golden eggs, and few people get good at being the goose that lays the golden eggs. Learn how to be the goose.”

Some Final Thoughts

The internet is getting more crowded. Every year that goes by, there is more competition, more stuff being shared on more platforms, and it becomes harder to stand out from the rest.

But it's still very possible.

The last thing I will say is that I consistently run into people who are starting internet businesses or start building a platform for their content and who get discouraged a few months in that it's “not working.”

They start their site or their channel or their podcast, they get that first influx of a few dozen (or if they're lucky, a few hundred) visitors/listeners/viewers, and it feels amazing.

But then it soon plateaus or even drops off and they're sitting there six months later feeling dejected and as though everything is impossible.

These are the moments that separate who achieves their goals from who doesn't.

The people who never make it are the people who, when confronted with a plateau or a downswing, immediately think, "Well, I guess nobody wants to hear what I have to say after all," or "I guess I'm just not cut out for this."

And hey, if you don't enjoy it. If you were just in it for the glory and not the guts, then yeah, you probably aren't cut out for it.

But if you do enjoy it. If you do love it and believe in it and are willing to work for it, what you should be doing is taking a step back, looking at where the weaknesses and flaws in your platform is.

Could the production value be higher?

Is the brand clear and on point?

Are they appealing to the right people in the right places?

What could they do to make their voice stand out more or insert more personality and creativity into their work?

In the eight years that I have been publishing and selling online, I can tell you that, with no exception, the most successful changes and decisions I've made always seemed crazy and made me feel very uncomfortable at first.

But it's that discomfort and sense of craziness that proves that what you're doing is new and different.

And only what is new and different can ever truly break through the noise and make a dent in the universe.

