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## My Favorite Graphs... and the future

### Out-spend or Out-teach



This blog has always been about optimism, creating better user experiences, helping users spend more time in flow, and learning. There are 405 posts here. More importantly, there are nearly 10,000 comments from y'all that add so much more to the topics, and from which myself and others have learned a great deal. I don't want the last thing people remember about this blog to be The Bad Things.

So, I've moved my original "threats" post--something many people find very difficult to look at-- to a different web page -- rather than keeping it as a post here. If you want to read the original content of the post (it lost some formatting), [it's here](#).

But I want the thing people see when they come here now to reflect what this blog has always been about, so I'm including a few of my favorite pictures from the last two years here.

As for the future of this blog, I know I cannot just return to business as usual -- whatever absurd reasons have led to this much hatred for me (and for what I write here) will continue, so there is no reason to think the same things wouldn't happen again... and probably soon. That includes anything that raises (or maintains) my visibility, so I will not be doing speaking engagements--especially at public events. (And of course it's not just me, it's anyone with a lot of visibility. Think: Scoble. He can take it, I can't.)

I made no money from this blog -- it was always a labor of love. Contrary to what the critics have been saying, I was never on the "paid" speaking circuit, never used

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## RECENT COMMENTS

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[Just-in-time vs. Just-in-case learning](#)

[Your brain on multitasking](#)

[Can you have too much ease-of-use?](#)

[One of us is smarter than all of us](#)

[Why I want a tablet PC \(hint: mind mapping\)](#)



it to gain "lucrative consulting contracts" (or even a *single* contract). I don't have Amazon affiliate links... this blog was because I love helping and teaching and learning from readers.

That leaves me with... what to do next?

I have a few ideas, but I'm now asking for any suggestions OTHER than simply returning to this blog and doing what I was doing before. These are just some wild possibilities that many of you have come up with and sent me emails about. Some are more reasonable or appealing to me than others. I'd love to hear more ideas, plus thoughts on the ones listed below.

1) Get a real job doing this, so that I can continue with the same kind of work, but without raising my own visibility. In other words, it would be for a company and the focus would be off of *me*.

2) "Ghost write" for someone or something else. I got myself into the Technorati Top 50, I could help someone else (if it's for the right reasons) raise their readership.

3) Create a fake persona and write as that fake person. Unfortunately, almost everything I do has a look and style, and I don't think the quality of my writing is suddenly going to improve, so it would be pretty obvious that it was me. Still... a rape fantasy about a fake person who lives thousands of miles from where I do would not effect me as deeply or as personally as when the dream/imagery is about *the real me* I don't like this idea as much because anonymity--NOT Owning Your Own Words--is one of the biggest contributors to the problems that have driven me and thousands of others off their blogs or other online communities.

4) Turn THIS blog into a *real* group blog... with a LOT of authors, and I would take more of an editorial role. That way, I represent only a small percentage and the hatred/anger/threats would be more distributed. Kind of a share-the-attacks approach ; ) More like [37 Signals](#), less like [Scoble](#), where all *personal* attacks are directed at him instead of The Blog.

5) Right now, I couldn't pay anyone else so the blog would have to be sponsored to pay other authors. I would agree to sponsorship only if it was by someone/something I already love (Apple? Adobe? Google? Anyone interested?)

(And of course I'd also need authors, so if it looks like a group blog is the way to go, there will be a call for participants)

6) Make the blog *private* -- where only registered members can see it. That way, it would be *much* more difficult (and probably less fun) for others to attack it and/or me. It would simply be a private community. My visibility would drop dramatically, yet I'd still be able to write about the same topics. This idea is one of my favorites -- but at the same time it is much less user-friendly (you'd have to log-in, no public RSS feed, etc.) and that would be a really *bad* idea.

7) Do something else on the blog -- podcasts, video, e-books -- something other

## [ARCHIVES](#)

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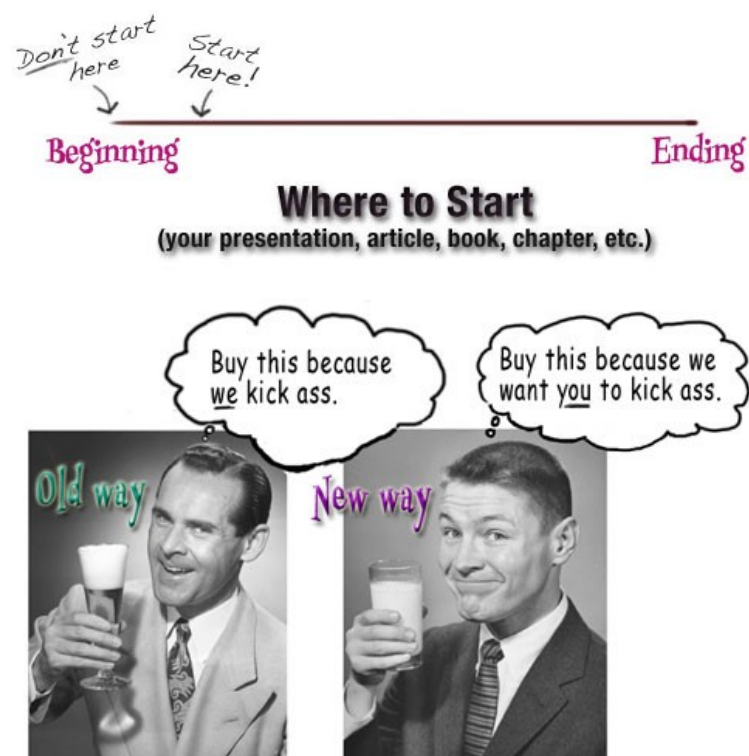
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than the posts. This might not make any difference, though. But perhaps without the words and pictures... it could just make it worse since it would still be my voice (podcast) or worse, my FACE (video), although I've considered cutting videos that wouldn't have to show me at all.

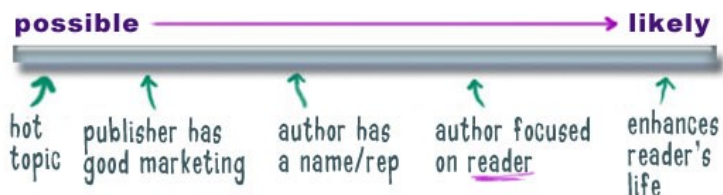
8) ???

Please help. This will be the last post here quite some time, until I figure out what to do next. Please enjoy the pictures... most of them have been inspired by y'all.

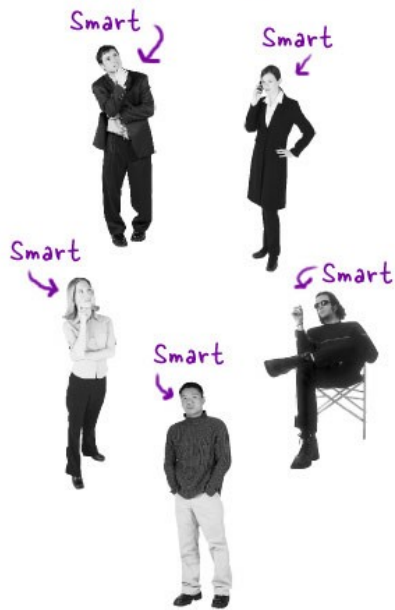
(I will leave comments open, of course, but moderate with abandon. There will be nothing nasty or personal in this thread. Like I said, I want the last thing people see on this blog to reflect the spirit of this blog and its readers.)



## Making a Bestseller



## Individuals

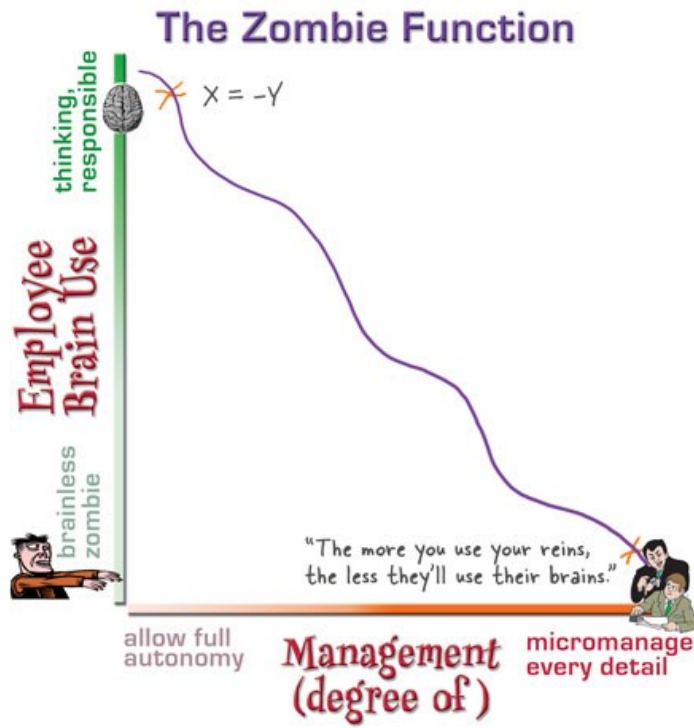


## Consensus



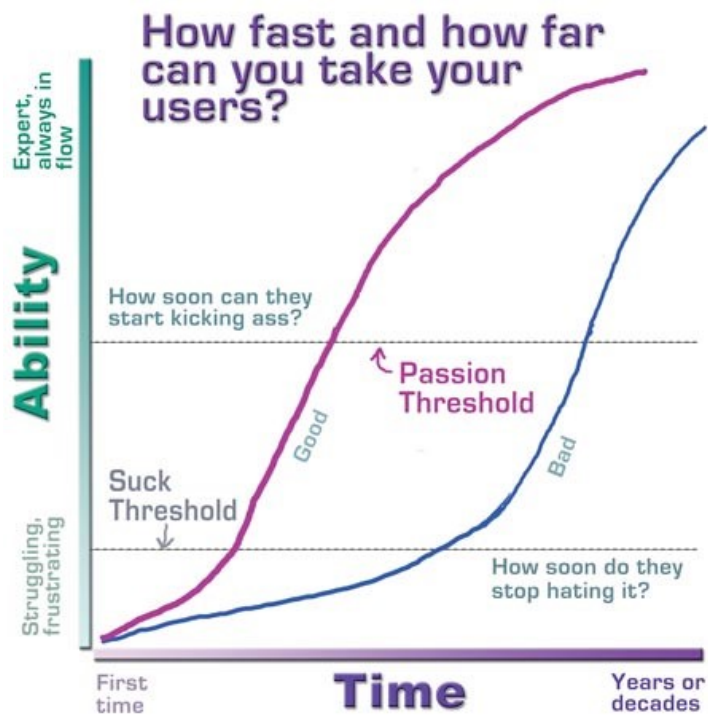
## Which one wins?





### User Hierarchy of Needs (and desires)

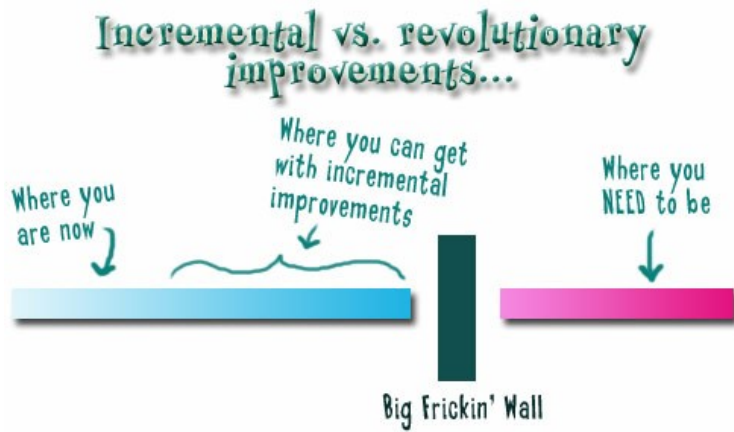
<b>Flow/Enchantment</b>	Does it keep me fully engaged, where the world drops away?
<b>Intuitiveness</b>	Does it feel natural, and doesn't "make me think?"
<b>Usability</b>	Is it user-friendly?
<b>Efficiency</b>	Does it let me do what I need without long workarounds?
<b>Learnability</b>	Can I learn it quickly? Is the manual good?
<b>Correctness</b>	Does it do it correctly, without a bunch of bugs?
<b>Functionality</b>	Does it do what I need?



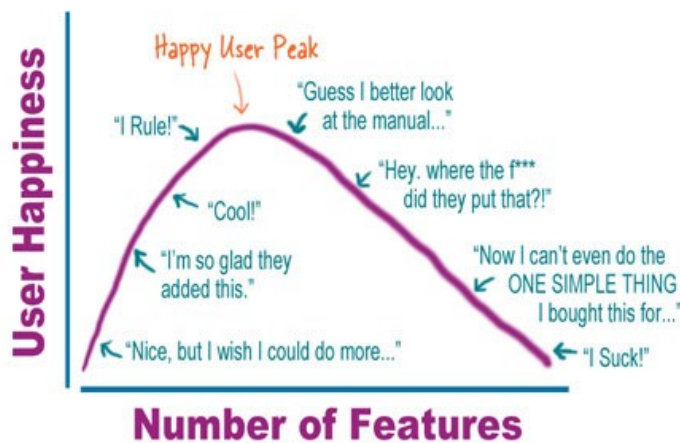
## Death by risk aversion







## The Featuritis Curve



Posted by **Kathy** on April 6, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(381\)](#) | [TrackBack \(3\)](#)

## Death threats against bloggers are NOT "protected speech" (why I cancelled my ETech presentations)

Update: I could not bear to leave this post up on the site, as one of the last things people will see and remember about this blog -- and especially with that horrible photo. So, I have moved the post to a separate web page [here](#). The content is exactly as it was posted, although it lost some formatting. Comments are closed (after 1100 of them), but you can still read them here. I deleted only one comment from this thread.

Posted by **Kathy** on April 6, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1165\)](#)

## Update/Joint Statement with Chris Locke

Chris Locke and I agreed to [publish a statement](#), together (both in our own words) in advance of the story which will appear tomorrow (Monday, April 2) on CNN, at 7:20 AM (EST) on "CNN American Morning", and throughout the day on other CNN shows.

A quick explanation for the critics:

When I was first bombarded by the media about this story, I refused to answer questions. Having no media experience, I found that when you don't answer a

reporter, they'll tell *your* story without you, so I agreed to speak with a few. When I was asked for a short CNN interview, I said that I would do it only if they would let me invite Chris Locke as well. Needless to say, everyone including Chris was stunned to hear this.

But these stories should not be about *me*... I am simply one of a gazillion examples about what's happening today both on and offline. Nor is it a simple Nice Vs. Bully story, and I thought having us come to an understanding would encourage others to stop fighting on either of our behalves and try to listen first, and then talk, and maybe something good and useful really will come of this.

Although I've learned a lot in the last few days, I *still* do not know who made the unclobobism photo post, or why, or whether that person is a real threat. That part of the story has continued to devolve in even scarier ways.

So, this is the last post I'll make for some time, and I've closed comments because I cannot keep up with the hateful ones (including those that post my home address and social security number, etc.)

I'm sure I'll be back in the future.

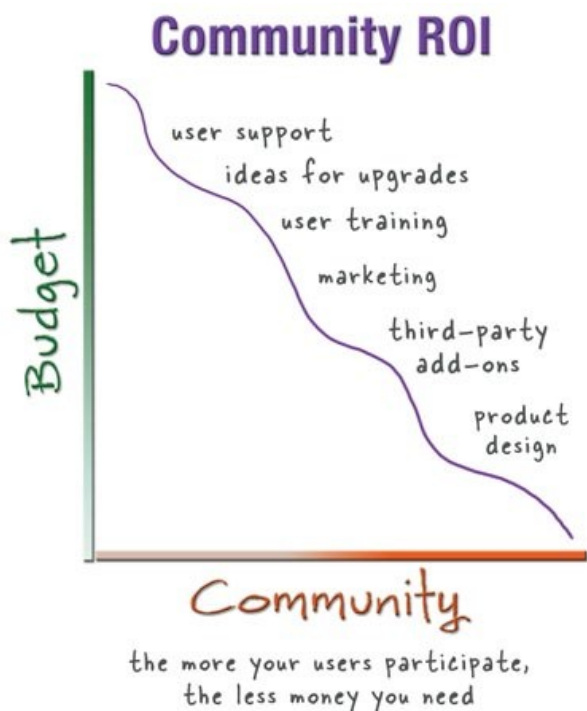
*I appreciate the overwhelming support here and elsewhere more than I can possibly say.*

I cannot thank you enough for your stories and encouragement and kind words.

I hope that people will continue talking, and with less rage on either side of the issue and more productive ideas for what to do going forward.

Posted by **Kathy** on April 2, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBack \(7\)](#)

## User Community and ROI



Every time I give a talk, someone always asks, "That's all good and nice that

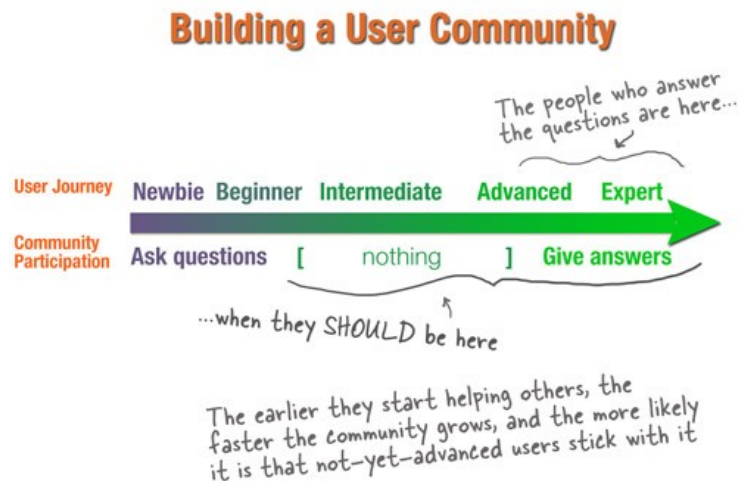


helping users learn is the key to creating passionate users... but who's going to do all that extra work? Who's going to make the extra tutorials and better docs?"

Answer: *your user community*. Think about all the things a strong user community can do for you: tech support, user training, marketing (evangelism, word of mouth), third-party add-ons, even new product ideas. And that's not including any extra sales you might make on community/tribe items like t-shirts, stickers, and other gear.

Yes, there's still a budget... but we've all seen third-party fan/user groups that got *no* support at all from "the mother ship" and yet thrived and gave users a level of support and training the company didn't provide. But there's still that little of issue of getting users *involved*, and for that--the single biggest factor is getting users involved at a much earlier path on their learning journey than typically happens.

This picture is from an earlier post:



In [Building a User Community Part 1](#) we talked about the importance of not only a strict "There Are No Dumb Questions" policy, but also an even more dedicated "There Are No Dumb Answers" message.

Today, this post will offer a few more tips on how to use your marketing budget (tiny as it may be) to build, support, and grow a user community from the beginning.

\* Host some kind of discussion forum (can include chat, wikis, and blogs as well), and do whatever it takes to get people there as soon as possible, ideally while the thing is still in beta (but it's never too late to start!)

\* Look on *other* third-party forums where users are discussing (which usually means struggling) your product, and find the most active people. Reach out to your earliest adopters or strongest new users and offer them *non-paid* incentives for becoming active. Chances are, if you have any users at all and your product is even the least bit complicated, people are discussing it *somewhere*. This could be anywhere from Amazon product reviews to technical discussion boards and even comments on related blogs.

- \* Make these folks life-time "charter members" with special privileges and recognition as 'founders' that nobody else will ever get.
- \* Have levels and rewards for participating (but again, not *money*--that totally changes the motivation, or at least the *perceived* motivation). The rewards can simply be status, early access to betas, and especially restricted access to the developers where they can discuss their ideas or at least listen to the engineers and designers describe why they made the choices they did, etc. [Don't reward people for post quantity alone... if post-count is the only criteria, you end up with a zillion useless posts]. Study successful user group communities for examples (like, say, javaranch.com--3/4 million unique visitors a *month*).
- \* *Teach* users how to help other members by creating documents (or getting other users to write them) on how to ask and answer questions in the most productive way.
- \* Include some just-for-fun activities in your community, like one (usually ONLY one) totally off-topic forum.
- \* Make sure there are interesting, easy-access ways for users to get to know more about one another. Be SURE to have user profile pages that include gender, photos, and some other personal info in addition to the specifics related to this particular community. Which leads to...
- \* Encourage members to meet *offline*! Hold a dirt-cheap User's Conference, ideally in more than one city, to get things started. Start a forum from the people who sign-up for the conference, and offer user group or forum leaders free entry to the event (and be sure to have a private user group or forum leader cocktail reception). Tips for that are in this [recent post on face-to-face](#)). Create a document on *How To Start A User Group*, and make sure users know how to get it. There is a *great* series of posts on how to start a user group written by the guys behind the [Edmonton .NET User Group](#). (Thanks guys)
- \* Encourage forum moderators or other community leaders to have their own private discussion space.
- \* Don't tolerate abuse of the beginners, but don't force the experts to have to put up with newbie issues. As any community matures, you must provide separate areas for newbies and experts... if the community culture is one of generosity and motivation, there will still be enough experts who *want* to spend time helping newbies.
- \* Why not help your top community leaders get a book deal? You never know... if it's a tech topic, direct them (or yourself) over to Wiley publisher [Joe Wikert](#) for some excellent and candid advice (search his archives, and you'll find everything from how to write a proposal, whether you need an agent, etc.)
- \* Consider starting a monthly "official" user group membership subscription, with something that *comes in the real mail* each month. Think about it. Think about how you feel when Fedex or UPS pulls up with that little Amazon box with the

smile on the side. Each month, send them a newsletter or DVD. Where's the budget for *that* content? Get your users involved! Have *them* submit things, and use the small monthly membership fee to cover the cost of materials and mailing, etc. Maybe you can partner with a sponsor on this, to include other things in the monthly "kit."

\* Create limited-edition, not-for-sale t-shirts, stickers, and other gear JUST for the founding community members (if you're just getting started in building a community). For ongoing communities, do the same thing and distribute them randomly, for free. Use the principle of "intermittent variable reward" that works so well to make slot machines and twitter so addicting ; )

\* Make your community leaders or even just active participants HEROES. Create "superhero" [Moo cards](#) for them. Plaster their photos everywhere. (Cute story I heard from a reader here -- she met her husband online while they were both moderators for an Autodesk CAD forum.)

\* Host an offline retreat just for the key community leaders. Can't afford to do what Microsoft does with its Search Champs? Can't afford to put people up at the "W"? Have a campout. Supply the marshmallows.

\* Above all, keep teaching members to teach other members. Give *everyone* a [crash course in learning theory](#). The better they become at helping others--the more skills they develop in mentoring/tutoring others--the more meaningful and motivating it is for them to *keep on doing it*..

These are just a few tips for now. Stay tuned for more. And of course, please add your own... while I have quite a lot of user group/community experience having launched several groups from scratch, they were all technology-related, and many of you are from very different domains.

Posted by **Kathy** on March 21, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(39\)](#) | [TrackBack \(8\)](#)

## Is your app an ass-kisser?

If your app was an employee, what kind of employee would it be? When it's employee performance review time, how would you rate it? These are just a few of the apps I've worked with recently...



"Dude. I don't know what just happened, but whatever it was, I better start over."



### Clueless Guy

In way over his head with most tasks... could have used more time for training before being put in front of real customers



### The Paper Hat Guy

Friendly... very, very friendly. But can't do much, and you wouldn't trust him with anything important.



### Brilliant but temperamental

Can do amazing work, but the slightest thing can set him off. Difficult to keep happy. Pain in the ass, but worth it... until someone else comes along who can do what he does without all the "issues".

"You did not put a daytime phone number in the field. I cannot accept that."



## **Anal-Retentive Guy**

Meticulous but inflexible. There is only ONE RIGHT WAY to do things, and if you don't do it perfectly, he'll make you do it again. And this time it better be *exactly* the way he wants it. Assuming you can ever figure out what that is...



## **The Show-off**

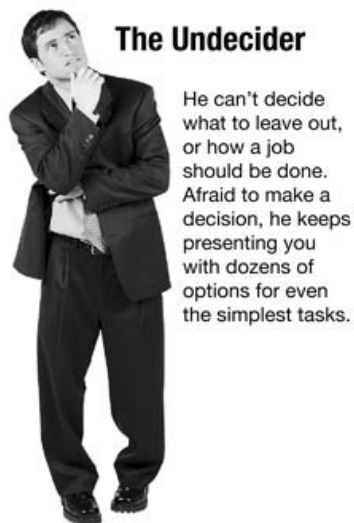
Does amazing tricks, just not the things you actually want him to do

"Chill out. I told you I've got it covered. I put the thing in the shopping cart. Trust me."



## **Just-Trust-Me Guy**

He says all the right things, but you just don't trust him. You always feel that nagging doubt since he never gives you any real feedback or proof. You hate having to micro-manage the guy, but you can't help it.



What other app/product employee-types are there? Know any apps that need an employee appraisal?

Posted by **Kathy** on March 20, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(56\)](#) | [TrackBack \(7\)](#)

## Random Tuesday Links

Some Tuesday links:

[Josh Clark \(globalmoxie\)](#) has written a *wonderful* post [about the power of mystery](#). I highly, highly recommend it.

We love Jeff Atwood at Coding Horror, and thanks to Ryan Fox for pointing out this post on friendlier [404 pages](#). Ryan was kind enough to refer to our 404 page here as "not great" as opposed to what he was actually *thinking*. [We've added that to the list of things to fix.]

Jacqueline Nagel translated one of our posts into German. You'll have to [guess which post this was from](#). Thanks Jacky!

There's a [very short video clip](#) the SXSW folks put together, edited from my opening remarks there. It's not exactly the way it happened in the talk -- they cut things and rearranged things -- but it does show a couple of the slides about The Suck Threshold.

My good friends at [Stikkit](#) wrote to say they have integrated a version of the WTF button into an upcoming beta. (You'll see a WTF button in the video clip from SXSW). I'm sure Asha Dornfest will let us know when we can actually see it in action.

[Pamela Slim](#), our favorite motivator for (as her tagline says) "how to go from corporate prisoner to thriving entrepreneur" has a new [podcast show](#) about the themes from Escape from Cubicle Nation.

Marty Baker has some good stuff on creativity at [Creativity Central](#)

Richard Sauerman started a new blog, [Wake Up Tiger](#) with a tagline and premise that *sounds* disturbingly a bit too self-helpish for me, but *it isn't*. It's funny, it's



creative and sassy (manages to stay above the "cheesy/sappy" threshold), and it's really making me smile!

(Warning: it is only 98% safe for work).

Longtime reader here Thierry Koehrien has a new publishing project, and the English version is [here](#).

Alright, Nathan and Max have a passion for... ink. Yes, ink. Like the kind you put in your printer and pay too much for. They even have a show, and against my will, I find myself [enjoying this](#). If these guys can make a passion-site out of ink, you can do it with frickin' anything.

If you're interested in humanizing the user's experience (and I know you are), don't forget to check out [Humanized](#).

Those of you at my SXSW opening know why [The Daily Puppy](#) is important. As for the mystery behind the not-always-subliminal gratuitous puppy photos in my talk, I'm leaving that for an exercise for the reader, although those of you who've been to my older "Creating Passionate Users" talk have a pretty good idea. The fun/silly thing was that throughout the week, a few other panelists threw random puppy photos into their slides, regardless of the topic. I loved it.

Posted by **Kathy** on March 20, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(17\)](#) | [TrackBack \(1\)](#)

## Helping users "feel the fear and do it anyway"

The Sydney Bridge Climb is the scariest thing I've ever done



Helping users "feel the fear and do it anyway" is powerful

We've said before that *reducing* fear might be a killer app... making something users were previously afraid of feel less threatening. [Wesabe](#) does this for personal finances. [Dr. Laurie Kemet](#) does this for a trip to the dentist. And [Electric Rain](#) does this for 3D. Our books try to do this for programming. But what about a step beyond that... where you help them do something that just IS *really, seriously, scary*? Making only things which are friendly and easy is *not* the holy grail of design.

Reduce my fear or guilt, and I'll be grateful. Help me do something that really IS

scary, and I'll be grateful *and exhilarated*. I'll be forever changed, and your company, product, or service will be linked to that change. To *reduce* fear means taking something *perceived* as scary and showing users that it's not. But not everything can be made to appear friendly and easy and safe. Like Apple's Logic. The learning curve is steep, it looks overwhelming and intimidating, but the payoff can be high. What if instead of removing advanced features that make a product inherently daunting, it's OK to say to users, "This IS hard. Really, frickin' hard. But we'll get you through it."

Sometimes, with some products, it's OK to say, "We can't make this any easier or less scary, but we *can* help you come out the other side."

A short time ago I went on the [Sydney Bridge Climb](#). At night. It was the most frightening thing I've ever done. But when it was over, I felt braver, stronger, and *different*. I'll never forget the Bridge Climb, and I'll probably be recommending it for the rest of my life.

We can reduce guilt:



We can reduce fear:

*Which dentist's office would you prefer?*



*No medical check-in window* →

*gourmet coffee bar* →



*Wine* →

*Warm colors & smells like fresh-baked cookies*

But helping a user be afraid and do it anyway is a powerful force. We shouldn't be too quick to over-simplify a product or experience. Of course, it's up to us to get our users through the big, challenging, thing--there's a big responsibility for stellar documentation and support. And we're talking *moral* support, not just *tech* support, so building a user community is even more important with something really, really, scary.

I've talked before about the benefits to *us* when we [do something scary](#), but maybe we can help give those benefits to our advanced (or trying to be) users.

So, what scary thing have YOU done lately?

Posted by **Kathy** on March 18, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(30\)](#) | [TrackBack \(4\)](#)

How to host a product/feature design party

## HOST A PRODUCT DESIGN DINNER PARTY

For product/feature design... one night of this



could be better than 3 months of this

Want to design the next great web app? Upgrade your product, but can't decide what to add or change? Add a new feature to your product, but can't decide how to implement it? Forget focus groups. Forget endless meetings and brainstorming sessions. Throw an ultra-rapid-design party, and do it in a single day. This approach exploits the wisdom-of-crowds through a process of enforced idea diversity and voting, so no consensus, committee, or even agreement is needed. And it's way more fun.

The Product Design Dinner Party takes 9 people, a pile of diverse "inputs", and has each of the 9 people voting on--and pitching--one another's ideas to continuously reconfigured groups of 3 people, letting the best ideas rise to the top. The process is a little complicated, but it's derived/modified from an existing rapid-prototyping design I'll talk about later in the post.

The basic idea looks like this, although there are a million ways to modify it:

- 1) Pick 9 people, ideally from different parts of your company and including some customers. (If you don't have a company yet, pick 9 friends--preferably those who don't know each other well)
- 2) Buy/borrow/find at least 20 "input materials" including books, magazines, a short film, graphic novels, etc. (a list of possibilities is a little lower in this post)
- 3) Assign (randomly) at least 2 "inputs" to each person. Do NOT let them choose (it's important they not be allowed to gravitate toward things they're already comfortable with)

4) Give the group 30 minutes to generate 4 ideas (if it's a feature/upgrade party, then 4 different features or feature sets... if it's a feature implementation party, then 4 different ways to implement the already-decided feature, etc.) These 4 ideas don't have to come directly from their input materials, although participants should be highly encouraged to describe at least one new thing they learned that inspired their idea.

5) Round One begins: split into 3 groups of 3 people (see chart below). Each person gets no more than 10 minutes to "pitch" four ideas to the other two in their group. There are 12 total ideas for this group, so allow about 30 minutes. Record (anonymously) the selections of each person, which represent a "vote" for the ideas.

6) At the end of Round One, each person must select their two favorite ideas from each of the other two members of their group. So if Group One had Fred, Mary, and Sue... then Fred must select his two favorite ideas from the four that Mary pitched, and his two favorites that Sue pitched.

7) Round Two begins: reconfigure the groups so that each person is now with different people (see chart below). Instead of pitching their *own* four ideas, each person pitches the four ideas they chose from their previous group members. Again, they have about 10 minutes to pitch the four ideas. Remember, the point is that each person is no longer pitching their own ideas!

8) At the end of Round Two, each person must again select their two favorite ideas from each of the other two members of this new group. Record (anonymously) the selections of each person, which represent a "vote" for the ideas.

9) Round Three begins: reconfigure the groups again. Each person in the group now pitches the four ideas (two from each of the two members of their most recent group) they chose in the previous (Round Two) round.

10) At this point, each person has pitched a total of 12 ideas:

\* Round One: pitch your own four ideas

\* Round Two: pitch four ideas from your Round One group to your new Round Two group -- two ideas from each of your previous group's other members.

\* Round Three: pitch four ideas from your Round Two group to your new Round Three group, as before.

11) At the end of Round Three, *again* each person selects their top two favorite ideas from the ones pitched by the other two members. Record these as a vote.

12) You should now have a total of 108 votes. Choose the top 9 vote-getters (you'll have to be creative about tie-breaking... you could choose more than 9, for example).

13) Give each person a copy of the 9 ideas, and send them back for another round of "inputs." Again, assign each person *different* materials from the ones they used at the beginning.

14) Give the participants 30 minutes to use their inputs and flesh out a single idea from the nine. Their one idea can be a modified version of one of the nine, based on their "research." Their one idea could be a mashup of two or more of the nine ideas. It cannot, however, be something completely new. Participants should be prepared to explain how something they got from their inputs helped in some way (not an absolute requirement).

15) Now it's up to you what to do with the ideas. You might choose just one, or take all 9 "winners" with their pitches back to another person or group, etc.

Group Configurations (just an idea to get you started):

**9 Participants: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I**  
(assign each participant a letter)

Group Assignments (always 3 people per group)

Round 1	A B C	D E F	G H I
Round 2	A E I	D H C	G B F
Round 3	A H F	D B I	G E C

Example: In Round 1, person A, person B, and person C form one group while person D, person E, and person F form a second group, etc.

While it might be hard to believe a process like this could lead to any useful ideas, it's actually derived from a well-designed, heavily-field-tested rapid-prototyping/development process from one of the leading training consultants on the planet, [Thiagi](#). Granted, that doesn't mean my modifications haven't completely messed it up, but the main goals and benefits of doing it this way are:

### 1) Time constraints

Constraint-fueled creativity is something we've talked about earlier, so I won't discuss it here.

[Build something cool in 24 hours](#)

[Creativity on Speed](#)

[How to make something amazing right now](#)

and a little in [Don't wait for the muse](#)

### 2) Forced lack of attachment

By having to pitch someone *else's* ideas instead of your own (after Round One), it keeps people from getting stuck/married/attached to their own idea.

### 3) Random, outside-your-domain inputs

By having to use pre-selected (and pre-assigned) materials from outside your domain, participants have a better chance for a diversity-driven inspiration.



The whole thing is based on the assumption that you have all the knowledge you need -- the *wisdom* within your own company and your customers... you just need a way to tap into it that doesn't dilute the idea (as design-by-consensus would do) or prevent innovation (as design-by-listening-to-customers would do).

### Ideas for "input materials"

Books on a wide range of topics outside your domain including architecture, astronomy, pop culture, filmmaking, comic books, wedding planning, education, children's book, romance-novel-writing, crafts magazine, travel book, sports, history, environment, etc.

If it's a software product, you might assign people to look at a variety of pre-chosen sites or web apps that are way outside your domain.

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I've used this in the training world -- as a tool for learners to help come up with what they ought to be learning, but I've never used it in the way I've described here. I'm looking forward to trying it...

(And yes, I took a little artistic license with the photo at the top--pizza and coke might be better than alcohol. Then again...)

I'd love to hear ideas for modifying this, or from anyone who's done anything like this!

Posted by **Kathy** on March 18, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(36\)](#) | [TrackBack \(4\)](#)

## Seven Blog Virtues (for a Global Microbrand)

I was on [a panel at SXSWi](#) based on Hugh MacLeod's Global Microbrand idea. My slides for that panel were very lightweight--nothing meaty, just an orientation that I believe is really important if you're trying to attract more readers. I've added a little text to the slides and made a PDF here:

[Download SevenVirtues.pdf \(4.7 MBs\)](#)

So, no secret tips and tricks, just a way of *thinking* about blogging for the purpose of building a Global Microbrand (whether the brand is you, your product, a cause, etc.).

These slides are under a CC non-commercial, with attribution license, so fee free to use them.

Posted by **Kathy** on March 16, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(32\)](#) | [TrackBack \(1\)](#)

## Is Twitter TOO good?



Twitter scares me. For all its popularity, I see at least three issues: 1) it's a near-perfect example of the psychological principle of *intermittent variable reward*, the key addictive element of slot machines. 2) The strong "feeling of connectedness" Twitterers get can *trick* the brain into thinking its having a meaningful social interaction, while another (ancient) part of the brain "knows" something crucial to human survival is missing. 3) Twitter is yet another--potentially more dramatic--contribution to the problems of always-on multi-tasking... you can't be Twittering (or emailing or chatting, of course) and simultaneously be in deep thought and/or a flow state.

[Disclaimer: I'm SO in the minority on this one... it looks like about a hundred-to-one in favor of Twitter, so I'm most likely way wrong on this one (but it doesn't stop me from trying). And this post is mostly a mashup of a variety of earlier posts I've made on related subjects.]

I'll look at each of the three points in more detail:

### 1) The Twitter Slot Machine

One of Skinner's most important discoveries is that behavior reinforced intermittently (as opposed to consistently) is the most difficult to extinguish. In other words, intermittent rewards beat predictable rewards. It's the basis of most animal training, but applies to humans as well... which is why slot machines are so appealing, and one needn't be addicted to feel it.

From a Time magazine feature story on multitasking:

*Patricia Wallace, a techno-psychologist,...believes part of the allure of e-mail--for adults as well as teens--is similar to that of a slot machine. "You have intermittent, variable reinforcement," she explains. "You are not sure you are going to get a reward every time or how often you will, so you keep pulling that handle."*

## 2) The feeling of connectedness

The biggest benefit most people seem to be deriving from Twitter is the ability to feel more connected to others. [Carson Systems' Lisa](#) put it this way in a comment to Tara Hunt's [defense of Twitter](#):

*"Twittering fills in those gaps...recording our friends' feelings, geographic location and actions as if we were spookily almost there. That makes us feel \*really\* connected..."*

Is this really a *good* thing?

Probably, yes. For most people, perhaps. But I think it's worth a critical look as opposed to an automatic connected-is-always-implicitly-good response. UCSF neurobiologist [Thomas Lewis](#) claims that if we're not careful, we can *trick* a part of our brain into thinking that we're having a real social interaction--something crucial and ancient for human survival--when we actually aren't. This leads to a stressful (but subconscious) cognitive dissonance, where we're getting *some* of what the brain thinks it needs, but not enough to fill that whatever-ineffable-thing-is-scientists-still-haven't-completely-nailed-but-might-be-smell. He didn't make this claim about Twitter... I attended his talk at [The Conference on World Affairs](#), and he was addressing e-mail, chat, and even television (brain recognizes it's looking at "people", and feels it *must* be having a social connection (GOOD), but yet it knows something's missing (BAD).

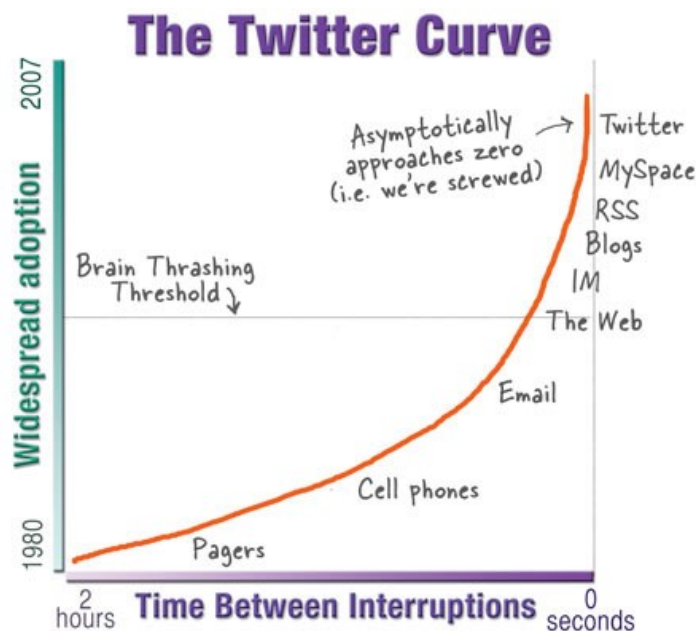
Dr. Lewis cited a ton of studies which I didn't write down, so you can take this with a grain of salt. Plus, I'm extending his issues from e-mail and chat to Twitter. But part of the reasons he talks about are that our brain has evolved an innate ability to interpret body language, facial expression, tone of voice, etc. so the brain *expects* these channels of information and becomes distressed when the social interaction appears to be there, but these innate, legacy-brain pieces are missing.

Again, this doesn't mean that it's not worth it and highly valuable for people TO stay connected to far-flung family and friends, I'm just saying that it's worth a look at whether that might be lulling some folks into a false sense of "I'm connected" at the expense of *real-life* connections.

### **Coffee with your next-door neighbor could do more for your brain than a thousand Twitter updates.**

While this same argument has been going around forever, and is the same claim made about television, that doesn't make it untrue. (There's that study about the isolated Canadian village whose collective IQ went down once cable finally came to the village... Lewis cites it in his talks, although I can't find it referenced online).

Ironically, services like Twitter are simultaneously leaving some people with a feeling of *not* being connected, by feeding the fear of not being in the loop. By elevating the importance of being "constantly updated," it amplifies the feeling of missing something if you're not checking Twitter (or Twittering) with enough frequency.



### 3) Twitter is the best/worst cause of continuous partial attention

From an earlier post of mine:

Worst of all, this onslaught is keeping us from doing the one thing that makes most of us the happiest... being in flow. Flow requires a depth of thinking and a focus of attention that all that context-switching prevents. Flow requires a challenging use of our knowledge and skills, and that's quite different from mindless tasks we can multitask (eating and watching tv, etc.) Flow means we need a certain amount of time to load our knowledge and skills into our brain RAM. And the more big or small interruptions we have, the less likely we are to ever get there.

And not only are we stopping ourselves from ever getting in flow, we're stopping ourselves from ever getting really good at something. From [becoming experts](#). The brain scientists now tell us that becoming an expert is not a matter of being a prodigy, it's a matter of being [able to focus](#).

We're already seeing a backlash response to info overload, and it seems like a good chunk of Web 2.0 VC investments are going to companies that promise to help us get/stay organized. There's a reason [43 Folders](#) is a Top 100 blog, and it's got to be more than just Merlin Mann's good looks ; )

Lots of people are talking about this, and perhaps nobody more eloquently than [Linda Stone](#):

"To pay continuous partial attention is to pay partial attention -- CONTINUOUSLY. It is motivated by a desire to be a LIVE node on the network. Another way of saying this is that we want to connect and be connected. We want to effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment. To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter.

We pay continuous partial attention in an effort NOT TO MISS ANYTHING. It is

an always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that involves an artificial sense of constant crisis. We are always in high alert when we pay continuous partial attention. This artificial sense of constant crisis is more typical of continuous partial attention than it is of multi-tasking."

Bottom line(s):

Do I think Twitter has benefits? Clearly, and Tara does a great job of defining them (although not everyone agrees that these things are all *benefits*, they are for her and that's what matters).

Do I think people can use Twitter responsibly, without letting it get out of control or become too much of a distraction or encourage the same kind of voyeurism that makes tabloid news and TV so pervasively popular in the US?

Yes, definitely.

All I'm saying is that beyond the hype, we should consider just how far down the rabbit hole of always-on-attention we really want to go.

I am not in the target audience for Twitter--I am by nature [a loner](#). I don't *want* to be *that* connected. And I also have a huge appreciation for the art of *keeping the mystery alive*. I don't *want* to know *that* much about so many people, and I sure don't want people to know that much about me... mundane or otherwise. So, that puts me in the minority, and my Twitter fears are probably based solely on my own--quirky and less common--personality traits.

Posted by **Kathy** on March 16, 2007 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(121\)](#) | [TrackBack \(17\)](#)

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