Case Study: How I Built The An Audience Before I Built A Product

by Glenn Stovall

Estimated Reading Time: 45 minutes

Foreword

At the beginning of 2014, I set a new year's resolution. In fact, I set a lot of them. Some of them stuck, some didn't, but there was one that was most important to me: Launch a product by the end of the year. I started working on a book, which at the time was entitled *Bootstrap Freelance,* which was about starting a freelance career from scratch.

Now, I know there are a lot of eBooks on the internet. New ones are published every day. What could I do to give my book a greater chance of success?

I could start building an audience.

By building a mailing list of freelancers, I could start building trust and authority in my niche. I would also have an avenue to get feedback from potential customers on my product ideas. Nathan Barry once said "Email is like recurring revenue for marketing.[1]" Every time I wrote a new article, for example, I could send it out to people.

I decided to work on building an audience *before* I released my product. This would lead to a more successful launch day. It would also give me some practice on selling products at a lower scale. After all, an email list sign up is a sales transaction. You are asking someone to give up something of value (their email address) in exchange for something else of value (whatever you give your audience members. I'll cover that soon).

I believe these techniques can work on building *any kind* of audience. In this case study, I'm going to show you what I did in an absurd amount of detail, and show you how you

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[1] http://nathanbarry.com/email-marketing/

can do the same. Along the way I'll include other tools and techniques I came across in my research. Building an audience is extremely valuable, even if you don't have an idea for a product or service yet.

Building an audience has gotten me the following:

- Several value and interesting conversations.
- A constant source of traffic and referrals for any piece of content I write.
- Opportunities to host webinars with experts in my field.
- Targeted customer feedback whenever I want it.
- Building real relationships with people.

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1. Incentives: The Keystones of Audience Building

An email list subscription is a sales transaction. You are asking someone to exchange something of value, which is access to their inbox, for information from your newsletter. The problem is that people don't like newsletters. Most people consider them 'spammy', because many of them are. Many companies are just looking to send you the internet equivalent of a junk mailer every so often.

We need to change the conversation here. We aren't going to be just building a "list", we are going to be building and audience. And we aren't going to be sending out "newsletters". We are going to be building relationships.

But how do we get over people's hesitation to sign up? By increasing the amount of value we are providing on signup. We aren't going to just ask people to sign up, we want to give them something in value in exchange. We increase the likelihood that people will want to sign up. Which email capture form do you think works best:

1: "Sign up for my newsletter"
2: "Sign up for my newsletter and I will give you X".

Before I created an incentive, my mailing list had a whopping 15 subscribers. As of this writing, it has over 500. The second proposition will work much better. Our goal now is to come up with what that "X" will be.

16 Ideas For List Building Incentives

1. **eBook.** This is the approach I went with initially. Your eBook doesn't have to be long. Think of a problem your potential customers have that can be solved with education, and write about that. My first one was write around 30 pages.

2. **Email Course.** Instead of writing your content in one piece, you can break it out over several days. The benefit of the email course is that it gets people used to you showing up in their inbox. The most common formats are a 5-day course, a 7-day course, or a 30-day course.

3. **Video Tutorial or Course.** If you have something to share with your potential audience, video can be a good way of doing so. Patrick MacKenzie uses this approach, and offers a 45-minute video about user on boarding as an incentive. If you think your audience wouldn't respond well to a longer video, you can also create several smaller 3 - 10 minute videos and package them as a course.

4. **Video or Audio Interview.** If you have any connections with influencers in your target market, ask them to do a brief interview on Skype with them. Come up with a topic and some good questions, and just talk for 20 - 30 minutes.

5. **Cheat Sheet.** If you have a list of tips or tricks that you can put into a single-page PDF, that can be a good incentive.

6. **Template or Creative Resource.** If you are a designer, you could offer a PSD file as an incentive. BidSketch, a proposal writing tool, offers example proposals. You could also offer something like an excel template.

7. **Toolkit**: if you have created several incentives geared towards the same audience, then you can bundle them together to create a single stronger incentive. You can also make large, extensive lists and give those away.

8. **Big List.** Get together a large list of resources and give those away. For example, "50 tools for mobile developers" or something similar. This one is a bit easier since it

doesn't require you to create your own content. Instead, you are playing the role of curator and DJ.

9. **Case Study.** Just like the one you are reading now. Case studies are nice because not only are they educational, they tell a story.

10. **Webinar.** You could host an event online, and invite people to attend. This one has a high conversion rate, however it is not as reusable as ones listed above. A webinar requires your time each time you want to do it. You can write a webinar and perform in monthly, so it is still more than a one-time shot.

11. **Live Event.** Same idea as the webinar, except performed live. This is a good idea if you want to build an audience that is local to you.

12. **Contest or Giveaway.** Find something that you can give away and hold a contest.

13. **Beta access / Pre-order discounts.** This incentive can be a way to help optimize a landing page for a product that is still in the works. Offer people early access, or a discount once the product is available. The best part of this incentive is that it takes no time up front to offer. Simply put it on the form, and keep track of which subscribers claim this incentive so you can make good on it in the future.

14. **Free Samples or Coupons.** If you have a software or membership based product, you can offer to send people free samples. If you are working on a product like a book, you can offer a couple of sample chapters. If you are releasing a large educational course, you could offer the first video / section for free. If you selling something online already, you can offer people a coupon / discount code.

15. **A Free Consultation** — One of my colleagues books appointments when signing people up. This can be a good approach if you are a consultant or have some type of service based business. You can send people a followup email with a link to an appointment tool such as Calendly[2] or Appointlet[3] to automate the process. If you

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[2] https://calendly.com/

[3] https://www.appointlet.com/

do automate it, be careful. You don't want to fill up your calendar and not leave yourself any time to actually get work done.

16. **Something Unique.** You'll see many of these examples all around the internet. If you can think of something unique to give to your audience, it can get you a lot of traction.

Whichever incentive you choose, you want to make sure that it is something that *provides value to your new audience.* A good question to ask yourself is "would people be willing to pay money for what I am offering?".

Find a problem that your target audience has, and create an incentive that can solve it. Selling to other freelancers was a bit easier than other markets, because I already frequently online communities, and were familiar with the problems they faced first hand. I noticed a common question coming from other Freelancers:

"How much do I charge?"

2. Building My First Incentive: How I Wrote a 30 page book in Two Days

I decided to take the approach of writing an eBook to initially build my audience. When writing an eBook, you don't have to start from scratch. Have you written content for your site a blog, or anywhere else already? That is a great place to start. If not, I'd highly recommend getting started with writing and publishing.[4]

I dug through my archives, and found that I had written several articles that were either about pricing your freelance services, positioning your services, or about the value in your work:

- Why I Don't Bill Hourly[5]
- Presenting Value to Clients[6]
- How to Bill Daily or Weekly[7]
- Reading on Wealth and Programming[8]

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[4] Winnie Lim captured my feelings on this better than I could: https://medium.com/@wynlim/the-power-of-your-writing-c235ee82e603

[5] http://glennstovall.com/blog/2014/07/31/why-i-dont-bill-hourly/

[6] http://glennstovall.com/blog/2014/04/19/presenting-value-to-clients/

[7] http://glennstovall.com/blog/2014/02/21/how-to-bill-daily-or-weekly/

[8] http://glennstovall.com/blog/2013/06/07/reading-on-wealth-and-programming/

In addition to these articles, I also had a draft chapter from the book I was working on, and several pages in Evernote where I had linked to other articles, or taken notes on other resources such as podcasts I had listened to.[9]

Crafting The eBook

I took all of this content, and made an outline of a way to arrange it cohesively. Then I went to work creating the book. I used Pages for mac to write it. I cut and pasted all the relevant sections from the articles to start. Then, I went through and added new content to fill in the gaps and tie the sections together.

If you think that cutting & pasting several articles into a Frankenstein's monster of a document would create a mess, you would be 100% correct. This is how I like to write: create a *terrible* first draft, then take a few rounds to polish it and make it shine.

Next, I added action steps to each chapter. At the end of each section of the book, I added a task for the reader to complete. People don't read education guides for the fun of it, they want to *apply that knowledge.* I get frustrated when guides would tell me about something, but then not give me the tools to apply it personally. The action steps at the end of each chapter are a way to prevent that.

Once I did this, I made a simple cover in photoshop. The cover is just a picture from The Noun Project[10] , on a simple background. If you are making an eBook, don't fret too

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[10] http://thenounproject.com/term/prostitute/16839/ . The actual meaning of the icon is both a fun little easter egg. :)

much about the design. I then chose a color scheme (money green), put it all together, and asked a few friends to read over it and give me feedback.

Once I got some notes, and did some proofreading and editing, it was time to release my incentive and start growing my list. Here are a couple of other ideas to help you craft your first incentive:

Turn Your By-Products Into Something Useful

Incentives can come from the by-products of your work. I call this the 'sawdust' of your organization. Sawdust used to be considered waste in the lumber industry. Then, they found a market for sawdust, wood chips and shredded wood, and started selling it for a nice profit[11]. The articles I write are another form of by-product: They are a simple packaging of knowledge that I learned along the way, Here are some ideas:

- Notes you have taken for personal use[12].
- Internal documentation or standard operating procedures[13].
- No longer used creative resources[14].
- PSDs from projects[15].

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[11] https://signalvnoise.com/posts/1620-sell-your-by-products

[12] I repurposed notes I had taken from a presentation into an article: http://glennstovall.com/blog/2014/07/30/aarrr-pirate-metrics/

[13] I always do post mortems on my projects. These are usually internal, but I published one of them: http://glennstovall.com/blog/2014/05/09/freelance-pricing-handbook-launch-post-mortem/

[14] John Saddington gives away WordPress themes he no longer uses: http://john.do/the-digital-business-card-wordpress-theme/

[15] Example from Nathan Barry: http://nathanbarry.com/design-graphics-blog-posts/

- Conversations you've had with customers or colleagues[16].

Level Up Existing Content

Do you have a piece of content that went over really well? You can take that piece of content, and add to it, or change the format.

- Wrote a blog article? Turn it into a series or short book.
- Wrote a few articles that were related? Turn them into an email course.
- Wrote a short book? Turn it into a video.
- Made an email course or a video? Expand on it and create a video course.
- If you wrote a "top 5" or "top 10" list, make it a "top 100" list.
- Take a tutorial, and provide resources that help people accomplish the lesson. If you write a design tutorial, create a PDF that goes along with it.
- If you host an event, put the slides up on SlideShare or make them available for download.

Creating new content is hard. When you do create good content, make sure you get the most mileage out of it.
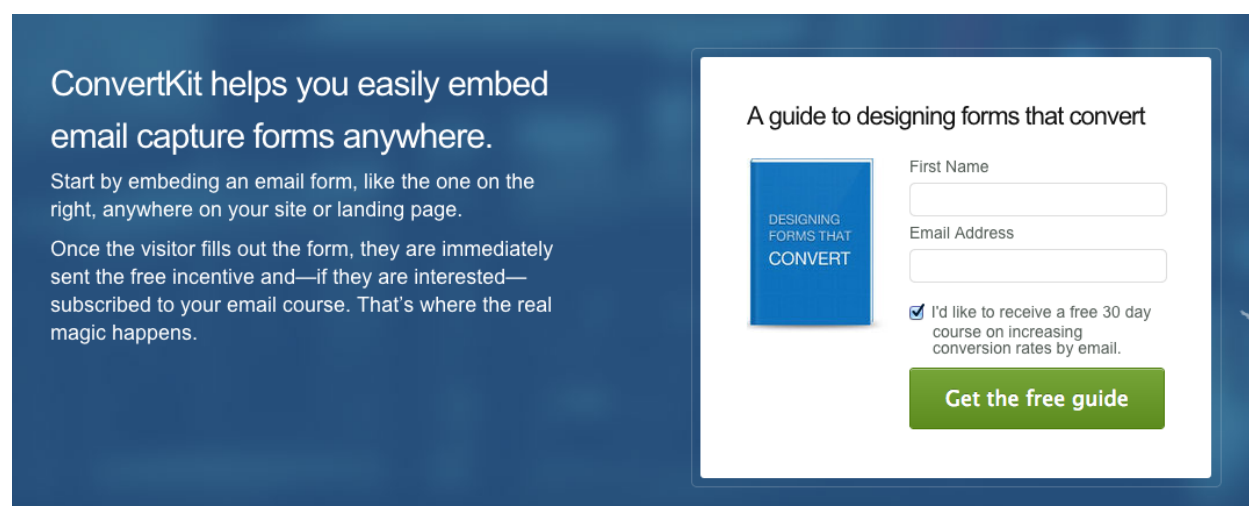
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[16] After getting lunch with a client discussing their pricing strategy, I wrote this article: http://glennstovall.com/blog/2014/08/04/breakdown-of-a-pricing-grid/

3. Tools For Building and Maintaining Your List

Before going too much further, I wanted to lay out some of the options for capturing subscribers and giving away incentives. This list is by no means comprehensive, but these three are the ones I have had positive experiences with.

ConvertKit

ConvertKit[17] is what I use. It's built around the idea of offering incentives via download and creating multi-part email courses. ConvertKit allows you to build multiple forms with multiple incentives, and then break your subscribers down into segments based on where they signed up originally. For example, If users sign up for a beta access list, then when I have information about the project, I can send that to only people who signed up through that one particular list. It also allows you to create landing pages as well, which can help save you time or give you a place to send people if you don't have a full site set up yet.


[17] https://convertkit.com/

Example of a ConvertKit capture form.

Drip

Drip[18] brands itself as "*lightweight marketing automation that doesn't suck*". It provides a lot of tools for segmenting your audience and sending out emails based on different user behavior. They are also well known for their "pop overs", which are pop ups that appear in the lower right corner of the page. They are designed to be attention grabbing without being as annoying as your standard pop-up window. Drip offers full support for managing your list, but you can just use Drip for capturing subscribers, and send them to another system, such as MailChimp.
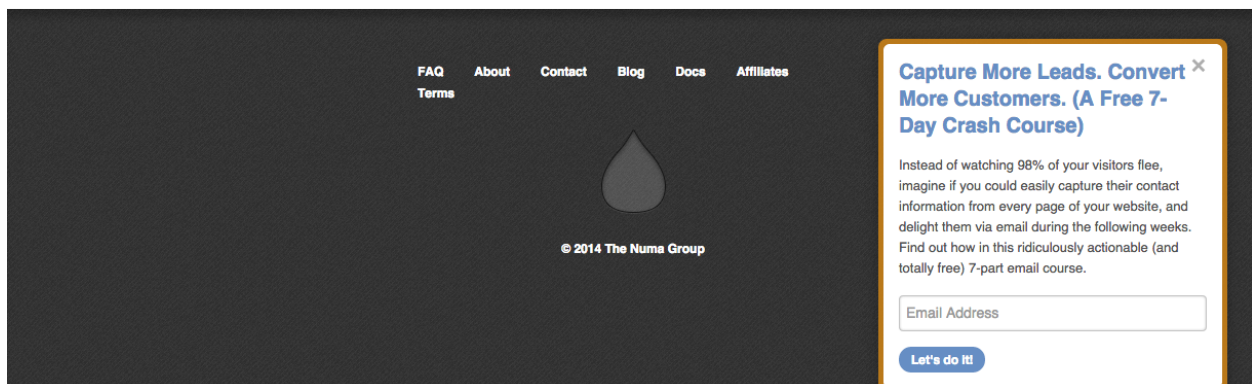
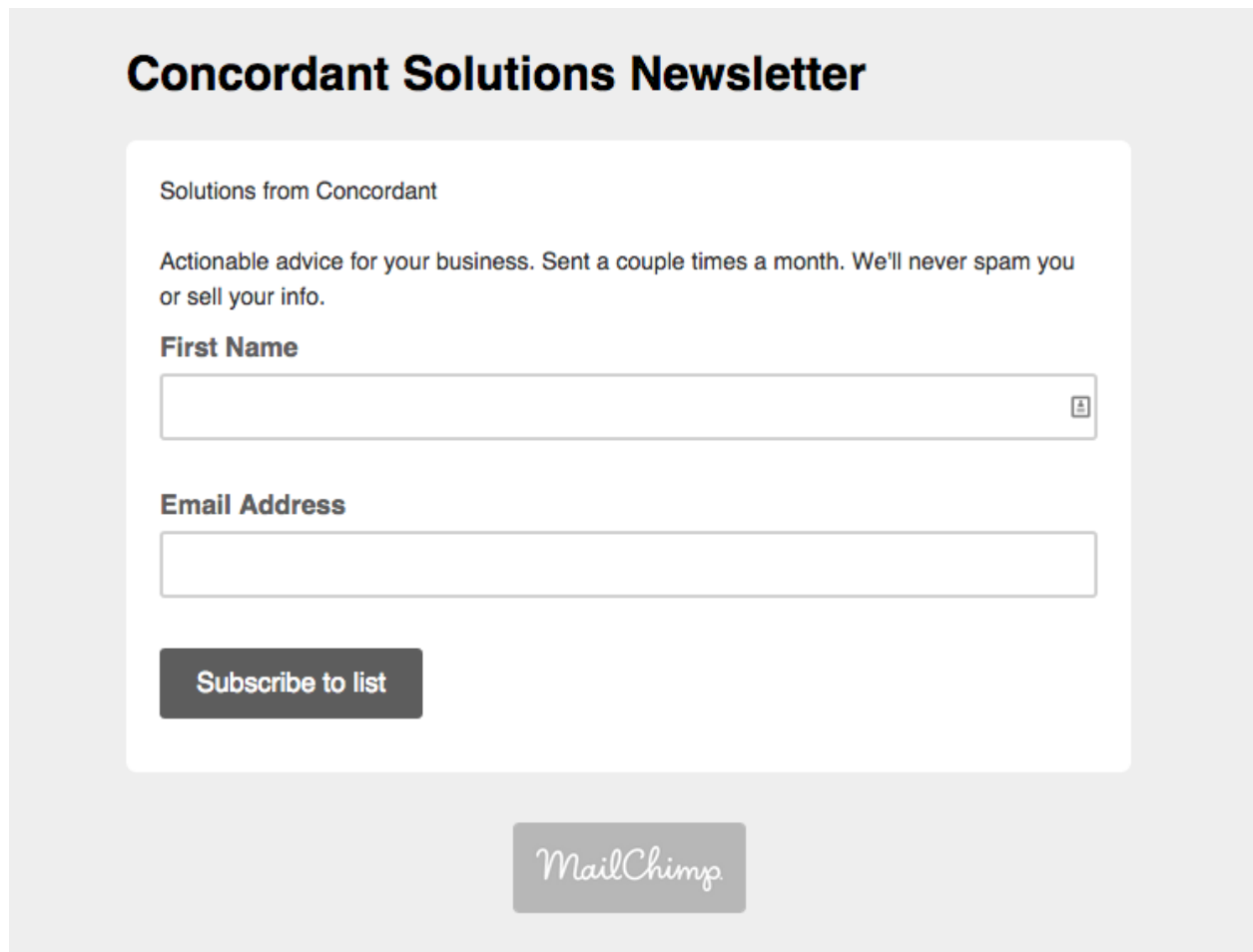Drip's "Pop Over" Form

MailChimp

MailChimp[19] recently added marketing automation tools to their offerings[20]. They are also one of the largest email list subscribers. They have a lot of nice templates that you can

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18 https://www.getdrip.com/

19 http://mailchimp.com/

20 http://mailchimp.com/features/automation/

use , and their software is user friendly. If you want to use email courses or multiple incentives, I have found their support a bit weak. If you want to build a separate list for each inventive however, or just focus on one, MailChimp can be useful. Also, their customer support and design is second-to-none.

Example of a MailChimp landing page.

4. Building Buzz With a Mini Product Launch

Once I completed my new incentive, *The Freelance Pricing Handbook[21],* It was time to put it to use. I could have put it on my site quietly, but instead, I decided to have a product launch.

In addition to building some buzz and getting my first set of subscribers, This would also be good practice for launching a larger, profitable product in the future. So when it came time to launch the product, here is what I did:

Set up a Landing Page

I created a landing page for the product. Every incentive you offer **needs** a landing page. It's a convenient way to link to the incentive, and if anyone ever asks about it, you will have a place to send them. The landing page doesn't have to be long, just a couple of paragraphs, and a form where people can sign up.

Wrote an Announcement Post

I wrote two posts announcing the release of my book: One of my personal blog[22], and one on my company blog. I recently got rid of my company blog and now just have the personal one.

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[21] http://glennstovall.com/books/freelance-pricing-handbook/

[22] http://glennstovall.com/blog/2014/04/29/announcing-the-freelance-pricing-handbook/

Posted on Social Media

I posted on my personal Facebook, Twitter, on Reddit[23], and on LinkedIn about my new book. I tailored each post to the audience.

Emailed My Existing List

Since the incentive was something my current (albeit small) list would be interested in, I let them know. I also added a P.S.[24] to the email, and ask them to share it on Facebook and Twitter if they found it useful.

Reached Out to Friends and Colleagues

I am part of a local tech community[25]. We always help each other out with new initiatives. I posted on the community board and asked anyone who wanted to share the book. I also reached out to several freelancer friends of mine personally.

The Results

By the end of the week, I had gained 84 new subscribers. This was with 323 visitors and a conversion rate of 25.8%. These aren't amazing numbers, but going from 15 subscribers to 100 in a couple of days was a win in my book.

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[23] on /r/freelance : http://www.reddit.com/r/freelance/comments/249uvr/i_wrote_a_book_on_how_to_price_your_services/

[24] the PS is one of the most read parts of an email, and a great place to insert a call to action.

[25] Four Athens Tech Incubator: http://www.fourathens.com/

The launch was just the beginning. While it gave me an event that gave my subscriber list a shot in the arm, it more importantly gave me a tool that I could continue to use to grow my list. Now it was time to take this tool I was armed with and put it too work.

5. Every Page Has a Purpose: Additional Calls to Action

I went though and added a form to download the book to all of my blog posts. I added it to the footer, which I find to be the most effective location to put the call-to-action[26]. If people liked the article and got value out of it, they will want to hear more from you.

I have written several articles that bring traffic to my site every day. Before people would read these articles, and then leave. If I was lucky, *maybe* they would share the article on Facebook and Twitter. Even if they did, so what? One more person could show up, read an article, and leave?

Now every page on my site had a purpose. Every single article was now driving people to join my list. In August 2014, I acquired another 27 subscribers with 0% more effort on my part.

I will say that the one thing I learned is that **the more relevant your sing up is to the content of the article, the more it will convert.** This means that if you want to build your list by writing content, you need to do one of two things:

1. Write content that is related to the incentive you have already created.
2. Create incentives that relate to content you have already created.

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[26] http://blog.hubspot.com/customers/bid/109515/Call-to-Action-Placement-Best-Practices

Other Call To Action Locations

In addition to the bottom of your blog page, there are other options for placing your form on your pages:

The "Hello Bar"

The "Hello Bar" is a bar at the top of your page. You are trying to capture people as soon as they get to your page. Tim Ferris uses one on his site[27]:
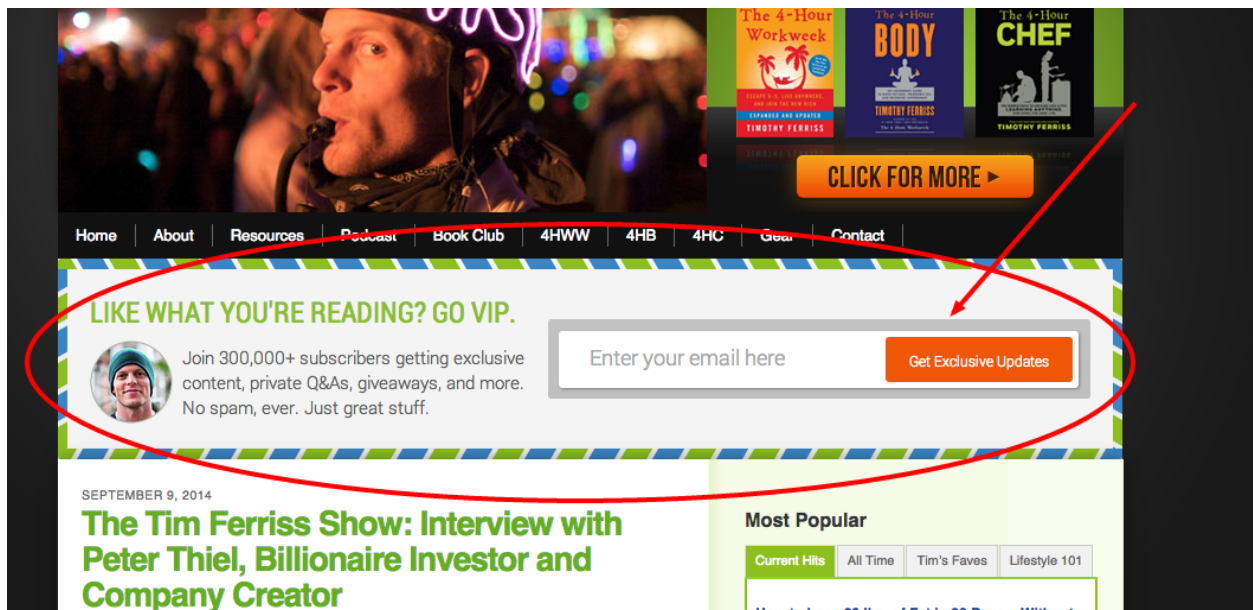

Hello Bar Example

The Side Bar

Placing a small form on the top right corner of your sidebar is another high covering piece of web site real estate. Rob Walling uses one on his site, and has talked about it on

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[27] http://fourhourworkweek.com/blog/

his podcast[28]. Since he owns the email marketing software company Drip I talked about earlier, I am going to assume that he knows what he is talking about[29].
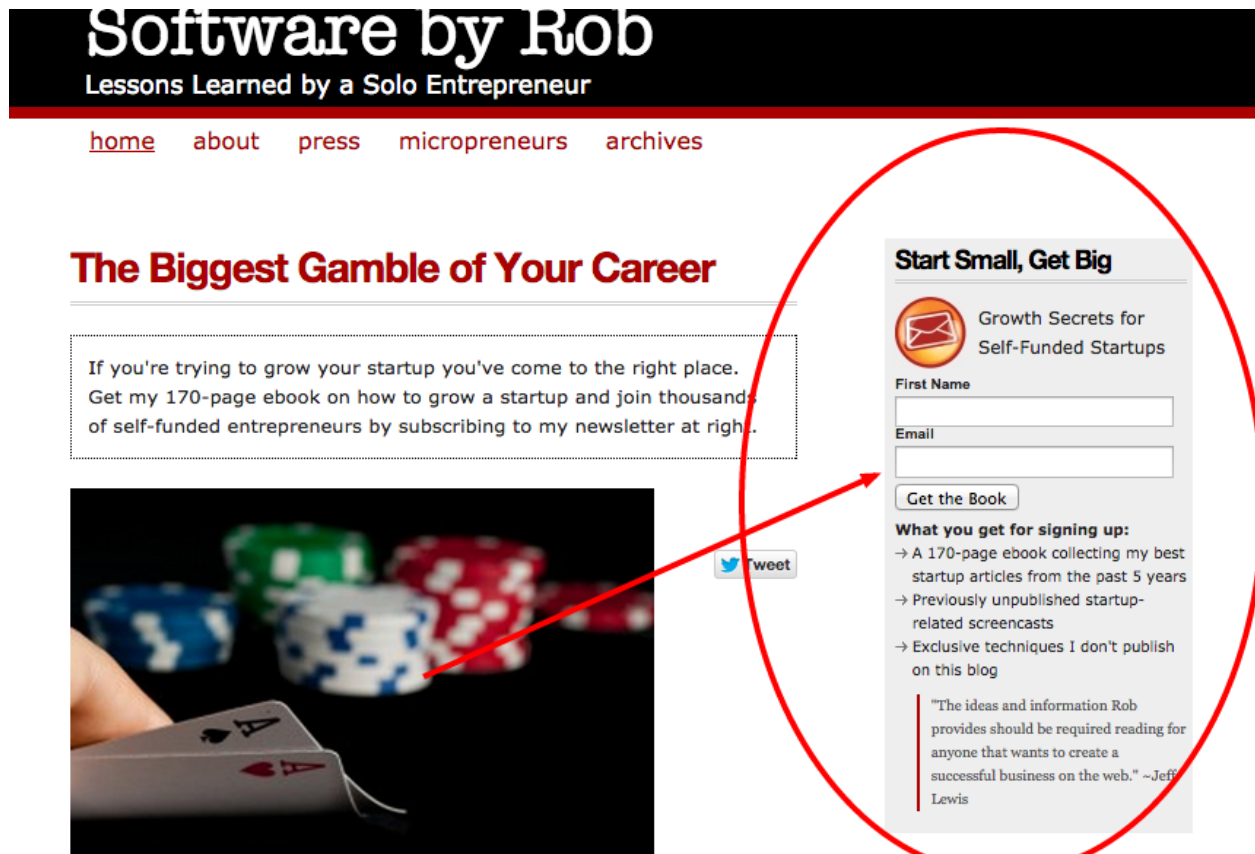
Sidebar Example

The Inline Call To Action

If referencing one of your incentives makes sense in a piece of content you are writing, include a link to the landing page in the text. Even though that don't stand out, the strong context makes these powerful.

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[28] 8 tactics for growing your pre-launch mailing list, something I am sure is relevant to you: http://www.startupsfortherestofus.com/episodes/episode-72-8-tactics-for-building-your-pre-launch-mailing-list

[29] http://www.softwarebyrob.com/

The Pop-Up

This is one that I hear increases conversion numbers, but it is one that I am not a fan of. I find it annoying and intrusive. These also tend to not work well on mobile devices, which will turn a lot of visitors away. Several people see these, think they are *required* to give up their email address to get to the content, do so, and then unsubscribe. The only people you want on your list are people that *actually care* about what you have to say. Using pop ups is a great way to increase your "number of subscribers" metric, but not actually build your audience, which is our goal here.

6. Reaching Out to Influencers

After my launch, the next big surge in subscribers I got was because of a single tweet by Nathan Barry[30].

For those of you who aren't familiar with Nathan, he is a self published author, and the creator of ConvertKit. As of this writing, he has over 8,000 twitter followers. The tweet that he wrote pushed another 75 or so subscribers to my list. How did I get him to do that?

I sent him an email.

I didn't **ask him** to send out a tweet about it. Instead, I just wanted to let him know that I had a successful launch using his software and techniques that he had talked about. Here is the email I sent:

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30 https://twitter.com/nathanbarry/status/464418759990857728

Hey Nathan,
 I just wanted to say thanks for the ConvertKit academy and the software you built. Previous I had a list of 15 subscribers that I had built up over 3 months. But by creating an incentive (a free ebook that was compiled mostly of past writings), and integrating the ConvertKit forms on my site and some of my more popular posts, I was able to get 77 subscribers in just 2 days! I just wanted to let you know how happy I am with the product and the academy.

Cheers,
 Glenn

P.S. I know client testimonials are always a nice thing to have, so feel free to quote / print anything from this email.

The important thing to take away from this email is that I was **providing value** to Nathan. I stated this directly in the P.S.: Testimonials are strong sales tool, and I just gave him one without him asking. Also, it just *feels* nice to get emails like this.

Because of this, he offered to tweet about my book, which will also make him look good. Doesn't your product look better the more successful customers it has? It also helped that I had exchanged emails with Nathan a couple of times before, so we had a bit of a rapport.

If you want to reach out to influencers, start reaching out to them. Twitter is a good platform for this. If they ask questions, answer them. If you like something they did, tweet about it[31]. Give value before asking for it in return.

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[31] A lot more information on influence marketing: http://perfectpitchconcepts.com/strategy-behind-influence-marketing/

Another way I have built connections with influencers is to mention them in content directly. I recently wrote a post where I referenced another well respected person in the freelance industry, Brennan Dunn[32]. I mentioned it to him and he tweeted about it as well.

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[32] http://doubleyourfreelancing.com/

7. Getting Involved in Communities

Audience members come from the strangest places. I would never have guessed that one tweet could send several dozen people my way. The next one was even *more* unexpected.

A single comment on Reddit[33].

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33 http://www.reddit.com/r/freelance/comments/25naa7/
freelancers_earning_100k_per_year_what_pushed_you/chiuuel

A few things that made this comment impactful:

1. **It's a good comment on it's own.** I wrote several pieces of information that would be helpful to the reader, and I went above and beyond answering the initial question in the thread.
2. **It shows effort.** I took some time to make sure the post was nicely formatted. I used bulleted list and bolded the important sections.
3. **It doesn't sell, at least not directly.** If the whole comment was about my book, then I would have gotten down votes, and I could have been banned from the community. Instead, I offered several points, and the call to action is buried in the 5th out of 8 bullet points in the post.

What also helped is that I was already involved in the community. Building an audience is all about **building trust and authority.** You don't build trust and authority by selling every time you open your mouth. You build trust by being helpful, and providing value to the community. I have made dozens of comments on this particular Reddit community, and I have only mentioned my book a couple times. You should only link to your incentive when it makes sense to do so organically.

Other Online Communities

Quora

Quora[34] is all about sharing content and building authority. It can also be a source for ideas for incentives, products, and content. It's a Q & A site. The Questions are both a source of inspiration for new products and content, and an opportunity to answer them in order to help people. A lot of smart people write in-depth answers there as well, so it can be a great educational resource.

LinkedIn

If you are looking to target people in the B2B or professional service space, then LinkedIn can be the place to go. I will say that many communities are more noise than signal, so be wary about where you choose to spend your time. And don't become part of the noise.

The StackExchange Network

The stack exchange network[35] started as a single site, stackoverflow.com , that was aimed at becoming an objective place for programmers to ask and answer questions with their peers. Unlike Quora, which has one site of all of its questions, the stack exchange network is currently made up of over 100 sites that cover a wide range of topics. Find one that serves the audience you would like to acquire, and start asking and answering questions.

Industry Specific Sites

These are the communities that you can find by painting broad strokes. Are there specific

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[34] http://www.quora.com/

[35] http://stackexchange.com/

forums, blogs, or news sources that your target audience is a part of? If so, you can get involved in those communities.

8. Advertising on Social Media: 3 Networks By The Numbers

Several online advertising networks will offer free $50 or $100 credits to try out their platform. I had a few of these sitting around, but I never had anything to do with them. Now that I had something to offer people, I did. I decided to spend $50 in either my own money or credits on three platforms: LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

Now, advertising is not my strong suit. I am sure that the copy on these ads could have been a lot better. Every audience and every offering is different. Just because I got a lot conversion rate on a network doesn't mean you will have the same results.

Advertising on LinkedIn
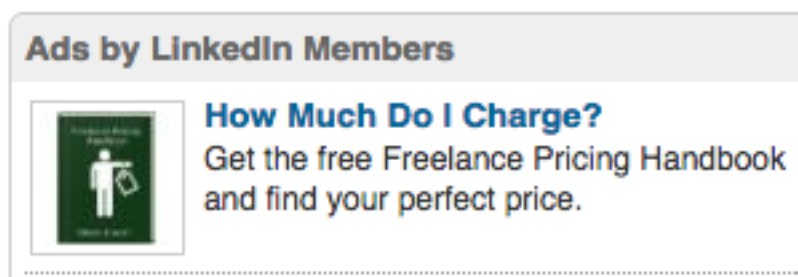
My LinkedIn Advertisement

I thought LinkedIn would be a good place to start, since it is a book aimed at other professionals. LinkedIn allows you to target based on job title, and will offer suggestions to you. You can also target by companies, groups, skills, and the usual demographics.

Results: 43,214 impressions, CTR of 0.032%, CPC of $3.38.

Although the CPC was high, pretty much everyone that clicked the ad downloaded the book and joined my list.

Advertising on Facebook
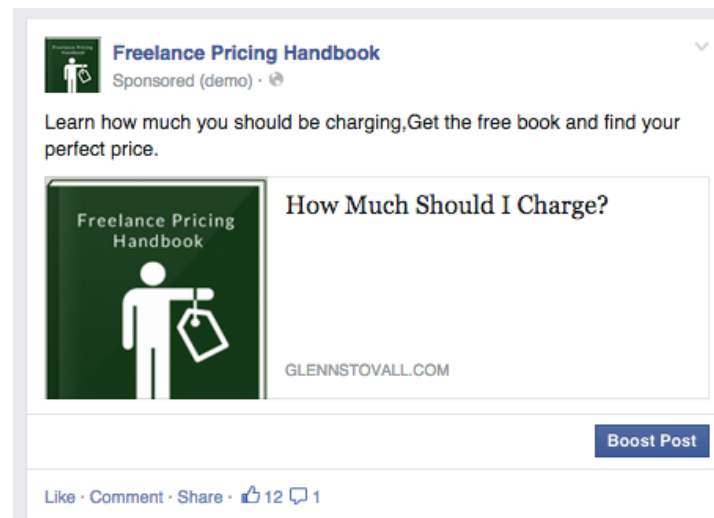
Facebook Ad Example

Facebook provides a lot of options. You can send people to your website, or a page on Facebook. The advertising system seems to be geared more towards getting likes than getting people to perform other actions. Since Facebook collects so much data on people, you can target on pretty much anything. I aimed mine at people who liked freelancing and a few freelancing related things.

Results: 43,860 impressions, CTR of 0.67%, CPC of $0.28.

This may seem like better results from LinkedIn, but people who clicked through on Facebook were actually *ten times* less likely to download the book. A new subscriber from LinkedIn and a new Subscriber from Facebook ended up costing around the same.

Advertising on Twitter
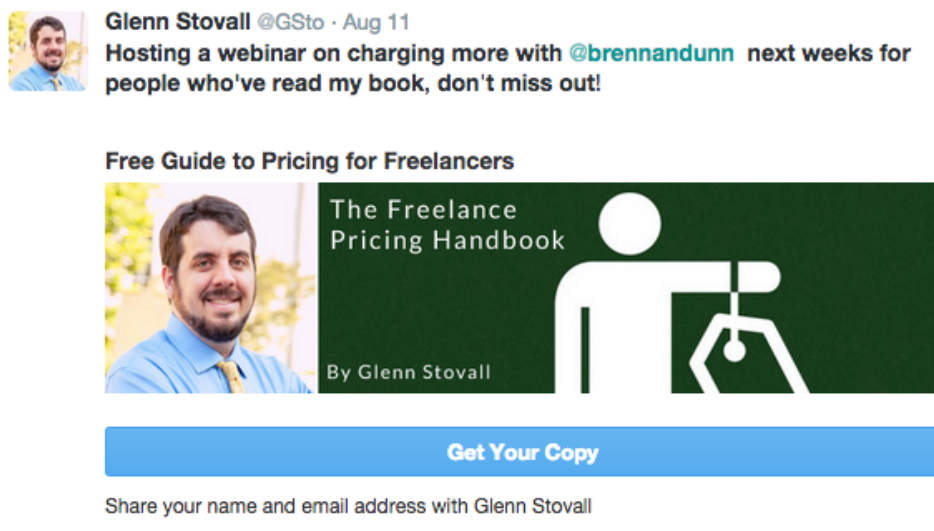
Twitter Ad Example

Twitter offer domes unique features when it comes to advertising: You can target by followers, and you can embed your call to action directly in the tweet using Twitter cards[36]. You can also use it promote particular tweets. Here is the one I used. I had to make a longer image, so I included a head shot, since studies show that pictures of people convert[37].

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[36] https://blog.twitter.com/2013/capture-user-interest-with-the-lead-generation-card

[37] http://unbounce.com/conversion-rate-optimization/images-and-conversion-rates/

Results: 8,256 impressions, Engagement rate of 1.91%, Cost per Engagement of $0.63

Twitter doesn't track clicks, it tracks 'engagements'. Any retweet, favorite, or reply is considered an engagement. Even though the engagement rate was high, I didn't see a huge climb in followers. My analytics weren't exact, but I would guess that the engagement conversion ratio was around 7%. That actually made Twitter the *worst* platform for me, with a cost per acquisition coming in at around $6.

9. Tracking and Increasing Conversions: Analytics + Optimizations

Once I had started getting a bit of traffic, I wanted to start improving on what I already had. One downside to my current set up is that I wasn't getting a lot of data on when people were signing up, where they were signing up, and how they got there. I decided that I needed to beef up my analytics tracking and start capturing this information.

Also, I had some conversion rates that were not doing so well. One of my most popular blog posts that still gets the most traffic on my site on most days[38], had a conversion rate of a whopping 0%.

Event Tracking With Google Analytics

Most websites use Google Analytics for tracking. Most people also install the tracking code, and then don't do anything else with it (I'm pretty guilty of this myself). So, I decided to use the event tracking functionality of Google Analytics to start tracking newsletter signups.

This can be accomplished in one line of code (non-techies can skip along to the next section):

---

[38] http://glennstovall.com/blog/2013/06/27/angularjs-an-overview/

```
onSubmit="_gaq.push(['_trackEvent','Newsletter','FPH
Download','standard']);"
```

This line of code is added to the <form> tag that is used to collect email addresses. There are 4 arguments to the _gaq.push function:

1. **The type of data we are sending to Google Analytics**. '_trackEvent' tells Google Analytics we want to, well, track an event.
2. **The category of event we are capturing**. This can be whatever you want. I decided to name the category 'Newsletter'.
3. **The label for the particular event.** I named this event 'FPH Download'. This way, I can look at diagnostics for different incentives.
4. **The value for the event.** In this example, I set it to 'standard'. I have a few different ways you can download *The Freelance Pricing Handbook,* this helps me determine which ones are the most effective (more on that in a bit). This can also be a numerical value, so if you are using event tracking in eCommerce, you can track the value of each sale.

Creating Specific Calls to Action, Plus 1 Small Optimization

Earlier I mentioned that **the more your incentive matches your content, the more it will convert.** I said that some of the content in *The Freelance Pricing Handbook* came from an article I wrote called "Why I don't bill hourly". That article actually converts more than any other blog article, and brings in more signups with significantly less traffic. Thanks for that info, analytics I set up in the last paragraph!

It's jarring to read about one subject (for example, my tutorial on the AngularJS framework), and then be presented an offer on something else (pricing for freelancers). The problem is that the reader's mind is elsewhere, and the reader may not be the type of person interested in your incentive. There are plenty of developers that aren't freelancers. This is totally fine. Building your audience isn't about wrangling up the most people, it's about wrangling up the **right** people.

One way to solve this problem is to create additional incentives. This is a good approach, but a time consuming one. I have several articles written about technical subject, aimed at developers. Instead of creating a new incentive just for them, I changed the *positioning* of my current incentive.

My usual capture form…

…and the capture form I use for articles about programming.

The more specific you make your call-to-action, the more it will convert. If your name was Tom, and you liked Blue T-Shirts, And you found a web page that said "Hey Tom, here is a nice Blue T-Shirt I picked out just for you! Tell your wife Helen I said Hello". You would buy that shirt. Or be terrified. Or both.

At the end of each paragraph on the capture form, there is a 'Learn More…' link. That was not there originally. That was another little optimization trick I picked up. When people get to a call-to-action, They are going to have 3 reactions:

1. What a neat thing! I want that thing! *[fills out email capture form]*
2. What a stupid thing! I do not want that thing. *[Leaves]*
3. That might be a good thing …. hmmmm …. *[gets distracted by the million other parts of the internet competing for their attention, leaves]*

The 'learn more' link is aimed at visitor #3. Some people may need a bit more a nudge than a headline, a picture, and a couple lines of copy can give them. Instead of them leaving, you are giving them an additional avenue to learn more about the offering before giving you their email address.

Now that I am asking my landing page to do even more work (and it has been doing a lot so far), I decided it was time to give it some tender love & care.

Creating a More Effective Landing Page

A majority of the sign-ups I get are via the landing page I set up[39].

Let's look back at the top 3 ways I acquired new audience members I have mentioned:
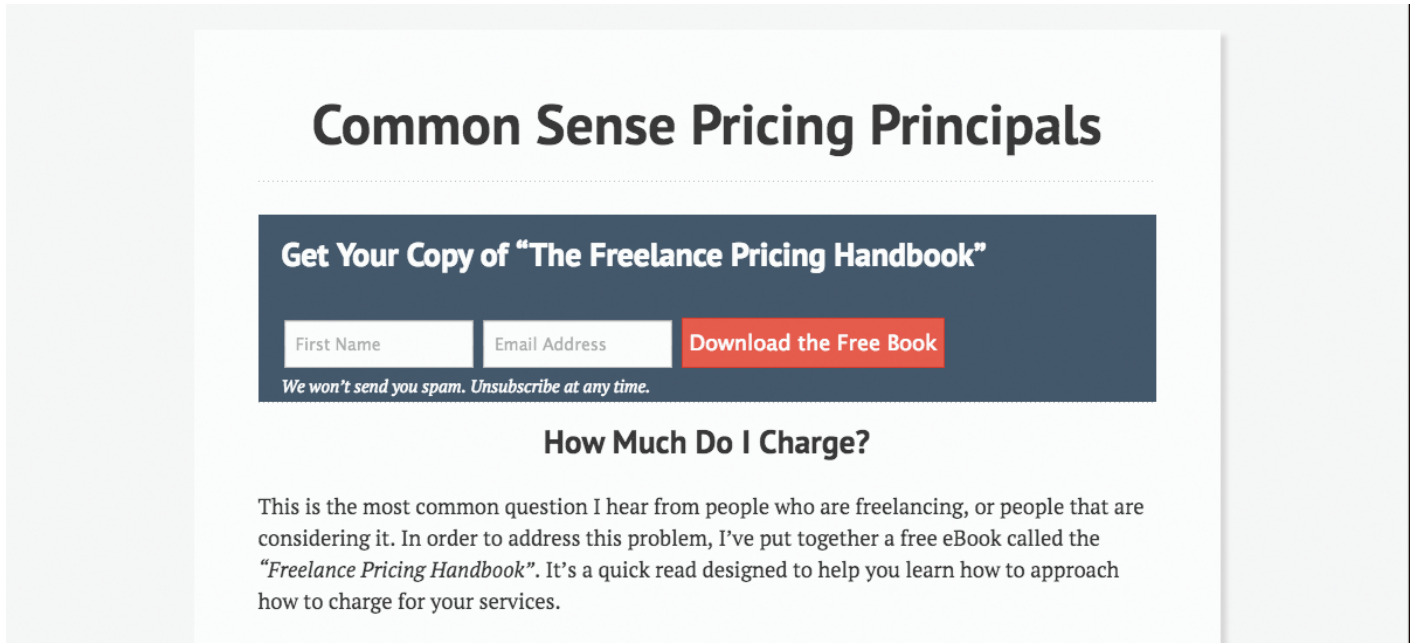
1. The launch. Where did they sign up? *The landing page.*
2. A tweet from an influencer in my niche. Where did they sign up? *The landing page.*
3. A well thought out comment on a site my niche frequents. Where did they sign up? *The landing page.*

Driving traffic to the landing page has not been an issue. Now, it's time to do some work to turn our landing page into converting machine.

For this section, I am just going to run down the landing page from top to bottom, and go over some changes.

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[39] 74.63% if you want specifics.

I Removed The Navigation, and Most of the Site Styles

The current iteration of my landing page, as of this writing.

My landing page lives on my personal domain. It originally used the same template as every other page on my site. This is a problem because landing pages are different from every other page on your site. They are there to do one job, and one job only.

First, I removed The header, The colors, and the branding. I don't want this to look like a 'Glenn Stovall' page. I want this to look like a page with a single focus. If you get on *The Freelance Pricing Handbook* landing page, that is all I want you to think about. The only thing this page wants the user to do is download the incentive, and join the mailing list.

Next I removed more navigation. Site navigation just gives people something to do that isn't completing the intended action. If any part of the page isn't helping conversion, then it is hurting conversion, and it needs to go[40].

A More Engaging Headline

The original headline for this landing page was 'The Freelance Pricing Handbook'. Descriptive, but it doesn't hook the reader. Instead of that, I changed it to "*Common Sense Pricing Principles*"

I didn't write that headline. One of my readers did. Someone was kind enough to send me an email and say, "I appreciated this guide. It's full of common sense pricing principles". You want to write like your readers talk. If this one guy loved having a set of common sense pricing principles, it stands to reason that other people would want that as well. The other benefit of reflective writing is that with this one tool, you see that in order to write good sales copy, **you don't have to be creative at all.**

Including a Hello Bar For The Ready-To-Go Reader

Sometimes, people get to this site from a location where they have already been primed. They don't need to read *anything,* They are ready to go. For those people, I added the hello bar. They don't need to read a single word. They can sign up and be done here.

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[40] http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/landing-page-navigation-ht

Adding Testimonials For Social Proof

This was actually one of the first changes I made to the landing page. A couple of people said some nice things on Twitter, and I decided to embed their tweets. Testimonials are a great form of *social proof.* People want to know that other people have read this book. The reason I chose tweets were two fold.

1. **I wanted to keep it short.** The book is short, and the investment for the book is minimal. Therefore, a short landing page should work best. Tweets are short, so it seemed to fit.

2. **They are harder to fake, and therefore provide more proof.** I used Twitter's embedded tweet functionality. That means that you can click through and see these are real tweets, and you can look at their profiles and see they are real people. I could have quoted Joanna's email about how the book was "incredibly helpful", but you have no way of knowing if I made up Joanna or that quote[41].

Give People The Table of Contents

A couple people told me they were surprised at what all was included, and thought I should make it more clear what was in the book. If they had this hesitation, it's likely that other people did too.

The 'About the Author' Blurb

This little block is doing three jobs:

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[41] I didn't. Just FYI.

1. **It's squashing an objection.** With any product, a common objective is "*Do you have the authority and knowledge to deliver what you say you will?*" By highlighting my experience, I can help stop that objection.

2. **It makes the page more personal.** Faces convert[42].People connect more with people than brands or objects. This makes the book be about more than a book, or about freelancing or prices. It drives home the fact that this book is a 2 person conversation between me and you.

3. **It acts like a 'P.S.'** The P.S. is the second most read part of a letter, after the first line (or for email, the subject line). By being *after* the call-to-action, this acts like a P.S. It gives me one last chance to sway the reader into converting.

This case study up to this point is roughly the first 50% of building my audience. The next two sections explain the one thing that was the second 50%.

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[42] https://blog.kissmetrics.com/boost-conversions-using-images/

10. Writing A Kick-Ass Piece of Authoritative Content

The final action (of this case study) that built up my audience was an article that I published on medium.com. The name of that article is "How I used writing to double my rate as a freelance programmer"[43]. This article brought me a couple hundred new sign ups, and it made it into the Medium monthly top 100 most read articles[44].

Writing shorter articles is fine, But the most effective tool I have ever found is to write long form, valuable, helpful content. Strong content will market itself. Once I started writing this article, I knew I had a lot to say, and that I could have a real authoritative piece on my hands. This section is all about *how* to create that kind of content.

Do Your Research

Before you start writing, do some googling, or check out some books on your bookshelf about the subject. Even if you are an expert, there is no way you know everything about the subject you are writing about. You can find additional nuggets of gold to give to your readers, evidence to back up your statements, and opposing views that you can address. All of these will make your piece stronger.

Write a Specific, Value Proposition Headline

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[43] Link to article goes here.

[44] Link to medium August 2014 top 100.

The title has a clear value proposition built in: *I raised my rate, and I am going to teach you how to do the same.* It's also specific. It seems counter intuitive, but **the more specific a headline is, the more it tends to convert.** This is the same principle as the specific call-to-action on capture forms as well. The more you think a piece of copy was written just for you, the more it resonates. The more you react. Even if you aren't a freelance developer, if you are one or the other, you would still be interested.

Open With a Story

We all love stories. I used to hate writing until I figured out I could use it to tell stories. **If you can wrap your educational message in a story, it will be received better.** There are several narrative archetypes in literature, but when writing content, you can just worry about the most basic one:

Things were one way, then something happened. Now, things are different.

That's what the first paragraph does: I charged $50/hr. **Then** I went on a "journey" to figure out why my colleges were charging more. **Now,** I charge a higher rate.

If I can be meta for a second, this whole case study is a lot of advice wrapped in one narrative; I didn't have an audience at all. **Then** I learned & applied several techniques in order to build an audience. **Now,** I have an audience of several hundred people.

Continue With a Lot of Content

This piece clocks in at over 3,000 words. Medium estimates it is a 12 minute read[45]. That's a pretty hefty piece of writing. Most blog articles are between 250 - 500 words long, so this article is the equivalent to writing 6 - 12 articles *at once.*

There is a lot of debate on all sides about how long content should be. In my experience, long form works best[46]. All of my traction I have gotten from content has been from longer pieces. This is the longest article I have ever published. Remember when I mentioned the most popular article on my blog? That one is 2,000 words. It was my longest piece until this one.

However, when I say make pieces long, don't make them unnecessarily so. Don't fill them with fluff. Fill them with **everything you know about the subject.** Every piece of information in your brain needs to go into your authoritative piece. Then, you need to research and put information from *other people's* brains into your piece as well.

If you try to write a long form piece and it is only 1,000 words, fine. 1,000 words is still more than I lot of people write, and more than many will read. **Make you piece as long as needs to be, but no longer.**

A Long Piece Is Just a Bunch of Short Pieces

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[45] By the way, if you ever want to give an estimated reading time, words/250 in minutes is a good back of the napkin calculation. (i.e. 1000 words takes 4 minutes).

[46] However, it's almost impossible to publish all long form content. Short form is still better than nothing.

Writing a long-form piece of content is not as daunting as it seems. A long form piece of content is just several smaller pieces of content strung together. That's why you need a narrative. **The narrative is the string that holds the piece together.** If you look at the article, you will see there is no one piece of text that goes on for too long. There is a sub head, one or more short paragraphs (but never more than four), and then another sub head to create another section.

This makes the piece less daunting to the reader, and hopefully makes it a little less daunting to you as a writer.

Keep Your Piece Visually Interesting

I like to think of a long form piece as a set of several "blocks" stacked on top of each other. In fact, Medium's text editor is kind of set up to work this way. Here's a list of blocks you have available when publishing online:

- **A paragraph.** This is going to be your main 'block'. A paragraph can be just one sentence, and should never be more than five. More than five an it should be more than one paragraph. It's also worth noting that paragraphs are the only block on this entire list it is ok to repeat regularly.
- **A subheading.** A subheading is heading besides the main one at the top of the page. Subheadings define the beginning and end of sections of content.
- **A sub-sub-heading.** This is to break sections down even further.
- **A block quote.** Quotes help give your piece authority. Big block quotes stand help and help give your piece some "oomph".

- **A bulleted list.** The internet loves lists. Even if you aren't writing a buzz feed style article like "22 Dogs Who Understand The Struggle Of Being Lactose Intolerant"[47], having smaller lists through out a piece can help break it up. If you ever find your self writing sentences starting with "firstly" or "secondly", put that stuff in a list.

- **A numbered list.** Similar to the bulleted list. The only difference is that there is an order that lines belong in. If you could re-arrange the order and the list would still make sense, then it should probably be bulleted. If it wouldn't, then use numbers.

- **An Image.** In this example, I didn't use any images except for the header, which was probably a mistake. Images help break up the content and hold the reader's attention. The amount of images you use is contingent on the kind of content you are writing. I didn't use any in that article, because writing about writing doesn't invoke a whole lot of imagery. If I were talking about design though, I may have a lot of examples. Or for analytics, I could include charts. Or for an article about the environment I could include beautiful nature shots.

Provide Additional Reading for Your Readers

It is always nice to provide a "further reading" section in your article. Remember that research you did earlier? Include links to books, articles, podcasts, and courses that got you to where you are when writing that article. This should go at the end, and if someone made it through your long form piece, then it stands to reason that they like learning about whatever subject you are writing about. This gives the reader a way to take their education further.

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47 That is a **real** headline: http://www.buzzfeed.com/kaelintully/20-dogs-who-understand-the-struggle-of-being-lactose-intoler

This can be a way to slip in an inline call-to-action as well. In addition to several useful books and articles that I didn't write, I included a link to my book as well. That one link was the part that drove a lot of sign-ups my way.

Make Your Article Actionable

This is the **number one** piece of advice I have about writing educational content. I actually picked this one up from the Copyhackers book series. They didn't say this explicitly, but I saw it in how they wrote. **Give your user specific ways they can apply what you taught them to their problem.** This can include specific next steps, or a stronger call to action.

Bad: 'Write a more effective headline'.
Good: 'Here are 10 formulas you can use to write headlines. Fill in the blanks.'

Bad: 'research your competition'.
Good: 'here is a strategy for identifying competition, and a 5-part questionnaire to ask about each of them'.

Bad: 'write more'.
Good: 'go write an article **today.**'

This is a great way to close out your piece, and this makes your piece so much more valuable. People who read informative content online are looking to change something in their life. They want to be richer or sexier or less stressed. Writing actionable steps in your

article closes the gap between being a piece of content and a piece of life-changing content.

Make the Article Jam Packed With Content

You might be tempted to hold back when writing a long form authoritative piece. You might think "If I give everything away from free, how am I ever supposed to **sell** anything?". This couldn't be farther from the truth. The more you give, the more people will want from you. It's counterintuitive, but true.

Once you have written your piece, go through each section. Is there anything else you could add? Could you make any section just a *little* bit stronger? Here are some ideas to get you going.

- Can you think of any additional examples of what you are talking about?
- Are there any external resources you could link to that could help the reader further?
- If you included a list, is there one more item you could add to that list?
- If you gave people examples of things to do, could you include examples of what *not* to do?
- Are there any images or videos you could include? These could be images that you find online, or images that you create.

Once you have put your piece together, polished it and made it shine, it's time to publish it.

11. Borrowing Audiences … Why Your Blog Should be the Last Place You Publish

So, you have written your long form piece. You went through a few drafts. You polished it and made it shine. Now what do you do with it? Most people want to put it on your blog, but I am going to advise against that. You should publish some of your best stuff to anywhere *but* your blog.

Your Blog is For Your Existing Audience … But It's Less Helpful at Bringing New People In

I used to publish all of my content to either my personal or company blog. Now, I have one blog, but it is a 'catalog' of content I have produced. I still publish new things there, but depending on what I want to accomplish with a piece of content, I will often publish it somewhere else first, and then add a link to my blog a week or so later. Here are some other options you have for publishing content:

Medium

You may have guessed by the previous section, but Medium[48] is my favorite publishing platform. The interface is gorgeous, and they encourage long form, thought provoking content. If I would have published my last long form article on my blog, it may have got some traction, but I doubt it would have done as well. These days, I consider Medium a regular part of my publishing strategy.

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[48] https://medium.com/

Quora

Quora, the Q & A platform I mentioned earlier in the online communities section, also has a blog publishing platform[49]. I don't have a lot of experience with this one.

LinkedIn

Also like Quora, LinkedIn has a publishing platform[50]. This is one that I haven't played around with either, but I could see it being a valuable way to drive traffic to more professional content.

Reddit

You may not think of Reddit as a link sharing platform and not a publishing platform, but that is not the case. Reddit allows for 'self' posts, where you submit a text post. I have seen several people submit long text articles as a self post, and do a lot better than just submitting a link to their own blog.

Guest Posting

Guest posting used to be in the SEO bag of tricks. Even though Google recently shut the lid on this practice[51], it is still a good way to drive additional traffic to your site. This one is harder though, since you need the permission of someone to guest post on their site.

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[49] http://www.quora.com/posts

[50] http://help.linkedin.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/47445/~/long-form-posts-on-linkedin---overview

[51] https://www.mattcutts.com/blog/guest-blogging/

Guest posting is akin to connecting to influencers that I talked about earlier. Build a rapport with someone, think of a way you can provide value to their audience, and then offer to do a guest post.

Alex Turnbull has done quote well at this, and He has a great write up on how he uses guest posting to grow his customer service product[52].

It's All About Borrowing Audiences

If there is a group of people you want to target and bring into your audience, then chances are someone else has already brought them into *their* audience. By connecting with them, and getting in front of that audience you can grow your own.

Borrowing audiences is the entire business model of Medium. They have several editors that run collections. These collections go out to subscribers, and the people who control the collections control who can and who can't write for them. By getting into one of these collections, you are getting in front of a lot of new eyeballs.

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[52] http://www.groovehq.com/blog/guest-blogging

12. 2 List Building Techniques That Don't Scale

I would rather have one quality listener than 100 subscribers who don't care. I don't want to reach 100 inboxes, I want to reach 100 *people*. A list with 100 subscribers and a 50% open rate is more valuable than a list with 1,000 subscribers and a 1% open rate.

These two techniques won't bring you many subscribers. But I every one of them will be solid gold. These techniques are inspired by Paul Graham's article on startup acquisition, *Do things that don't scale[53]*.

Capture Leads In Person With Your Phone

On my iPhone, I have a short cut to my email list capture form. If I am ever having a conversation, I may mention what I write about. Mind you, this should come up organically, don't force this into every conversation at the next mixer you go to. If they are interested, I say "Fill this out and I'll send you a copy". This way I can capture them right then and there.

How to Capture People on Twitter One at a Time

I manage all of my Twitter usage with Tweetdeck[54]. On my Tweetdeck dashboard, I have two columns: one is for mentions of my username, one is a search for my domain. These

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[53] http://paulgraham.com/ds.html

[54] https://about.twitter.com/products/tweetdeck

let me know every time someone tweets one of my articles. Every time they do that, I send them a tweet that says "Thanks!"

It doesn't just say Thanks. I try to personalize each one a bit. I don't want it to seem like an automated script. I may say "thanks for the tweet" or "glad you found it helpful". If they referenced something specific, I will reference it in my response.

Then, if they respond to *that,* I will follow up with a call to join my list. Their response shows they are engaged, and we **only want subscribers who are engaged in what we are doing.** You can even use Twitter cards to build the subscription into your reply, but I prefer to just use links. It feels more authentic to me.

13. I Have an Audience… What do I DO With It?

So, you are building your audience, what do you do with them now? This section is all about how to communicate with your audience.

You may notice that I don't like calling them your "list", I like calling them your "audience". I also want to call what you send to them "emails" and not "newsletters" or "blasts". The important point is that you don't view your list as a *marketing channel,* but instead as a *relationship channel.*

Drop The Newsletters and start writing emails

Newsletters are usually ignored and end up right in the trash bin. Instead of thinking of emails to your list as newsletters, approach them like you would writing an email to one person. When I write email drafts, I will start with the line 'Hey Bob', where Bob is a real person I know. When you write with a more personal tone in mind, it will show in the final result.

The medium needs to match the message. That means no more email templates or themes.

7 Steps to Formatting Your Email

1.Remove all formatting.

Your email should look just like you sent it from your GMail or Mailbox account. This means that you don't want any of the formatting that email list providers offer. However, you don't want to send a plain text email either. Plain text takes away some key formatting tools, such as bolding, italicizing, and putting in links.

2. Write your subject line like you would a regular email.

Don't title case your headline. Capitalize the first word, and then write the rest lowercase. Using questions in your subject line is a good way to increase open rates, but can become annoying if over used.

3.The 'From' Address Should Be Your Address. Encourage Replies.

Emails are conversations, and conversations are a two-way street. The from address should be from your personal address if possible, and if not, one that you check and respond too frequently. Your subscribers should be able to reply to any of your emails and expect a response (it may not be obvious this is the case since the email is automated).

4.Start with a Salutation.

If possible, capture the first name of people when they sign up for your list. This will allow you to start with a line like 'Hey [first_name]'. A person's name is their favorite word to hear, and it starts your email off on the right foot.

5.Write short body copy.

Some people like to send out entire articles in their email list. Personally, I don't like this approach and haven't had much success. If I have a lot to say, I will publish a larger article elsewhere, and include a short description in the email. I like to provide something extra to my subscribers, so I will usually provide additional examples or a personal story in the email.

6.End with a friendly signature.

I always sign my emails with "cheers, Glenn". Much like the salutation, This gives the letter a more personal feel.

7.Often, but not always, include a PS.

The post script is one of the most read part of the email, after the subject line and the first paragraph. Even if people don't want to read the rest of your email, they will check out the PS. In old letter writing, the 'PS' was where people would include something so good

that they just couldn't leave it out. Your PS should only be a couple sentences long, and get straight to the point.

The 3 Types of Emails to Send

When writing emails to your list, there are three formats that I use:

1.The Value Email.

This email has no ulterior motive. This is simply an email that provides value to your list. You can provide value by offering something educational, useful, or entertaining. You do not sell to your list here. If someone was nice enough to sign up for your list, they deserve value from you in return. This is where you give it to them.

2.The Soft Sell Email.

The soft sell email is identical to the value email, with one small difference: You mention something you are selling as a secondary point in the email. The PS is a great place to do this. You can write a valuable article, then in the PS include a call to action. Now when I say "sale", I don't always mean that you are asking the people on your list to give you money in exchange for goods or services. A "sale" is anytime you are asking them to give up something of value in exchange for something of equal or greater value. When people sign up for your list, that was a sale. They exchanged access to their inbox for valuable information. In addition to selling products, you could ask them to sign up for a free trial, a question, or to share your content via social media or forwarding your email.

3.The Hard Sell Email.

These emails have one goal: To get your users to buy something you are selling. Like the soft sell email, that sale could be anything from a transaction to a webinar sign-up. Use these sparingly.

The Frequency of Emails

I send out emails every one to two weeks. If you email your list more frequently than that, they may become fatigued and unsubscribe. Some people push their list harder, and this is something that depends on your audience.

The only time I break this rule is when I am launching a new product or have an upcoming event. I will ramp up the emails to build anticipation for the event, and usually send reminders a week before, a day before, and sometimes an hour before.

When it comes to email frequency, you should also be mindful of the frequency you use the three templates above. The hard sell email is OK sometimes, but if that is all you send, you will not keep your subscribers for long. My general rule of thumb is to keep a 2:1 ratio for helpful, valuable emails, and sales emails. Here's the 6-email rotation I tend to use:

- Value email
- Value email

- Soft sell email
- Value email
- Value email
- Hard sell email

That way, once I have gotten to the point where I am selling someone, I have already provided them a lot of value. This also means that I am only sending out hard sell emails once every 6 - 8 weeks. It may seem odd to spend a lot of time building a list and then sell to it so infrequently, but by taking this approach those sales emails are much more likely to get responses.

Above All Else, Respect Your Audience

The inbox is a sacred place. People use their inbox as a primary communication channel, as a to-do list, and as a calendar. Your audience is a group of people that has given you access to the place, along with some of their precious minutes on this planet. Don't ever forget it, and *always* treat your audience with respect.

14. Next Steps

If you read through this case study, and apply the steps applied, I guarantee you can start growing an audience. It may not be huge, but it will be worlds ahead of where you were. An audience of 1 is orders of magnitude better than an audience of 0. Just to summarize, here is a quick list of actions you can take away from this personal case study and apply to yourself;

- Create an incentive that you can use to drive sign-ups.
- Launch and promote your incentive via social media, reaching out to your network, advertising.
- Optimize your current online presence to start capturing sign-ups.
- If you aren't publishing content online, start. If you are publishing, publish more.
- Start connecting with influencers in your target audience.
- Find online communities to get involved in.
- Set up analytics so you can start collecting data for optimization.
- Write a valuable and education piece of long form content.
- Find additional publishing channels to get more mileage out of your existing content.
- Nurture and grow your audience.

Once you have done that, the possibilities are endless. An engaged audience can do the following for you:

- Be a reliable source of traffic.
- Be agents that can refer you and share your content.
- A source of customer feedback & beta testers.

- A source of clients.
- A new way to build relationships.
- A primed, engaged audience when you are ready to bring a new product to market.

I wrote this case study because I know what a valuable asset an audience can be, and wanted to help other people build one. I want to know how implementing these steps worked for you. Shoot me an email at glenn@concordantsolutions.com and let me know what you think.

In addition, I'll be sending additional resources about building stronger and more sustainable businesses & audiences to you. Hit reply to any of those emails. Or, if you are not interested, hit 'unsubscribe'.