CHAPTER SIX

Targeting Blogs

Targeting blogs prospective customers read is one of the most effective ways to get your first wave of customers. However, this traction channel can be difficult to scale in phases II and III due to the limited number of relevant high-traffic blogs. That's okay. Not all traction channels are infinitely scalable. In fact, using tactics that don't scale is one of the best ways to get your first customers. Paul Graham put it like this:

> The need to do something unscalably laborious to get started is so nearly universal that it might be a good idea to stop thinking of startup ideas as scalars. Instead we should try thinking of them as pairs of what you're going to build, plus the unscalable thing(s) you're going to do initially to get the company going.

We interviewed Noah Kagan, former head of marketing at Mint and founder of AppSumo, to learn how he used this channel to get significant initial traction for both startups by targeting blogs.

Mint's story is impressive. It launched its simple money management site in 2007, and—less than two years later—Intuit acquired it for $170 million. In between, Mint was able to acquire more than 1.5 million customers, 20,000 of whom signed up *before* it even launched. Within six months of Mint's launch, it had more than 1 million active users.

Very few startups experience this kind of growth during their first six months. Kagan, Mint's director of marketing at the time, drove many of its early marketing efforts. As he told us in our interview, Mint's phase I goal was to get 100,000 users within six months. To hit those numbers, Noah created a quant-based marketing spreadsheet like this:

SOURCE	TRAFFIC	CTR	CONVER-SION %	TOTAL USERS	STATUS	CONFIRMED	CONFIRMED USERS
Tech Crunch	300,000	10%	25%	7,500	Friend	Yes	7,500
Dave McClure	30,000	10%	25%	750	Friend	Yes	750
Mashable	500,000	10%	25%	12,500	Emailing	No	0
reddit	25,000	100%	25%	6,250	Coordinated	Yes	6,250
Digg	100,000	100%	25%	25,000	Coordinated	Yes	25,000
Google Organic	5000	100%	15%	750	Receiving	Yes	750
Google Ads	1,000,000	3%	35%	10,500	Bought	Yes	10,500
Paul Stamatiou	50,000	5%	50%	1,250	Friend	Yes	1,250
Personal Finance Sponsorships	200,000	40%	65%	52,000	Coordinated	Yes	52,000
Okdork.com	3,000	10%	75%	225	Self	Yes	225
Total Users				116,725			104,225

His spreadsheet listed traction channel strategies Mint planned to mine for potential customers. Then, Noah ran the numbers in terms of traffic, click-through rates (CTR), and conversions (actually signing up for the product in this case), and then calculated the number of expected customers from each channel strategy.

Next, he tested the channel strategies Mint might focus on by running tests on the ones that seemed promising. To test targeting blogs, he contacted a few that were representative of different customer segments and got them to write articles about Mint.

This should all sound pretty familiar at this point. Noah's method is an implementation of Bullseye: he systematically set out to determine which channel would allow him to accomplish his specific traction goal.

Mint's initial series of tests revealed that targeting blogs should be its core traction channel. Noah then created a long list of blogs to target, and set about focusing on this channel. Initially the focus was on more standard articles and guest posts. Through inner ring testing, Noah additionally uncovered channel strategies that further improved Mint's traction: VIP access and direct sponsoring.

Mint did something that few startups had done before to increase awareness and build excitement for its launch: it asked people on its prelaunch waiting list to recommend Mint to their friends in return for priority product access. As part of the signup process, users could embed an "I Want Mint" badge on their personal blogs, Facebook, or other Web sites. Users who drove signups through these badges were rewarded with VIP access before other invitations were sent out.

The key to the success of these badges was to make them easy to share and embed. Much as YouTube provides an embed code below each video on its site, Mint provided the code necessary to make embedding badges as simple as copying and pasting. Many users were happy to place the small badge on their Web site in order to get early access to a product they wanted. Mint had six hundred blogs display the badge and fifty thousand users signed up through them. This strategy also gave Mint an SEO boost from the hundreds of new links pointing to Mint.com.

Mint used a second innovative strategy to acquire customers through this traction channel: direct sponsoring of blogs. Each sponsored blog would place a small Mint advertisement on its site for a period of time. Noah tracked each advertisement to see which blogs were most effective and how many people signed up. Not only did this approach contribute more than ten thousand pre-registrations for its product, but it also allowed the Mint team to understand the kind of customer most interested in its product.

Many personal bloggers have strong readerships, but don't make money from their writing. Noah offered them a way to show off a cool new service and make some money doing it. He simply sent them a message with "Can I send you $500?" as the subject and told them a bit about the product and what Mint was trying to do. Most were happy to share a useful product with their audiences and make some money in the process.

Mint also created content partnerships with larger sites like *The Motley Fool,* a personal investing site. With this content partnership (each site contributed content to the other), Mint exposed its valuable, free product to more than 3 million readers who would likely be interested in its service. This postlaunch content partnership combined targeting blogs with elements of business development and was a big win for the Mint team.

Noah used this traction channel again at AppSumo, his startup that sells software bundles and educational products at discounted prices. To get traction, Noah pulled together free bundles for blogs and conferences, such as SXSW.

One of the first bundles AppSumo did was specifically for *Lifehacker,* a popular productivity blog. Rather than just trying to pitch *Lifehacker* on his new startup, Noah built a product bundle for them before reaching out. *Lifehacker* couldn't turn down a bundle geared specifically toward its readers. In the blog's words:

> *Our love of free software here at Lifehacker is no secret, but sometimes you just need to shell out for some advanced features. AppSumo is currently offering a bundle of our favorite productivity webapps, for a fraction of the price.*

The offer did really well with *Lifehacker*'s audience, and led to strong early traction for AppSumo. Noah also sponsored blogs to run AppSumo giveaways, much as he did at Mint. AppSumo is now a profitable business with more than 800,000 customers.

TARGETING BLOG TACTICS

It can be difficult to uncover the smaller blogs that cover your niche. Here are several tools you can use to find all the influential bloggers in your space:

Search Engines—Simply search for things like "top blogs for *x*" or "best *x* blogs."

YouTube—Doing a simple search for your product keywords on YouTube shows you the most popular videos in your industry. These videos are often associated with influencers who have blogs, and you can use references to their videos as icebreakers to start building relationships with them. This tactic can be applied to other video sharing sites, such as Vimeo and Dailymotion.

Delicious—Delicious allows you to use keywords to find links that others have saved, which can unearth new blogs.

Twitter—Using Twitter search is another easy way to find blogs in a niche. You can also use tools like Followerwonk and Klout to determine the top Twitter accounts in your industry.

Social Mention—Social Mention helps you determine the sites that have the most frequent mentions for your keywords.

Talk to People—The most effective way to figure out what your target audience is really reading online is by asking them directly!

In addition to targeting blogs directly, you can also target the link-sharing communities that often link to them. Sharing links is at the heart of many large communities on the Web (e.g., reddit, Product Hunt, *Hacker News*, Inbound.org). In addition, there are hundreds of niche communities and forums that encourage and reward the sharing of links.

Dropbox, the file storage startup, targeted these communities for their initial traction. By sharing a video on *Hacker News*, Dropbox received more than ten thousand signups. Soon, it was trending on Digg (significantly bigger at the time), which drove even more signups.

Quora, Codecademy, and Gumroad saw similar success from initial postings on *Hacker News* because their products were a good fit for users of that site. The founders behind Filepicker.io—a file management tool for developers—also posted a basic demo there, looking for some feedback and early customers. Their submission was in the top spot for nearly three hours, during which they saw:

- 10,000+ visits
- 460 concurrent users
- 500+ developer signups
- 5,000+ files managed

In a crowded online environment, reaching prospects in an arena where they choose to spend their time is a valuable way to get traction. Targeting blogs and link-sharing communities can be a great way to get your first wave of customers.

TARGETS

- **Run tests on a variety of smaller blogs.** See what type of audience resonates best with your product and messaging. There are a variety of tools you can use to uncover relevant blogs, including YouTube, Delicious, StumbleUpon, Twitter, search engines, Google Alerts, and Social Mention. You can also ask people!
- **Sponsor small blogs, especially personal blogs.** Providing influential bloggers early access or offering early access in exchange for spreading the word are other effective strategies.
- **Offer something unique to your best targets.** Build a special offer just for them and put together a draft guest post that they can run with.