

68: Hollywood Launch

Go from teaser to preview to launch

If an app launches in a forest and there's no one there to use it, does it make a noise? The point here is that if you launch your app without any pre-hype, people aren't going to know about it.

To build up buzz and anticipation, go with a Hollywood-style launch: 1) Teaser, 2) Preview, and 3) Launch.

Teaser

A few months ahead of time, start dropping hints. Let people know what you're working on. Post a logo. Post to your blog about the development. Stay vague but plant the seed. Also, get a site up where you can collect emails from folks who are interested.

At this stage, you should also start seducing mavens and insiders. These are the folks on the cutting edge. They're the tastemakers. Appeal to their vanity and status as ahead-of-the-curve. Tell them they're getting an exclusive sneak preview. If a site like Boing Boing, Slashdot, or Digg links up your app, you'll get loads of traffic and followers. Plus, your page rank at Google will go up too.

Preview

A few weeks ahead of launch, start previewing features. Give people behind-the-scenes access. Describe the theme of the product. For Basecamp, we posted screenshots and highlighted reminders, milestones, and other features.

Also, tell people about the ideas and principles behind the app. For Backpack, we posted our manifesto before launch. This got people thinking and talking about the app.

You can also offer some special "golden tickets" to a few people so they can start using the app early. You'll get the benefit of having some beta testers while they'll feel that special glow that people get from being early adopters.

And again, encourage people to sign up so you've got a foundation of emails to blitz once you launch. By the time we launch our apps, we have thousands of emails to ping which is a big help in gaining traction.

Launch

It's release time. Now people can actually go to the "theater" and see your app. Get emails out to those who signed up. Launch your full marketing site. Spread the gospel as much as possible. Get blogs to link to you. Post about your progress: How many people have signed up? What updates/tweaks have you made? Show momentum and keep at it.

The Road to Launch Day

As soon as we knew Blinksale was really going to happen, we began floating some teasers to our mailing list. These are people who have asked to receive information from us about our projects. These are our fans, if you will. If you already have permission to talk to a group of people, they are the best place to start.

The second thing we did is get permission to talk to more people about our product. About six weeks before the Blinksale launch we put up a teaser page at our website that proclaimed the coming of an easier way to send invoices online. The page gave just enough information to build excitement and suspense, without giving away sensitive details that needed to remain confidential. Prominently displayed on the page was a newsletter subscription form, requiring nothing but an email (keep it simple) so that those interested could be notified when the product launched.

We spread the word to a dozen or so friends and colleagues that we felt would be interested in the product as well, and they began to spread the word about the teaser page through their blogs and websites. Within a few days, we had thousands on our mailing list. These were extremely important people — people who are asking to learn more about our product and who wanted to know when we launched.

Finally, about two weeks before we launched, we invited a handful of friends, colleagues, and industry mavens to help us beta test Blinksale. This allowed us to get the product in front of people we felt could benefit from its use and who could help us spread the word about the product when we launched. It's important to note that we didn't force anyone to use or write about the product. We simply wanted it to be seen and wanted people to talk about it when it launched. In the end, if you're going to build buzz this way, you better be sure your product can deliver. Otherwise, it's like clouds without rain.

When launch day arrived, we sent an email to our mailing list, notified our blogging friends, and encouraged our beta testers to speak their minds. And to our great delight, the effort paid big dividends. Shortly after launch tens of thousands had visited our site and thousands of those had signed up to use the product.

—Josh Williams, founder, [Blinksale](#)

69: A Powerful Promo Site

Go from teaser to preview to launch

The best promotional tool is a great product. Word will get out if you've got an app that people find really useful.

Still, you need an ace promotional site too. What should you include on this site? Some ideas:

- **Overview:** Explain your app and its benefits.
- **Tour:** Guide people through various features.
- **Screen captures and videos:** Show people what the app actually looks like and how to use it.
- **Manifesto:** Explain the philosophy and ideas behind it.
- **Case Studies:** Provide real life examples that show what's possible.
- **Buzz:** Testimonial quotes from customers, reviews, press, etc.
- **Forum:** Offer a place for members of the community to help one another.
- **Pricing & Sign-up:** Get people into your app as quickly as possible.
- **Weblog:** Blogs keep your site fresh with news, tips, etc.

70: Ride the Blog Wave

Blogging can be more effective than advertising (and it's a hell of a lot cheaper)

Advertising is expensive. And evaluating the effectiveness of various types of advertising can wind up being even more expensive than the advertising itself. When you don't have the time or money to go the traditional advertising route, consider the promote-via-blog route instead.

Start off by creating a blog that not only touts your product but offers helpful advice, tips, tricks, links, etc. Our Signal vs. Noise blog gets thousands of unique readers a week thanks to the helpful, informative, and interesting bits and anecdotes we post on a daily basis.

So when it came time to promote our first product, Basecamp, we started there. We got the word out on SvN and it started to spread. Folks like Jason Kottke, the BoingBoingers, Jim Coudal, and a variety of other people with popular blogs helped raise the visibility and things took off.

Ta-da Lists is another great example of the power of blog-based marketing. We launched Ta-da with a single post on Signal vs. Noise, and a few weeks later it had been mentioned on over 200 blogs and over 12,000 people had signed up for their own Ta-da account. Word about Backpack spread even faster. Within 24 hours of launch, more than 10,000 signed up.

71: Solicit Early

Get advance buzz and signups going ASAP

We've already touched on it but it bears repeating: Get some sort of site up and start collecting emails as soon as possible. Pick your domain name and put up a logo and maybe a sentence or two that describes, or at least hints at, what your app will do. Then let people give you their email address. Now you're on your way to having a foundation of folks ready and waiting to be notified of your launch.

72: Promote Through Education

Share your knowledge with the world

When a teacher appears as a contestant on Jeopardy, Alex Trebek often comments that it's a "noble profession." He's right. There's definitely something wonderful and rewarding about sharing your knowledge with others. **And when the subject you're teaching is your app, it serves a dual purpose: You can give something back to the community that supports you and score some nice promotional exposure at the same time.**

As a promotional technique, education is a soft way to get your name — and your product's name — in front of more people. And instead of a hard sell "buy this product" approach, you're getting attention by providing a valuable service. That creates positive buzz that traditional marketing tactics can't match. People who you educate will become your evangelists.

Education can come in many forms. Post tips and tricks at your site that people will want to share with others. Speak at conferences and stay afterwards to meet and greet with attendees. Conduct workshops so curious fans can learn more and talk to you in the flesh. Give interviews to publications. Write articles that share helpful information. And write books. ;)

An example from our own history is the Yellow Fade Technique, a method we invented to subtly spotlight a recently changed area on a page. We wrote a post about it on Signal vs. Noise. That post made the rounds and got thousands and thousands of page views (to this day it's doing huge traffic).

The post worked on both an educational and a promotional level. A lesson was learned and a lot of people who never would have known about our products were exposed to them. Another example: During our development of Ruby on Rails, we decided to make the infrastructure open source. It turned out to be a wise move. We gave something back to the community, built up goodwill, garnered recognition for our team, received useful feedback, and began receiving patches and contributions from programmers all over the world.

Teaching is all about good karma. You're paying it forward. You're helping others. You get some healthy promotion. And you can even bask in a bit of nobility. So what do you know that the world wants to hear about?

Pay It Forward

The articles and tips section of our blog is one of the most popular sections of our site. Passing on our knowledge about email marketing ensures our customers get the most out of our

software. If they can provide a better service to their customers, then they're likely to get more business, which in turn creates more business for us — everyone wins.

Freely sharing our knowledge has also helped position us as experts in the industry and strengthened our relationship with existing customers. They know we care about the quality of their work. Finally, we get loads of targeted inbound traffic from search engines and bloggers who share our articles with their readers. These are people that would never have heard of our software had we not written that article.

—David Greiner, founder, Campaign Monitor

73: Feature Food

They're hungry for it so serve it up

New or interesting features are a great way to generate buzz for your application. Special interest groups love to chew up “feature food” and spit it back out to the community. Alright, that’s kind of an unpleasant analogy but you get the point.

For example, by using Ruby on Rails, a new development platform, we generated a ton of attention for Basecamp within the developer community.

The Ajax elements we used in our applications got lots of buzz and even led to Business 2.0 magazine naming Basecamp a “key player in Ajax” alongside big names like Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Amazon.

Another example: Bloggers took notice of Basecamp’s RSS support since it was one of the first business examples of RSS.

iCal integration, a seemingly minor feature, got us press on a ton of Mac-related sites which probably never would have mentioned the app otherwise.

Small teams have a leg up on integrating new ideas into software. While bigger companies have to deal with bureaucratic bottlenecks, you can rapidly implement new ideas and get attention for using them.

Riding the hype coattails of the technology du jour is an effective and cheap way to build your buzz. That said, don’t go adding the latest obscure technology just to gain some notice. But if you are using something new or noteworthy, go ahead and spotlight it for special interest groups.

74: Track Your Logs

Study your logs to track buzz

You need to know who's talking about you. Check your logs and find out where the buzz is coming from. Who's linking to you? Who's bitching about you? Which blogs listed at Technorati, Blogdex, Feedster, Del.icio.us, and Daypop are hot on your trail?

Find out and then make your presence felt. Leave comments at those blogs. Thank people for posting links. Ask them if they want to be included on your special advance list so they'll be among the first to know about future releases, updates, etc. Collect positive praise and create a "buzz" page at your site. Testimonials are a great way to promote your app since third-party praise is more trustworthy to most people.

If the comments are negative, still pay attention. Show you're listening. Respond to critiques thoughtfully. Something like: "We appreciate the feedback but we did it this way because..." Or "You raise a good point and we're working on it." You'll soften up your critics and put a human face on your product. It's amazing how much a thoughtful comment on a blog can diffuse naysayers and even turn complainers into evangelists.

75: Inline Upsell

Promote upgrade opportunities inside the app

Everyone knows to pitch at the marketing site. But the sell shouldn't stop there. If you have a tiered pricing plan (or a free version of your app), don't forget to call out upgrade opportunities from within the product.

Tell folks that you'll remove barriers if they upgrade. For example, in Basecamp you can't upload files if you have a free account. When someone tries to upload a file, we don't just turn them away. We explain why file uploading isn't available and encourage them to upgrade to the paid version and explain why that's a good idea. The same approach is used to encourage existing customers to upgrade to a higher level account when they max out their current plan.

Existing customers are your best bet for sales. Don't be shy about trying to get repeat business from people who already know and use your product.

76: Name Hook

Give your app a name that's easy to remember

A big mistake a lot of people make is thinking their app's name needs to be ultradescriptive. Don't worry about picking a name that vividly describes your tool's purpose; That usually just leads to a generic, forgettable name. Basecamp is a better name than something like Project Management Center or ProjectExpress. Writeboard is better than CollaborEdit.

Also, don't focus group or committee-ize the naming process too much. Pick a name that's short, catchy, and memorable and then run with it.

And don't sweat it if you can't get the exact domain name you want. You can always be creative and get close with a couple of extra letters (e.g. backpackit.com or campfirenow.com).

Easy Does It

Doesn't the tech industry realize that thinking up catchy, self-explanatory names would ultimately benefit it in the same way? They'd sell more of whatever it was, because they wouldn't scare off consumers who think they're being kept out of the high-tech club by a bunch of arrogant engineers. The technology would catch on quicker, too. The new product would be easier to describe, easier to use and easier to buy — which, for the companies, means easier to sell.

—David Pogue, columnist, New York Times (from What's in a Product Name?)