# Hacking Kickstarter: How to Raise $100,000 in 10 Days (Includes Successful Templates, E-mails, etc.)

by Tim Ferriss • Dec. 18, 2012 • 20 min read • original



**Mike Del Ponte co-founded Soma, which raised more than $100,000 on Kickstarter using virtual assistants and free apps.**

I first met Mike Del Ponte two years ago when he was running marketing at BranchOut, a startup I advise.

Before joining BranchOut, Mike had explored a variety of career paths, including preparing for the priesthood at Yale Divinity School and serving as a peacemaker in the West Bank.

Earlier this year, Mike came to me with a new product idea called Soma. Soma is, in its simplest form, a high-end competitor to Brita water filters. It combines Apple-inspired design (e.g. sleek glass carafe) with a subscription service that delivers the world's first compostable water filter to your door. From form to function, from funding model to revenue model, Mike was eager to disrupt a sleepy but enormous market: water. I became an advisor.

To launch Soma on Kickstarter (and raise $100,000+ in just nine days), Mike and his team used some of the techniques that helped BranchOut grow to 25 million users in just 16 months.

You can replicate what he did.

This post includes all of their email templates, spreadsheets, open-source code to build landing pages, and even a custom dashboard Soma's hacker Zach Allia built to monitor their Kickstarter data, social media, and press.

This post is as close to copy-and-paste Kickstarter success as you will find. And even if you have no interest in Kickstarter, Mike's approach is a blueprint for launching nearly any product online for maximal impact and minimal cost.

Enjoy!

> UPDATE: Soma is offering a 7-course, private dinner with me at a historic mansion in San Francisco (travel included) as one of their Kickstarter prizes. At the time this post was published, there was still one spot left.

## Enter Mike

How many times have you dreamt of launching a new product, only to let your dream fall to the wayside?

*I don't have the money to even get started! What if it fails?*

In the past, these excuses held some weight, as bringing a new product to market could be incredibly expensive. Oftentimes, you had to prototype, build, and then hope the world wanted what you were selling. If not, you could end up with a warehouse full of debt: unsellable inventory.

Now, there are new options. Crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and IndieGogo allow you to introduce (test) a new product before you start manufacturing, removing a huge amount of risk. If people like what you're proposing, you can pull in thousands or even millions of dollars to fund your dream. At the very worst, you were able to test your idea without investing much time or money.

But planning and running a Kickstarter campaign is often done in a haphazard fashion.

To prepare for ours, we didn't want to leave anything to chance, so we interviewed 15 of the top-earning Kickstarter creators. Their projects ranged from a grizzly bear jacket to a gaming console that raised nearly $8.6 million on Kickstarter. What we learned is that whether you're successful or struggling, your Kickstarter campaign is often "40 days of chaos," as one creator put it. Either you succeed beyond your wildest dreams and are overwhelmed with inquiries from backers, press, retailers and investors, or you struggle to achieve your goal and frantically beg bloggers and friends to spread the word. Either type of overwhelm can be a huge headache.

So, we got creative.

Using virtual assistants, growth hacking techniques, and principles from Tim's books, we raised over $100,000 in less than 10 days. Having accomplished our goal with almost 30 days to spare, we are now relaxing for the holidays. The Kickstarter is behind us, allowing us to get back to product development as we get to know our new community of 1,600+ committed customers.

Here are the steps we used to do it…

## Step 1: Start with principles that require less work and yield better results

We chose three core principles for our Kickstarter strategy. The hacks and tactics we'll share with you are cool, but these principles were the foundation of our campaign. Make sure you understand them before moving forward.

1. **Minimum Effective Dose.** MED is the smallest input needed to produce a desired outcome. For example, if you want to boil water, the MED is 212 degrees Fahrenheit. Increasing the temperature above 212 degrees will not produce a better result, it will just waste resources. We wanted to focus on the 1-3 things that would allow us to raise $100,000 in 10 days, and eliminate everything else. MED is described in detail in *The 4-Hour Body*.
2. **Outsource and automate.** These two steps allow you to get results by delegating tasks and setting up automated systems so you can focus your energy on more valuable projects. The #1 resource we found for outsourcing is Zirtual. Zirtual provides US-based virtual assistants (VAs) for as little as $399. Do not run a Kickstarter campaign (or your life) without VAs. They will save you countless hours of work. *The 4-Hour Workweek* is the best book on outsourcing and automating.
3. **Prep and pick up.** Chef's don't prepare meals like you and me. They don't start 15-60 minutes before dinner. Instead, they prep everything in advance (sometimes days before), so they can just heat the food and make it look nice when it's time to eat. This concept was critical to our success. Our goal was to do 90% of the work in advance. For example, crafting emails 2-3 days early so we just needed to click "send" when we
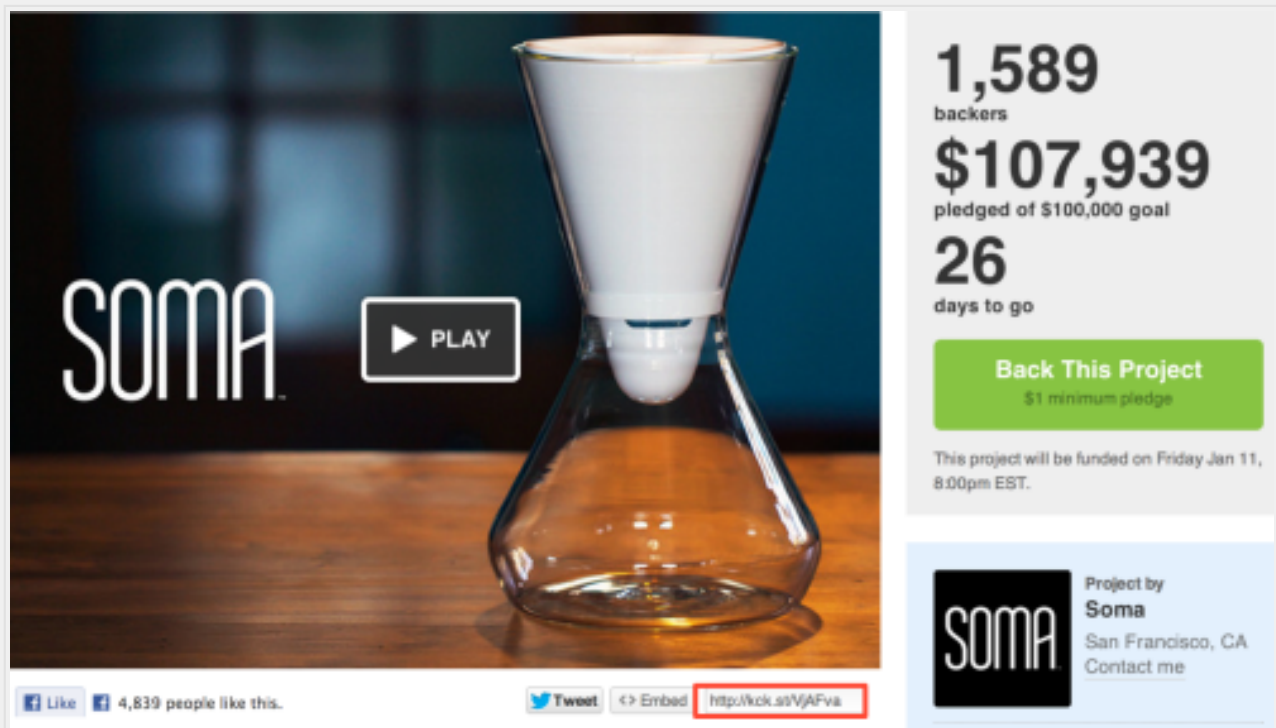
launched. We learned about prep and pick up in *The 4-Hour Chef*. It's a game changer.

## Step 2: Find the MED for Kickstarter traffic

If you want to raise a lot of money on Kickstarter, you need to drive a lot of traffic to your project. And you want that traffic to be comprised of prospective backers of your project. Applying the concept of MED, we knew we needed to discover and focus on the best traffic sources.

My friend, Clay Hebert, is a Kickstarter expert. One of the things he taught me is a simple trick using Bit.ly tracking. Bit.ly is a link shortening service used by millions of people...and Kickstarter. If you add a + to the end of any bit.ly URL, you can see stats about that link. For example: here are stats for the shortlink Kickstarter generated for our campaign http://kck.st/VjAFva+.

**Click here** for full size image



**Click here** for full size image
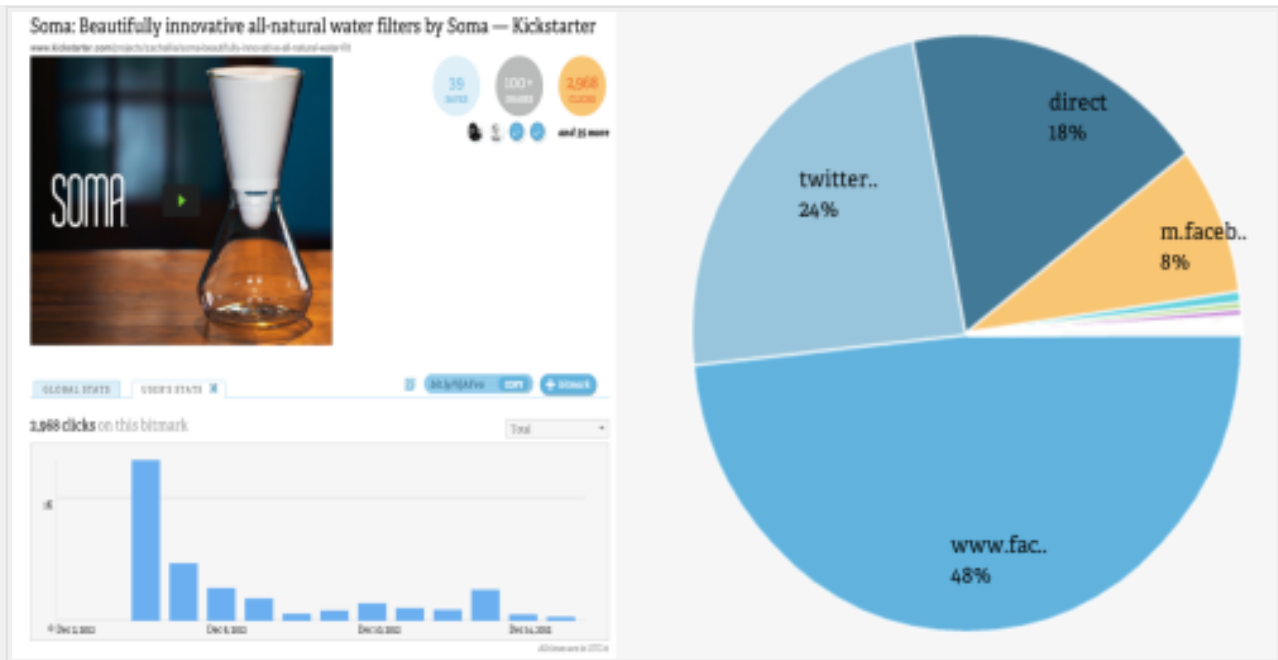
To discover the top referral sources, we gave our VA a list of Kickstarter projects similar to ours and asked her to list the referrers for each project. Almost without fail, the order of top referrers was:

1. Facebook
2. Direct traffic (primarily via email)
3. Twitter
4. Kickstarter
5. Blogs

Based on this data, we decided to focus all of our attention on just two goals:

1. Getting coverage on the right blogs
2. Activating our networks to create buzz on Facebook, Twitter, and email

We knew that if we did this, we would be listed on Kickstarter's "popular projects" sections, which is how you get people who are browsing Kickstarter to check out and back your project.

## Step 3: Use the 80/20 rule to focus on the best media targets

At Soma, we were fortunate to get a ton of press in just 10 days (*Forbes, Fast Company, Inc., Mashable, Cool Hunting, Business Insider, GOOD, Salon, Gear Patrol, Thrillist, The Huffington Post,* and many more). We made mistakes and learned a lot. This section offers our best advice on how to get the MED of press and succeed on Kickstarter.

The 80/20 rule teaches us that 20% of stories will yield 80% of your press results. This was absolutely the case for us. One week into our Kickstarter campaign, we reviewed our press coverage. Surprisingly, the post that earned us the most money was on a site most people

have never heard of: www.good.is, the online property of GOOD magazine.

We stopped and asked ourselves, "Why did good.is outperform bigger and more well-known media outlets?" We discovered that good.is was in some cases 10x more valuable than other press because the audience is relevant, the readership is substantial (400,000+ unique monthly visitors), we got an introduction to a writer at GOOD, and we reached prospective backers through GOOD's daily email and its Facebook and Twitter accounts.

## Therefore, when making your media list, these are the four things to look for:

1. **Relevance** – will their readers LOVE your project?
2. **Readership** – how much traffic does their site get? *[TIM: For a quick idea, I use the SEO for Chrome extension]*
3. **Relationships** – do you know at least one person who can make a strong introduction?
4. **Reach** – will the blog reach prospective backers by promoting your post via email newsletter, RSS feed, Facebook, Twitter, and other channels? *[TIM: This is the most neglected checkbox. Blogs that expect you to drive all traffic to their posts are a waste of time. Remember: big site-wide traffic does not mean each post gets much (or any) traffic.]*

What follows is a 5-step process for making the world's greatest media list. Your VA will do 90% of the work. We've included email templates you can use to delegate these projects to your VA.

## I. Find relevant bloggers using Google Images

Start by looking at who covered Kickstarter projects similar to yours. You can do this by using a simple Google Images hack. If you drag and drop any image file into the search bar at images.google.com, you'll be shown every website that has ever posted that image. Pretty cool, huh?

**Click here for full size image. Below, the Porthole by Martin Kastner.**
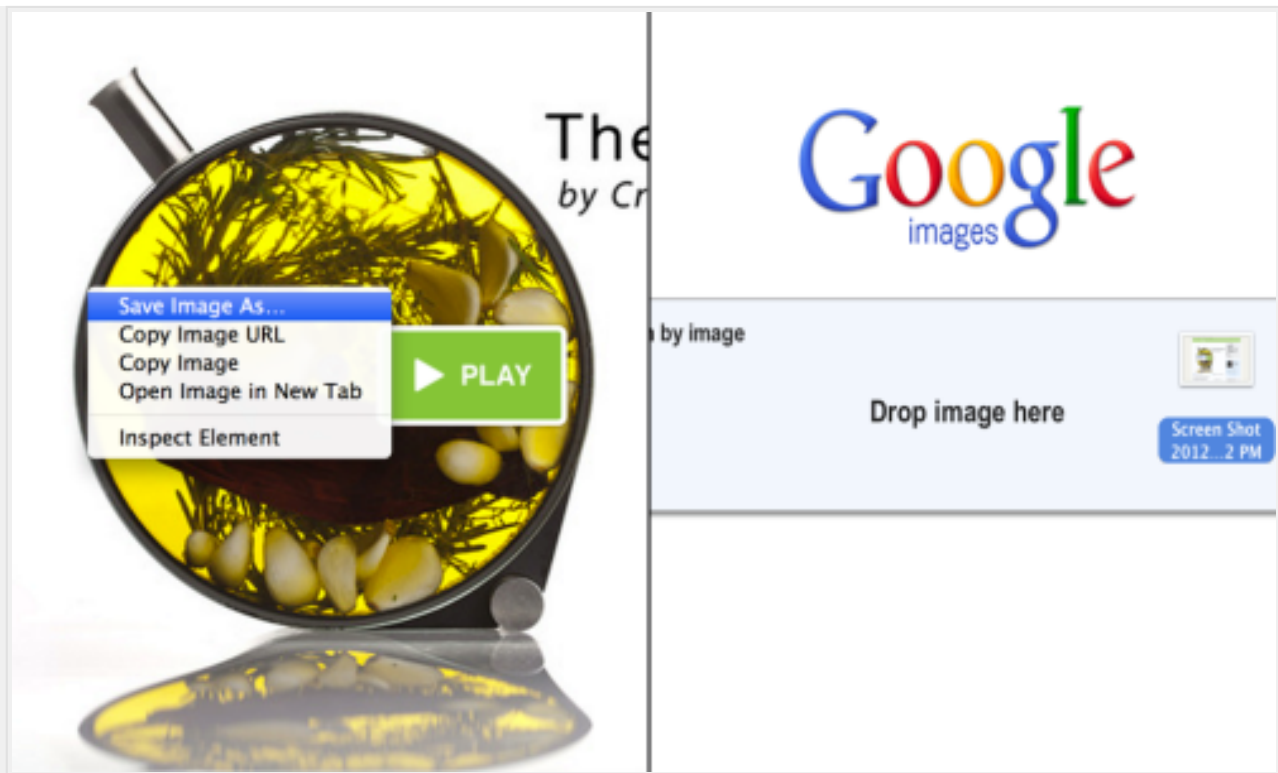
Here's the process your VA will use:

1. Find 10 Kickstarter projects similar to yours, and for each, do the following.
2. Right-click and save-to-desktop 2-3 images.
3. Drag and drop each image file from your desktop into the Google Images search bar.
4. Review blogs listed on the results page to see which might be relevant to your project.
5. Fill out the following fields in the attached "Media List" spreadsheet: Publication, URL, first and last name of the writer, and links to relevant posts by that writer.

You now have dozens of blogs that have a high probability of relevance, all neatly organized in a spreadsheet. Your VA can find more sites like the ones in your media list by searching SimilarSites.com.

## II. Research site traffic on Compete.com

Bigger is not always better. But it is helpful to know the size of each blog's readership. Have your VA research how many unique monthly visitors each blog has and add that data to your media list.

## III. Identify relationships on Facebook

This may be the most important part of your PR efforts. For us, eight out of ten valuable blog posts resulted from relationships. Either we knew the blogger or got an introduction. When we pitched a blogger without a relationship, less than 1% even responded. With introductions, our success rate was over 50%.

How do you identify relationships? Facebook. Have your VA log in to your Facebook account, search for bloggers in your media list, and add mutual friends to your spreadsheet. You can also search on professional networks like BranchOut or LinkedIn.

## IV. Discover each blog's reach on email, social media, and RSS

After witnessing the value of good.is featuring Soma in their email newletter, we completely changed the way we thought about press coverage. A blog post is just the beginning. Once you get covered, you need distribution. You need to reach your prospective backers through email, RSS feeds, and social media.

To estimate a blog's reach, have your VA research how many followers it has on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and RSS. Once you make your short list of media targets (see below), you should also sign up for each blog's email newsletter.

You won't really know what your reach will be until you've landed each story and received a commitment by each blog to promote your posts. But don't worry, we'll help you get both below. So keep reading.

## V. Review your media list and turn it into a dossier fit for a Seal Team 6 secret mission

Ok. So now you have a really strong media list...and all you had to do is send four emails, which we wrote for you. Not bad. Now it's time for you to double check your VA's work and create your blogger shortlist.

1. Open your media list spreadsheet and look at the mutual friends you share with each blogger. Delete the people you do not know well enough to ask for an introduction. Email the people who remain and say, "Hey ____, I saw you're friends with [name of blogger] on Facebook. Do you know him well enough to make an intro next month? I think our Kickstarter project could be a good fit for [name of blog]. Thanks!" Based on the answers you get, rate how strong your relationship is for each blog (1 = strong, 3 = weak). If your VA didn't find any mutual connections, tweet or post on Facebook: "Please message me if you know anyone at [name of blog]. I have a great story I'd like to share with them. Thanks!" I did this twice and immediately got introductions.
2. Spend some time on each blog and judge for yourself how relevant it is. Rate relevance in the spreadsheet (1 = extremely relevant, 3 = not relevant).
3. For each blog, research the writers your VA found. Based on their past posts, are they really the best bloggers to cover you? Is there anyone at the blog who is a better fit?
4. Now, sort your spreadsheet by relevance, relationships, and readership (in that order) to prioritize your outreach. Have your VA find email addresses for the top ten bloggers in your spreadsheet. At this point, you should only focus on ten bloggers.
5. Using this template, have your VA make a one-page brief for each of the top 10 bloggers. Print these out and hang them on the wall like wanted posters or put them in a top secret dossier. Whether you fancy yourself a bounty hunter or the next James Bond, your mission is to find, befriend, and get covered by these bloggers so the dream

you're launching on Kickstarter can become a reality.

## Step 4: Turn bloggers into buddies

The only thing better than pitching a blogger through a friendly introduction is becoming friends with the blogger yourself.

If there's one thing we learned from our Kickstarter campaign, it's that friends are incredibly generous. They will go to great lengths to help you succeed. Blogger friends are no exception. Some of our blog posts came from close friends who offered to help before we even asked. For example, this *Fast Company* article by Amber Rae that got over 6,000 Facebook likes and 4,000 tweets in just 10 days.

The key is to genuinely form friendships with bloggers. They get pitched every day by strangers who don't care about them and only want publicity. Do the exact opposite. Really care about them. Figure out ways to be helpful. Hang out. Even if they don't end up covering you, at least you'll have a new friend.

## Step 5: Get the story and make specific requests to maximize your reach

Once you connect with a blogger that is interested in covering your project, your job is to make it as easy as possible for them to write a story that is valuable to their readers and to you. The benefit of starting with a shortlist of just 10 bloggers is that you can really get to know their blog and writing style. Armed with this information, you can tailor your pitch to their needs. For example, after receiving an email introduction to a blogger at Gear Patrol, the ultra cool men's digital magazine, I sent over this pitch (to someone not named John):

> Hi John
>
> It's great to meet you. I'm a huge fan of Gear Patrol and wanted to pass on something new that could be a nice fit for your kitchen section. I've attached an image of the Soma glass carafe and our revolutionary water filter. Our Kickstarter page has a video and bullet points on why Soma is unique.
>
> We think Soma could be a great story for Gear Patrol for these reasons:
>
> Innovative gear – Soma is the world's first compostable water filter: made of Malaysian coconut shells, vegan silk, and food-based plastic.
> Sleek design – The Soma carafe is made of decanter-quality glass, in a world of plastic pitchers. The hour-glass shape is unprecedented in the industry.
> Made for busy guys – Soma delivers your water filters right to your door so you never forget when to change it.

> If you're interested, please let me know how I can make the writing process easy for your team. I'm happy to send more hi-res photos. We launch Tuesday at 8am PST.
>
> Thanks for taking the time to check us out,
> Mike

The good thing about Kickstarter is that most of the information and assets bloggers need for a story can be found right on your Kickstarter page, including high resolution photos and the embed code for your video. We built a press page and wrote a press release. In retrospect, they may not have been worth it given the amount of time we spent on them. All you need is a DropBox folder with hi-res photos and 5-7 bullet points about your project that you can paste in an email. The key is to make sure you package everything in a way that's convenient for bloggers.

*[TIM: For more real-world successful pitches (e.g. Wired Magazine, Dr. Oz), see my post "From First TV to Dr. Oz – How to Get Local Media...Then National Media"]*

Once you get the story, your work is far from over. Remember, you want to ensure each story reaches people who will back your project. So after a story is confirmed, make sure to ask the blogger the following questions, ideally in person or over the phone one week prior to launch.

1. "We're launching on Monday at 8am PST, can the story go live at that time?" If they say "no," ask for the story to be published at another time on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday 8am-5pm PST, ideally in the morning. If they say, "I'll try," push for a confirmation of the date and time your story will go live. We missed out on a lot of valuable traffic because big blogs posted our story at night or on the weekend.
2. "As a subscriber to your email newsletter, I always read the stories you curate and am sure others do, too. Can our story be featured in your newsletter?"
3. "We've found that Facebook is the #1 source of traffic to Kickstarter. Can you post our story on your Facebook fan page the morning it goes live? Cool! And I'm assuming you'll tweet it out, too, right? Awesome!"
4. "I follow you on Pinterest and noticed you have like a gazillion followers. We pinned a new picture of our product. If I send you a link, would you mind repinning it?"

Once we realized how important timing and promotion were, we started making these requests. To be honest, initially I was nervous. I thought it would be more polite to not bother bloggers. But then I learned two important lessons. First, bloggers work hard to create content and they want it to be seen by as many people as possible. And second, bloggers won't get annoyed by your requests if you're polite, explain why timing and promotion are so important, and give them the time and help they need to work within the confines of a content calendar they may not control. The more you befriend bloggers and consider their fears and motivations, as well as your own, the better your results will be.

What I've just shared with you is a step-by-step approach to getting the most effective media coverage possible. I've worked with PR firms that charge $20,000 a month and spend three-months planning a launch. Follow our advice and there's a good chance you'll get better results without spending anything.

What I'm about to share, how to activate your network, is equally as important. In both cases you want to create what Tim calls "the surround sound effect." Especially on the first few days of your launch, you want people to see your project everywhere – on blogs, Facebook, Twitter…everywhere. One tool that creates this surround sound effect is retargeting. For as little as $500, you can display banner ads on various sites to 10,000 people who have seen your project, but may not have backed it. I haven't heard of many Kickstarter projects using retargeting, but it's something worth investigating.

## Step 6: Segment and activate your network

Someone recently asked us, "How did Soma raise $100,000 on Kickstarter in just nine days?" Our answer: friends. The secret to our success was leveraging our personal networks. Our friends introduced us to bloggers, were the first to back our project, and promoted Soma to their personal networks via email, social media, and word of mouth. Your friends are super heroes. Treat them as such.

The way to activate your network of friends is to give them a sense of ownership. Let them know they are part of the team. That way, they are working with you, rather than doing you favors.

Our Kickstarter launch team included three full-time teammates, two virtual assistants, one intern, and an army of friends. Our network of friends had a strong sense of ownership because we engaged them months before the Kickstarter launched. Here's how.

1. Ask for (and listen to) your friends' advice. We asked for feedback on everything from our name to product design to pricing.
2. Offer them "sneak peaks" that no one else gets. We showed our friends product renderings, pictures, and our Kickstarter video long before we released them to the public.
3. Throw a launch party. Having a large group of people in one room, all excited about your project, creates a united energy you can't create through emails, phone calls, or one-on-one meetings. Invite over 50 motivated and influential friends, show them your Kickstarter video and make a speech telling them why you need their help and exactly what you need them to do. The people who attended our launch party ended up being our first backers and our most passionate evangelists.

## Segmenting friends to ensure appropriate messaging

I went through the tedious process of making segmented email lists for my personal network. Since this involved making decisions based on my personal relationships, it was impossible to outsource. It was annoying, but worth it. I exported all of my Gmail contacts, about 7,200 total, into an Excel spreadsheet. Then, I deleted 6,000 contacts I did not have a meaningful relationship with. The remaining 1,200 contacts were divided into three groups: influencers, in-the-know friends, and acquaintances.

1. I identified my influencers using Klout, which measures online influence. Go to http://www.klout.com, connect with Facebook, select "friends" from the drop down menu in the upper right hand corner of the screen, then click on the "top klout score" tab half-way down the page on the right. This will show all of your Facebook friends, ranked by Klout score. Anyone with a Klout above 60 was put on my influencer list. Our goal for this group was for everyone to share Soma on Facebook and Twitter, right when we launched, to create the surround sound effect.
2. My in-the-know friends were already aware of Soma. They knew about the Kickstarter campaign, and that we wanted them to back our project and spread the word. The people in this group, regardless of their Klout score or financial resources, were ready to hustle for us.
3. Acquaintances were people I hadn't spoken with in a while. They needed to be told what Soma is and why it's important. This group was by far the largest, comprising at least 1,000 of the 1,200 people on my master list.

Each of these three groups received a different email when we launched, which you can see here. The acquaintances received a mass email sent via MailChimp. The influencers and in-the-know friends each received a personalized email, everyone was slightly different.

Personalized emails require much more time than one mass email, but we put in the extra hours to honor our friends and reinforce that they're part of the team. One tool proved to be a huge time saver. TextExpander allows you to paste any saved message – whether it's a phone number or a 2-page email – into any document or text field, simply by typing an abbreviation. For example, when I type "ppush", a basic form of the email above appears with fields for me to fill in the name, in this case "Joe". It's a must have app that probably saved us 1-2 hours a day in typing.

One tool that we did not use, but should have, is Boomerang, a Gmail plug-in that allows you to schedule emails. We crafted emails to our influencers and in-the-know friends the day of our launch, using TextExpander, then slightly customized each one. What we should have done is write and save these personalized emails a few days before we launched. That way, we could have scheduled them to be automatically sent by Boomerang the second we launched. This would have freed up many valuable hours on launch day.

## Step 7: Use landing pages to spark sharing

**Support Soma with 3 Clicks**

Hola, rockstar!

We hope you're having an awesome day. You're here because we know you have influence. When you share something, people pay attention. So, please take a few seconds to spread the Soma love.

**Thanks so much,**
Mike, Zach and the entire Soma Team

33%

**1. Share on Facebook**
Share Soma with your friends
👤 Share

**2. Post on Twitter**
Hook your following up
🐦 Tweet

**3. Watch our Video**
Thank you in advance for backing Soma
▶ Play

You'll notice in our email templates that we often send people to landing pages we built for our Kickstarter launch (rather than to our Kickstarter page directly). We realized that most Kickstarter creators do one of two things:
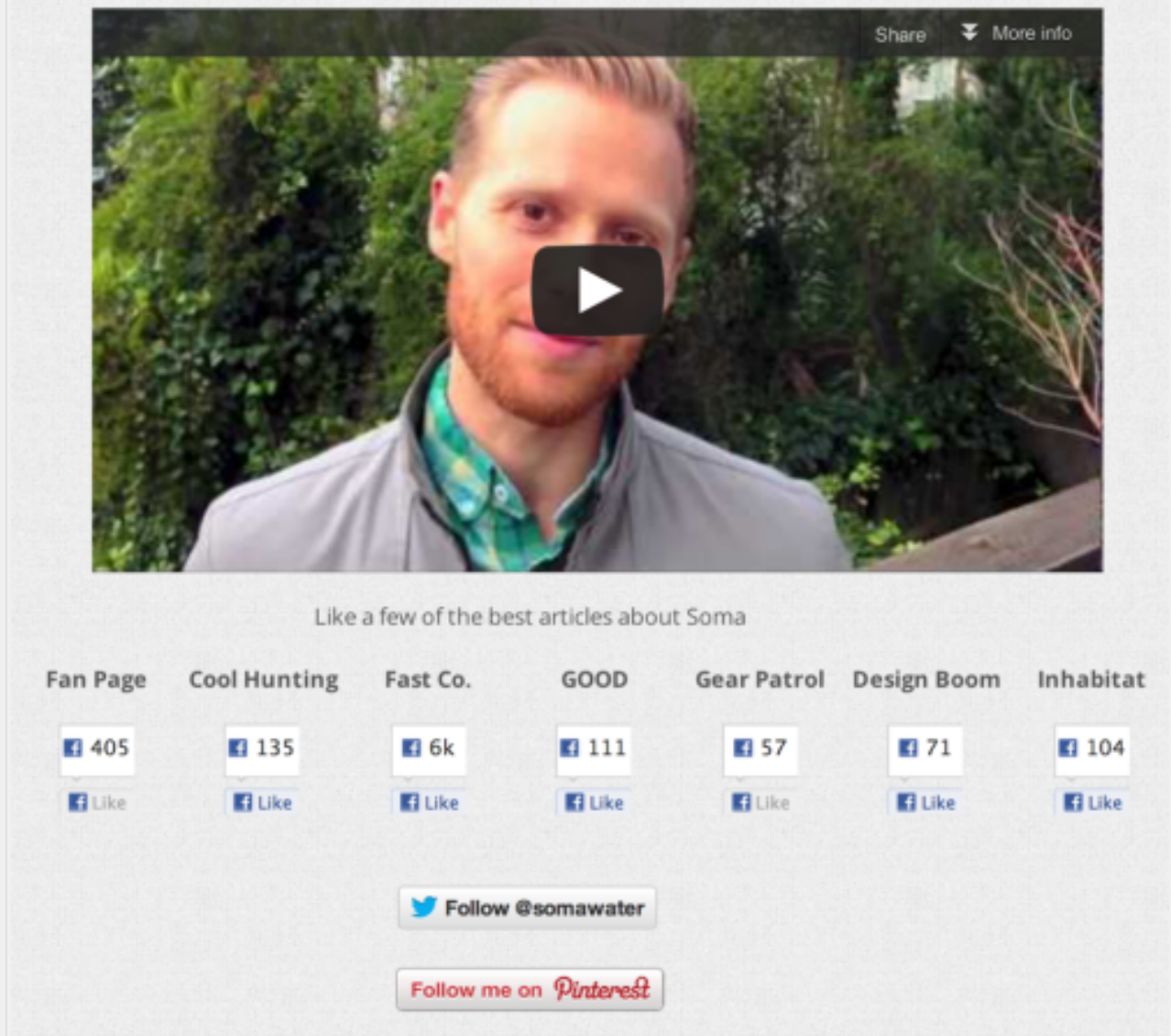
1. They ask for too many things ("Back us! Tweet! Like us on Facebook! Email friends!), which often results in people doing nothing at all.
2. They ask for just one thing, which people do, but miss out on other actions their friends might do if asked the right way.

We wanted to have our cake and eat it, too. So we asked our friends to click just one link, which of course, had 3 ways to help! Then, when they returned to their email, we had a subsequent ask, which was to forward the email to others.

Why it worked: Essentially we were asking them to do just one thing at a time, typically just to click something.

Throughout the campaign we built two more landing pages. Each were meant to maximize sharing on social media, primarily Facebook. We included videos so our friends were incentivized to visit the landing page and got value. These videos were recorded on an iPhone. They were free to make and only took about an hour to shoot, edit, and upload. Highly recommended.

**We're halfway there!**

Share ⬇ More info

Like a few of the best articles about Soma

| Fan Page | Cool Hunting | Fast Co. | GOOD | Gear Patrol | Design Boom | Inhabitat |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 405 | 135 | 6k | 111 | 57 | 71 | 104 |
| Like | Like | Like | Like | Like | Like | Like |

Follow @somawater

Follow me on *Pinterest*

The emails and landing pages were sent out on days 1, 2 and 9, usually at 8am. We've left them up so you can check them out: Day 1, Day 2, Day 9. You can see the emails and Kickstarter updates here.

These landing pages were critical when it came to creating the surround sound effect. We know because every time we launched one, we got flooded with texts and emails saying, "Dude! I'm seeing you guys everywhere. Congrats!" When you get a lot of people sharing the same link on Facebook, it's displayed to more people, who share it with even more people, and you get this virtuous viral burst that keeps growing.

You can make your own custom landing pages by using our opensource code.

## Final thoughts

If you look at our advice, it essentially boils down to empowering people and making it easy for them to contribute to a worthy cause. Always try to empathize with other people. And take the time to say, "Thank you." It goes a long way.

The best story we heard about using Kickstarter to derisk a business was by the founders of Hidden Radio, which raised $938,000 on Kickstarter. Inspired by *The 4-Hour Workweek*, they wanted to test out ideas as much as possible. So before building a prototype, they submitted product renderings to a few design blogs. The response was positive, but they didn't rush into manufacturing. Instead, they tested their idea again as a Kickstarter project, knowing it forces people to put their money where their mouth is. 5,300 people backed their project, which provided proof of concept, capital, and a big group of customers willing to provide free market research. To us, this is a great example of hacking Kickstarter. It's about a mindset, not just tricks and technology.

Although we stopped marketing our Kickstarter on day 9 of the campaign, our page is still up and you can reserve a Soma until January 11, 2013. If you're fast, you may also get a private, 7-course dinner with Tim Ferriss, which is the last reward listed on our Kickstarter page.

## Tools

Zirtual – US-based virtual assistants. ($399 and up)

TextExpander – Paste frequently used text and pictures into documents, emails, and text fields by simply typing an abbreviation. ($34.95)

Boomerang – A Gmail plug in that allows you to schedule emails. You can also receive reminders to follow up on an email you sent if the other person does not reply. (Free)

MailChimp – A service to design and send mass emails. (Free if you have less than 2,000 subscribers and send less than 12,000 emails per month)

The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing – This book provides critical insights on how best to position your product amongst the competition. ($11)

Brainfluence: 100 Ways to Persuade and Convince Consumers with Neuromarketing – A must read for anyone doing any form of marketing. The sections on pricing and copywriting will be incredibly helpful as you craft your emails, video script, and Kickstarter page. ($17)

Custom Kickstarter dashboard – We built this Chrome extension to manage our Kickstarter campaign. You can see your Kickstarter, Facebook and bit.ly metrics, as well as tweets and press. All updated in real time. You can even see Klout scores of people tweeting about you and reply right from the dashboard. (Free)
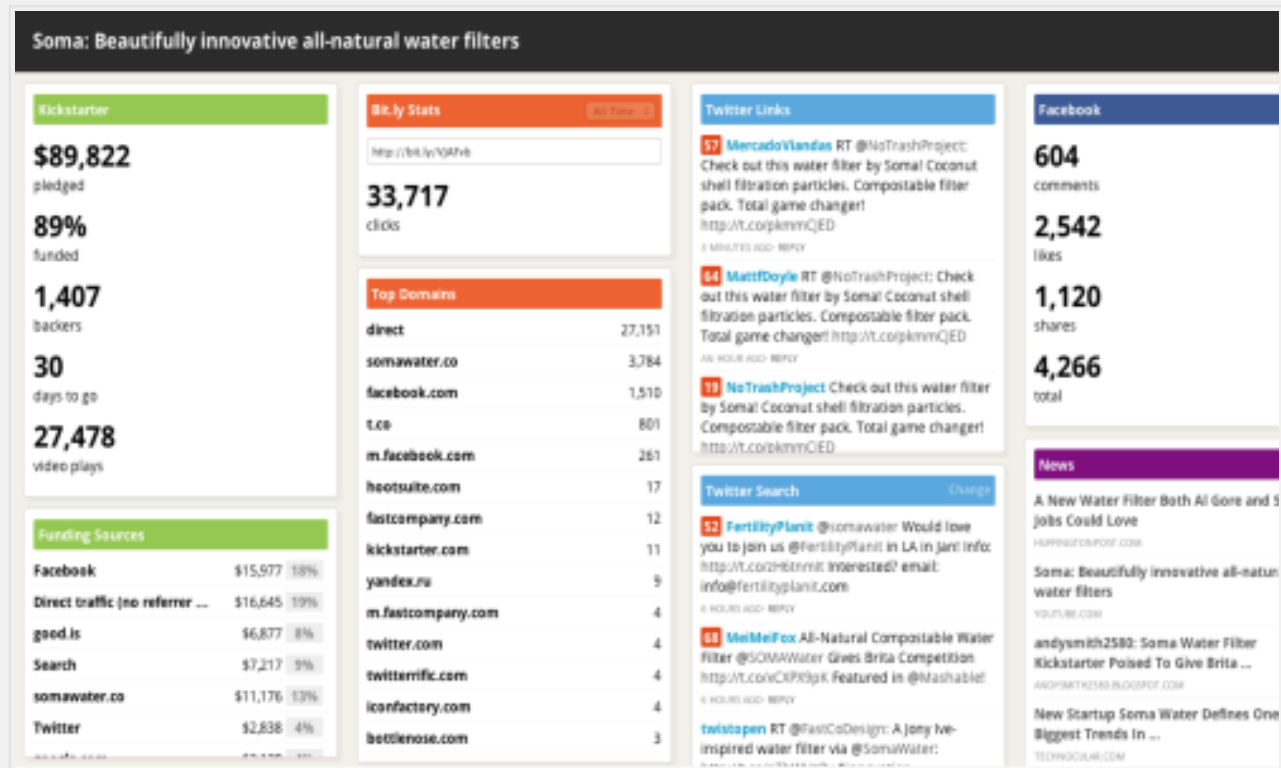
*Posted on: December 18, 2012.*

Watch The Tim Ferriss Experiment, the new #1-rated TV show with "the world's best human guinea pig" (Newsweek), Tim Ferriss. It's Mythbusters meets Jackass. Shot and edited by the Emmy-award winning team behind Anthony Bourdain's No Reservations and Parts Unknown. Here's the trailer.

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