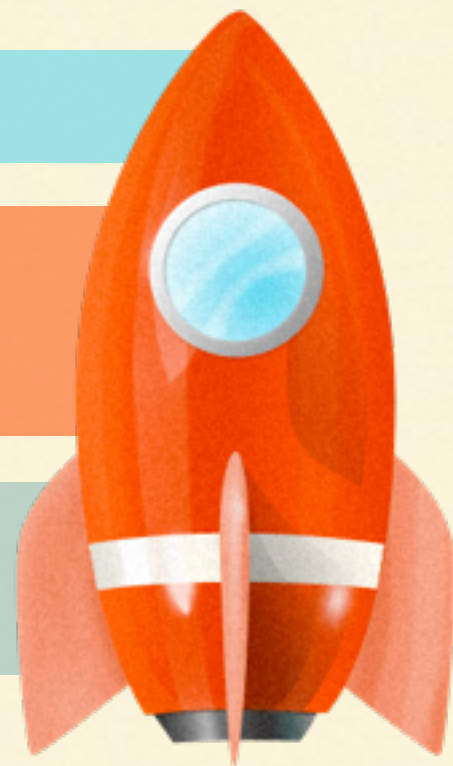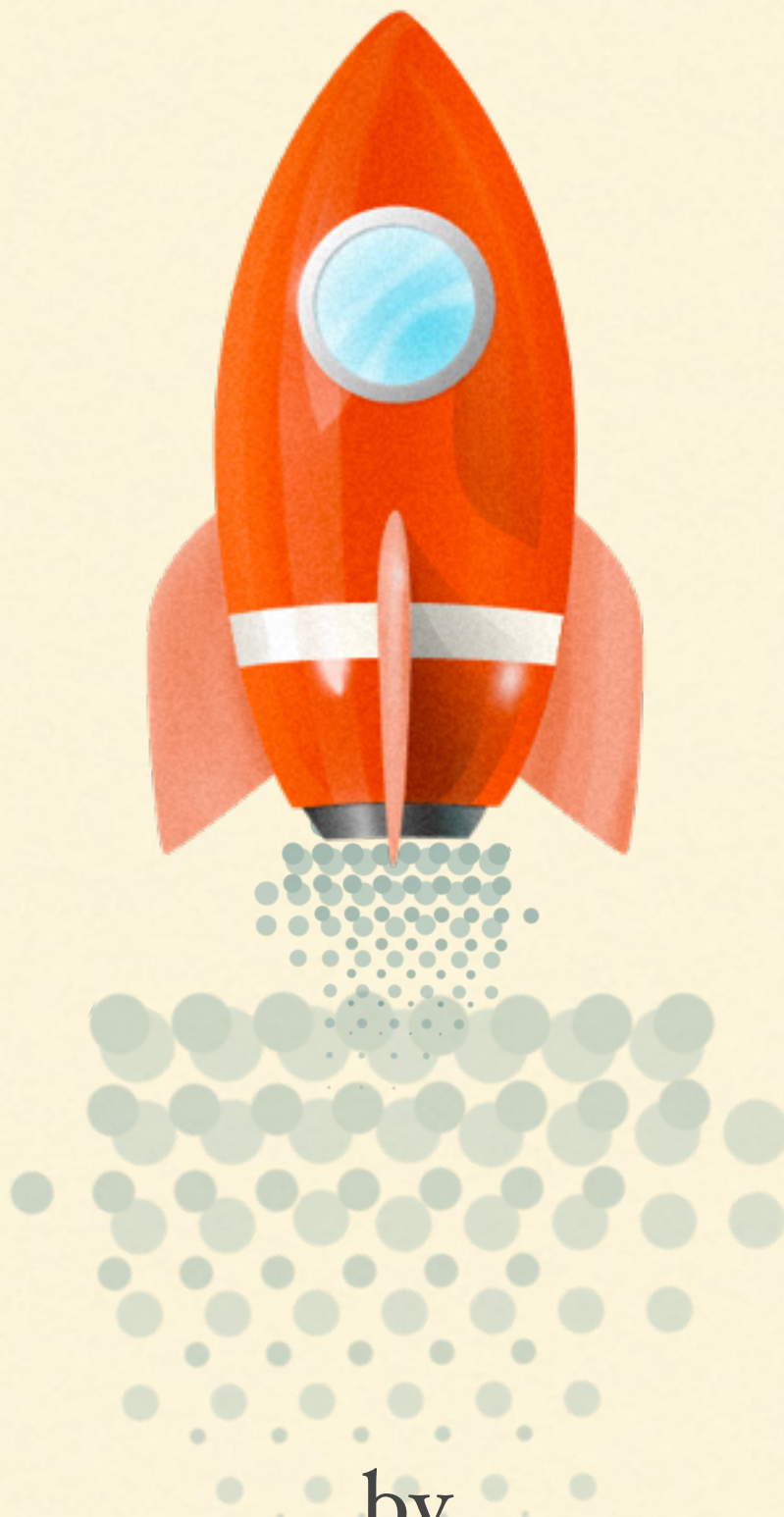# Build Your Audience

by

Justin Jackson

1

Before You Start

Before you start building your audience, you need to decide why you're doing it.

I'd been trying to build my audience for years; but wasn't able to get my list past 100. What was my problem? **I hadn't identified why I was doing it**. The result was an aimless newsletter and blog, with haphazard topics, and a small group of subscribers with no common ground. It wasn't until I defined where I wanted to end up that I was able to finally get my breakthrough.

Why do you want to build an audience?

Your first step is to identify what you want to achieve. Answer the question: "Why am I doing this?"

Here are some common reasons people build an audience:

• They want to sell their own products, and gain financial independence

- They want to increase their profile within their industry (analysts in particular have this aim)

- They own a business and want to communicate with past clients and encourage repeat sales

- They own a business and want to get strong leads for future sales

This is the only part of the process that should be about you.

Don't be afraid to explicitly state what you want to achieve. Be brutally honest: building an audience is just a smaller step towards something bigger you're working towards. Identifying your "ultimate outcome" will help you evaluate your progress, and also provide a boost when you're feeling down.

Your homework

Today's homework is simple: write down the objective you want to achieve.

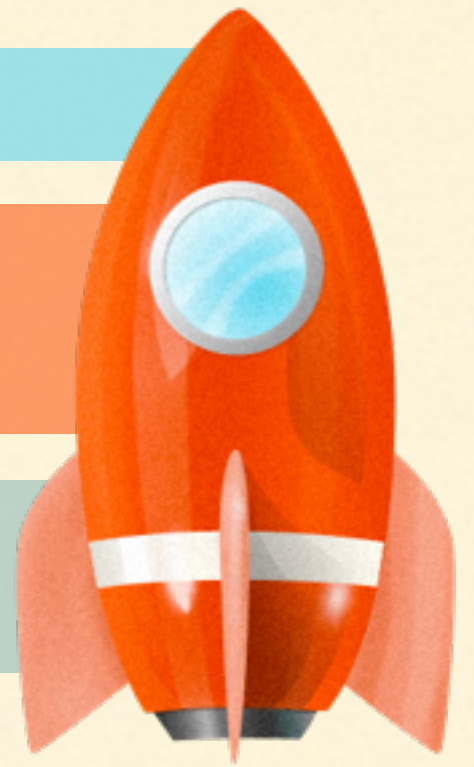My name is _____ *(your name)* _____ .

I want an _____ *email list* _____

so that I can _____ *(sell my own products)* _____

and eventually _____ *(earn a side income)* _____ .

[You can download a printable PDF of this homework here](#).

In the next chapter, we're going to move on to the second big question you need to answer before you start building your list.

2

Who is Your Audience?

In 2012, I asked a mentor to critique my blog:

"Justin, your blog is unfocused. You're talking about everything! As a reader I don't care about you; I only care about my problems. Who is your blog for? Who does it help?"

Ouch.

But you know what? She was right. Go back and look at my old posts on justinjackson.ca. I talk about AppleTV, photography, and even toilets (yes, toilets). It wasn't until I started focusing on product entrepreneurs that my blog started to get traction.

Before you build an audience, you need to answer two important questions:

1. Who is this for?

2. What do they really need?

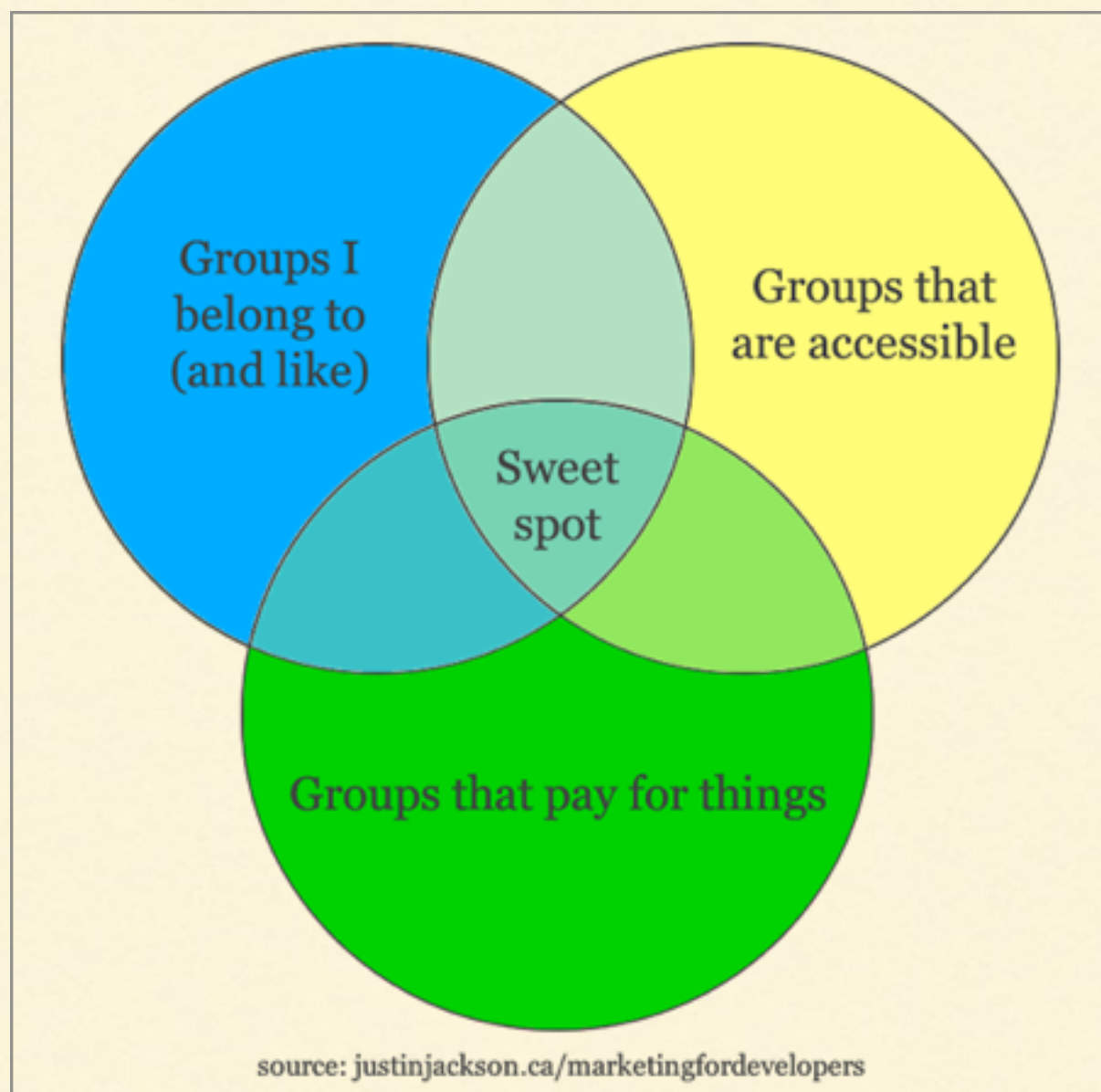# People don't care about your problems, your dreams, or your outcomes.

They're focused on their own issues. The key to a successful email list is choosing an audience you can speak to, and then finding their pain.

How do you choose an audience?

If you're hoping to create a business, your audience should have three characteristics:

1. It should be a group you belong to (and like)

2. It should be a group that's reachable / accessible (for marketing)

3. It should be a group that pays for things

You can find this group, by filling out a venn diagram that looks like this:

Groups I belong to (and like)

Groups that are accessible

Sweet spot

Groups that pay for things

source: justinjackson.ca/marketingfordevelopers

Here's an example of a good target group:

"I'm an executive who travels a lot, so I'm going to target business people who are new to international travel."

This group has money to spend (if you launch a product) and has a pain point you can help with.

Here are a few examples of bad target groups:

"I'm a college student, so I'm going to target college students who want to learn about investing in stocks."

I'm surprised by the number of people I meet who want to launch lists and products for college students. If you're looking for an audience to sell products to, college students are generally a bad market, because they don't have very much disposable income.

"I'm a programmer, and I'd like to target real estate agents."

Again, the number of people I meet who want to target real estate agents is surprising. Here's the problem with this scenario: you're a programmer. What do you have to say to real estate agents? Who are you going to more passionate about serving; other developers, or a bunch of salespeople? Which group can you provide value for right now?

Amy Hoy has a great quote on why all of this is important:

"If you start doing something that's even remotely out of your zone, you're discarding all the advantages you have. You have to use every single advantage you have, every single one. You have to be able to 'punch above your weight'. If you have a really powerful punch, you can punch above your weight. You can knock out somebody bigger than you."

Here's what I want you to do: write a list of the different groups that you belong to. Here's mine:

• Product Managers

• Product bootstrappers

• Small business owners

- People interested in startups

- Content marketers

- Business managers

- Web designers & developers

- Podcasters

- Bloggers

- Snowboarders

- Cyclists

That's a long list! To trim it down, I asked these questions:

1. **In which of these groups do I have an unnatural advantage?** For me, I decided to target product bootstrappers. I have an unnatural advantage in that I ran a podcast (called Product People), have an audience there, connections, and a lot of insight from people that would like to build and launch their own thing. I've also been working for a bootstrapped startup for the last 5 years. I understand the challenges and needs of this group!

2. **Which of these groups am I currently most excited about?** Passion and excitement are like a magnet: when people sense your excitement about a topic, they're more likely to listen.

3. **If your goal is to eventually sell a product: which of these groups has money to spend?** When I chose my audience, I realized that there would be individuals willing to spend money on their product business (it's a business expense) as well as the possibility to sell to teams who are bootstrapping.

Here's your homework:

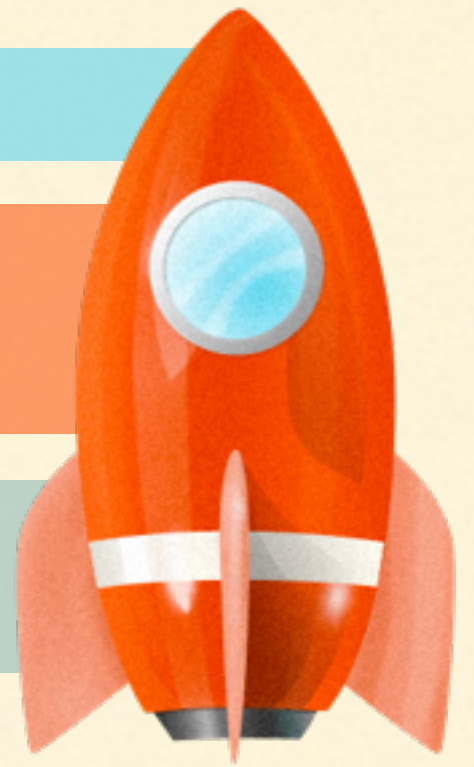My name is _____ (name) _____.

The audience I'm choosing is

_____ (web designers) _____

who are _____ (just starting out) _____,

because

_____ (I remember what it's like) _____.

You can download a printable PDF of the homework here.

3

Research

People have pain: they have problems in their lives that they need help with. A plumber is a classic example: most people don't want to deal with pipes, drains, and leaky toilets - they're happy to call someone.

Derek Sivers tells a great story about trying to make it in the music business. He hustled for years as a musician, but his career never really took off. Then he created CD Baby, a site that allowed artists to sell their music. This was before PayPal existed, and setting up a shopping cart was difficult. The company he'd accidentally created in a weekend, took off and became a great success.

"I'd finally created something people wanted. It was like I'd written a hit song. Once you have a hit, all the locked doors open wide. People love it so much, it seems to promote itself. Don't persistently do what's not working."

Finding a hit means starting with your audience (we covered this yesterday), and figuring out what they need.

Don't start with an idea - start by listening to people.

This is difficult! It's hard for two reasons:

1. We're inherently self-focused, and don't think about the needs of others

2. A lot of legitimate problems have boring solutions, or solutions that require hard work (this is another reason it's important to be passionate about the *people* you're serving, because the *solution* you provide might not be exciting).

You want to start with "People need me to…" not "I want to…".

Finding pain

To find pain you need to train yourself to listen and recognize patterns.

A lot of my audience is comprised of people in technology. I started noticing a number of tweets that looked like this:

"I think I'm just going to turn off email… for ever… and then finally get back to work :-) #productivity."

"I need less email in my life."

"It's estimated that the avg employee checks email 36 times a day - efficiency killer."

"I wish @mailchimp had a way to instantly remove me from every single mailing list in their system. I literally want ZERO newsletters."

"So many newsletters to unsubscribe to."

Email overload isn't anything new, but this is still a good example of observing a pattern. There's enough signal here that we could say: "there's a number of people with this problem."

Notice that these people don't know what they need; they're just voicing a frustration. That's what you're looking for a pain. In these threads we also start to get an indication of people's willingness to pay for a solution:

"I would pay a premium for a block list for a mailing service. That's a good idea."

You want to collect and organize these notes in a way that's easy to edit and sort. Some people prefer a simple text file on their desktop (like this one). I actually use a private Wordpress install: whenever I find a pain point online, I use the Wordpress bookmarklet to save it to my site (and I use tags to track different pain points). Others use bookmarking tools like Delicious, Icebergs or services like Evernote. The important part is that you develop a habit of recognizing and recording patterns.

If you're looking to build a product for your audience, you'll want to heed Brennan Dunn's advice:

"Listen to what people, who have a financial interest, are complaining about!"

Another way to find pain: start helping right away

If you're out in the world and your recognize opportunities where you can help people, start helping them right away.

This is how Brennan Dunn built his business, Planscope. His trick was to "find a community, and just keep adding value." For him, this meant hanging out on internet forums, like Reddit, and listening to the pain that consultants had.

He was an experienced consultant himself, and he was able to offer insight to freelancers who were just starting out. As you respond to pain with with aid, you'll get a picture of how many people have the pain, and perhaps, a more efficient way to solve it.

Another way to find pain: think of one person in your audience who needs help

Here's a simple way to test business ideas: do you know someone right now who would pay money for this? Can't name anyone? Move on.

Sometimes thinking about a big, anonymous group isn't helpful. For example: if you're thinking about "software developers" in general it's hard to envision, or notice, what they might need help with.

But can you think of *one* person who needs help? Maybe you meet "Scott" at a software developer's meetup and he's having trouble with version control in Git. You talk through the process with him and are able to help him out. Maybe there's other Rails programmers with the same problem.

You could confirm this by asking more people on Twitter, in newsgroups, on mailing lists, on forums, or in real life.

Justin Jackson
@mijustin

Anyone out there want to build their email list to 1,000 subscribers?

I'm thinking about doing a blog series on that topic. Helpful?
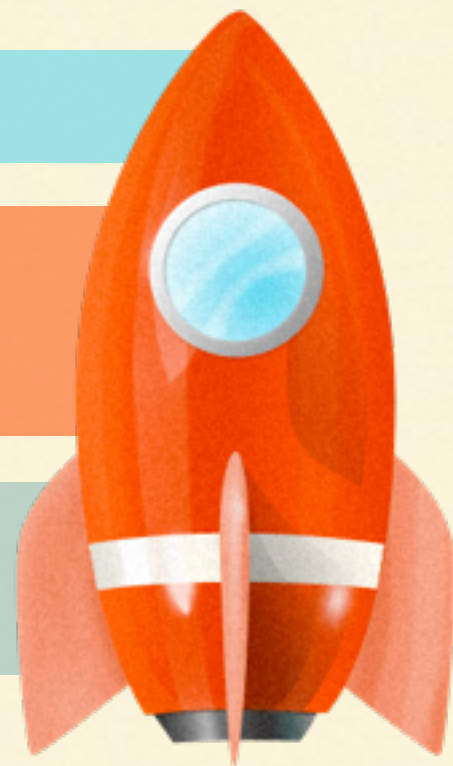
6:54 AM - 11 Nov 13

How does this relate to my audience?

You grow an audience by targeting people's pain.

This is important, because once you've identified the pain, you can build a great landing page that convinces people to sign-up for your list. The pain point becomes your headline for that sign-up page.

Your homework

Start looking for pain! Start noticing what types of things people in your audience need help with. Write these down. Find a pattern. Develop a hypothesis. Test it out!

4

Help Them

You know your audience. You understand their pain. Now it's time to help them.

Here are 3 things you need to do:

1. Show them you have a solution

2. Convince them to sign-up for your solution

3. Provide them with the solution

Email is the channel you're going to use to help your audience (#3). The sign-up form is how you show them you have a solution (#1) and convince them to sign-up for it (#2).

Where to start

The best way to start is to build a dedicated landing page for your email list. This is helpful because:

1. Building a landing page helps you to properly frame who your audience is, their need, and your solution.

2. A properly framed landing page converts really well.

"Things switched for me when I started looking at my email newsletter as a product. There are a lot of people that have a box on their site. Why are people going to subscribe? You have to give them something." - Brennan Dunn

Here are the ingredients of a good landing page:

Headline: "You are this type of person, with this type of problem"

Sub-headline: "Here is the solution"

Call to action: "Sign-up here!"

Reward: What do you get for signing up?

Some good examples:

Hack Design - **hackdesign.org**

• Headline: "An easy to follow design course for people who do amazing things."

• Sub-headline: "Receive a design lesson in your inbox each week, hand crafted by a design pro."

• Call to action: "Get started"

• Reward: Free email course

Freckle - **letsfreckle.com**

• Headline: Quote - "Our biggest issue was people forgot to track their time…"

• Sub-headline: "Your business runs on time. It's the fuel your team uses to start, create, finish projects for yourselves and your clients. You've got to make sure every minute counts… and can be counted."

• Call to action: "Start your free 30 day trial"

• Reward: Free trial

Patio11 - **training.kalzumeus.com**

• Headline: "Sell more software with actionable techniques that actually work"

- Sub-headline: "Give me (Patrick McKenzie -- patio11) your email and get the rest of it, totally free. (This advice has lead to 20%-100% increases in sales at 3 companies, and normally I charge five figures for it.)"

- Call to action: "Get the full video and advice from Patio11"

- Reward: Free video

Don't start with code, start with words

Don't worry about what your landing page will look like; start with the words.

Here's your homework: open up a plain text document, and follow these steps.

1. At the very top, write a headline that encapsulates the pain you're focusing on, and the audience you're targeting (You can also do this in the sub-header).

2. In the sub-header, and the following paragraphs if you wish, talk about the solution you're offering.

3. Put a call to action at the bottom. This will be your email sign-up form and button.

4. In the call to action, include the benefit or reward the subscriber will get for signing up.

"The language that you use makes a big difference. You need to do a good job of stating the benefit that they'll receive from this, not just the action you want them to take." - James Clear

This the process that Robert Williams and I worked through on his landing page for [Workshop](#).

> 💼 Workshop
>
> ## "My freelance business is prone to dry spells."
>
> Failing to keep up with lead-generation is a vicious cycle that wakes most freelancers up at night, and attracts constant droughts to their business.
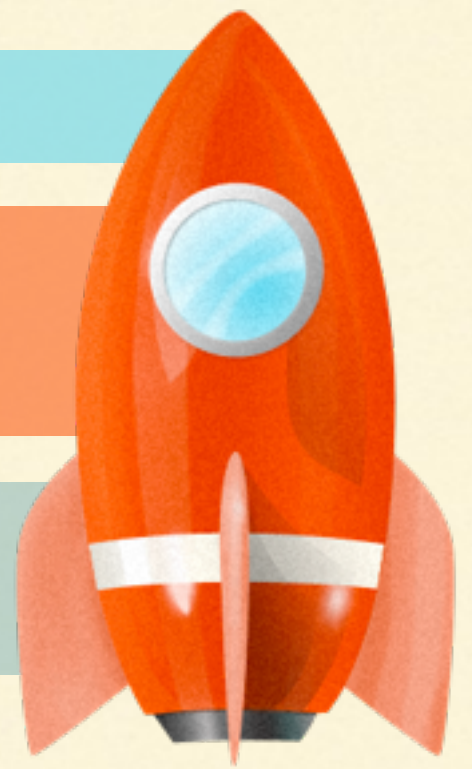
5

Attracting Subscribers with Content

Ok, let's talk about how to attract more subscribers.

By now, you should have created a landing page for email signups. **It's a page designed to target a specific person, with a certain pain, and offer them a reward for signing up.**

To get people to sign-up, you'll need to drive traffic to that page.

The best way to do that is write good stuff, targeted to your audience:

• on your own blog

• other people's blogs

• open networks like Quora, Medium, and Reddit.

If, in the past, you've struggled with writing posts that get a lot of traffic, I'd highly recommend you check out my Amplification course. But here are a few pointers:

Target pain

I hate to sound like a broken record, but this is crucial. People won't care about something you wrote just because it's on the internet. People will only care if they get something out of it. What benefit do they receive from reading your article?

It's time to go back and look at that research you did on your audience. What do they need? Target your audience's needs and they'll pay attention.

"Always be researching your niche; never stop. I look wherever people congregate: forums, mailing lists, blog posts, off-hand comments from people on Twitter, support portals, user groups." - Amy Hoy

Let me give you an example: last summer I kept hearing people talk about how difficult it was to focus while at their desk. I also saw the trend in my own life. I had a hard time thinking through difficult problems while at the office. I found most of my breakthroughs occurred in the shower, at the coffee shop, or on my walk home. One day, while discussing this with a coworker I blurted out:

"Nobody does their best thinking sitting at their desk. A desk is for executing; people should do their thinking elsewhere."

My friend took a step back, and then said: "that's so true; I've never thought about that before."

Later that week I tweeted the same phrase and a bunch of people started re-tweeting it. I realized I'd hit on something. This led to one of my most popular blog posts, *Things I've Quit Doing at My Desk*.

Write to one person

Nathan Barry recently shared this piece of advice with me:

To write good content that people care about, write to one person. A specific person. My book Designing Web Applications was written to my brother-in-law, Philip. I wrote what I knew would help him.

Writing to a specific person helps keep your writing style natural and authentic, rather than too casual or condescending.

If your writing is truly valuable to that one person, your ideas will be valuable to many.

This is a great way to get started. Think about one person in your audience: maybe it's someone you just had an interaction with on Twitter, or via email. What kind of questions were they asking? Where could they use some help? Pick that person, and start writing an email as if it were just for them.

Use Amplification techniques

In my course, Amplification, I explain some specific tactics for tapping into high quality networks to "amplify" your content to bigger audiences. The idea is you need to find people and sites that have bigger audiences than you do, and get your content featured by those people (or those sites).

The footer

So you've written some good content that targets a specific pain for you audience. You've also amplified it to bigger audiences. Now (hopefully) you're getting traffic that converts to email signups.

Here's the rule: everything you post should have a link to your email landing page, or should have an embedded sign-up form in the footer.

Here's two examples from my site:

• justinjackson.ca/jfdi.html

• justinjackson.ca/email-audience

Be careful about just sticking a sign-up form in the sidebar of your site:

"If you just have a box in your sidebar, you're asking your audience to make the connection between your content and subscribing." - Corbett Barr

However, I've had some success with a scroll-triggered pop-up form. If you're on Wordpress, this plugin is a good way to implement that.

Your homework

Write your first post. Yes, I mean it. Close all your windows and distractions, find a place where you can focus. Pick a topic that matters to your audience, and aim to write 500 words. If you feel like writing more, keep going. Read it over (out loud). Then publish it. Remember to put a link to your sign-up page!

Doing your audience research
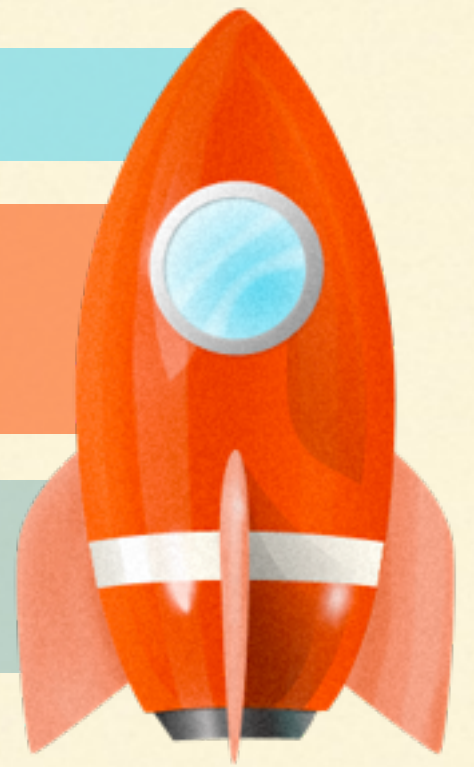
Case Study

"Things really switched for me when I started looking at my email newsletter as a product. There are a lot of people that have a box on their site. Why are people going to subscribe? You have to give them something." - Brennan Dunn

I know that getting your first customers (or mailing list sign-ups) can be tough. To help you, let's walk through a case study of *how to do the research*.

Let's say you started with a question:

"I wonder if there are people that want to learn how to program in C#?"

The first step would be to see who's interested in this, and what their pain is. Most people building a list will only go one level deep: "the pain is they want to learn C#." But that's too general. For example: there'd be a big difference between the needs of a 70 year-old retiree who wants to

learn to program, and a college student who's been using computers since he was 5.

So you need to force yourself to really dig and identify a specific group you're going to focus on, and you need to target a specific pain.

Let's start on Reddit.

Why Reddit? Reddit is home to many well-formed communities (called subreddits) and is easily searchable.

I started with a search query: "want to learn C#"
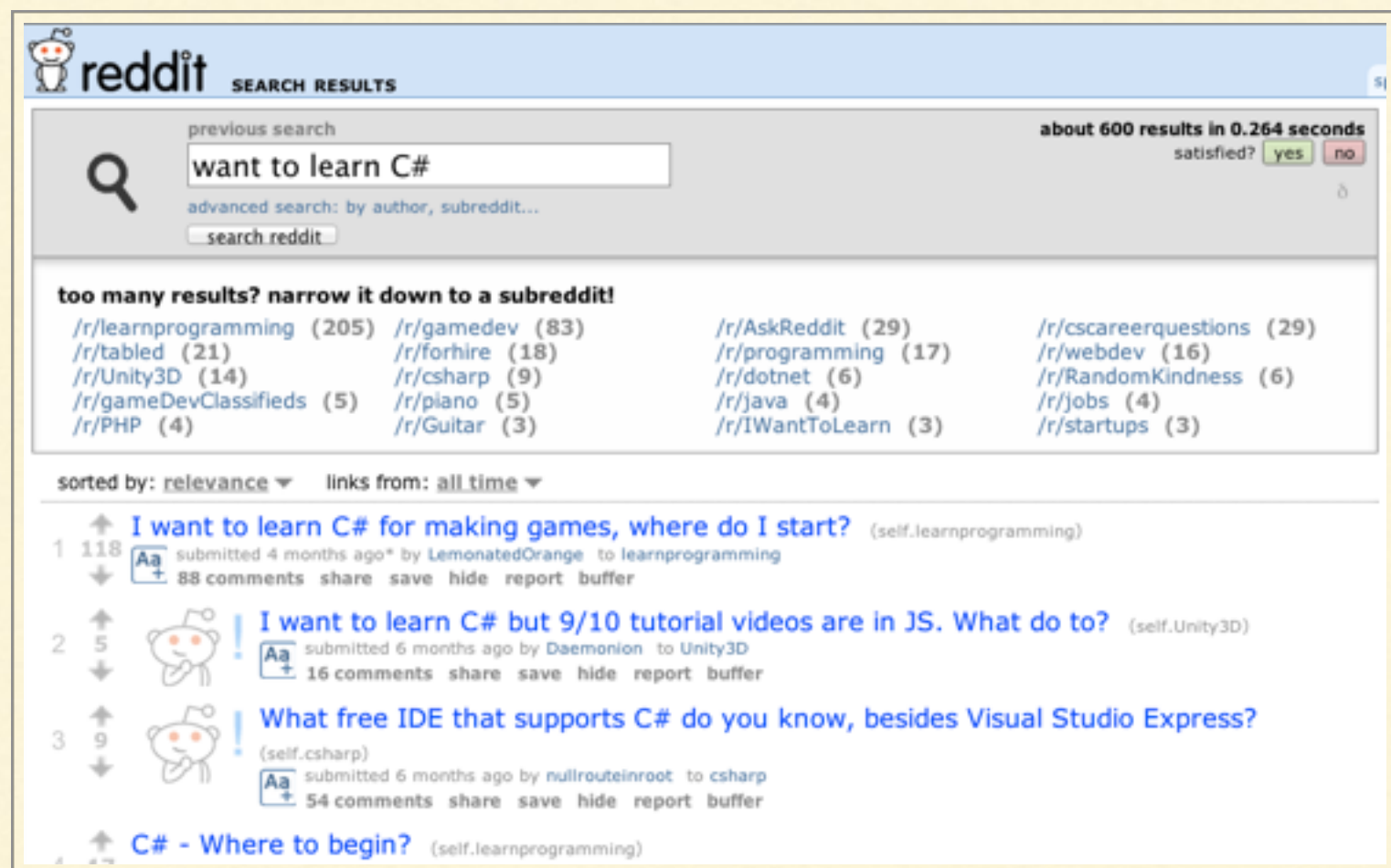
Already we can see some interesting information. First: we can see which communities on Reddit are asking this question most frequently. There's a subreddit called /learnprogramming and another called /gamedev. We also see that the top search result was "I want to learn C# for making games, where do I start?"

Continued research confirms the trend: there's a number of folks interested in learning C# to build simple games.

When I dig a bit more in each thread, a more detailed picture of the audience starts to emerge:

- These are people that know the basics of programming.

- They often have previous programming experience. Multiple threads mention Python.

- They're having a hard time finding tutorials online.

- They really don't like a lot of the existing reference books or Microsoft resources.

- There's also a group of people looking to learn C# with Unity3D.

Based on this information, *I'm going target novice programmers who want to learn C# by building a basic game*. Their biggest pain is finding well organized tutorials.

This looks like a perfect opportunity for an email course. Offering a free course (or PDF download) is a good way to test out demand. The time involved in creating the content is relatively low (when compared to building a full product) and it offers the people who sign-up something of value right away.

Here's what my landing page could look like:

> ## Want to learn the basics of C# game development but can't find good tutorials?
>
> Learn C# by making a simple RPG with 7 easy tutorials delivered straight to your inbox. You'll learn to build a game in one week!
>
> **Subscribe to get your 7 free C# game dev tutorials.**

I have an audience, a pain point, and a landing page. Now it's time to promote the landing page and test the response to what I'm offering.

The great thing about doing your research first is you'll have a starting place to promote your new resource. To start, I can reply to these Reddit threads, and tell them about my course:

"I run a 7 day email course that teaches the basics of C# development. By the end of the week you'll know how to build a simple RPG: <link here>"

I wouldn't stop there: next I'd reach out to influential folks in the C# and C# game dev communities and ask if they'd share my course with their audience. I'd also look for other threads on Quora, Hacker News, and Stack Overflow where I could promote the landing page.

The whole idea with this phase is to create a feedback loop:

1) Start with a hypothesis: "There are people that would like to learn C#".

2) Collect data by observing what people need (this is especially effective in online forums; you can observe what questions people are already asking).

3) Prune the data by revealing the most relevant results. At this stage we go through all of our observations (data) and look for patterns. We get rid of the outliers, and look for the relevant bits of data that come up over and over again. The question we're trying to answer here is: "What is a big pain that this group needs solved?" "Where are they getting stuck?"

4) Focus on the most relevant problem, and determine how to solve it.

5) Repeat the process by testing out our new hypothesis: "People will pay for basic game tutorials so that they can learn how to program in C#".

The benefit of employing this process, is that each time we go through this feedback loop we get a stronger and stronger signal of what people actually want.

Once we have a strong signal, we can start marketing effectively. We can go back to the people we observed and say: "Do you have this problem? What do you think of this solution?"

It's like gathering specs for a software project

When you follow this approach, the marketing becomes easy: all the hard work is done during the research stage. It's like gathering requirements for a software project; the clearer the specs and architecture, the easier it is to sit down and write code.

"Always be researching your niche; never stop. I look wherever people congregate: forums, mailing lists, blog posts, off-hand comments from people on Twitter, support portals, user groups." - Amy Hoy

People don't really care about us. Yes, as individuals we have dreams and aspirations, but our customers are focused on their own issues. The key to successfully building and marketing a product is to choose an audience you can speak to, and then find their pain.

Thanks for reading!

If you have more questions, please email me: words@bizbox.ca

When you purchase a resource from an indie author (like me), you're helping to support a thriving economy of individual makers, builders, and creators. Thank you!

Cheers,
Justin Jackson, [@mijustin](#)