

# Web Design Is Dead

The professional web design sector is being torn apart. Where there used to be solid ground, a huge rift is splitting open, so web designers need to move quickly in order to survive.

What's causing the split is actually our own online publishing technology, which recently evolved to the point that it is making the traditional web designer role redundant.

Since I started designing websites professionally in 1994, "web design" has steadily evolved from a technically challenging, time-consuming, and very costly service into a mature off-the-shelf commodity that anyone can purchase for pennies. The changes have been gradual, but at some point recently they reached a tipping point.

The result is that many familiar methods and roles are going to fall into the abyss. Those of us who have earned a living crafting websites will either evolve fast or we will perish as the market disappears beneath our feet.

The good news is that there will still be plenty of good work for web designers — but it will look quite different to the projects we're used to. Web designers must dramatically change the way we approach our work.

There's no doubt that we are going through a period of massive, and accelerating, disruptive technological innovation. As always in times of massive change, there will be winners and there will be losers. The survivors tend to do very well. (In fact, it is said the Great Depression created more millionaires than any other period in US history, [source](#).)

So who survives? It's very simple. The survivors are always those who...

- **Notice** what's changing
- **Accept** that it's changing
- And make the **necessary changes** to adapt to the new conditions.

That's why I'm writing this book. With "Web Design Is Dead" I'm going to explain **why** the current seismic shift is happening now, and set out your survival plan.

Today, for the first time in twenty years, we're seeing very good web designers suddenly finding their web design work no longer pays the bills.

One of my [inner circle group](#) runs a web marketing agency in New Jersey. He has a friend who is also a talented web designer, has years of experience, a strong track record, and some great clients. But, in recent years, her business seemed to slow down.

She didn't think anything of it, until one day disaster struck. Her husband suddenly learned he had lost his job. The real shock came when they realized that the wife's web design income

was not enough even to cover their mortgage. Sadly, this couple lost their home, and the reason they lost it because the market evolved, but the web designer didn't.

I don't want anything like that to happen to you. That's why I'm going to explain what's really happening in the web design sector, what's causing it, and — most importantly — ***exactly what you should do now*** to ensure you are one of the survivors.

## The Commoditization of Web Design

To understand what's so different now from any other time in the short history of this industry, we need to see how web design has evolved from an **artisan craft service** into a **commodity product**.

To an outside analyst, it should not come as a surprise, because, since the Industrial Revolution, most technology that started as a cottage craft has been systemized and productized.

Take clothes making, for example. Before industrialization, people would prepare and dye fibers, then spin and weave them ready to make clothes for their families. Over time, we invented systems to automate these processes, enabling clothing to be produced far more efficiently. In the Western world today, making clothes by hand is either a **high-end luxury** or a **hobby**.

If we step back far enough, we can see the exact same progression playing out in information technology, including web publishing.

Just twenty or so years ago, if a department needed to create a newsletter, they had to engage a professional print shop. Today, every administrator has the tools in the form of standardized software products.

Until quite recently, photography and video recording required expensive specialist equipment and a skilled operator. Today, everyone carries the technology required not only to capture photos and videos but also to publish them for the whole world to see — in our pockets!

Likewise, even up to just a few years ago, if someone needed to publish information online, they would have to engage a web designer who had the range of specialist technical skills required. Today, anyone can publish practically any content, write articles, communicate with friends and family and followers worldwide, participate in groups, create graphics, and even sell products or services.

Today, anyone can make a web page...

A good one...

In minutes...

At practically no cost.

And with almost zero technical skills.

Let's be clear. Until quite recently, making websites **was** a skilled, manual craft. If you wanted to make a website you either needed to master a range of complex skills, or hire someone who had those skills.

But that is not the case anymore. Today, online publishing processes have become standardized and have evolved from the service level into **product**.

From the earliest platforms like MySpace that enabled the general public to create new content online, publishing content online has grown into a regular activity for many people in the West. Today, folk across most generations are comfortable using the ever-expanding range of blogging and microblogging platforms such as WordPress, Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter.

As the market for hand-building services dries up, this means that familiar role of all-round web designer (or “webmaster”) is also going to disappear.

Of course, this is not the first time we have seen whole industries completely swept away by new technology.



Image from Wikipedia

A few hundred years ago in Europe, the only people who made books were highly educated monks. Their illustrated manuscripts were among the most beautiful examples of devotional

art ever made. These early books were carefully and slowly crafted by hand, which meant they were very expensive, and that meant that book production was out of reach for the vast majority of the population.

That all changed swiftly with the arrival of the movable type printing press, credited to Gutenberg. Instead of being a laborious manual process, pages could now be printed quickly in batches. (The new technology had an incredible impact, not least in enabling Luther to publish a translation of the Bible in German, which was key to the Protestant Reformation.)

We are experiencing a revolution of much the same magnitude today, and we must be ready. Just as with the monks and their beautiful illuminated manuscripts, the dominance of the all-round artisan web designer is coming to an end.

I'll show you why web design, as we've known it, is dead. There will be no question about that.

The questions we **should** be asking are...

- What's coming next?
- And what should web professionals do **today** to plan for a profitable future?

I have to say now, we shouldn't grieve over the death of web design, but celebrate it. This is progress, and we'll only be victims if we refuse to evolve. If we're smart we can all move on to something that's both easier and more profitable — for clients and for web professionals too.

In retrospect, the twenty-year history of web design has been dominated by ignorance, confusion, and waste.

Let me walk you through how we've come to this point.

## **1990s: Age of the Dancing Bear**

In 1994, I was studying on a mixed communications and media course at university. When this new web technology appeared, young geeks like me jumped on it. It was a great technical and creative challenge. We felt like we were the magicians, holding the keys to a magical new world.

The skills were not easy to learn. It took brains, time, and dedication to get to grips with HTML and the technical processes of publishing pages online (with setting up hosting and transferring files with early FTP clients). The young punks who had the time and energy to master these new skills quickly soon found we held the keys to a new world.

But, of course, we didn't really have a clue what we were doing! And because we didn't have any actual marketing education, we really were ignorant about what customers actually

needed. Of course that didn't stop us from quickly turning professional. (Personally, I initially specialized in creating rotating 3D logos, which looked very cool at the time.)

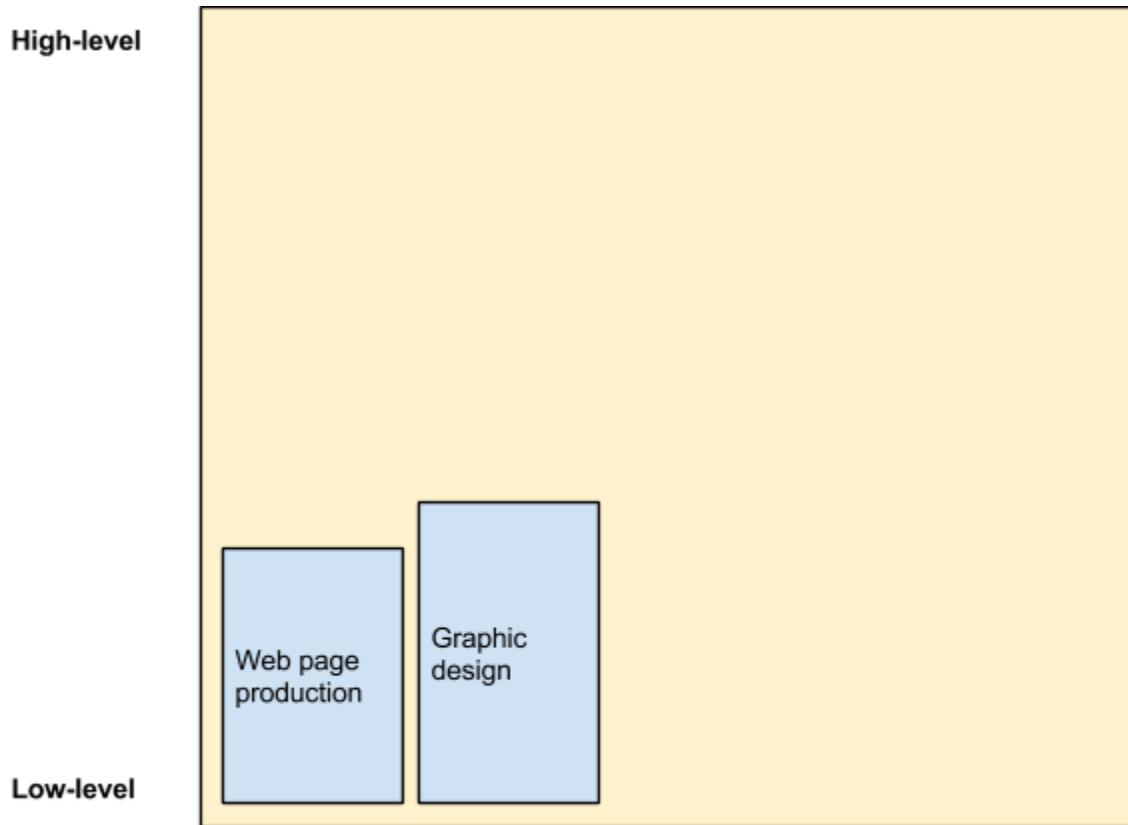
The web was a lawless frontier land, like the old Wild West. The early pioneers didn't know what to expect. It all seemed so completely new. We knew web technology would change the world for ever, but we didn't really know how. Everyone was dizzy with excitement.

The novelty of just getting online gave people a massive buzz. At that time, simply having a website (preferably with a rotating 3D logo) was an end in itself. Clients didn't know ***why*** they should be online, or what the ultimate goals should be, but they happily paid thousands for websites anyway.

Businesses raced to get on "the Information Superhighway" (whatever that meant). Anything could be made to appear instantly sexier by prefixing it with "e-" or "hyper-" or "cyber-".

Back in those early days, graphic design and web page production (HTML, JavaScript, server set-up, and maybe some PERL or ASP scripting) were the only skills you needed to offer a complete "web design" service. We can call these "low-level" skills, as they are more concerned with detailed execution than marketing.

If the square area in the graphic below represents the range and scope of web marketing skills as we know it today, that original skillset seems pretty narrow. I do not mean to say they were not challenging to master, but it was feasible for one person to master all the skills to a high level.



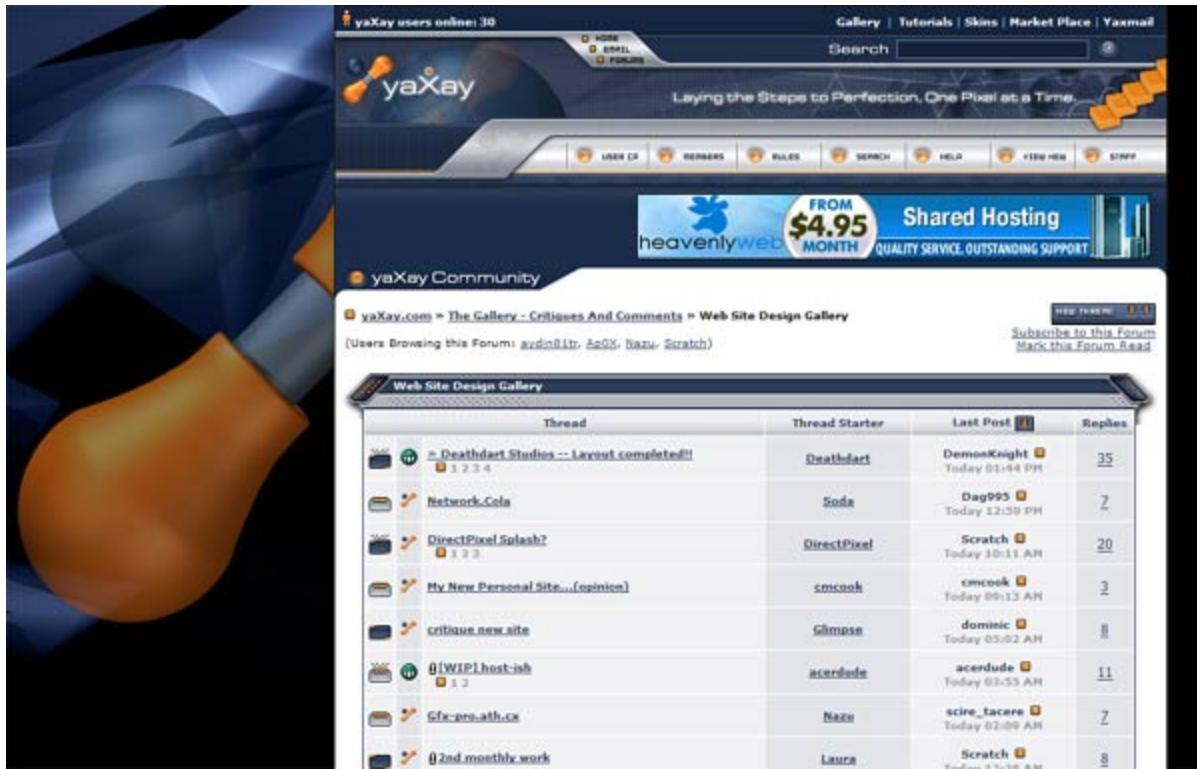
Some people could see what was coming. In 1994, Ken McCarthy ran a seminar in San Francisco, where he defined the Internet as a new true direct marketing medium, and predicted that its ultimate success would not be down to technical issues, but content issues. (Watch an excerpt of that groundbreaking talk [on Ken's page](#).) And in 1996 Bill Gates published his excellent short essay [Content Is King](#), in which he mentioned the “gold rush atmosphere” that was sweeping the United States at the time, and predicted that content was where the real money would be made online. (That was years before YouTube, Google, and eBay even existed.)

But these sensible ideas were slow to gain traction with a sector that was so dazzled by the technology that we simply didn't see any need to apply it to the real business of creating customers and making a profit.

As “creative” web designers, we were not interested in content. We were bound to the superstition that “design equals esthetics.” If it looked sexy, that was good design. We were also addicted to whatever seemed new. So designers were falling over themselves to create interfaces that looked ever more futuristic.

Here's one of my favorite examples. Yaxay.com was a forum for web designers. In the screenshot below, just look at how much effort, how much visual detail, and how much of the

screen has been sacrificed to looking shiny and futuristic — compared to the area that actually contains real content. The site is no longer live.



In those frontier-land days, novelty was everything. Creativity and originality had to be good things, right? As “creatives”, we pioneering designers felt a duty to fight any threat to creative freedom. That’s why we have had to endure a series of pointless battles over the years, such as “Design vs. Usability” and “Design vs. SEO.” In fact, originality was so highly prized that it was seen almost as a crime to copy another designer’s work.

Alan Cooper described the delirium perfectly with the “Dancing Bear” analogy in his 2004 book “The Inmates are Running the Asylum”. He asks you to imagine a medieval market square, where a man is showing his “dancing bear” to the crowd. The bear stands on its hind legs and shuffles around, dressed in a stupid costume, and people throw money to show their appreciation of this unique spectacle. Cooper says that what’s important here is not that the bear can dance well — it can’t, it’s a terrible dancer — but it’s that the bear can “dance” at all that is remarkable.

In the same way, we were so amazed by the fact that suddenly we **could** publish something that could instantly be seen by people all round the world, we didn’t stop to notice that most of what we were publishing was pointless crap. But, to be fair, we also had nothing to compare it against, because pretty much everything else online was pointless crap too.

It was a time of “anything goes” when designers experimented with ideas that, in retrospect, we’re truly abominable, such as the “splash page”, a default page dominated by some flashy

graphics, requiring the visitor to click a link to “Enter Site”, or hidden navigation that had to be hovered over with the mouse to reveal their target. Perhaps designers assumed that everyone was so excited about the technology itself that they didn’t mind being forced to do extra work. If that was ever true, it did not remain the case for long.

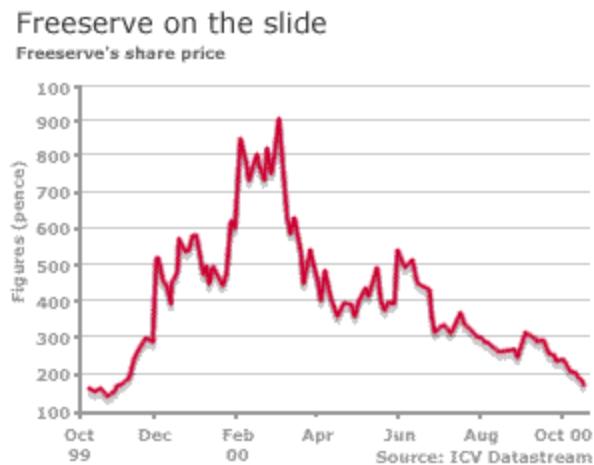
Publishing online was pretty expensive in those days. In 1996, a .com domain name typically cost \$50 **per year**. And because design and production processes were so labor-intensive, website creation was a costly exercise. Clients frequently willingly paid large sums of money for websites that would probably never generate real value for their businesses.

## The Dot-Com Bubble

Even in the last years of the 1990s, when we saw some of the Internet’s biggest names emerge, the “dot-com bubble” days proved it wasn’t just web designers, or our clients, who didn’t have the slightest clue about what was going on. Even the world of big money was bewildered.

In some cases, there was clear potential. Take eBay, for example, which in 1997 hosted just two million auctions and raised \$6.7 million in funding before floating on the stock market the following year with a healthy valuation of around \$1.9 billion.

However, the general frenzy resulted in some spectacular errors of judgement. In 1999, I joined a tiny startup ISP (Internet service provider) called Freeserve, where I went on to lead the design team. I think there were fewer than twenty of us in the business when Freeserve floated on the stock market that year. The IPO raised \$3.4 billion, despite the fact that its revenues at the time were only about \$4 million, and it had not yet made a penny in profit: a valuation of almost a thousand times revenue! The business never went on to make money.



It seemed no one had a grasp on what this all meant. Everyone knew the web was going to be big, but we didn’t have any yardstick we could use to put a value on anything.

Is it surprising that businesses and investors continued to hand over large sums of cash to web designers and developers, never to see their money again?

## **2000s: Bottom-Up Publishing Begins**

In November 2000, I attended a usability conference where I heard Bruce Tognazzini deliver this great quote, which has stuck with me ever since...

*“The best thing about the web is, everybody can be a publisher.*

*And the worst thing about the web is... everybody can be a publisher!”*

That quote describes a phenomenon we have seen over and over again. Giving someone the ability to do something is not the same as giving them the ability to **do it well**.

We only have to remember the PC and desktop publishing revolution of the 1990s. (The fact that no one talks about the phenomena of “personal computing” or “desktop publishing” anymore is an interesting example of how technology trickles down from elite early adopters to the mass market, eventually becoming commonplace.)

Prior to the DTP revolution, if someone needed to display a poster on multiple notice boards, they would go to a print shop where a trained designer would create the artwork.

Thanks to wide access to software like Microsoft Word, DTP put the ability to create posters and newsletters into the hands of the people. (As the musical comic Tom Lehrer said, “The reason most folk songs are so atrocious is, they were written by the *people*.”)

Suddenly, Tina on the reception desk could create and print anything she wanted. So, instead of eye-catching professional typography, the world was subjected to eye-watering, unreadable, three-dimensional, rainbow-colored “Word Art”.



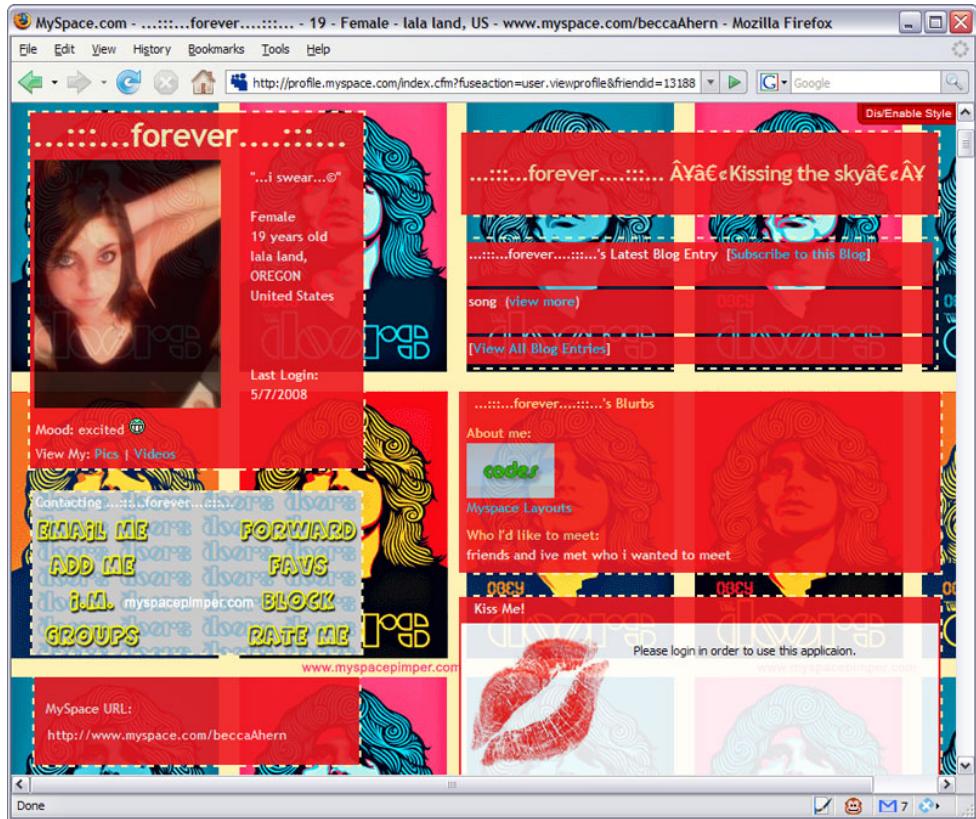
Of course, web designers had been producing some very nasty and ineffective design for many years. But the time was coming when anyone really could be their own web designer. The “top-down” era of publishing dominated by a minority of brands was about to be turned on its head.

The first years of the new millennium saw the start of the trickle-down of web publishing technology into the hands of the people. In the early days, if a client wanted to edit their own website, it required a custom-built content management system (CMS). Web design agencies were charging a lot of money for these systems in the late nineties and early noughties.

2000 brought the beginnings of flexible CMS platforms like Drupal and Mambo (which eventually led to Joomla). This represented the evolution of hard-coded CMSs into more generic platforms, which was the start of being able to create new website structures without a programmer having to code every change.

Although wiki technology had been around since the mid-Nineties, it wasn’t until 2001 that the world’s most massive publicly-edited site, Wikipedia, was launched.

Then in 2003, the world got MySpace, giving everyone the ability to create pages like the screenshot below.



The point here is not how awful the design is. Sure, MySpace would never pose a threat to the professional web design sector. But don't forget that, for a short time in 2006, MySpace overtook Google.com as the most visited domain by Americans.

Clearly, **despite** putting the online equivalent of Word Art into the hands of the uninitiated, resulting in almost unusable content... ***the "bottom-up" publishing revolution had started!***

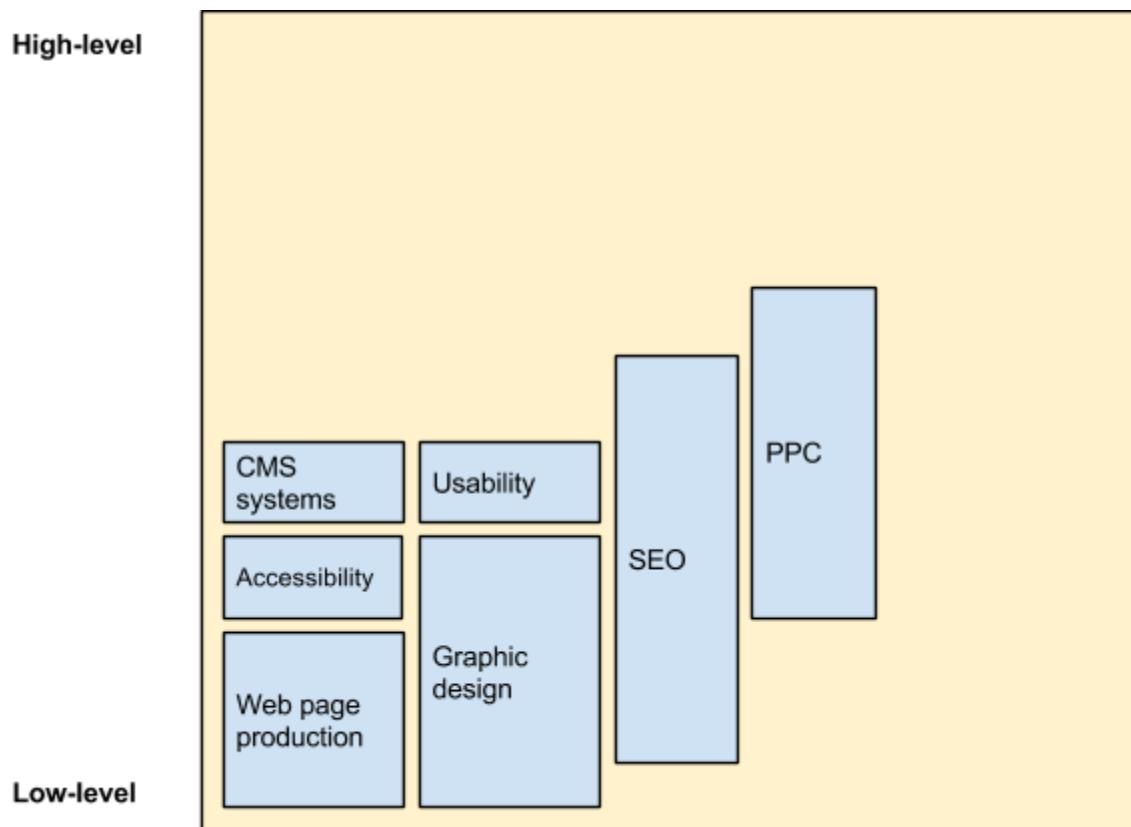
Now anybody really **could** be a publisher! Publishing technology was suddenly cheap enough, fast enough, and easy enough for everyone to use. I cannot overstate the importance of this. It is as significant a revolution as the printing press. The Internet was starting to live up to its promise of **democratizing publishing and communication**. The people were starting to get used to the idea that anyone could do it.

While some bands and small businesses and organizations could get some value from MySpace pages, serious clients, of course, still demanded professional web design. Web designers and developers continued to enjoy easy profits. But it was still really a frontierland, with no spam laws, no accessibility requirements, and hardly any legislation at all to say what we could or couldn't do online.

As the technology has matured, the web marketing sector has undergone a steady process of **diversification**, which continues to this day. Some designers started to specialize in

usability, accessibility, or localization, for example. Others moved to focus on front-end development using JavaScript, or into developing e-commerce sites. And, when Google started to establish itself as the dominant search engine around 2000, it gave rise to SEO as a truly professional discipline. Google then launched the AdWords pay-per-click platform in October 2000, creating both a new advertising sector and the new role of PPC management.

Our map of marketing skills is gradually starting to fill up. The existing design and production areas grow more complex, with greater awareness of usability and accessibility, and the development of early content management systems. The emergence of pay-per-click and SEO disciplines reflects both increased competition for traffic and a shift towards a focus on marketing strategy.



But because the barrier to entry was still in place for professional website design, there would continue to be a healthy core market for the all-round web designer/webmaster for years to come. What's more, if web professionals were baffled by all this technology, imagine how it must have been for business owners. We only had to know a little more (or sound as though we knew more) in order to part clients with lots of cash.

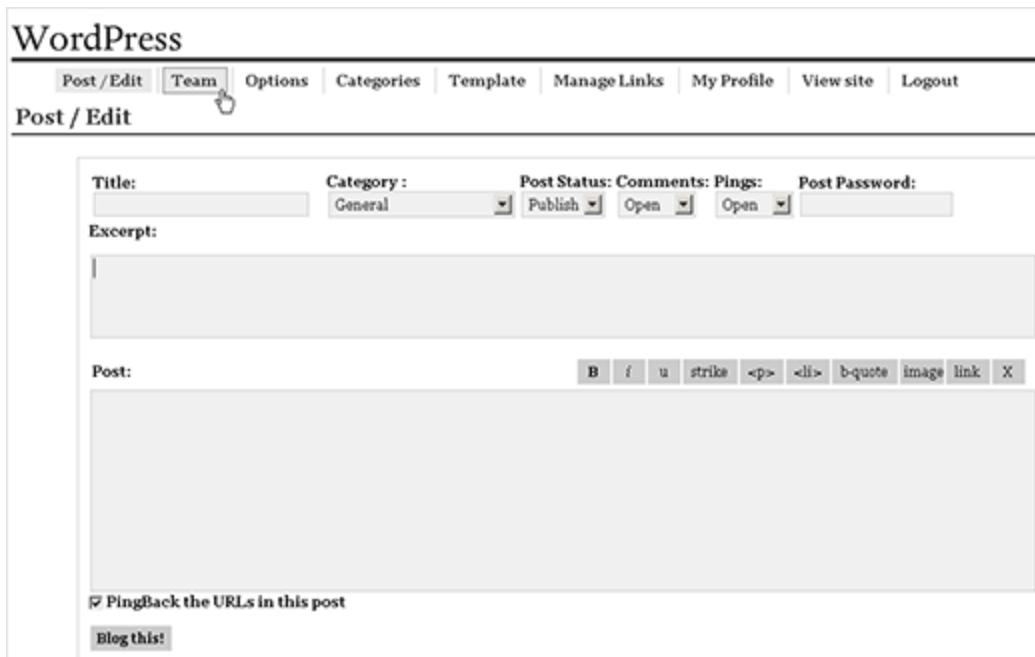
## Mid-2000s: Publishing Technology Breaks Free

If we know one thing about technological revolutions, it's that they don't tend to stop and reverse direction. We will never go back to hand-crafted illuminated manuscripts. They will never be more than a tiny niche market compared to mass print.

So bottom-up publishing is never going to go away. It can only get more effective — and more pervasive. The trend has continued, even gathered pace, with online publishing constantly getting faster, cheaper, and easier.

The first **blogging platforms** started to emerge in the early 2000s, starting with the early market leader, Movable Type, which was publicly released in October 2001.

The first version of WordPress was announced in May 2003, and its version 1.0 release came out in January 2004. (Here's how primitive the WordPress interface was only eleven years ago.)



WordPress 1.4 came out in May 2004, introducing its plugin architecture. Theme support did not arrive until February 2005. While these were important innovations, it was its **open-source model** that enabled WordPress quickly to overtake all the competing blogging platforms, eventually becoming the most popular online publishing platform (some estimates say one fifth of all websites run on WordPress today).

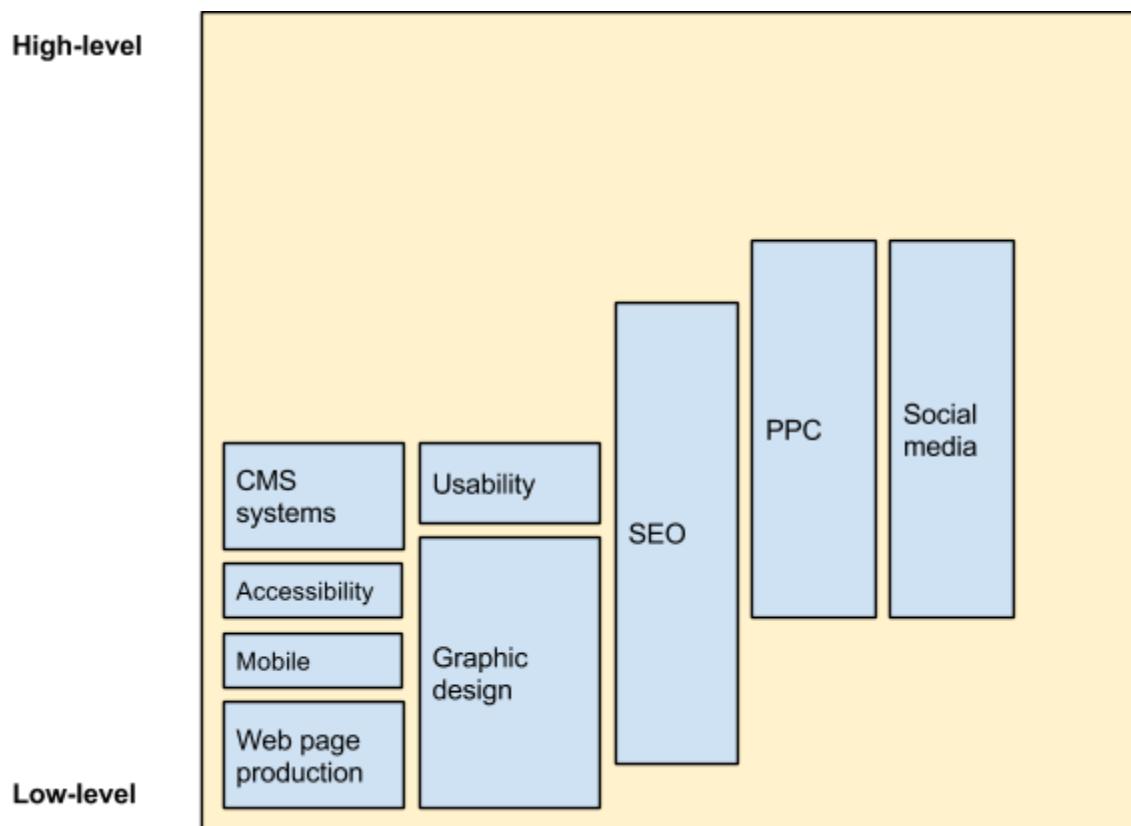
The mid-noughties was when self-publishing really started to accelerate. We had a new buzzword, “Web2.0”, which referred to the web as not just a publishing medium, but as an application platform. (At this time, we also saw some graphic design conventions emerge

across the web design sector, which became known as “Web2.0 design”. This was a positive sign that web design was maturing. See [my article from 2006](#).)

In addition to the explosion of WordPress, this is also when the world got **microblogging**, in the form of Twitter, which went live in July 2006, and Facebook, which launched to the public in September 2006. That’s the same year that Google purchased YouTube. And in January 2007, Steve Jobs announced the launch of the iPhone, which would create the smartphone sector and pave the way for another leap forward in mobile consumption — as well as in bottom-up publishing through proliferating portable digital media recording technology.

The map of skills continues to diversify and to fragment. Traffic generation grows more strategic and gets new channels in the form of social media.

Just think, just ten years before I’m writing this book, it was not possible to pull a device out of your pocket, take a photo or record a video, and instantly publish it for the whole world to see online. There were no smart phones, and nobody had heard of Facebook or YouTube. Smart phones literally put Internet access, photography and video production in everyone’s hands.



Even though the client sector was starting to get informed and educated about marketing online, the technology continued to explode at a dizzying rate. There was no shortage of shiny

objects to get excited about, and ever more marketing channels to invest in, so web designers continued to do very well.

The late-2000s also gave birth to the Internet marketing “info-product” market, which offered people training in the emerging channels and tactics. This has been extremely profitable for many people, but unfortunately is not always done with integrity. The general confusion when faced with new options has made it easy for unscrupulous “trainers” to get keen marketers and business owners to hand over significant amounts of money for the promise of marketing insights that may not be as broadly applicable as they are claimed. ([More about my thoughts](#) on this practice.)

## **2010s: The Tipping Point**

The current decade has seen the progress of online technology continue to accelerate.

The Web2.0 revolution continues, with a mass move to the “cloud”. Now, everything that **can** be provided via an online platform **is** being provided via an online platform: dating, gaming, gambling, surveys, campaigning, buying, selling, finding work, hiring resources, CRM, bookkeeping, community building, payment, music...

The online marketing industry continues to diversify, offering clients new “must-have” disciplines like content marketing, marketing automation, conversion rate optimization, and social media management.

And most skillsets continue to fragment. Nowadays you're just as likely to be a specialist in a niche within WordPress, such as the Genesis framework, Thrive, or WooCommerce, as an all-round WordPress developer.

All those effects are natural evolution. What's most significant for the web design sector is that, at some point in the past couple of years, without anyone really noticing, we crossed an invisible line, which spelled the beginning of the end of web design as we've known it.

Here's what's changed...

***Now, not only can anyone create content online, but we can make it GOOD too.***

For years, the trickle-down of publishing technology did not concern professional web designers, because those platforms (like MySpace, and all the budget website builders offered by web hosts) could never compare to the quality of an artisan-built website. They would often be slow, ugly, inaccessible, and very unlikely to appear on search results.

That was then. That was before the tipping point.

I'll explain by giving the automobile industry as an analogy. The earliest motor cars were hand-built, a natural move for coachbuilders who had up till then crafted horse-drawn coaches.

Then Henry Ford came along, with his production line innovations. He gave the world the Model T, which was not a very good car, but thanks to the economies of scale made possible through Ford's techniques it **was** relatively affordable compared to anything else on the market. This did not initially concern the coachbuilders, because their wealthy customers wanted the best, and their product was still better.

But if we fast-forward to the present day, we can see there has been a tipping point in the automobile industry. Today, you can still buy a hand-built motor car, for example from the British company Morgan. Morgan produce less than 1000 cars per year, and they're all crafted by hand. They're great little sports cars, and highly sought after by well-off customers. But this is a tiny segment of the market (as most custom-build segments are in any market).



A £44,000 Morgan Plus 4 (2011) and a £4296 Toyota Corolla (2006)

Here's the thing. Morgans are great, and it must feel really special to own one, but Toyotas are arguably **better**. The Toyota above will be better designed, more thoroughly tested, better made, more reliable, and will probably carry its owners many times more miles than the Morgan that costs more than ten times the price.

Toyota produce nearly ten million vehicles per year, that's ten thousand times more than Morgan can build. That scale lets them invest far more in improving their design and production processes than a smaller car-maker ever could.

While the hand-crafted Morgan may give its owner emotional benefits that far outweigh its price tag — for a wealthy top-end of the market — the Toyota will more completely suit the needs of the majority of the market, making it the better car.

Well, the exact same thing happened recently in the web publishing world. I believe that, **mass-produced themes and platforms are now not just cheaper, but demonstrably better, than hand-crafted websites.**

I can share a personal experience of this. Around a year ago, I redesigned my main blog site, switching the previous WordPress theme to a simpler custom design, based on the Genesis framework. The process took me a few days, and I was pretty happy with the result.

Then, one morning in September 2014, I woke up, reached for my laptop, and decided to check out a theme I'd seen from a new company (Thrive) which I thought looked very exciting. WordPress let me preview the theme privately.

Wow! Apart from a couple of display issues, which I knew I could fix pretty easily, the site already looked **way better** than my previous custom-made theme! And it didn't only look better, but it immediately inherited some fantastic **new functionality**, such as smart social sharing icons, automatically-loading related posts, and lazy-loading comments. And it even worked great on tablets and phones, straight out of the box.

By that lunchtime, I had already put the new theme live, and I hadn't even got out of bed. I loved it, my visitors loved it ([see comments](#)), and even Google loved it! Because the new theme was so much faster than my previous hand-built theme, which means an improved user experience, Google gave it an instant boost, sending me 13% more search traffic overnight ([see my article](#)).

How much would it cost a client to pay a web designer and a developer to create something similar to the theme on my site? At a guess, I would say definitely a five-figure sum, probably no less than \$30,000, if it had to be thoroughly tested on all browsers and mobile devices.

What does my theme actually cost? At the time of writing, [only \\$49](#). A **fraction of one percent** of the cost of a custom build.

***Now you can have a professional-quality website without hiring a professional.***

Please take a moment to let that sink in. The guys at Thrive can now sell you a five-figure-value website for \$49. And they're not the only ones. There's a huge and growing market for themes, some of which are extremely good (and many of which are rotten too).

So how is this possible? It's the same factor that enabled Henry Ford to make his early motor cars affordable a hundred years ago, and how Toyota can produce some of the world's best-made cars even cheaper today. (When the Model T came out in 1909, it cost between \$850 and \$1000, which is the equivalent of over \$20,000 in today's money.)

## **The Economy of Scale Cycle**

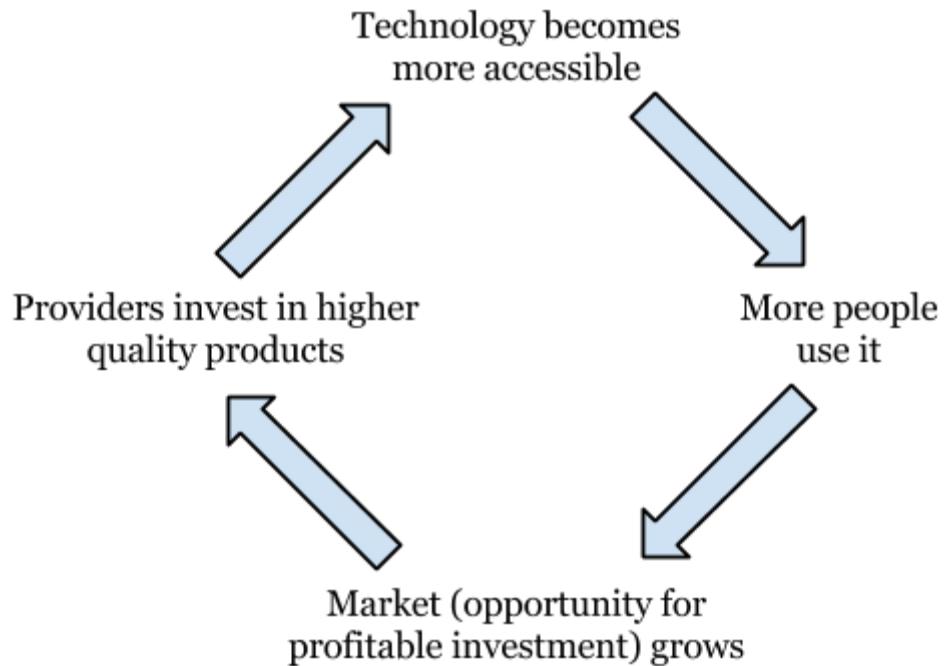
The magic factor is: **economy of scale**. Put simply, whenever there's a potential mass-market for any product, it doesn't make sense to design each one individually, or to craft each one by hand. Standardizing, systemizing, automating, and then optimizing the production process lets you make more products more cost-effectively.

When a technology is new, it can only reach a limited market (innovator and early adopter personalities). As it becomes more accessible, its user base starts to grow. That then creates a potential market that offers the potential to reward investment. Providers will then step in to productize the technology further.

Productization is a process of **systemization**: moving from making something in a more haphazard way to a more formal way. That in turn requires a certain level of

**standardization.** As Henry Ford famously said, “You can have the Model T in any color, so long as it’s black.”

Below is a diagram that shows the **economy of scale cycle** at work. You can see how this might apply to the emergence of almost any physical or technical product, from motor cars to accounting software.



This is a progressive cycle, because its effects are progressively reinforced over time. That also means it can also never be reversed. It can only follow the natural [technology lifecycle](#), eventually saturating the market until it is replaced by new innovations.

Let's review how we can see this cycle at work in the growth of the online publishing sector.

- In the early days, web publishing was only available to an exclusive group, because of its technical barrier to entry and high costs.
- Gradually, as more people got online and online publishing started to expand, that created opportunities for standardizing and systemizing the publishing process.
- This led innovators to build the earliest content management systems. They were fairly laborious, but they delivered some economy compared to hand-coding every page.
- The early systemized CMS products enable more publishers to publish more content more quickly, so the web grew more rapidly and became more useful.

- Publishers got used to the idea of database-driven publishing systems with simple admin interfaces, and started to request more innovation.
- Around the year 2000 we got big, expensive systems from providers like Broadvision and Vignette, which gave ground to low-cost or free generic systems like Mambo, Joomla, and Drupal, as well as more specialized platforms to support a range of publishing models, such as blogging, wikis, and forums.

Taking a long-term view, we can see that here in the West we are now in a maturing market, in which the majority of users are now connected, spending more time online, on more devices, and carrying out more tasks.

As we've seen, the market for publishing technology has followed a predictable pattern, continually diversifying and trickling down from those early days with slow, costly CMS systems hacked together for each job.

In the "Web2.0" mid-noughties, the technology became further systemized as it moved up to the **platform**, meaning that you did not have to install and manage your own server software. That gave the world MySpace, Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, Flickr, Pinterest, and YouTube, among countless others.

As the market matures, **design conventions** emerge in areas like navigation, typography, and accessibility. Conventions are patterns that become established over time as people discover what works. These enable further standardization, which facilitates productization.

The continual growth of the market for publishing tools created space for people to develop a range of productized assets including graphics and whole website themes. The bigger this economic sector grew, the greater the rewards for developing better products.

So, whereas some of the early WordPress themes may have had a few days of time invested in them, which was broadly similar to a custom-built website, today's bigger market can profitably support themes that may have taken **thousands of hours** of development.

**And that's the tipping point...** when you can buy an off-the-shelf product that is not just cheaper, but is also **better**, because it has had far more money, skill, and effort invested in its development than a custom builder could possibly afford to match.

Today, it is hard to make a case in favor of custom-made graphics, custom-made themes, custom-written code, or custom-built publishing systems, at least for the vast **majority of the market**.

Of course there will always be a market for any hand-crafted custom product, from shoes and shirts to homes and automobiles. But the niches for these products are always a tiny percentage right at the top-end of the market and serve the most affluent customer who demands the highest possible degree of customization or control.

So I think there will continue to be a market for the custom-crafted website. But it will definitely no longer be suitable for the large traditional web design sector: delivering marketing solutions for the small-to-medium business.

When we look at that major part of the market, here's what the maturation of the publishing product does to the web design and marketing skillset.



Today, the majority of web page design, production, and even some of the lower-level traffic generation and social skills, can now all be taken care of by **products**. We have great themes for our web pages, which deliver better results than hand-crafted sites, and which integrate easily with social media and email management systems. And we have **platforms** for building landing pages, for video marketing, for SEO management, even for automatically optimizing AdWords campaigns, all available instantly for affordable subscriptions.

To summarize, most of the low-level tasks that web designers have traditionally been paid for have now been made **redundant**.

There is a future for the web design professional, and it's a bright future, but it looks quite different to what we have been used to.

## The Future for Web Design Professionals

Web designers need to accept that we have lost our exclusive franchise over online publishing. Our beloved technology has been simplified and put in the hands of the proletariat. The world doesn't need artisan web design monks anymore.

I think that is all true. If that means we have noticed and accepted the shift that is happening, that's a good thing. The next question is what to do about it.

I'm sure there will be some resistance even to these facts. The artisan web design field has always scorned the progress of publishing technology, and some die-hard artisan designers and producers probably always will.

They'll argue that **style** and **originality** are important, and that clients demand originality. (They're right that visual appeal matters, but the truth is that it doesn't matter anywhere near as much as they believe, as I demonstrate in [this article](#).)

They'll say that you can only really be confident in the **quality of the code** on your site if you crafted every line yourself. They're probably right about that as well, but they also overestimate the importance of standards compliance, which some people adhere to with an almost religious fanaticism. The fact is, compliance is great, but real-world pragmatism means that making something work is far more important than making it work perfectly. (As Voltaire said, "Perfect is the enemy of good.") What's more, the economy of scale cycle means that publishing platforms are probably already better at producing standards-compliant code than the typical web page producer.

I think these arguments are attempts to distract from the truth, in order to preserve a particular outdated way of life. They are also remarkably short-sighted, because, as I'll show, the growth of the online publishing product market at the expense of the custom publishing market is actually **great news** for the die-hard designer and producer!

Yes, a huge chasm is opening up beneath the classic web design/webmaster role. Anyone who stands their ground will perish. But there is good news. We just have to respond, which — if you want to be involved in building websites — means moving in **one of three directions**.

## The Three Types of Web Designer

You can understand the web designer's three options quite easily by looking at the parallels with **furnishing a room**.

In pre-industrial times, furniture may have been either bogged down by peasant craftsmen, or hand-crafted by skilled artisans. Over time, the economy of scale cycle kicked in leading to the standardization of furniture production, and that enabled manufacturers to produce a decent quality product at much lower costs than building each piece by hand.

In today's mature market, furnishing a room may involve three types of design.

First, if you're in the market for totally custom furniture, you can get it. (My cousin Oscar at [Hendzel + Hunt](#) would happily design and build you something as stunning as the wardrobe below.)



But most of us will never afford custom-designed furniture. When the rest of us want to furnish a room, we may pick up a furniture catalog like this one, which offers a range of well-designed and affordable products...



... which we'll use to design our room.



We've just identified three distinct design disciplines...

1. The high-end totally **custom** design and build;
2. The design of mass-produced **component products** for the retail catalog;
3. And the interior design of the **actual room**, using those mass-produced products.

The future options for web designers parallel these disciplines exactly. Your three options are to focus on either...

1. The custom-built, high-end website niche;
2. Developing marketing products and platforms;
3. Specialist services for clients.

## Option 1: The Custom Website Niche

As I mentioned before, there will always be a few customers in any market who demand products or services to a particular level of standard or detail, and are willing to pay accordingly.

I do not believe that there is a significant market for custom marketing websites for the smaller business. There is almost no argument in favor of custom-build compared to the best themes on sale today. But the biggest businesses will always need advanced custom skills, and that will only improve as every online sector continues to grow.

It makes sense for very busy marketing websites and web-based applications to maintain the complete control that only a custom build can offer. The startup market for custom-built web apps is also bigger now than it was in the dot-com bubble days, which may be appealing for some designers or front-end developers.

Moving into the custom website niche will often signify a move in-house, whether for an established brand, or a growing one, because that is simply more cost-effective than using agencies.

## Option 2: The Product Development Market

Your second option is the equivalent of designing furniture for the IKEA catalog.

There is an exciting and rapidly-growing sector dedicated building ***saleable products***, which includes apps, themes, plugins, graphics resources, and a huge range of web-based platforms.

This option also offers the professional a path to move away from the broad generic, spread of low-level skills and ***specialize*** in what you do best, whether that is branding, graphic design, HTML and CSS, mobile design, animation, usability, social media, marketing automation, copywriting, ad management, or programming.

However, I would advise deliberately focusing on higher-level, more strategic skills where possible. Low-level production and programming tasks are among the easiest to outsource via the new global marketplace. The specialties that are most immune to outsourcing will be those that either require deep understanding of the target audience, language, or culture, or which have natural barriers to learning (such as expensive training courses, or geographic focus).

If you are truly passionate about getting down into the details of pixels or code, either of the first options could be perfect for you.

As with Option 1, moving into product development will usually involve moving from the ***multiple-client/agency*** scenario to the ***single-client/in-house*** scenario (which may be your own start-up).

But what if your heart lies in crafting marketing websites for clients? What if you really enjoy talking to people and helping them to sort out their business problems? Or what if you love being your own boss, and want to grow your own business?

We know that the earth is disappearing beneath the feet of the all-round web designer/webmaster role, because the majority of the work we used to charge clients for can be replaced with superior off-the-shelf products and platforms. But that does not mean the end of the web design agency or the web design professional.

Clients clearly still need people to go to, who can help them to plan and deliver their online marketing campaigns. In fact, I think the role of web marketing professional is more important than it has ever been. But it does mean we need to evolve — fast.

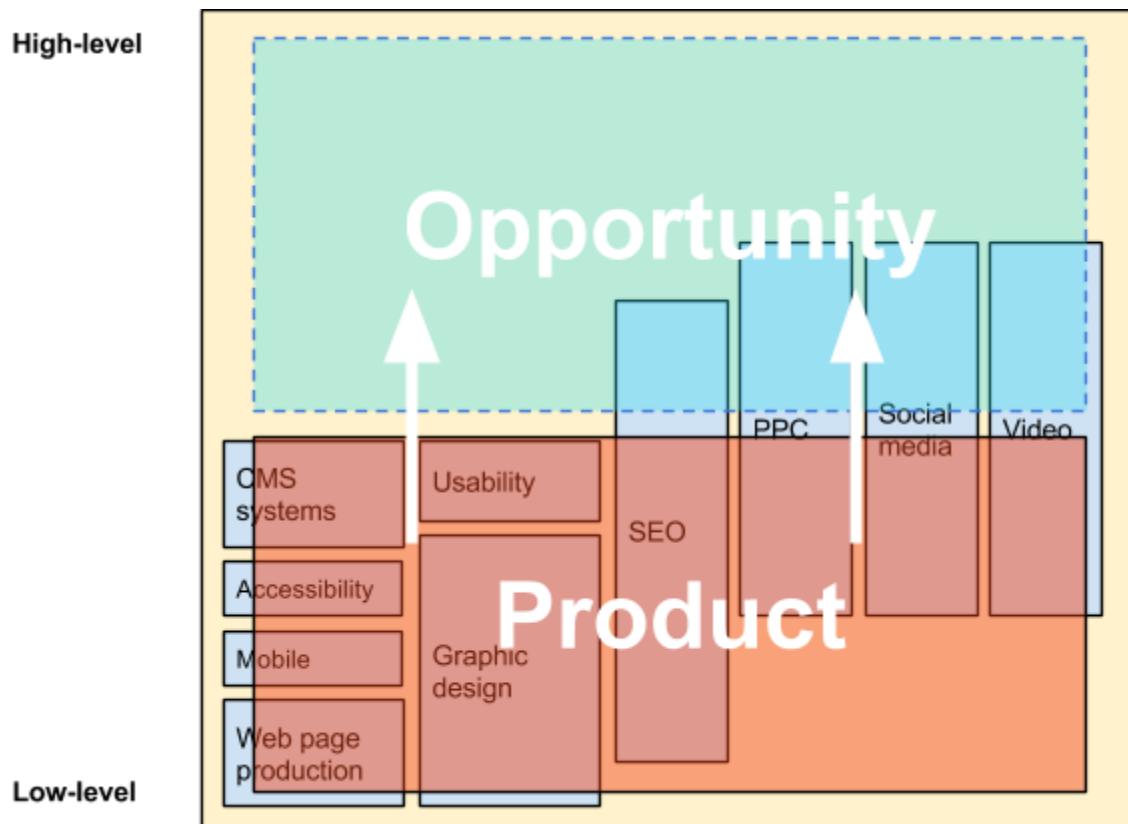
## Option 3: The Client-Facing Marketing Specialist

As the design and production of websites have become mainly productised, the barrier to entry for competing online is now lower than ever. If having a professional-looking, highly functional website was once enough to differentiate an organization in the marketplace, that is no longer the case, because now anyone can make a professional site quickly and cheaply.

Just as the maturing of publishing technology is pushing web designers out of the low end of the market, it is also shifting the competitive edge for our clients too. Now, clients need to do more in order to stand out and win customers.

So where do companies find their competitive edge, and how can web designers and marketing professionals help them to do that successfully?

The answer is right there in the large, empty area on our simple skillset map. The area of opportunity has to be the area that is **not now covered** by the new generation of marketing and publishing products.



Of course, this skills map is highly simplified, we could break it down into dozens of more skill areas, but the key point remains that the lower-level, repetitive functions have either already been transformed into products, or they are in the process of being productized.

That commoditization of low-level publishing tasks leaves a domain of higher-level skills as the new frontier. By “high-level” I mean those that are more **strategic** (concerned with what we *should* do) than **functional** (concerned with actually *doing* it), and the good news is that those high-level services can never be fully standardized.

The future for the marketing service professional is to move **up the food chain**, away from low-level delivery, and into higher-level services.

The good news is, high-level skills are no more difficult than the low-level ones. In fact, I think they’re easier, partly because they don’t change so much over time. The core principles of marketing and strategy are eternal, because they’re based on common sense.

One other effect of systemization worth noting is that it facilitates assigning tasks to the “least possible skilled person”. This has always been a factor in the division of labor, but was taken to new levels following the Industrial Revolution. The principle is that, if you break down a complex task into smaller, discrete, simpler tasks, those minor tasks take less skill and can therefore be carried out by an individual with less skill or training, therefore saving money.

In the case of web publishing, we have seen the emergence of affordable resource markets, particularly through sites like ODesk and Fiverr. These Web2.0 platforms represent a bottom-up revolution of the old freelancing model, which now lets you access resources from all over the world.

I believe that the globalization of this marketplace should not be perceived as a threat to the smart web professional, only to those who hope to resist progress and cling on to selling low-level skills.

It is those more functional design, production, and coding skills that face the greatest threat from the proliferation of accessible publishing platforms, and also that are most suited to outsourcing. (Just check out how many providers are [offering “PSD to HTML” services on Fiverr](#).)

The direction in which the market is moving is indisputable and unavoidable. That’s why old-school web designers who have failed to notice the signs and failed to adapt are going out of business and losing their homes.

I **was** one of the first old-school web designers. But I strongly believe this shift signifies progress, because it can make life better for all of us.

I think the future for the web publishing and marketing disciplines is brighter than ever, and the opportunities for the client sector are more exciting than ever before!

But before we can move forward we must fully and finally accept the following facts...

- The design and publishing of websites is now a relatively cheap commoditized product.
- The facility of publishing online is now universal, and no longer in the exclusive control of professional web designers.
- The market for the traditional web design service is disappearing into the ground.
- Just having a corporate website is no longer a competitive advantage, but is now accepted as a prerequisite for doing business.
- Competing effectively in online marketing may now require a far broader range of channels and tactics.

Let's now look at what today's web designers need to do in order not only to survive, but also to capitalize on, the shift.

## **The Future For The Client-Facing Web Designer**

I believe that providing the right marketing services to clients is immensely important. Small businesses and nonprofits are the real lifeblood of the world's economy. They create jobs, start movements, and make cool stuff... all making the world a better place. They deserve the best marketing services they can get.

The client sector also represents a much bigger chunk of the market than the previous two options, which means it will be the direction for the majority of today's web designers. That's why the rest of the book examines in detail what being a client-facing web marketer will mean in 2015 and beyond.

Our priority has to be whatever is in our clients' best interests, not only because that is right, but also because finding ways to serve customers better will be the key to long-term security.

I think we can agree that, overall, clients have not been well served by the web design sector over the past twenty years, despite the best intentions of most service providers. I'm sure we have all heard numerous stories about clients who have paid large sums of money for flawed websites or services that would never pay back the initial investment.

Looking through the first two decades of online marketing gives us a clear idea about what clients **don't need**. Quite simply, they don't need to invest a significant amount of cash for marketing without knowing how it is going to pay for itself.

Isn't it time that all marketing professionals take responsibility for the performance of the marketing services we deliver? Let's put the concept of "service" back into our services.

It should not be up to our clients to know what kind of marketing techniques they need to employ in a sector that is growing ever more diverse and complex. They should never feel confusion or pressure to chase the latest traffic or conversion trick.

Every client deserves to be able to trust a professional to give them expert guidance. Above all, they should have confidence in their marketing (and their marketing service providers) and be able to hold them to account.

At its core, marketing is the practice of **creating customers**. Great marketing is so important because it really can make a dramatic difference to success. It can help a failing business survive, and can make a good business even better.

Most of the services delivered by web designers etc over the past two decades cannot be considered great marketing.

Why? **Lack of education.** Most practitioners have had no formal education in how to market. Much of the formal education that is available is out of step with the fast-moving online marketing sector. What's more, the market has been dominated by profiteering information marketers who don't give the best advice.

So if businesses and organizations need marketing that's affordable, likely to generate profits, and accountable, the next challenge is **how to deliver that**.

The core problem is that **nobody knows** what the right marketing campaign looks like for any particular business, in its individual market and with its own unique environmental factors.

I'm serious. Nobody knows.

Anyone who tells you that you **must** use any particular channel or technique is a liar and a charlatan. Internet marketing gurus love to tease you that they've found a great new technique that's just "killing it" and if you're not using their new technique you're leaving money on the table. Don't listen to them. They're liars and charlatans.

SEO can be great. AdWords can be great. Ebooks can be great. Blogging can be great. Video drip-feed follow-up sequences can be great. Live webinars and Hangouts on Air can be great. Content marketing can be great. Facebook and Pinterest and Twitter and Spotify can be great...

And any of the array of techniques we have available to us can be **great**.

And **any** of them can be entirely **wrong**, and a complete waste of time and money.

Any approach that's totally right for one business could be catastrophic for the next.

The truth is that great marketing is extremely context-dependent, but that's really hard to make into a profitable course.

Where does that leave the client-facing web designer? How do we cope with the dizzying range of choices out there? Should we specialize in one, or try to learn everything?

The answer is, you can actually choose either. You can choose to master one particular technique, channel, or platform. Or you can choose a very different path. I am going to explain all the options, but for now all I would ask you to do is be open to whatever direction feels like the best fit for you.

As the online marketing sector has matured and expanded over the years, we have seen a constant diversification in skillsets, and that is bound to continue. The increasing diversification clearly demands a similar degree of increasing specialization, which is a good thing for practitioners, because it helps to protect you from price competition.

So if your passion truly lies in a particular technique, it probably makes sense to pursue that, and to develop your special powers as a **technique specialist**. If you're good at Facebook pay-per-click, my advice is to be **great** at Facebook pay-per-click. If you love creating email campaigns for charities, put everything into that. If you're a wizard at Google Analytics, why not become a specialist?

A diversifying market increasingly rewards specialization, and being in the top few percent of practitioners in your niche is a great way to get professional security.

However, some people are natural generalists. If you find yourself naturally drawn to the big picture, and if you find you get uncomfortable with details or repetition, then specializing in a narrow vertical technique niche may not be appropriate for you. The good news for you is that there is a great opportunity for the big-picture client-facing marketer, in providing **strategic marketing services**.

In order to set out all your options as clearly as possible, I'm going to take you through the phases of the ideal marketing campaign — as far as I've figured it out — because each phase reveals natural opportunities for the client-facing marketing professional.

When I discovered my natural place in the order of things, I felt a level of confidence and security that I had never known before, and the path I needed to follow began to get clear.

## A Radical New Approach

I recently spent six months breaking down the highly complex world of marketing into its logical pieces. I was obsessed with figuring out how some experienced marketers can just **see** what's missing in a campaign, or what needed to be changed.

So I decided to see if I could figure it out. Sitting down with paper and pencil one warm summer's day, I started to figure out if there was a model that could apply to any marketing campaign.

The only way I figured I could do it was to take existing real-world projects I had worked on and to ask, “Okay, if the right technique for that particular project was (say) Facebook organic marketing, **why?** What were the **factors** that made that the correct way forward?”

That enquiry would generate one or more “because...” statements. I then turned those statements into questions, and soon noticed that they started to form a logical structure.

I realized that, while campaigns can take an infinite variety of forms, the overall process should follow a simple common sequence, comprising **four phases**. It also started to become clear that the basis of every marketing proposition is comprised of the same fundamental elements: me, you, the problem I'm promising to solve for you, and how I propose to do it.

What was really exciting for me over these few months was that, for the first time, I had the beginnings of both a **conceptual model** and a **step-by-step process** for marketing! The reason that's so exciting is because, when you have models and processes that can be written down and shared, you have something you can optimize.

I can't begin to tell you how important this development has proved to be, but what happened next should give you a good idea...

Originally, I planned to create a new premium course around the new system. Just a few weeks earlier, I had taken my main “cash cow” product, my Pro Web Design Course, off the market. That course was very well received — and made me a lot of money — but there was a big problem. Because I had started to put it together back in 2010, it was teaching people how to be web design generalists, and the world doesn't need any more web design generalists!

The other big shift for me in 2014 was that I had gone through a period of intense reflection ([more here](#)), and I realized that I am really passionate about championing small businesses and nonprofits.

Now I had started to develop something that I knew was immensely powerful, and could make a massive difference to these guys... It caused me a problem. My conscience told me I couldn't sell it as a premium course.

As it happens, a few members of my [inner circle group](#), who had been working together on a workbook based on the model, independently came to the same conclusion as I had. They said, “Wouldn't it be great if we could give this away?”

So, in January 2015, inspired by the open-source movement, I made the decision to put the new material online, for free. In fact, I made all my courses (including [PWDC](#) and [UWD](#)) and [ebooks](#) **totally free**.

Open-source was originally devised as a method for developing software, and it has helped create some of the world's most successful software, including the Linux operating system, the Apache web server, and WordPress.

It is extremely labor-intensive to create such a big software project and make it competitive. It would be unbelievably costly to achieve any of those massive projects using the familiar top-down management model. (Even a corporation with the resources of Microsoft can struggle to turn out a fast, robust web browser.) So open-source took a different approach. What if, instead of making the product proprietary and guarding the intellectual property from the “competition”, we open it up to the world, let everyone use and distribute it for free, and invite everyone to contribute to make it better?

The method has worked incredibly well for developing complex products. The more eyeballs you focus on a problem, the more likely you are to make rapid improvements, and solve the problem. It turns out developers are happy to contribute a few hours of coding time in return for nothing but the satisfaction of being part of building a product they love.

I figured, if it can work for software development, could a similar approach be applied to the challenge of developing a complex marketing system? All **systems** have common characteristics, including structural and procedural logic that can be written down, shared, tested, and improved upon. In computer software, the structural logic is data models and the procedural logic is code. In this marketing system, the structural logic would be the Circuit model and other matrices, and the procedural logic would be the step-by-step method.

I could see no reason why it shouldn't be possible to apply the principles of open-source to a marketing system.

The only issue seemed to be that it wasn't the done thing in Internet Marketing circles.

The old, familiar way of learning marketing doesn't serve the world, only a small minority. These Internet Marketing gurus are like an exclusive priesthood that has the power to dole out absolution. They teach us that they have special insights, and that if we don't follow their advice we're losing money.

Their messages hint at shortcuts to easy money. But the reality is there isn't any easy money, at least if you're ethical. The easiest money you'll make is to build a great business and market it well.

A few gurus have got very rich selling this snake-oil, much of which is recycled or misrepresented. (And often all they're teaching you is how to recycle, misrepresent and manipulate. More about that [in this post](#).)

I subscribe to the idea that **information wants to be free**. Shouldn't everyone be able to access the information their business needs, without spending more than they can afford?

My plan is to **share all marketing knowledge freely with the world**, and invite the world to improve on my ideas and methods over time, thereby building a marketing system that gets better and better over time, and which anyone can use for free.

One of the principles of open-source is that anyone could contribute an improvement, which is an acknowledgement of the power collective intelligence and experience.



Because this could apply to more than just web design and online marketing, I created a new brand: **Open-Source Marketing**, which will act as an umbrella for the core system, and for any other resources that people all round the world choose to donate or to build together.

[Check out OpenSourceMarketingProject.org for more details.](http://OpenSourceMarketingProject.org)

Next I'll walk you step-by-step through the four phases of a marketing campaign, as they are defined in Open-Source Marketing, because they also provide the **map to your future options**.

As we go through this conceptual model, I would invite you to look out for which phase or discipline feels naturally right for your aptitudes or skills.

## The Ideal Marketing Campaign

The four major phases of the ideal marketing campaign are...

1. Strategy
2. Campaign Design
3. Campaign Delivery
4. Live Operation

### Phase One: Strategy

In the early days, it was enough simply to have a website. We had a professional sector dedicated to **execution**, simply delivering websites.

Over time, the technology diversified, and so did the sector. Clients paid web professionals to execute an expanding range of disciplines and channels including usability, accessibility, mobile, SEO, pay-per-click, conversion optimisation, and email marketing.

As the market grew, opportunity powered competition, which led to better and better marketing products.

Then we passed the tipping point, where a high quality of execution has now become the standard, made possible by great themes and platforms. Now, anyone can have a website that's well-designed, SEO-ready, looks and works great on all devices, and comes already hooked up with social media, video marketing, and professional-standard email automation.

Professional-quality execution matters, but it is now the ***price of entry***. It doesn't make anyone competitive anymore.

The future competitive edge will not only be in execution, but increasingly in ***strategy***.

We have all heard the phrase “digital marketing strategy” thrown around. Very often, this is just confused with chasing the latest trend. Announcing “We have to get into mobile!” or “We have to do social media!” isn’t strategy, it’s just knee-jerk reaction. True strategy sits at a level above any channel, platform, or tactic.

## What Is Strategy?

Marketing strategy is not concerned with tactical execution. It is about knowing ***what*** you want to achieve, and the ***direction*** you need to take, before you invest a penny in rolling out a campaign, buy a single click, or write the first landing page.

Marketing strategy addresses the most fundamental questions, the ones which truly differentiate a brand in the marketplace. An organisation that has its strategy sorted knows ***what*** it stands for, ***who*** its ideal prospects are, and ***why*** people will want what they offer. That clarity of purpose makes it easier to see how to deliver a message that folk will respond to.

It is marketing strategy that informs where an organisation should focus its energy and financial resources, ensuring that any campaign can reach out to the right target audience using the most appropriate channels. An organisation that knows its strategy can execute campaigns that direct its resources efficiently, learn fast, and keep any loss to a minimum.

Marketing strategy makes the difference between short-term and long-term growth. In fact, the word “strategy” implies a longer-term perspective.

Here’s the problem. Because, in the past, when there was less competition, we could compete on the basis of better execution alone, means most web designers, as well as most clients, are

not accustomed to thinking strategically. We have been busy chasing the latest fashions and technological developments, wondering what we should be doing next to compete.

But surely the world doesn't need all-rounder web designers anymore...

Actually, let me qualify that. The world **does** need professional web designers, but it **doesn't need them to design websites.**

The future of the client-facing web designer is **to design marketing campaigns.**

Let's look at the strategy phase of the Open-Source Marketing method.

Before spending anything on marketing execution, it is essential to get clear on whether you have a powerful and distinctive marketing proposition to take to market.

The Strategy phase requires in-depth, honest analysis of the five core logical elements of any marketing campaign. I called this model "The Circuit" because when all the elements are present, complete, and aligned, you find that energy flows. But, if any elements is missing or misaligned, the whole structure is compromised.

## The Circuit Model

1. **Brand:** Who is making the offer? Is it something people can believe in and trust?
2. **Products or Services:** What is actually going to be delivered? Why should prospects be interested?
3. **Proposition:** What is the promise? Is it compelling and bold?
4. **Problem:** Is the offer addressing something that really matters to people, and which they care enough about to take action?
5. **Market:** Does the campaign know who its target prospect really is? Is the market clear, coherent, and reachable?

The first phase starts with a **Circuit Interview**. This takes the form of in-depth investigation, asking dozens — perhaps hundreds — of challenging questions, with the goal of truly understanding the reality of the marketing environment, together with what might be possible.

We then do a **Circuit Review**, to establish whether there is a compelling case to take to market. If all the Circuit elements are not clear, strong, and aligned, we stop and consider what can be changed before we proceed.

This is an essential step, because any of the elements can be modified or re-thought, from the brand to the target market, and anything in between. If the Circuit doesn't have integrity, fix it before you move forward and risk wasting significant time and money.

I used a series of real-world case study projects to help develop the Circuit model. As I worked through the projects, I continually came across new marketing scenarios. Each case study threw up unique decisions that, if I wanted to build a repeatable process, would require new questions to be asked. As I uncovered those questions, I added them to my [Circuit Questionnaire document](#) (which at the time of writing already covers nineteen printed pages).

## **Your Option: Marketing Strategist**

I strongly believe the client sector urgently needs one particular new type of specialist: ***the marketing strategist***.

All online marketing should now be delivered ***within a strategic context***, with each specialty working to a common ***strategic plan***.

The more our roles specialize, the more vital it becomes that everyone should be working in concert. The strategic campaign design is the symphonic score that helps to keep all the various disciplines working together.

Any marketing exercise or asset we might consider — whether it's a website, landing page, email sequence, blog post, ebook, AdWords campaign, or competition on social media — should be part of executing that single, shared strategy.

You should not be a web design generalist anymore, but if you enjoy the high-level general overview, if you have broad interests, and if you like tackling important questions head-on, specializing in strategy could be for you.

As we know, it is unreasonable to expect our clients to have a comprehensive high-level perspective of all the available options. That has been the case for some time now. But ***somebody*** needs to have that perspective. I believe that falls to the role of marketing strategist.

Of course, where possible, pay-per-click campaigns should always be set up and managed by pay-per click experts... Copy should be crafted by skilled copywriters... Keyword research, local SEO, and graphic design should all be done by experts in those disciplines.

But, alongside all those specialties, every campaign should be designed by a strategy specialist, who is both trained in strategic methods and maintains a high-level professional view of the world of marketing channels and tactics.

In 2013, there was a discussion in web marketing circles about the “T-shaped marketer” model. The idea was that, in order to maximize their usefulness, professional marketers required both a broad understanding of multiple disciplines and in-depth mastery of at least

one discipline. I think this model is close to the mark, provided that we anchor the broad skillset within the context of **strategic** expertise. Every specialist needs at least an appreciation of marketing strategy.

We have to put an end to “headless” marketing, with either clients being expected to produce the brief for marketers to follow, or the equally ineffective situation of a client hiring a series of individual skill specialists, each of whom may be tempted to undo the work of the previous ones.

This is a very common scenario. A client hears that social media is important, so is email marketing, so is SEO, so is conversion rate optimization... So they go out and hire experts in each of these fields. But that can quickly end up with a car crash, because nobody knows who owns the actual pages on the website, and who has ultimate responsibility when the concerns of these disciplines overlap or come into conflict.

Without a central, clear, well-conceived and comprehensive strategy, even the best-intentioned specialist service providers can find themselves pulling in opposite directions.

I believe we urgently need to develop a **discipline of marketing strategy**, which should permeate the whole online marketing sector, along with a role of marketing strategist, who is responsible for designing and maintaining the marketing strategy that all other disciplines use as they execute marketing campaigns over time.

Responsibility for making subjective decisions about projects should not be left to one person. Instead, we need to develop a strategic plan that we can be confident reflects the objective facts of the present environment, what we have agreed we want to make happen, and the path forward.

It is the marketing strategist’s job to maintain a high-level perspective. They are committed to the strategy, and should therefore remain agnostic to the various tactical choices, other than how well they can serve the execution of the strategic plan.

(Note: it seems that there are very few people stepping up to this role today, which could signify a great opportunity. I did a search on ODesk for people selling the skill “marketing strategy”, charging at least \$100 per hour, and who had done **any** work via ODesk in the past 6 months. The [result](#) was only 27 people.)

If marketing strategy appeals to you, start here...

<http://opensourcemarketingproject.org/strategy>.

## Phase Two: Campaign Design

Campaign Design uses the facts as set out in the Strategy phase to try to plan how best to reach prospects, and how to take them on the journey from first contact to becoming a happy customer.

Note: The strategy specialist is also the ideal person to design a marketing campaign.

The ever-increasing complexity and fragmentation in the marketing sector brings new challenges for the client-facing marketer, whether independent or part of an agency. In fact, the most significant challenge happens to parallel the major problem that clients face today.

In the old Wild West days of web design, life was pretty simple. If you wanted to be online, you needed to hire either a web design agency or a freelance web designer, who would have the skills you needed to get a website.

But success in online marketing today is not just about websites. In fact, many small businesses — who may have paid for a series of poor websites over the years — are finding that they don't need a website at all!

My partner Sally is an expert in Facebook organic marketing (here's the [course](#) we made, which is now free). Sally has **doubled the business** of one of her clients — who doesn't even have a website — using Facebook alone. Another new client just told her that their store's turnover was up £30,000 (almost \$50,000) compared to the same month the previous year, after just three weeks of Facebook marketing!

Am I saying Facebook organic marketing is great for everyone? No! Nothing is great for everyone.

Today, many organizations can market themselves effectively without a website, through traditional media channels such as radio advertising or direct mail, or online using LinkedIn, YouTube, or Facebook. The path to success may be about social media, Facebook pages, SEO, marketing automation, content marketing... or any of a huge range of other channels or techniques.

Or it may not! And that's the problem.

***How is any client supposed to know which channels, platforms, or tactics they need?***

The answer is simple: They can't.

It should not be the client's responsibility to figure out if they need a new website, or if their old one is good enough. They should not be expected to discern whether SEO or PPC or

organic Facebook marketing or blogging or video marketing is best for their needs. How can **anyone** be expected to remain on top of all the different choices?

If even professional marketers cannot maintain mastery of all the choices out there on the market, how can we possibly expect clients to do so? I think we should say goodbye to the idea of the “client brief” for ever, and give clients what they really need: true professional guidance.

Clients can’t even expect to turn to a specialist in any particular discipline for objective cross-discipline direction. Experts only become experts by focusing on one way of solving problems, which can lead to the problem of, “When all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail.”

That’s obviously a problem for clients, but there is a parallel problem for marketing specialists as well. We want to deliver great value and great results to our clients. But, as specialists, we often don’t have the breadth of perspective ourselves to be able to recommend the best direction for the client to take. We will tend to make recommendations based only on what we know well, which means that clients cannot always get the best advice — or the best results.

And we can’t trust Internet Marketing gurus, who make their money selling courses in particular channels or tactics, to give us the honest facts. [There are no magic beans](#). You can’t — and shouldn’t — chase every shiny new thing that comes along (do a search for “[Pinterest marketing course](#)” for an insight).

I cannot overemphasize the importance of building every campaign on a clearly communicated strategy. Because there are so many marketing options available today, and because nobody needs to use them all, we must have a structure to help us discern which options are likely to be most appropriate from those that could be catastrophic.

## Context is Everything

Let me give you just a few examples, from real case studies I have worked on in the past few months...

- Sharon Small is the first accredited trainer in the United States in her particular field, [Clean Language](#). The strategic work I did with Sharon revealed a significant “awareness gap” between her real target audience and their perception of a problem to solve. Because of the scale of the shift in thinking that would need to take place, an email series, sales letter, or video would not be sufficient. In Sharon’s case, the most appropriate marketing channel is actually a full-length **book** — so [that’s what we wrote](#).
- Extreme sportsman and entrepreneur Jeff Whitt has invented an improved design for base jumping containers, which he believes will help prevent chutes from failing to open, and which he is taking to market through his startup microbusiness [Skunk Ape Base](#). Because Jeff’s product is innovative, and because it represents incremental

improvements on kit that his market already owns, he needs to focus his campaign on the **innovator/early-adopter audience**. Without the in-depth strategic review, which asked enough probing questions, we would not have had those insights, and Jeff's message may have missed his ideal audience entirely. (See full [case study](#).)

- I previously mentioned Sally's customer, who is a local mobile butcher. Their particular strategic landscape makes **Facebook organic marketing** the ideal channel to reach their paying market. If they had invested thousands on a website, that money would have been wasted. Without the strategy, this client could have wasted cash that could have been better invested elsewhere.

I could also tell you about...

- a consultant to the printing industry who suddenly realized that two out of his three initial target markets would probably have lost him money...
- the birthing educator who is launching her new business using a crowdfunding campaign instead of the traditional video launch sequence...
- an executive coach who knows he can safely ignore the usual online lead-generation channels and focus on LinkedIn and print media to promote his radical online training platform...

If any of these businesses had taken the familiar route — hired a regular all-round web designer, handed over their brief, waited for their website, and paid the invoice — it is quite likely they would never have seen their money again.

With so many options before us today, every business must get crystal clear on its strategic direction **before** going to market, or risk losing their investment.

So what do we really need?

Clearly, we need to take time to design a campaign that thoroughly addresses every important aspect of marketing. The first vital step to success is in deciding which techniques (channels and tactics) are **appropriate for the particular business context**. No technique is right for everyone. The answers must come from the results of your Strategy work.

Open-Source Marketing breaks the Campaign model down into six steps, which are...

- **Outreach**: Generally raising awareness of the brand and its offers, in order to nurture a potential market indirectly. This should be part of any brand's general activity.
- **Targeting**: Directly identifying our target prospects and getting our message to them.
- **Capture**: Where possible, obtain the prospect's contact details, so that we can continue to market to them directly.

- Nurture: Fully communicate the benefits of the proposition, and try to resolve any objections, until the prospect is ready to buy.
- Close: Make the “sale” (which is not always a financial transaction).
- Continuity: Once we have a new customer, what else can we do to keep them happy, or to get them to engage further?

Each of these steps may be critically important, and each can be executed using a choice of many techniques. Mapping the library of available techniques, together with guidance on when each one may be appropriate, is one of the primary long-term goals of Open-Source Marketing.

Obviously, nobody can possibly have enough experience to know which channels and methods — of the plethora of options available to us — is appropriate for every context.

Now, because Sally is an expert in organic marketing on Facebook, we had created a short course about that technique in 2014. As part of putting together that course, we figured out the exact criteria that would indicate Facebook organic as an ideal marketing channel for a particular business (which you can see in the [first two videos on the free course](#)). But that's just one technique among... dozens... hundreds?

That's why we need to draw on the power of everybody! So Open-Source Marketing is building a continuously-expanding library of interviews with experts in particular techniques. The interviews will address two key questions...

1. In what circumstances is the particular technique **appropriate**? (Crucial for the Campaign Design phase.)
2. If the particular technique is right for us, **how** can we employ it most effectively? (Crucial for the next phase: Campaign Delivery.)

We often find that there is no one clear best approach. In these cases, it is sensible to plan to test multiple candidate techniques in parallel, to discover which may be preferable based on actual data.

For the model and process for Campaign Design, start here...  
<http://opensourcemarketingproject.org/campaign-design>

## Phase Three: Campaign Delivery

Only after we are confident we have a compelling case to take to market, and have planned how we'll deliver every key step, should we build out our campaigns.

The tasks involved in rolling out a campaign are very often far quicker and cheaper than even a typical website publishing project in the old days. But, as we've seen, that increased ease and

speed and lower cost do not necessarily mean success. The key criterion of success is definitely having the right strategy to start with.

Now, the marketing strategist can take more of a back seat, and coordinate **technique specialists**. The campaign plan describes how each of the campaign steps will be delivered with one or more techniques, so each of these should ideally be executed by experts in that technique, each carefully delivering the precise objectives of their piece of the picture.

Being able to invest time and mental focus in their chosen specialty means that technique specialists should be able to get better results faster and more cheaply than non-specialists.

Where feasible, it is usually far more cost-effective for...

- SEO to be done by SEO specialists,
- PPC to be done by PPC specialists,
- Copy to be written by professional copywriters,
- Social media marketing to be done by social media experts, etc.

I should add that, while a general rule, this is not always true. I have seen many great examples of small business owners becoming experts in one or two techniques. But I have also seen many more examples of people wasting huge amounts of time and money by trying their hand at techniques that would have been better left to experts.

In addition to continuity we get from working within an overarching strategic context, a well-executed strategic campaign should look very different to the old web design model.

Under the old model, most of the investment would already have been spent at the time of launch, with clients often paying large sums for a “Big Bang” approach, typically involving a costly website. At this point, the web designers may disappear from the scene, leaving the client to find new service providers for things like SEO, PPC, email marketing, and conversion optimization.

Today, we know that the mechanics of publishing websites, social presences, or landing pages are far quicker, cheaper, and easier than ever before. That changes the whole landscape of campaign execution, putting greater emphasis on getting the essentials right.

Freed from the “Big Bang” economics, I visualize properly-executed projects spreading investment out over a more extended period of time. In order to prepare for that shift, we may need to break our fixation on “final deliverables”, which very much belong in the old model.

Campaigns can also be more like two-way conversations. You will often find that a campaign is based on a few **assumptions**: about the market, their problem, and the proposition that

will most appeal. So we can borrow from the ideas and practices of ***lean startup*** and set out to test and prove or disprove those assumptions as cost-effectively as possible.

Open-Source Marketing is also building a comprehensive set of guides on how to use the full toolkit of marketing techniques effectively, delivered free by experts who have significant practical experience.

Keep an eye <http://opensourcemarketingproject.org/campaign-delivery> to find out more.

## **Your Option: Technique Specialist**

If you know your talents lie in your favored technique, it will pay to become the best you can be. In my inner circle, we have full-time specialists in techniques as diverse pay-per-click, in B2B strategy, and in Google Analytics.

No specialist should operate in isolation. Whatever your specialty, you can always learn from the experience and intelligence of your peers. That's one of the main benefits Open-Source Marketing aims to deliver by collecting the world's knowledge about all marketing techniques in one place.

A move away from fixed teams toward teams of ad-hoc specialists raises some challenging questions for the future of the web design or marketing agency, which I can see dissolving, giving rise to a stronger freelance community made up of self-organizing networks. It is very early days, and I will continue to explore new models along with my inner circle of marketing professionals ([see more](#)).

## **Phase Four: Live Operation**

The old mode of web design was to deliver a high-cost website project up-front, possibly with on-going revenue from hosting or additional services. Not only did this contribute to a problematic “feast or famine” situation for design professionals (which can only tend to drive up fees) but it also did not serve the real needs of clients very well, primarily because that model does not reflect the way the world works.

In reality, all markets are organic, shifting and growing over time, so it is only right that campaigns should also evolve over time in response to new insights or to changes in the environment. Effective marketing should be agile and responsive, constantly watching and listening for new developments.

So any complete campaign should allow for...

- **monitoring** (through Analytics, SEO, and social media tools),
- consistent **interaction** with the customer base (through PR, email, and social media),

- and usually for **optimizing** both conversion rates and traffic sources (SEO, pay-per-click, and social) over time.

The techniques involved in monitoring, interaction, and optimization also belong naturally to **technique specialists**.

It is worth repeating the old cliché, “You can’t polish a turd.” No amount of monitoring or optimization will ever compensate for an ill-conceived strategy.

Additionally, the marketing landscape may change over time, as new competitors or technologies come on the scene. So a campaign should be aware of its environment, and be ready to make changes — even radical changes to strategy — if called for.

For new insights into Live Operation techniques, watch this space:

<http://opensourcemarketingproject.org/live-operation>

## **What Will You Do?**

I have run a few agencies over the years. Around three years ago, I had a great in-house team comprising three professionals: a designer, a producer, and a developer. Two of those three guys are now working in product companies, one going to the WordPress product company WooThemes, and another taking an in-house role with a large domain registrar. The third works at an agency that specializes exclusively in WordPress sites.

Which direction is right for you?

1. **The custom-built, high-end website niche?**
2. **Developing marketing products and platforms?**
3. **Strategy specialist?**
4. **Technique specialist?**

I hope this book has helped you to visualize your own positive future in this wonderful industry.

I would like to offer some next steps, which may also be helpful for you.

- Please make sure you follow Open-Source Marketing. If you are not already on my email list, you can get on it [here](#).
- If you are (or become) a technique specialist, please share your insights with the world via Open-Source Marketing. It’s a great way to help others, and to raise your profile.

- If you would like to join a friendly collective of marketing experts, you may consider [joining my group here](#).

Whatever next step is right for you, I hope you can take that step with confidence that you're part of a new generation that's delivering the great services the world needs.

Thank you for reading!

*Your friend,*  
*Ben*