

Five Simple Steps

A Pocket Guide

Design evolution

by Josh Long

A Pocket Guide to Design Evolution
by Josh Long

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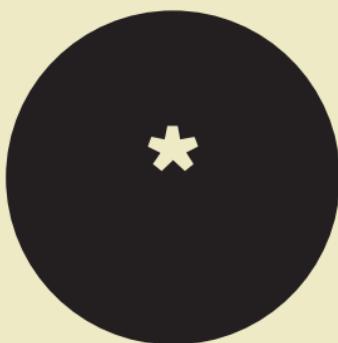
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Introduction

Imagine for a second that you and I are sitting at our favorite bar and you've just launched your first product to great success (thanks to putting into practice my first book, [Execute](#), and Dan Zambonini's [Web App Success](#). Only sort of kidding.). Your small studio needs to take your app or website from a successfully launched idea into a fully fledged business, and you're ready to do whatever it takes to get there. We've met at our favorite bar because you want to know what I think you should do next, and I only have the next three drinks to help you decide.

This book is our conversation.

If you want to know what I think you should do now, I'd tell you that a well-designed product and the business of that product are never done. They are in a state of continuous evolution, hence the title of this book, *Design Evolution*.

Here is what I've always done after the initial success of a product or business:

1. Think design evolution
2. Reduce to the essence
3. Focus on core users
4. Spread the virus
5. Grow through the product

I always make quick decisions on what the long-term business model will be and how I will design and evolve a product within that model. I then put the product through a merciless cutting process to reduce it down to its core. What remains, once it has been distilled to its essence, is a simple product that I can get a thousand people passionately behind. Then, I crystallize the value and idea of the product in a simple phrase. That gives me something to build a virus around. Finally, I keep evolving the simplest and best version of the product by engaging these new customers to help me – and pay me – to build the product they've always wanted.

Time to learn how

So, congratulations on building and launching version one of your product successfully. Doing so puts you in a small group of individuals who have the guts, talent and discipline to see something through.

Now let's turn it into a viable and sustainable business.

(Note: If you want customized and personalized information, feel free to find me and buy me an actual drink at an actual bar. Until then, here we go.)

1

Think design evolution

I have a personal design philosophy that I call “nature and code”. It’s an outlook I use to keep myself and my work in check to make sure I always build something with lasting value and purpose, rather than following a trend.

Nature is one of the best designers we have. It is a purposeful and cut-throat environment that only allows things to survive if they are needed, fulfil a purpose and can adapt. If a particular lizard no longer needs a tail, the tail will disappear. If a woodpecker needs to get deeper inside a tree, over a number of decades the whole species will have a longer beak. If a species of insect relies on an endangered plant and can't adapt to survive, it becomes extinct. You get the point.

In nature, beauty doesn't appear in an instant, but is the result of years and years of small changes that lead to the most magnificent displays of slow, thoughtful, intentional and nurturing design.

Well-designed businesses and products share similar evolutionary behaviours, although their timelines for change are obviously much shorter. If your application contains functionality that isn't being used, it should be removed; with too many functions the product gets bloated and ultimately doesn't survive the competition.

Things in nature evolve to survive and improve, and we should make sure that we are aware of and actively engage in the evolution of our products and businesses as well.

Simple systems

Gall's law states:

"A complex system that works is invariably found to have evolved from a simple system that worked. The inverse proposition also appears to be true: A complex system designed from scratch never works and cannot be made to work. You have to start over, beginning with a working simple system."

John Gall, *The Systems Bible (Systemantics)*, 2002 (1975)

This is one of my absolute favorite laws because I believe it defines the essence of design and nature. Any product or site that we build, and even nature itself, is ultimately a complex system that is made up of multiple simple systems.

It is essential for us to deconstruct and break apart every complex design to fully understand the simple systems that make it up. To secure a product's or business's success as a whole, I always break down and isolate the individual simple systems that it is comprised of to redesign them to improve performance and function. This deconstruction process is applied to both the business and the product individually.

Breaking down the business

One of the tools I use to deconstruct a business is Alexander Osterwalder's [Business Model Canvas](#). I recommend picking up his book, [Business Model Generation](#), if you want to really master the art of designing your business's model.

In this business model canvas, you can break down your business into the following simple systems:

- key activities
- key partners
- key resources
- cost structure
- customer relationships
- customer segments
- value propositions
- channels
- revenue streams

Overleaf: The Business Model Canvas is an effective way to test and visualize your business strategy.

The Business Model Canvas

Designed for:

On: _____

Iteration: _____

	Key Partners Who are our key partners? Who are our suppliers? Which key resources are we acquiring from partners? Which key activities do partners perform?	 What key activities does our business require? Our distribution channels? Customer Relationship? Revenue streams? Key resources required? Key partners required?		Value Propositions What value do we offer to our customers? What new products and services are we offering? What bundles of products and services are we offering? What customer needs are we satisfying?		Customer Segments For whom are we creating value? Who are most important customers? How many segments are there? How are they aligned with the rest of the business model?	
	Customer Relationships What type of relationship do we have with our Customer Segments? How do we report to the established partners? Which ones are most important? How are they aligned with the rest of the business model?			Channels Through which Channels do our Customer Segments want to be reached? How are we reaching them now? Who are our Distribution Channels? What are their costs? Which ones are most cost effective? How are they aligned with customer segments?		Revenue Streams For which value are our customers really willing to pay? How are they aligned with the rest of the business model? How would they profit by buying? How much does each Revenue Stream contribute to overall revenue?	
	Key Activities What key activities does our Value Proposition require? Our Distribution Channels? Customer Relationship? Revenue Streams? Key resources required? Key partners required?				Key Resources What key resources does our Value Proposition require? Our Distribution Channels? Customer Relationship? Revenue Streams? Key resources required? Key partners required?		Cost Structure What are the most important costs driving our business model? Which Key Activities are most expensive? What are the most important resources? What are the most important partners? What are the most important channels? What are the most important revenue streams?
							

This canvas allows you to understand and develop the simple systems inside your business using only a single sheet of paper. If you can find clarity on this single canvas, you're looking pretty good. If your business doesn't make sense on this canvas, then you haven't simplified enough.

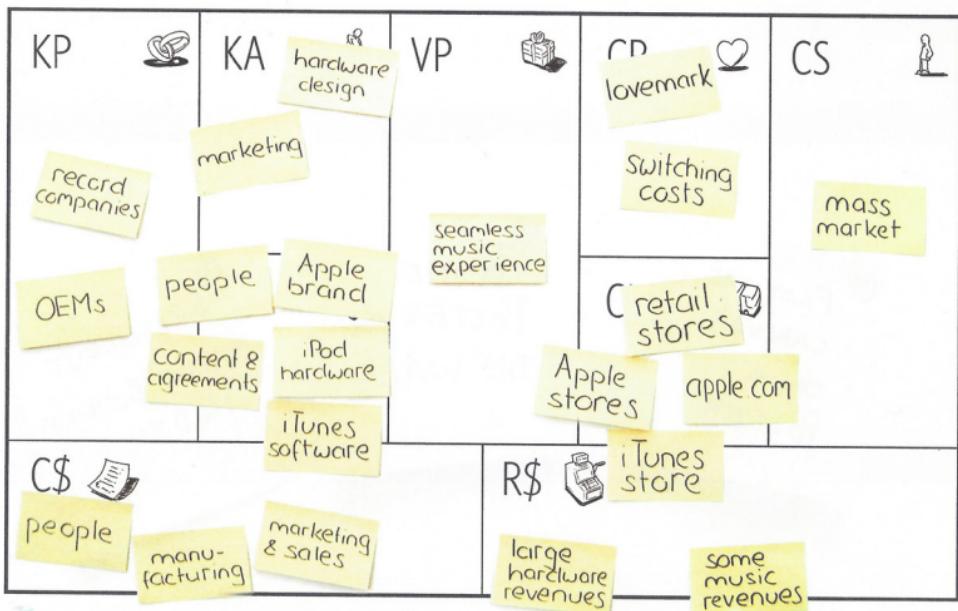
To get really nerdy, break each of these simple systems down into their own simple systems. Just like looking at a plant's cells under a microscope, a business and product can be broken down to the cellular level as well. This gives you deeper understanding and facilitates a more stable and sustainable complex system for your business as a whole.

Here's a breakdown of what each part of the canvas represents:

1. Customer segments: the different groups of people or organizations a business aims to reach and serve.
2. Value propositions: the bundle of products and services that create value for the customer segment.
3. Channels: how a company communicates with and reaches its customer segments to deliver the value proposition.
4. Customer relationships: the types of relationships a company establishes with the customer segments.
5. Revenue streams: the cash a company generates from each customer segment (costs are subtracted from revenues to create earnings).

6. Key resources: the most important assets required to make a business model work.
7. Key activities: the most important things a company must do to make its business model work.
8. Key partnerships: the network of suppliers and partners that make the business model work.
9. Cost structure: all costs incurred to operate the business model.

To put this business model canvas into perspective, here's the iTunes example from Alex's book:



Analyzing your business in this way, whether it's a product, a client site, magazine site or web design firm, will allow you to isolate and improve each area of your business.

You can also dive into each area a level deeper, which we'll do in chapter 4 when we discuss spreading your ideas and marketing your product.

Being able to see and be aware of each portion of your business allows you to grow exponentially, because you can focus on small 10% improvements in multiple areas. This gives you the growth you want without becoming overwhelmed by unfocused dreams of massive growth. Just like in nature, pace is the trick to a steady and long-term growth approach.

Breaking down the product

Now that you've deconstructed your business, and have an objective way to assess it, let's do the same for your product.

In our internet world, a product can mean an application, a client website, a magazine site, an e-commerce site, or a myriad of other digital options. There are even hybrid products that combine digital and physical experiences, like the [Little Printer](#) from BERG, that turns your digital content into a receipt-sized digest.

In the same way that you laid out your business, draw out your own version of a canvas containing each of the individual elements of your product. Separate the functions and the different

pages of your site, app or e-commerce platform into individual elements. Start to evaluate opportunities for incremental change and improvement for each of the elements.

Take the time to print out the separate screens from your site or app and conduct a thorough audit of each element to test its viability, feasibility and desirability. If three of your pages could be reduced or combined into one, it could save you time, money and energy – and could ultimately lead to a simplified experience for your customers. This is an easy and tangible approach to objectively assessing your product.

For example, an app we can all relate to is Twitter. Breaking down Twitter's product would mean separating the profile pages, the settings pages, the API, the web app, the iOS apps, the Android apps, the discovery pages, the image viewer, the on-boarding screens for new users, and so on. Each element should stand on its own and be reworked and challenged on every level and through each interaction. Scour each part for extraneous features – things like double indication, text that could be replaced with icons, large bodies of text that could be edited and simplified, elements that only a few people use – and then tweak them or eliminate them altogether.

Now that both your business and your product are deconstructed, let's cut them down to the core to let a more potent product evolve.

2

Reduce to the essence

“Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des hommes* (translated as *Wind, Sand and Stars*), 1939

In my book, [Execute](#), Drew Wilson and I wrote about the importance of shipping the smallest possible version of your product. One of the biggest killers of products in the internet world is having too many features and so lacking focus.

I know you have big plans and ideas for your product, but now is not the time. With all of the elements of your business and product isolated, you need to put them all on the chopping block. You need to quickly assess whether each element adds true value or is simply nice to have.

For you to grow the business you want, you have to distill the idea and functionality of your product down to be clear, simple and direct. To expand early you'll have to simplify every part of the product as much as you can so that people can get behind the idea, spread the word and help you grow through their use of the product. If not, potential customers can get confused and be picked off one-by-one by more focused competitors.

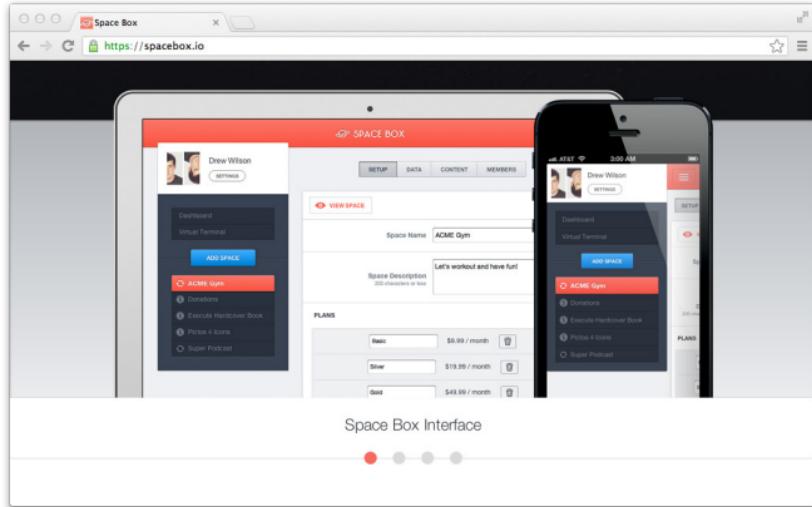
The hot dog stand

An example that I always use to get to the essence of a business or product is what I call the hot dog stand test. The essence of a hot dog stand is the hot dog. Without the hot dog, you have no hot dog stand. Products and businesses always have an essence and this test helps me find that essence every time.



A hotdog stand no longer exists if you take away the hot dog.

When Drew and I assessed his product [Space Box](#) for Execute, we realized that the ability to take payments via the Space Box payment form was the essence of the product. He understood that this was the smallest possible version and that the ability to take payments was the only thing that needed to ship with version one.



Space Box is a PayPal alternative built on Stripe, built in only five days.

Drew had many more ideas for Space Box, just like we all do for our products, but if he had tried to ship them all early in the product life cycle, he would have failed miserably. It would have taken many more months to launch Space Box and all of his momentum would have been lost. Furthermore, his users told him he needed features he hadn't thought of, but if he had spent months including what he initially thought would work, it would have been a complete waste of time and Space Box would have died of feature creep.

By reducing down to the essence, Drew was able to get traction from new users who understood the simple purpose of the product, and now pay him to build out the features that they want. To me, this is the holy grail of a product business: build exactly what people want to pay you for, while they're paying you to build it.

Everything is exponential

Another great reason to cut your product down to its essence is that each feature carries with it exponential challenges. For every feature, person, client, customer, add-on and so on, there are a number of things that can go wrong, things you'll have to support, and things you'll have to pay extra money for.

If you apply the 80–20 rule (the Pareto principle) to your product, you'll realize that 80% of your problems will stem from the 20% of features that most people don't use. Conversely, 80% of your best customers will only use 20% of the features you provide.

Reducing to the essence means merciless subtraction and accepting that to have a stronger base to grow on you'll have to let some of your users go. It requires a lot of discipline, because losing any willing customer is tough at first – but you'll never build a substantial business by catering to everyone. It's been done, but by so few companies that it will make you nauseous just thinking about it.

Be the smallest and best possible version of yourself, because the extra fat always leads to more work with less effect for less than passionate users who will leave you at the first sign of competition.

Polish

Now that you've discovered what the essence of your product is, it's time to tighten up all the loose ends from launching version one and to polish the features that survived the chopping block.

We might have a few design elements on the settings page that weren't perfect when we launched. Maybe there are a few bugs that have been reported and pixels that need to be brushed up. Now is the time to do that. Although the design of a product is never done, the moment you've reduced down to your core is a nice time to make sure that your base product is a polished one.

The essence of your team

In my experience, larger teams tend to be less effective at growth, innovation, communication and execution, among other things. If you've grown to a staff of 50–200, it would be wise to make sure none of your teams are greater than three to eight people. There are many who would argue with me on this point, but in all of my experience I have never seen a large team without inefficiency, bad communication and lack of execution.

Reducing to your essence in business also means reducing to the essence of your team. If you can't get your teams lean at this stage, it will be impossible to do it later without some sort of repercussion.

Eight words or fewer

Now that your business is lean and focused, your product is the best possible version of itself, and your team is tight, there's one more element we'll need before focusing on the next step.

We need to take all of the hard work we've done to get our offerings and operations as simple as possible, and boil everything down to a short phrase, ideally eight words or fewer.

Before we can move on to strengthening our core users, spreading the word about our product or concentrating on growth, we need to be as clear as possible about what we're trying to accomplish. This is the point where all of your hard work becomes a simple and direct statement that customers, team members and media outlets can all rally around.

This may sound easy, but formulating this phrase could be one of the most daunting things you ever do. For the future of your company, however, it is the most crucial statement you could ever write. This statement becomes what people talk about, how they spread your message. It's both a catalyst and a benchmark by which you cross-check every future decision inside your venture.

Some examples of core phrases include:

- Hot pizza in 30 minutes or it's free. (Domino's Pizza)
- The fastest, simplest way to stay close to everything you care about. (Twitter)

- Connect and share with the people in your life. (Facebook)
- Follow the blogs you've been hearing about. Share the things that you love. (Tumblr)
- Happiness is building things the moment inspiration hits. (*Execute*)

If you've ever paid very close attention to the communication that Apple designs (yes, I said designs), you'll notice that for the company and every single product released, Apple will do the hard work of creating a simple, often eight-word phrase for it. Here are a few currently on Apple's site:

- iOS7: The Mobile OS from a Whole New Perspective
- iTunes: Hear Where Your Music Takes You
- Mac Pro: A Sneak Peek at the Future of the Pro Desktop
- MacBook Air: All the Power You Want. All Day Long.

It is extremely hard to formulate such simple phrases – it's a craft in and of itself. Yet, working hard to create such phrases allows you to gain great insight about what messages you wish to communicate. It's important to note that every business is in the communication business and that if you're not completely clear about what it is you hope to accomplish, then you can never expect your customers to be.

Get your eight-word phrases nailed down because you're going to need them to communicate your essence in the next three stages. Create them now and get ready to use them to build a core audience to spread the word about you, and be inspired to help you grow your business.

3

Focus on core users

In nature, wolves form packs in order to survive and thrive. If they attempted to act as free agents and fend for themselves it's likely that they would be picked off one by one and eventually the species would become endangered.

The customers for your site, business or app act in a similar way. If you do the hard work of cultivating a strong bond between the users that you already have, you are more likely to get traction, and the probability that they switch at the first sign of a competitor is slim. If users are only slightly engaged, your competition and the millions of other apps in the marketplace will capture their attention and your market will fade away.

Paid products have always been at the heart of business

The temptation for many businesses and products in our industry is to try to open the floodgates, get as many users as they can for nothing, and then sell to a venture firm for millions of dollars.

I'm here to tell you that those days are coming to an end. Even if you're using free apps, you're paying. You pay for Facebook and your other free favorites with your lack of privacy and by effectively granting permission to sell your loyalty to the highest (advertising) bidder.

I certainly believe there are a few lucky ones that can hit it big. After all, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram started out like every other business. But for most of my friends building products, the future is to charge for them. The concept is as old as business itself and it's the most reliable and authentic way to build a company: provide value that is greater than the value paid for it.

It's clean and the expectations are served up honestly. Paying customers may have higher standards but they're much more likely to be loyal and to afford you a sustainable business.

1,000 true fans

In March 2008, I read what became one of my [favorite articles](#) concerning how to build a customer base. Its author, Kevin Kelly, stated that any creative person – artist, writer, designer or developer – could make a substantial living from only one thousand true fans.

"A creator, such as an artist, musician, photographer, craftsman, performer, animator, designer, videomaker, or author – in other words, anyone producing works of art – needs to acquire only 1,000 True Fans to make a living."

A True Fan is defined as someone who will purchase anything and everything you produce. They will drive 200 miles to see you sing. They will buy the super deluxe re-issued hi-res box set of your stuff even though they have the low-res version. They have a Google Alert set for your name. They bookmark the eBay page where your out-of-print editions show up. They come to your openings. They have you sign their copies. They buy the t-shirt, and the mug, and the hat. They can't wait till you issue your next work. They are true fans."

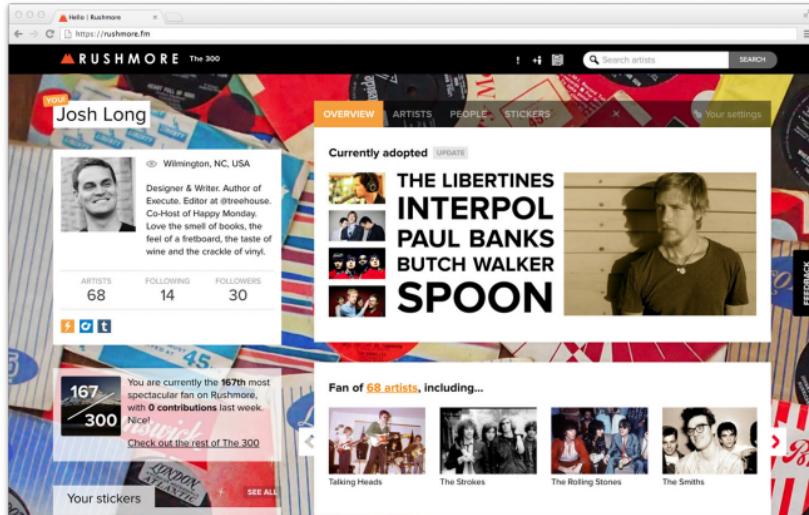
Kevin Kelly, "[1,000 True Fans](#)", 4 March 2008

That phrase, “1,000 True Fans”, has always stuck with me because it shows that being authentic and working hard to win the hearts of only one thousand people can give you everything you’ve ever wanted. It has stuck with me because it’s true. That one phrase drove home the importance of loving and engaging with people that really understand what you’re doing.

In the next chapter we’re going to talk about how to spread your ideas like a virus to get the word out about you and your products. To do that you’ll need to build a strong base of customers who will make up a delivery mechanism or vector to spread that virus more widely. You first have to do the hard work of building the core audience (your thousand true fans) around your product so that you have the focused foundation for creating a vector for your virus. No vector, no virus. No core audience, no sustainable business.

Building on a foundation of fans

One of my favorite companies, [Fictive Kin](#), consistently ships great ideas and great products. They build core audiences in a great way through their purpose pages and their authentic approach to attract focused users. One of my favorite sites online is their music fan app, [Rushmore](#).



When Rushmore started, it wasn't launched and opened to the world. It was reserved for only three hundred people who were responsible for populating the best information on each of their favorite bands. If you weren't a passionate user, you weren't allowed in. By focusing on their core fans and ignoring the masses, Rushmore gained a devoted following and evolved naturally to gain traction.

Extreme users

Another really cool thing I've experienced over and over when first focusing on a core group of fans is that you can learn everything you need to know by engaging with your extreme users.

When I say extreme, I'm not necessarily saying fanatical; I'm really talking about the two groups of users on opposite ends of the spectrum. For example, if you're hoping to create a product to help people quit smoking, you can learn the most from those who smoke three packs a day and the person who just took up the habit. You can find out what got them started and also what it would take the heaviest smoker to stop. The extremes are where you will find the most innovation, and if you have a strong bond with a small group of them, you can take the time to find out what they really want.

Think quality over quantity

As I stated earlier, it is really easy to accept any customer willing to pay you for your product, especially in the beginning. You'll be tempted to cater to everyone's needs and to make everyone happy because you need the money to survive, but experience has taught me that it is much more important to invest time in the people that will love you back.

There is no replacement for finding people who love your work and are behind you all the way. Spend time talking with your first thousand fans: find them on Twitter; engage them in the conversation surrounding your business. Everyone sends out an email asking for feedback, so your message can get lost. Send someone a personal message on Twitter, thanking them and asking them personally for their opinions and suggestions, and you'll receive informed answers and a fan for life.

The future of business is one-to-one. It doesn't scale as well as businesses used to in the past, but all you need is one thousand fans to start. Take the time to focus on those fans. Build your foundation on them. Your future and the evolution of your business rely on them.

In his book, [Tribes](#), [Seth Godin](#) wrote, "A tribe is any group of people, large or small, who are connected to one another, a leader, and an idea. For millions of years, humans have joined tribes, be they religious, ethnic, political, or even musical. It's our nature." People naturally want to be part of something. Forget about having half a million users. Make one thousand people clamour for what you create and take the time to make them feel like part of what you're building. They'll be everything you need from here on out. The rest will follow them.

4

Spreading the virus

Now that we understand the evolution of business, and we've broken our business and products down to their simple systems, we've mercilessly reduced them down to their essence, and we're focused on our first thousand fans – it's time to get the word out.

In the natural world, nothing spreads faster than a virus. We worked our asses off in chapter 2 to distill the essence of our business and express each of the features in our products in eight-word phrases. We've encapsulated our value to our customers in a simple, clear and direct hook that we can now use to build the conversation around our products.

The age of the internet has made me fall in love with marketing again. The web (aside from SEO experts, email spammers, diet supplement companies and recruiters) has made the sales process a little more transparent and has turned the dark art of marketing into more of an industry around storytelling rather than hard-selling.

Gone are the Don Draper days of creating great campaigns around terrible products (well, almost) and the era of authenticity is here. There is a lot of hype around the word authenticity due to companies trying to fake it, but here's the definition I've evolved for business over the years: *authenticity in art and in business means being true to the product and the process that created it.*

To me, marketing is just that simple. Create a solid product, don't promise anything it doesn't do and make good on the promises it does, and tell a compelling story about making the product. In other words, be authentic and spread the word.

Marketing is as easy as 1-2-3

Marketing your business no longer has to be the elephant in the room. It's really hard work but it can be simple if you take the time to deconstruct, plan and execute. Just like with anything else in design, when business growth is distilled to its essence, it becomes simple. Business growth comes down to only three things:

1. Increase the number of customers.
2. Increase the amount they spend per transaction.
3. Increase the number of times they buy.

That's it. Get more customers, who buy more, more often. This is the job of marketing, and creating a spreadable virus makes marketing all that much easier. Note, however, that I'm not talking about creating viral videos. A few brands like Old Spice or even Kmart have managed to do this, but their success isn't something you can count on. I'm referring to, and more focused on, multiple strategies with slow, incremental results.

Nine ways to market

After market research and public relations, there are nine ways I've always used to get the ideas behind a business or product out to those that want or need it most:

1. Advertising
2. Sales
3. Referrals
4. Partnerships
5. Joint ventures
6. Blogs
7. Video
8. Publishing
9. Podcasting

Advertising

Advertising has been around a long time. Today, it's easier and more effective than ever before. Companies like Google and Facebook focus on serving ads that are relevant to you and based on your interests, rather than a more traditional general approach. There are two types of advertising: direct advertising (which is measurable) and brand awareness.

Direct advertising includes things like Google Adwords, Facebook ads, banners, and even snail mail through the post. You can pay for a certain amount of ads and track them for their conversions to paying customers. The idea here is to track conversions for your return per dollar spent.

Brand awareness advertising comprises things like sponsoring conferences, podcasts, industry publications and meetups. It also includes billboards, T-shirts, commercials and other forms of media ads. This type of advertising can be measurable, too, with the use of promo codes and custom URLs, but the main goal is to show support for the industry and build brand equity over time.

Sales

Sales is one of the most underrated skills in our industry. People don't like to talk about sales because of the negative connotation it has received from telemarketers and used car salesmen. The truth of the matter is that if you can find someone who is authentic, knowledgeable of our industry, and knows how to add value before asking for the sell, then you'll have one of the best assets available to you.

I once helped to grow a company that came to generate \$10 million in revenue, based solely on a phone sales team. We developed a strategy of giving prospects a personalized sample of the product, and it led to selling a program for every 2.2 awards we sent out. That kind of result is very hard to find in most companies. The trick is to be smart, witty, genuine, persistent and to know how to provide value before asking for the sell. (And don't be a dick.)

Referrals

The best way to grow a business since the beginning of time is through referrals or word of mouth. [Jay Abraham](#), an author, consultant and expert in the field of marketing, says that people are twelve times more likely to buy from a referral than a cold call or landing page.

The strategy behind referrals is to make sure people know what to say to their friends and that you're actively seeking referrals, as well as rewarding them in some way, be it monetary or a friendly thank you. Have multiple referral strategies, but be sure to think them through and be honest and forthright about them.

Partnerships

Partnerships are a great way to grow quickly from a customer base that someone else has already spent time building. They work really well with companies that offer complementary services to your own, or that serve the same type of customer that you're after. One of the strategies I use to find partnerships is to analyze what customers use before and after they use my company's product or service. I also spend a lot of time on blogs and forums related to what customers use before and after they use what my company offers.

Joint ventures

Joint ventures differ from partnerships in that they are usually just one-time joint offers as opposed to more long-term, concrete agreements like partnerships. A joint venture could be an email

campaign offer that you run with another company, or maybe something like working on a limited edition run with a well-known artist. Either way, they're another way of making the most of an existing customer base.

We all own a media company

The remaining four ways to market are grounded in the new reality of the internet... we all own our own media company. You now have access to free (or inexpensive) video, audio, web hosting and blogging platforms. What used to cost media companies millions of dollars is now offered to you free of charge thanks to the latest technology. The digital era has made growing a business and spreading a virus easier than it has ever been.

Blogs

If you own a company, have a product of any kind, or if you're a creator, you need to have a blog. This is nothing new, but I'm surprised by the amount of people who still don't use this (as good as) free medium.

People are genuinely interested in what you have to say about your area of expertise. They want to know how you think and what you do behind the scenes. One of the best ways to sell someone your products is to let them see the detail of what goes in to making them. Writing has seen an unexpected resurgence as a communication medium between emails, texts, tweets and articles.

Be present and always add to the conversation. For example, wine expert [Gary Vaynerchuk](#) used his personal and company blogs to talk about wine and business, which led him to build a multimillion dollar wine business with a simple video camera. This brings me to our next point.

Video

Video remains probably the most engaging medium available. Are you giving a talk about your area of expertise? Are you in the process of designing a new site or application? Record it. Share it. You're doing it anyway and people are very interested in learning about your process whether you think so or not.

Videos are very shareable and they're easy to cue up for viewing later. I personally can't stand most of what is on TV so I'll save videos to [Organized Wonder](#) and kick back for some enjoyable industry-related viewing.

Treehouse spends a great deal of money creating free content both for the [blog](#) and [our YouTube channel](#). This content is a free resource that adds value to the wider web community, but also gets the word out about Treehouse and our quality. It also happens to be one of our best revenue generators and sources of converting new paying customers.

At [Execute Ventures](#), we used [video to complement the book](#), and we had a full video team travel to Australia to tell the story of the team creating our latest iOS build. We're documenting the entire process as part of the interactive magazine we're building to help people learn, to tell the story of Execute Ventures, and to get the word out about how we're doing things differently.

The important thing to remember about videos is that they should be short and only convey one idea depending on context or content. Remember, too, to always tell stories. People love stories. Be open and honest about the good stuff and the bad. Let people in and you'll make a serious connection that will last for years to come.

Publishing

Publishing, both digitally and physically, is one of the most powerful ways to build credibility inside an industry. Publishing your thoughts and ideas allows people to gain trust in you and your product. Customers can carry your philosophies with them and internalize them as they put them into practice themselves.

You can provide customers with resources to let them get more from your product, just like MailChimp does with its [free email guides](#). It's a way to give back, get your name out there, and get paid in the process.

MailChimp provides free resources to add value to their brand while helping you get the most out of your email campaigns.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL mailchimp.com/resources/. The page has a red header bar with the text "Resources Guides". Below the header, there is a brief description of what MailChimp's guides offer: "MailChimp's guides offer information for email marketing rookies, experts, and everyone in between. We'll walk you through your first newsletter, show you how to use your report stats to write better content, and make sure you know all the spam laws. Whether you're an email pro or just exploring your options, there's a MailChimp guide for you." Below this text are four thumbnail images for different guides:

- Getting Started With MailChimp**: A green cover featuring a silhouette of a person standing next to a laptop.
- Email Marketing Field Guide**: An orange cover featuring a silhouette of a dog.
- Understanding Reports**: A white cover featuring abstract geometric shapes.
- MailChimp for High-Volume Senders**: A dark cover featuring a tree and the text "HIGH VOLUME SENDERS".

At Execute Ventures we're using publishing in a multifaceted way. We have the book *Execute*, as well as Execute Magazine, Execute Guides, the [*Execute Podcast*](#) and the Execute Blog. These are all channels for creating value, helping people learn to build what inspires them, and it also helps us build a business. Publishing is hard work, but it's a win-win situation for everyone involved when it's done properly.

Podcasting

I used to have my doubts about podcasting, but since [Sarah Parmenter](#) and I started [Happy Monday](#), all of my doubts went out the door. I've never had so much fun talking with industry friends and thought leaders in the world of design. Although we're not selling anything, we're giving back to the community we love and it's keeping us involved in our industry conversations.

Happy Monday is a short-burst industry podcast that I co-host with my good friend Sarah Parmenter.

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying the Happy Monday Podcast website. The main title "HAPPY MONDAY" is prominently displayed in large white letters against a dark blue background. Below the title, a subtitle reads "A new, short-burst, Industry podcast available every Monday from 7am GMT." A banner at the top of the page features the logos for "HARVEST" and "MailChimp". The main content area displays episode 023, featuring a photo of Jason Santa Maria and the text "Monday 20th May 2013". Jason Santa Maria is described as a graphic designer living and working in sunny Brooklyn, NY. To the right of the episode details are two buttons: "SUBSCRIBE ON ITUNES" and "SUBSCRIBE VIA RSS". Further down the page, there is a section titled "SHOW NOTES" which includes links to "Editorialy", "Jason on Twitter", "Jason on Dribbble", "Mailchimp", "Typekit", and "Virtu Promo code: happymonday 50% off".

To get started in podcasting, it required a computer that we already had and a \$200 microphone. I look forward to recording Happy Monday every week and because of sponsorships, it actually pays more per hour than most website contracts would.

Another great example of using podcasting to build a business would be Paul Boag and his company, [Headscape](#). He used his [podcast show](#) as a way to add value to the community while getting his name out there about design and marketing. If you're timely and consistent, podcasting can be a low-cost and effective form of marketing.

Letting your marketing evolve

Just like everything else we've discussed so far, marketing is most effective when deconstructed and designed to evolve incrementally based on a multilayered strategy.

Take your eight-word phrases and use them to develop your business through the three simple ways to grow, by releasing them through the nine different marketing channels we've just discussed. It's much easier when you execute on the cellular level. The point of laying this marketing strategy out for you is to show you how I incrementally expand the businesses I build without killing myself in the process.

The goal is to work toward a small 10% increase in the three ways to grow, and a small 10% increase in the performance of each of the nine channels. That's what will lead you to a manageable and exponential growth in your business and product.

Now that we've talked about how to create a spreadable virus to get the word out, and we've got a good foundation built on passionate users, let's talk about how to evolve even further by growing through the product itself.

5

Grow through your product

So here we are at the last step – except there really is no last step. Nature and evolution just have cycles. Everything that we've talked about so far just keeps repeating and you just keep revisiting every single cell or simple system involved.

Most people start with this step. They add feature after feature before the product ever launches. They build what they think will work, and they spend months and thousands of dollars on guesswork.

But not you. You've reduced your product back to its essence, back to the smallest possible version. You've made your product clear and turned it into a simple idea that your thousand most ravenous fans can rally behind. You've armed them with what to say and you've opened all the marketing channels to have the many conversations necessary for building a great product and the perfect business for you.

Spend the money where it matters

Now that you've done your work and have your core audience, it's time to avoid the mistake most startups or businesses make: spending money on creating tricks to make people buy.

I have seen business after business spend money on ridiculous affiliate programs, deal sites, and other off-handed tricks to bring in new customers. It's time to save that money and put it back into the product. At this stage in your business, you need to grow through your product.

Prototyping

"[P]rototypes allowed us to see things in one of two ways: Things that don't work, and things that need work."

Teehan+Lax, "[The Making of Medium.com](#)"

In the evolution of a design, the prototyping never stops. Once you've reached this point in a product or business, it's time to focus your efforts on building features that are so good, your core fans will rave about them.

In other words, you can spend money trying to convince people to buy, through channels that focus on putting icing on an average cake, or you can invest that money in building remarkable products that people will spread for you.

The Google video strategy

If the Google product team has a new idea they would like to prototype, they do a nice little test that I think we could all benefit from. Before any work is done on a product idea, the product team engages Google's video team to create their own interpretation of what the product would look like.

Following a short brief of the idea, the video team gets to work. The final video gives the product team an objective look at whether or not their ideas have merit. If they do, there's now a nice story to drive the communication to all of the parties involved.

I love this idea and have been implementing it lately to avoid

spending too much time and money on a feature that would never have made sense to the general public. If it does make sense, then having a video like this helps the design and development teams communicate on what needs to happen with the feature build.

[According to TechCrunch](#), when Dropbox was originally demoed, it wasn't even a real product. The Dropbox team used video to create a roadmap of what features were important to users before they even built anything.

Design for laziness

Another area to focus on when evolving the design of a product is to help your customers be as lazy as possible. When conducting my research for this book, I had a conversation with designer [Yaron Schoen](#), the former design lead of the Twitter team in New York City.

He told me that his approach to design was that he was lazy. He wanted to create great designs because he was inherently too lazy to want to do any work. Now, I know Yaron, and I know how hard he works, but what he said really resonated with me. If you're going to build a product, put yourself in your customers' shoes and eliminate any unnecessary steps.

We build these great products, but we should constantly look to evolve the product in a way that helps our users do as little as possible, to be as lazy as they want to be. Do our users want to fill out an eight-step process to find their friends? No. They just want to log in and have all of their friends right there to choose from.

Our great fans are very busy just like we are, and we should strive to isolate the individual elements of our product and focus on making each of them as lazy as possible.

After all, the easier something is to use, the more it will get used. Design and redesign every individual element of your products so that they're easy to use, easy to share and easy to talk about.

Growth through amazing features

My friend Allan Grinshteyn is the CEO, co-founder and lead designer of the great design versioning product, [LayerVault](#). (If you want my opinion, he's one of the designers to really watch over the next few years.) I often find myself selling LayerVault on their behalf because of the great stories behind the amazing, thoughtful and well-designed features that they launch. They design and build features that no one else has done before. They're inventive, have great taste, and they execute consistently.

New features are announced on the [LayerVault blog](#). You'll notice that each has a story and they're a great mix of open source value, free new features, thoughtful problems that they solved for themselves, and ways to allow their users to be as lazy as possible. They could spend their time and money trying to figure out new ways to get PR or to hire some marketing firm, but instead they focus their time, money and energy on making the product better.

This arms people with new content to talk about constantly and it ensures that your product remains the topic of discussion. I buy from LayerVault, not only because their product is great, but because they've earned my trust that it will constantly evolve to be better. They've shown their customers that they care and that they obsess over making LayerVault an inventive product for the long-term.

At Treehouse, we're constantly doing the same. Our design and development teams have been iterating and launching new features consistently. There's a new interface for the app, new profiles containing a points system for more interaction, new text editors and code challenges, and a new forum to help students and facilitate the conversation about all of our great new features.

So, reinvest your time and money into the evolution of your product for growth. The easy route would be to pay to get new users, but the more effective and long-term growth strategy is to get your fans to grow it for you by giving them something to be passionate and excited to talk about.

Growth through fan-only invitation

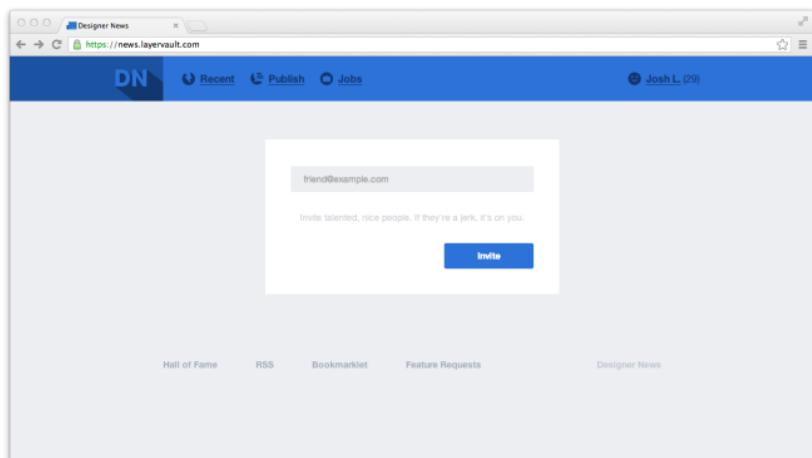
Earlier in this book I talked about [Rushmore](#), my favorite music cataloging app from the great guys at Fictive Kin. They were able to get traction with a small, niche idea by limiting who was allowed in. People like to feel special. They like to feel like they're part of something special.

This kind of environment is great for building your first thousand fans, but it also leads to a higher quality of new users. When Rushmore started letting its three hundred users invite a few friends, they only invited people who would care about Rushmore as much as they did.

When LayerVault created [Designer News](#) they only initially invited people who they knew would honour the product, contribute great content, and neither spam nor dilute the product's integrity. When they finally let fans start inviting people, they said, "invite talented, nice people. If they're a jerk, it's on you."

You see, the pace of a solid product's evolution is extremely important in today's competitive internet world. Growing through your fans won't get you an overnight mass audience, but it will give you a strong, oak-like foundation for your ideal business to evolve from.

Designer News is bold but effective in its copy regarding the invitation-only process.



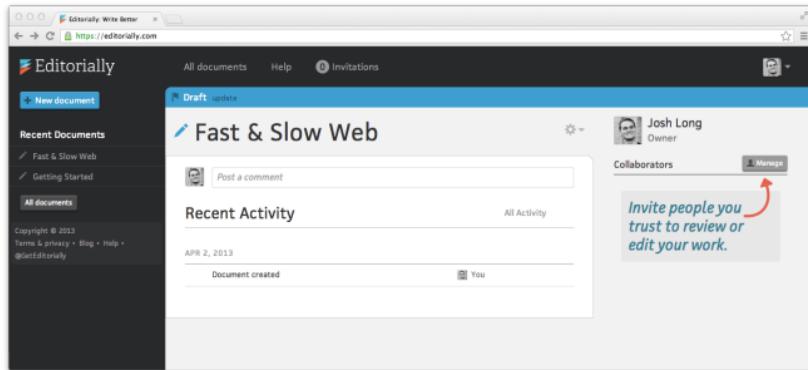
The screenshot shows a web browser window for 'Designer News' at the URL <https://news.layervault.com>. The page has a blue header bar with the 'DN' logo, 'Remain', 'Publish', 'Jobs', and a user profile for 'Josh L. (29)'. Below the header is a large white input field containing the placeholder 'friend@example.com'. Underneath the input field is the text 'Invite talented, nice people. If they're a jerk, it's on you.' followed by a prominent blue 'Invite' button. At the bottom of the page, there are links for 'Hall of Fame', 'RSS', 'Bookmarklet', 'Feature Requests', and the 'Designer News' logo.

Growth through collaboration

One of the more recent strategies I've noticed for growing through a product is growth through collaboration. Obvious Corporation, the company behind Twitter, recently launched its new product, [Medium](#). Medium is an invitation-only publishing platform that has been able to maintain some of the best content standards on the web. Its growth through invitation only shows that you can set the pace for strong evolution by being selective in your user acquisition.

What makes Medium even more intelligent in this approach is that it now lets you invite your friends to become collaborators and help you to be a better writer. Think about what this does. It is a feature that helps its fans, while helping Medium grow with high-quality users that you would trust as editors. In other words, Medium fans are filling Medium with quality users because they won't just invite anyone. They want to invite the best writers they know. Brilliant.

A similar strategy is being deployed by my favorite new writing app, [Editorially](#). Jason Santa Maria, Mandy Brown and Ethan Marcotte are just a few of the brilliant individuals behind this great new product. They are also being very smart about who they invite, and current users can only invite the three people they think are the best writers and editors to collaborate with. It's a solid product that I feel passionate and optimistic about. (I even used it to write this book.)



Editorially is my new favorite writing tool, but for now you have to be invited to use it.

The team at Mark Boulton Design followed a similar launch strategy when they released [Gridset](#), one of my favorite tools for creating, prototyping and producing grids for layout on the web. The product was able to improve at a good pace based on real-time feedback from beta testers.

Growth through collaboration could be one of the strongest and most intelligent forms of design and user evolution that I've seen of late, and it's definitely something to consider for your product as well.

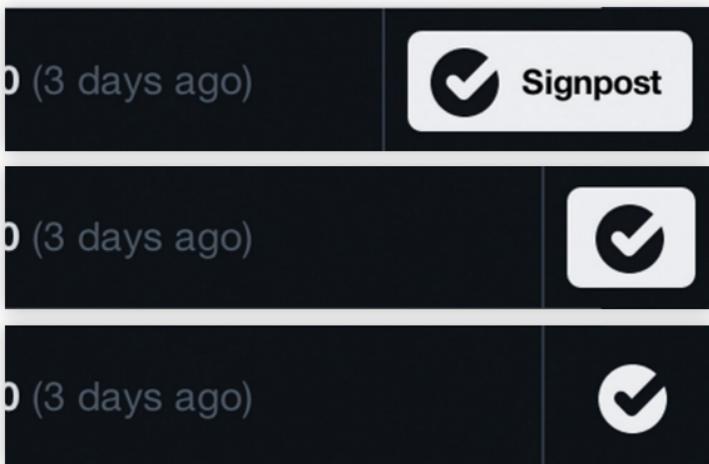
The future of product evolution

I hope that by highlighting a few examples of growing through a product I've convinced you of the value of reinvesting your resources into making your product better for the people that need it most.

Too many companies focus on getting new users in the funnel, but this is backwards and less productive to say the least. In chapter 4, I talked about how word of mouth was the best way to grow a business – giving your fans great features to talk about is the best way to instigate more word of mouth.

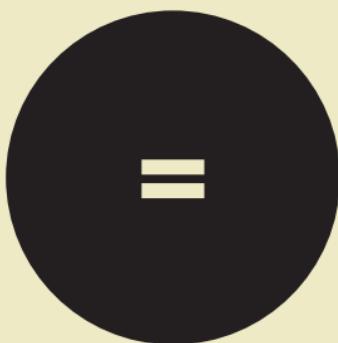
In the grand scheme of things, the internet, websites and applications are still very new. The future of product evolution will see smart apps and sites that adapt to our individual behaviors. LayerVault is already experimenting with this using [progressive reduction](#) and other forms of app intelligence.

LayerVault continues to innovate by thinking about the future of applications and how they evolve.



LayerVault tracks your use of the majority of the features they offer. As you use certain features more and more, and become familiar with the interface, the visual indicators of those functions are scaled back to let the app evolve a simpler and cleaner user experience.

In the near future our apps will come to learn our behaviors and they will evolve further to fit us better on an individual level. The physical world has always been able to give us quality products that, when made well, actually improve with age. Think of an old leather briefcase, or an antique dresser. These products get so much better as they form to your lifestyle, your personal habits, and even your own body. Until now digital products haven't been able to do that, but we're on the edge of seeing this come to light. I say that to leave you with thoughts about the future of your own products.



Conclusion

It's been nice talking with you. Thank you for the drinks. But before we leave our favorite bar, let's just recap what's worked for me and what we've decided you should do from here.

1. Understand that businesses and products evolve, and that knowing this puts you in a proper mindset for accomplishing your goals and beating any competition you might have.
2. To find its essence, reduce your product until there's nothing left to remove.
3. Translate that essence and craft your value into a simple eight-word phrase to gain a deep understanding of your business and the features of your products.
4. Focus on improving that value for your thousand true fans.
5. Focus on slowly increasing that fan base by getting 10% more customers, who buy 10% more, 10% more often.
6. Do this by spreading your virus and by improving 10% on advertising, sales, referrals, partnerships and joint ventures.
7. Do that through communicating your value via blogs, videos, publishing and podcasting.
8. But most importantly, grow through making your product better for your fans so they'll help you grow your business.

This process is by no means perfect, but after twenty years these are the patterns I've seen work time after time, for business after business. They have worked in both physical and digital worlds – it's a slow and steady strategy for building businesses and products that last.

I have thoroughly enjoyed putting these thoughts and strategies into a quick pocket guide for you. I hope they help you as much as they've helped me in the past. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and using the great products you'll build.