

# Making the Front Page of HN Without Even Trying

November 7, 2010 //

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... or without even knowing it, for that matter.

This post is about the recent launch of our start-up, Page99Test.com, and an interesting phenomenon I first heard coined by Jason Roberts of TechZing fame (a podcast I highly recommend for tech entrepreneurs): “**Luck Surface Area**”. As I understand it, Jason believes that by putting yourself out there... blogging, podcasting, commenting in online discussions, and following up with every customer and user, you increase the likelihood of having a serendipitous moment. It’s a fun concept to consider – but perhaps less of a scientific occurrence than yet another example of the Law of Averages. Whatever your belief system, something very interesting happened on the day of our launch...

For a little context, our Web site (which lets published and unpublished writers upload page 99 of their book or manuscript and get immediate first-impression feedback from readers on the quality of their writing) was launched in beta on October 10<sup>th</sup> (10/10/10) to about 100 people who had signed up on our pre-launch landing page.

During our 2-week beta test period, I had tried [unsuccessfully] to get some initial traction on Hacker News by writing a few posts on this blog about launching a start up, building an audience, etc. My attempts were likely unsuccessful because just as we were preparing to launch, there was a glut of “Ask HN” submissions for Rate My Start-up that were seeing fewer vote-ups and fewer promotions to the HN home page. So much for serendipity.

I had mentioned my goal (and fast-becoming obsession, frankly) of writing something of value for the HN community and landing on the front-page to my partner – in business, life, and love – who is always supportive of my endeavours, crazy as they may be (thank you, Joanna!). She is also an amazing Web copywriter and agented fiction writer who always reviews my blog post titles for ‘click appeal’ (like sex appeal, but for... well, you know). So when she learned of my obsession, she decided to spend some time on Hacker News to see what all the fuss was about. And in the time that she spent reading a few posts, she responded to a simple request for help by a HN member named Shereef, who was looking for some copywriting tips for his start-up, BetterMeans.com.

Being the generous person that she is, Joanna offered to help put together a brief list of recommendations that Shereef could implement on his site. But Shereef had no idea what he was about to receive. And with absolutely no expectations – and nary a mention of her work on BetterMeans.com to me – Joanna compiled a thoughtful and detailed list of best practices and recommendations on writing more effective copy for Shereef. I’m sure she thought that would be the end of it.

Fast forward about a week to October 26<sup>th</sup>... official launch day for Page99Test.com – and which also happened to be Joanna’s birthday. We spent the day making sure that when we launched the site to the 2,100 people who left us their email addresses, there would be no user experience or technical glitches – having read enough horror stories about sites that managed to get some tech news big coverage but collapsed under the traffic pressure (oh, but what a problem to have!).

We sent out our launch email and posted to Twitter and then got ready to head out for a romantic birthday dinner. We came home after an evening of awesome food and wine and couldn’t help but take a quick look at our traffic using Google Analytics. To our astonishment, traffic had soared while we were out, with our site receiving over 2,000 visits in the time it takes to finish a 5-course meal.

Thanks to Shereef’s gracious acknowledgement of Joanna’s work, the HN post received 423 points and 120 comments in 24 hours, landing easily on the front page and staying there for a good stint... and Joanna’s PPT deck (that Shereef posted to SlideShare) saw more than 7,500 views in that period.

**Post on Hacker News:** <http://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=1836538>

**Joanna’s PowerPoint deck:** <http://www.slideshare.net/shereefb/recommendations-for-bettermeans>

During the burst of activity on HN, Joanna received many requests for copywriting advice, and true to form, she’s making her way through a bunch of Web sites – despite being extremely busy with our own start-up and her day job as a senior Web copywriter for Intuit. She (and I) has also been fortunate to connect with some amazing people as a result of that one post – like Patrick McKenzie

of Bingo Card Creator and Appointment Reminder.

Whether you call it karma or expanding your luck surface area, it's clear to me that sometimes you can try too hard and miss out on letting good things happen. While I tried for weeks to think up creative ways to get some Hacker News love, Joanna was just herself and ended up with one of the biggest recent posts I've seen on HN about someone's generosity.

Good things come from doing good deeds. It pays to be generous and help others out, because you never know who you're helping, and it may come back to you many times over – in ways that you can't even imagine.

Thanks, Joanna. I love you.

Lance

Tags BetterMeans, generosity, Hacker News, karma, luck surface area, TechZing  
Categories Being a startup, Great ideas

## 7 Comments

*page99test*

November 7, 2010 at 4:10 pm

Awww... shucks. 😊 ~joanna

Reply

*Michael Woloszynowicz*

November 7, 2010 at 5:30 pm

It was great to read this post as I was one of the luck individuals to find the deck that joanna submitted. I shared this deck with my Twitter followers as the advice she gave really resonated with me. It contained lessons that any business can learn from and there were lots of tips that I plan on incorporating into my business. Great job Joanna! Also, the page 99 test site looks great, best of luck with the venture.

Reply

*Josiah*

November 7, 2010 at 5:46 pm

Silly question but doesn't it take a day to see Google Analytic traffic? I use other services for real-time stat reporting for this reason.

Reply

*page99test*

November 7, 2010 at 6:10 pm

Hey Josiah, fom what I can tell, there is about a 3 hour latency — for my GA account, anyway. I've heard good things about Clicky...

Reply

*rachna*

November 7, 2010 at 6:51 pm

I remember reading your post on the page99test, and also Shereef's post about Joanna's PPT, on HN. I strongly believe in karma, and am glad Joanna's good karma did great for your startup. 😊 All the best with your startup!

Reply

*stat arb*

November 7, 2010 at 9:56 pm

You might increase your chances of "serendipity", but it can also be a deadly time-sink!

Reply

*Kahlil Lechelt*

November 8, 2010 at 12:49 am

Wow, I just checked out Joanna's slideshow. That was some amazing feedback!

I am very impressed.

Good for you guys! I wish you much success!

Reply

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