Graham Cox presents...

An Interview with Viral List Builder Dan Thompson

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Q1 - For anyone not familiar with your name, could you give a brief rundown of your internet marketing career and how you got started?

Sure – I started marketing when I was in my final year of college. I was studying for an HND in BIT (Higher National Diploma in Business Information Technology) and I really had to start thinking about what I wanted to do at the end of the course with the qualifications that I had achieved.

I live in a small Village in the Yorkshire Dales (UK), so if I wanted to get a good job with my qualifications it would mean having to commute on a daily basis to either Leeds or Manchester which would be around 2 hours of travelling each day.

This didn't appeal to me but I couldn't think of any other options that were available to me, apart from taking a job that I would have been over-qualified for which again, didn't appeal to me. You are probably thinking that the sensible thing to do would have been to think about all of this **BEFORE** I started the course, and you would be right, but when you are young and ignorant you don't think about these things!

This dilemma continued to run through my head for the next few weeks and it was really starting to get me down. I had become so desperate that I started to look for “get rich quick” schemes on the internet, in the back of my mind I knew there was no such thing but I was desperate.

I then turned my attention to eBay and again, started to look for “ready to go” businesses. I came across John Thornhill's PlanetSMS eBook selling business and I decided to give it a try, I was really lucky because I managed to “hit gold” with my very first purchase, I could have spent hundreds of pounds on really bad eBay “ready to go businesses” but I found a gem straight away!

As soon as I logged in to the members area and started chatting to John and

other members on the message board I was intrigued by everything. There was a lot of information to take in but slowly and surely everything started to make sense and within a couple of weeks I had listed my first lot of eBooks on eBay.

I was doing quite well but it wasn't enough to make a living from, however I decided to stay at it and I was lucky to have parents that would let me give it a try. A lot would have told me to get real and go find a “real” job but they stood by me and everything has turned out well now, it took around a year for me to start making “real” money but that first year really helped me get a good grounding in the IM business and I wouldn't change it for anything.

Q2 - For anyone new to online marketing, would you recommend eBay as a good place to start? And if so, why?

I started out by selling eBooks on eBay and it's still a great place to get your feet wet, but I do think that eBay is becoming very saturated now and it's a totally different ball game from when I first started. I stopped selling on eBay around 6 months ago, not because it wasn't profitable, but purely because it was too time consuming and the time I was spending taking care of my eBay customers would have been better off spent else where.

Saying that I do still believe that eBay is a good starting point and can still be a great way to find new customers. If I were just starting out today, I would find it much easier to make sales via eBay than if I were to put up a website selling my goods. Ebay can be a good starting point but I think you also need to know when it's time to look at the bigger picture. By all means use eBay as a lead generator, but don't make eBay the centre of your online business – there are just far too many variables that you have no control over!

Q3 - Why do you think you've been successful online?

I think the first reason was my background. I was trained in computing so I already had a good understanding about the technical side of things – how to

upload a website, set up email filters, provide download links and so on, I think if I came in “blind” it would have been much harder for me to get started.

I'm not saying that you can't make a success of things if you are a technophobe but I think it defiantly helps if you have a good understanding of the basics before you start.

The second, and most important thing for me was that I managed to find some great people to work with. It can seem like a very lonely place sat behind your computer all day but when you have friendly, knowledgeable people around you it makes things a lot easier.

I'm going to do a bit of name dropping here but there's no way that I would be where I am today without the help of the following people – John Thornhill, Paula Brett, Dave Nicholson and Derek Chambers.

There are a lot more people that have been a great help to me, such as JV partners, customers, graphic designers and so on, but I feel that those 4 people helped to get me started so I owe them a big deal of thanks

Q4 - What, in your opinion, are the most important characteristics of successful online marketers?

One word – **PERSONALITY**

If you are an online marketer one of the fundamentals you must be able to do is communicate with people, this can be in the form of an email broadcast, a sales page to sell your product, a forum post, a conference call and so on.

If you can't communicate with people in a way that makes them want to listen to you then you are fighting an uphill battle. Try and put it to the test, think about the amount of email broadcasts you receive each day, which do you actually read?

I'd like to bet that you read the emails that contain a bit of humour and personality, rather than the emails that drag on and on and on and never seem to get anywhere!

The same goes for sales pages, would you buy a product from a site that sounds like the page has been written by a robot that has used a cookie cutter sales page template? Sure, the important points would be there, it would have a nice big headline, some of the more important points highlighted in bright yellow...but it's boring as hell!

You need to add personality to everything you do, try something different, make your page or site individual, it's vital to make your goods stand out from the crowd – use audio and video to add even more personality to your sales pages or ebay listings! - Apologies for the mini-rant, can you tell that it's something I feel quite strongly about? ;-)

Q5 - If you were starting out today from scratch and you had to make a $1000 in 30 days from online marketing, what would you do?

You asked for honest answers, so I'll give you one.

If you are just starting out and you need to make $1,000 in 30 days then I would tell you that you were in the wrong business – go get a regular 9 to 5 job. It can take months, if not years to get to that level, Internet Marketing is by no means a quick fix solution to ease your financial woes, it's a very high risk business, some people make it but others don't.

If you still want me to answer the question then the easiest, quickest, and most certain thing to actually work would be to gather a lot of your unwanted house hold items and sell them on eBay, you would easily make over $1,000 in 30 days....but you'd be left with a very empty house!

If you had been marketing for a few months and had managed to build up some relationships with past customers and potential JV partners then it would be easier for you to achieve that figure and some more besides. I would first create a new info product, most probably a “How To” guide, mainly because I quite like writing them and they tend to sell well! I would then look for JV partners as well as launching to my own list.

Q6 - You've created successful software products such as AuctionSOS and Boomerang List Builder. Where did the ideas for those products come from?

My first software product was actually quite an unsuccessful venture but it did help me in the long run - Auction SOS! In hindsight wasn't one of my best moments, it sold well but it was a nightmare to maintain. It first started out with me wanting to try something different, I had written a few eBooks and was ready to start on something new, I could have written a new eBook but I decided I would take a risk and try something totally different.

So I decided in a moment of madness to create some software, that was the first mistake that I made. I decided that I was going to create “a” piece of software, but what was that software going to do?....I had no idea!

At this time I was still selling eBooks on eBay so I decided that my software would be an application that worked in conjunction with eBay. I had built up a list of customers from eBay so I sent out a mailing asking them about things they didn't like about eBay, and asked them how it could be improved.

I got a lot of replies and quickly noticed that the same suggestions appeared in multiple emails. If a suggestion appeared more than once I would make a note of it and then look to see if it was something that could be included in the software.

I eventually narrowed it down to the five most popular features and then started

to write a detailed specification, ready to submit to the programmer.

After the software was created I released it to the public and it sold quite well. Unfortunately I hadn't considered the on-going problems that would be associated with such a program. The software was coded in such a way that meant if the layout of the eBay site changed in any way, it would mess up the software, so lot's of updates were needed to keep up with the constant changes implemented by eBay.

After a while we (me and the programmer) decided that it was no longer feasible to continue selling the software, it was costing more to maintain the software than we were making in sales so in late 2007 we discontinued Auction SOS!.

Rather than letting this put me off software development altogether, I used the experience to make sure that my next products didn't suffer from the same problems.

I wasn't actively looking to create a new software product but one day I came across a piece of software that looked like it had huge potential, but it was being implemented and marketed really badly.

The user interface was a mess, the instructions were complicated and everything about the software and the sales page was just badly put together. The idea behind the software was great, but when they put it into practice it turned into a bit of a monster!

I sensed an opportunity and started to write down some ways that I could improve the software, this included adding new features, totally changing the interface and making everything a lot more user-friendly and “mainstream”.

After spending a couple of weeks writing out a full specification I sent it over to my programmers and they started coding like they had never coded before!

Within a few weeks I had a beta copy and it was perfect, everything worked as it should and most of all you didn't need to be a computer genius to use it. I launched the software to the public and the feedback has been great, people seem to love the simplicity of the software which is great as this was one of the main things I was aiming for.

Development is currently on-going on a Boomerang List Builder upgrade that includes some new requested features, as well as a brand new “Pro” feature that I can't really say too much about at the present time as we are still in the development stages but fingers crossed it will take the software to a whole new level!

Q7 - Do you create the software yourself or do you outsource it?

As you've probably already guessed I outsource the coding of the software. I trained in computing so I have a sound grasp of programming but it's a lot quicker and easier for me to out-source.

I find that it helps a lot if you have a basic understanding of coding if you are planning to launch a software product, not only for dealing with support requests but when you are planning the software, you have a sound idea of what can and can't be done!

It also helps when you have to write the specification, programmers tend to speak in their own secret language so if you can write the specification in the language they understand you shouldn't have any problems!

Q8 - Do you do any market research before creating your products?

I already touched on this in Q6, but yes, I do tend to do quite a lot of research before starting on a product. After all, what's the point in making the world's best product if nobody is going to buy it?

I think this is a point that a lot of people fall down on, they will create a product and then complain about bad sales. When asked if there is a demand for their product they have no idea because they haven't done any research!

I did a post on my blog covering why research is so important:

http://www.elpassoblog.com/do-your-research/

I mainly used my list when I was researching my Auction SOS! Software, but for the Boomerang List Builder software I decided to do something different. I did the basics like taking a look at the keyword searches for related terms, I had a look at the competition, but then I decided to run a poll on my blog.

I didn't come straight out and say “I'm making some new software that will let you collect the email address of anyone that uses the product...would you buy it?!”

I simply asked them some very broad questions that related to the software. As well as getting some general feedback it also made them curious about the final product and helped the sales when I did eventually launch.

Q8 - What has been your most successful traffic generation strategy?

I think that in the short term the best way to get a big surge of traffic to your sales page is through joint ventures, however I think you need to remember that these are short term solutions for generating traffic.

You will have one or two days when the sales flood in from JV partners but the the traffic dies back down to a trickle again.

I think it's important to have long term traffic generation plans in place, a lot of people tend to shy away from it but I do love it when my sites generate traffic

from the search engines.

If you can get on the first page of Google for a decent keyword then you will be able to see a steady flow of traffic to your site each and every day. My most profitable website isn't related to internet marketing and all of the traffic comes through organic (non PPC) traffic from Google and Yahoo!

People also recommend having your own affiliate program to drive traffic to your sites, this can work but in reality very few, if any of your affiliates will turn out to be “Super affiliates”. The majority will sign up for your program, place a banner on their website and forget about it.

I'm not saying that driving traffic to your sites purely through affiliates isn't possible but it certainly takes a lot of work to attract good affiliates that are going to do more than just place a banner on their website.

Q9 - Do you attend any internet marketing seminars or groups? Have they been a big factor in your success?

I'm going to come clean....I have never been to any seminars or meetings. :-0

I have nothing against seminars or group meetings, but it's just finding the time to attend that is the problem!

Q10 - Tell us why you started your web hosting company D9, and what you did to stand out and prosper in such a competitive market as web hosting?

D9 Hosting is run by me, and my business partner Paula Brett. We were both fed up of bad web hosts, it seemed impossible to find a host that provided reliable servers with good uptime alongside fast, friendly and knowledgeable support staff.

We found that it wasn't only us that had this problem, we both provided website/script install services and the amount of time that web hosts were unable to help customers with basic information and requests was unbelievable, on some occasions you would have to wait 3 – 4 days for a reply, and even then the reply had nothing to do with the original question!

At the start of 2007 I jokingly said to Paula one day “You know what, we should start our own hosting company”. She asked me if I was serious, initially I wasn't but when we put our heads together and thought it through, there was nothing stopping us from doing this, I had the computing background and she is a real “people person” that enjoys helping others so she would be great for the support side of things.

So after a lot of planning we launched D9Hosting at the end of May 2007. To start with we had no idea what to expect, our main goal was to cover the costs of the server each month. We started off with a reseller account, initially we expected this to last us for at least 8 – 12 months as we only expected a handful of clients each month.

After a couple of months we had customers moving over to us from their old host left right and centre, we very quickly out-grew our reseller account and in September 2007 we upgraded to a brand new dedicated server.

Our main aim is to provide the things that we both felt were missing from the hosts we have been with in the past – good uptime and good, fast support.

So far we have been able to meet both of these goals. Our uptime since we upgraded all of our clients to our new dedicated server has been 100%:

We also aim to answer all support tickets within hours, rather than days! When we do reply we make sure that we explain everything in a way that the customer can understand. I think that a lot of hosts forget that the customers they are speaking too may not be PC experts and the computer jargon replies

don't mean a thing to them!

So to answer the original question, we look to provide great uptime with fast and friendly support :-)

Q11 - How did you go about getting JV partners when you launched your first product?

I was lucky because I had known John Thornhill since I first started marketing and he helped me a lot, not just in promoting the product but he also advised me on how I could make the product better in the long run.

When John promoted the product for me, I also got enquires from people that had seen his email that wished to promote to their list, so it all snowballed from Johns email really.

Q12 - What are your business goals for 2008 and beyond?

My goals for 2008 involve firstly launching the Boomerang List Builder upgrade. I then plan to create and release a new product showing exactly how I make the websites that I mentioned at the end of Question 8.

Finally I plan to work as hard as I possibly can to not only keep my existing projects at their current level, but to take them to the next level.

By the end of 2008 I hope to see a continued growth in D9 Hosting subscribers, an increase of readers of my blog and I hope to work with and meet interesting new people, who knows, I may even take in a seminar or two ;-)

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