



Six Pixels of Separation

Everyone Is Connected. Connect Your Business to Everyone.

by Mitch Joel
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Take-Aways

- Thanks to modern technology and the internet, “everyone is connected.”
- The most important currency today is not money; it’s community.
- The internet enables you to build your personal brand and share it with the entire world – for free.
- Building your brand online requires engaging people with superb content that will compel them to keep coming back.
- To start shaping your online presence, search for blogs and websites that interest you. Review their content, and join their communities by making comments.
- Then post great material online – either as text, audio, video, graphics or a combination of these mediums – to draw your target audience.
- Your goal is to create your own niche community of enthusiastic followers.
- Build their trust by being credible, consistent, straightforward and helpful.
- Online, “traffic does not equal community.” The quality of your connections counts more than the quantity.
- Don’t forget about mobile devices, as they are increasingly becoming the way that people access the internet. Yes, the iPad is also a mobile device.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
8	9	7	7

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How to nurture your personal brand online; 2) How to use blogs, podcasts, social networks, and other web tools and applications to connect with people; and 3) How mobile technology is changing the way people are accessing the web.

Recommendation

Columnist Arianna Huffington was once just another ink-stained scribe. Then, in 2005, she launched her liberal blog, *The Huffington Post* – which, by 2008, was valued at \$100 million. A miraculous transformation? Not really. On the web, Huffington's story is not that unusual. Many writers, artists, businesspeople and specialists have used online social networks, blogs and other internet tools to develop profitable personal brands. To learn how, read web-marketing expert Mitch Joel's eminently savvy book. He discusses the "myriad digital channels and free publishing tools" you can use online to promote yourself, your personal brand and your business. When online publishers act with energy and verve, Joel says, they can quickly build interest and influence. This author stresses that "content is king" and, accordingly, his book has superb content. *getAbstract* recommends it to CEOs, budding or established entrepreneurs and others who want to leverage the amazing connectivity of the internet.

Abstract

"We no longer live in a world where there are Six Degrees of Separation... Digital channels break down the notion of 'it's who you know,' because we all now live in a world where we can know everyone – and everyone can know us."

"In the digital world there are no degrees of separation between you and your customers."

How to Become an Online Brand

Through blogs, online social networks and other digital tools, you can showcase your abilities, get noticed, engage clients, build wealth and become the hub of a thriving online community. Success once depended on knowing the right people. Now the wired world is leveling the playing field by virtually connecting anyone and everyone.

In the digital age, your online brand is the "heart and soul" of your company. The web is an egalitarian platform, so you can develop an internet brand that rivals any corporate brand – at no cost. All you need is the desire and persistence. To get started online, define your areas of interest in cyberspace, and learn how to use web tools and applications to your advantage. The following free tools are particularly handy:

- **"Readers"** – Use an RSS (really simple syndication) reader, or a news reader, to aggregate the online information that interests you. Good options include Google Reader, iGoogle, My Yahoo and Netvibes. These tools alert you when the blogs and websites you specify update their information.
- **"News alerts"** – Set up news alerts to find out immediately when web users publish information about your business. Simply enter relevant terms, such as your company's name, products, and so on, as search criteria. Google Alerts offers this service.
- **"Social search engines"** – Sign up for alerts and feeds from Twitter Search, Google Blog Search, Social Mention or IceRocket. These search engines seek out specific mentions in the social media space.

“You don’t have to be a computer whiz or a member of the Geek Squad to make the online channel and communities work for you.”

“The internet is all about real people looking for real interactions.”

“The digital revolution has reinvented what it means to be an entrepreneur... Without even an office or a business card, your business (and your brand) is linked to millions of people and connected to thousands of potential business opportunities.”

“Everything you do, good and bad, is online forever.”

- **“Search engines”** – Consider these your “virtual sales representatives.” They enable people to find specific content online – including information about your business. Check to see what search results Google, Bing and Yahoo offer for your firm. Google also provides the special service of telling you how many websites link to your site. Just type the word “link” into the search box, followed immediately by a colon and your website address.
- **“Google Trends and Facebook Advertising”** – Employ these market research tools to define both demographics and level of conversation.

Carefully plan your showcasing and promotion strategy. Determine in advance exactly what you hope to accomplish online. Then, using a news reader, monitor the “blogs or online communities that speak to your target market.” Follow their content and conversations. Post your own comments, ensuring that you contribute something valuable and that you “push the conversation forward.” Don’t comment just to promote your special agenda. Become a useful contributor in various communities – for example, by writing reviews of podcasts on iTunes. This approach helps you establish your online presence, which will be essential to creating your own community at some later point.

Know Your Channels

Digital channels enable people to connect in ways never before possible. By exploiting this connectivity, you can create an online community of like-minded individuals with whom you can converse and eventually engage in commerce. This approach helps you find the people who are looking for the types of products or services you sell. To set up an online channel for promoting your business, consider starting a:

- **“Blog”** – A web “journal” people can subscribe to using RSS readers. Consider ramping up your blogging efforts by scheduling some time each day to write. This will help ensure that you consistently update your blog, a key to holding your online audience’s attention. Keep a pen and notebook handy to write down any spontaneous ideas you have for new content. Use catchy headlines. Ask questions to engage your readers and spark online conversations. For more pointers on how to make your posts as strong as possible, visit Copyblogger and ProBlogger online.
- **“Microblog”** – Brief communication blasts of about 140 characters. Through microblogs, “people follow you and you follow people.” Twitter is the primary example.
- **“Podcast”** – Audio or video content. Offer podcasts on your blog or make them available through iTunes.
- **“Online social network”** – For example, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Use such networks to connect with others, form groups and promote your content – and to monitor how your brand is doing online. To perform a “personal brand audit,” see if you have any new friend or group requests. Then browse through the pages and groups you administer, and check for updates on your personal profile. Ask yourself: “Has my following grown?” “Am I linking to the right people?” To design and run your own specialized social network, you can use Ning (this is a paid service).
- **“Sharing site”** – This is a platform for distributing, rating and linking to content. Try posting videos on YouTube or photos on Flickr, for instance.
- **“User-generated content”** – Material that your followers and other people publish about your brand. You cannot control online conversations. However, you can participate in them. Accept positive and negative comments in the same generous spirit. Understand that criticism can help you improve the quality of your content.

“Whoever has and creates the best content wins.”

“Create a provocative headline only when you have the content to back it up.”

“One would think that being online is all about how fast you can post the latest news with the most cutting-edge insights. Not the case. The longer content has been part of the internet, the more catalog that is built, the more trust that is gained by people linking to the content, the more valuable it is and the more growth the brand will have.”

“Once you gain some level of audience and community...push beyond your personal profiles in the online social networks and develop fan pages, groups or even a unique MySpace page for your blog.”

- **“Wiki”** – Mass-collaboration websites, such as Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia. If you post material on a wiki, others can adapt and edit it.
- **“Widget”** – You can place this mini-application on your website or blog for the benefit of other internet users. Widgets provide stock quotes, share news updates, track the weather and serve numerous other purposes.

In addition to blogging and social networking, create and maintain a terrific website. Ensure that it is functional, clean and easy to navigate, and that it demonstrates the same level of quality as your other web content.

Don’t forget to use traditional methods to promote your blog and online branding activities. For example, include your blog address on your business cards, and in your résumé and email signature. Also mention it in your voicemail message.

Establish Your Online Community

To create a community of engaged followers online, be credible and trustworthy. If you strike one false note, your following may go up in smoke. Convey helpfulness and sincerity in everything you say and do. You can’t “fake passion,” so ensure that your message is genuine. For best results, focus your internet community-building efforts on a special niche, even a very small one. Because the web covers the globe, the size of your niche community will quickly grow as others who share your interest find you.

Online, numbers are not everything: “Traffic does not equal community.” The quality of your connections counts more than the quantity. Publish superior online subject matter – material that thoroughly engages your target audience – and you will do well. Use it to “build your story” and generate a following. If your community members are not actively taking part in the conversations you initiate in your blog posts and other internet activities, you are in danger of becoming “extinct,” a victim of “Digital Darwinism.” Remember this fundamental rule of online brand-building: “Great content = great word of mouth.” The best online material is “short, punchy, memorable, fun – and, most importantly, simple.” Internet content can take these forms:

- **“Text”** – This includes blog entries, comments you post, articles or reviews you publish, and so on. Since internet searches are text-based, writing is the most popular way to deliver content on the web. Since “the power of text online is in the linking,” link extensively to websites, blogs and online social networks, for example, by making keywords and central concepts in your text into links. But do not engage in “unethical linkbaiting,” that is, creating filler material simply to amass a lot of links and increase your ranking on search engines. The secret to online brand-building success is great content, and nothing less.
- **“Images”** – Graphics add interest to text-based web pages. Pictures are particularly effective when they can tell a more convincing story about your product or service than words can. Make sure all your photos and other images are of good quality.
- **“Audio”** – The iPod, a top-selling electronic device, has made audio files enormously popular. Podcasts and other audio programs typically run five to eight minutes, or they are a “weekly half-hour show.” Don’t fall into the trap of “podfading,” that is, “running out of things to say” and letting your audio content dwindle over time. Continually produce fresh material.

“Viral expansion loops are all about making one plus one equal 10.”

“Mobile is going to be much more disruptive to your business than the internet.”

“Your digital footprint offers a whole new world of opportunity and business growth.”

- **“Video”** – YouTube is an internet sensation, offering anyone the chance to become a web celebrity. The decreasing cost of video production is also drawing more people to this medium.

Whatever form your content takes, make sure that it tells a compelling story. Heed these six additional pointers and principles to earn the trust of your online community:

1. **“Be consistent in everything you do”** – For instance, establish a content-publishing routine you can maintain. Don’t start strong and then fizzle.
2. **“Choose a global username”** – Your online username makes a big first impression. Simply using your company name can seem “cold,” since it “will look and read like a marketing message.” Instead, personalize your username by following this formula: “Your Name – Your Firm.” Employ one username for all your web activities.
3. **“Choose one good picture of yourself”** – Pick a good snapshot and use it everywhere. If you have an eye-catching company logo, you can use it in place of a photo.
4. **“Add value to the conversation”** – People won’t become part of your online community unless you participate in theirs. Avoid becoming a “lurker” (someone who just looks on in the background and doesn’t participate) by commenting frequently on websites that interest you.
5. **“Respond quickly and honestly”** – If people comment on your blog, Facebook page or anywhere you’ve developed a web presence, answer right away to show that you appreciate their interest. This is the “one golden rule” of online networking.
6. **“Speak like a human being, not a press release”** – Be straightforward and sincere online, or people will never connect with you.

Your overall goal is to trigger viral expansion loops for your content, in which throngs of online social network users enthusiastically pass along information about your firm. A viral expansion loop is “the network effect in effect.”

“Imagine the Possibilities”

If you think the internet revolutionized the way people work and connect, you haven’t seen anything yet. Mobile technology will have a remarkable effect on business. Indeed, mobile devices are already driving dramatic change. For young people, these devices are as vital as the clothes they wear. In a study of the Amherst Class of 2012, only 14 students brought a desktop computer to school, but 93 arrived with an iPhone or iPod Touch.

These findings are a signal to plan a robust mobile strategy for your brand. This should include designing your website to function well on mobile devices’ small screens. Such websites should be simple: heavy on text and light on graphics. Mobile devices add an element of context to content. To stay ahead of the curve, figure out the context in which mobile users want your great content, then deliver the “right messages and the right types of content at the right time.”

About the Author

Mitch Joel is president of Twist Image, a digital marketing and communications agency. In 2008, he was named Canada’s Most Influential Male in Social Media. His colleagues widely regard his blog and podcast, *Six Pixels of Separation*, as superior examples of marketing, communication and advertising.