Building Readership

The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish.

—Robert Louis Stevenson

When I interviewed Seth Godin, the noted marketing expert and CEO of Squidoo, for this chapter, he boiled the intricate, mysterious riddle of how to build readership into five words:

Voice plus reputation equals readership.

For good or ill, it's going to take me a few thousand times that many words to lightly cover some of the things you can do to build readership of your public blog. But hang in there—those five words are the beacon to guide you as you climb the influence hill in your part of the blogosphere.

First a disclaimer: Like most things in life, your mileage from these techniques will vary. Some are right for you; some are not. It's up to you to decide. And if you're looking for a single magic bullet, software, or writing technique that will do it all for you, please let me know when and where you find it! Building readership takes time and a good deal of effort; magic bullets work only in the movies.

Before we delve into the four main techniques I recommend you use to you find your blogging voice and build your blog's reputation, let's look at some of the many tools out there that will let you know just how many people you're influencing.

Tracking Your Readership and Influence

If you're interested in boosting the readership of your blog, you're going to want to know how many people are already reading your blog, and get a sense of which of the methods from this chapter (and elsewhere) are working for you. And that means knowing your stats.

Like a lot of things on the Net in general and the blogosphere specifically, you can spend anywhere from a little time a week to more than you can possibly afford on acquiring and analyzing readership stats. Before you dive right in and spend the next two workdays pulling in stats to crunch, a word of caution: Don't go overboard. You will get the most benefit from your first few consistent ways of tracking membership and less value from mastering every intricacy available to you.

Page Stats

The first place to look to get a sense of how many people are reading your blog is your blog's software. If your blog is hosted at TypePad, you're two clicks away from seeing your stats and your referrers,[1] as shown in Figure 13-1.

Figure 13-1. *Checking your TypePad stats*

WordPress has similar features, as do most major blogging services, except Blogger.[2] You'll need to resort to either a free or paid service if you want to track your Blogger blog. Here are three such services, which offer free and paid versions of their site-tracking software (just copy the enabling code to your blogger template):

- Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics/) is a free service, primarily intended for AdWords advertisers but open to all.

- Site Meter (http://sitemeter.com) has been around for years, providing both free basic and paid ($6.95 USD per month) website statistics for websites and blogs.

- Free Stats (http://freestats.com) has more reports than Site Meter, but wants ad space on your blog in exchange for tracking visitors, or $8.33 USD per month for the ad-free, more robust version.

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1. Referrer addresses show where people out on the Net are clicking to arrive at your blog.
2. For WordPress stats, see http://wordpress.com/features/stats/. As of this writing, Vox had adding readership stats on its Known Issues List page, at http://help.vox.com/cgi-bin/blogs_us.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=217.

If you are running your blog on your own server, or more likely, hosting your domain with a web-hosting service, you have access to what are called *server logs*. These logs contain raw statistical information that is recorded each and every time your web server responds to a request for a given page, like the post you did last week on furry kittens on your blog. Both the WordPress online community and Movable Type community have created plug-ins to track and report this kind of data for you.[3]

RSS Stats

As useful as this data is to get a sense of how "big" your blog is, page-view counts and referral logs are only the first third of the story. While only a small percentage of computer users know about and use RSS, both Microsoft and Apple have baked RSS into their latest operating systems, and Microsoft Internet Explorer 7, Outlook 2007, and Mozilla Firefox have support for RSS subscription and management. Who is getting your RSS feed is the second part of the readership equation.

Again, while your blogging software takes care of providing an RSS feed for your blog, FeedBurner both makes this feed more usable and reports back to you the statistics you need. I covered FeedBurner in detail in Chapter 8. Suffice it to say here that if you're serious about knowing what your readership is and increasing it, you should have, at a bare minimum, a free FeedBurner account so you can track your RSS stats, like those shown in Figure 13-2.
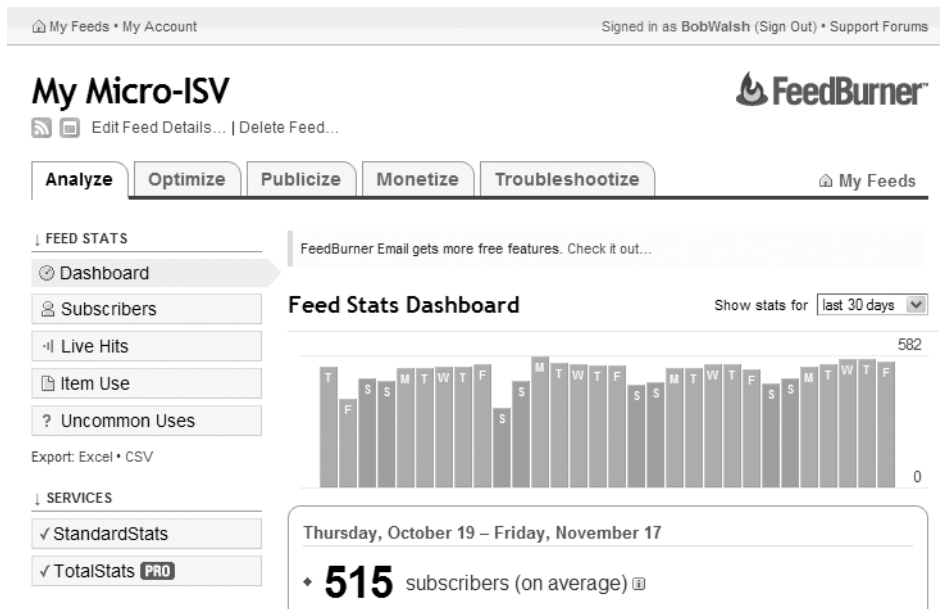

Figure 13-2. *Your RSS stats at FeedBurner*

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3. For WordPress, see the plug-ins listed at `http://wp-plugins.net/` under Stats. For Movable Type, sample the buffet at `www.eatdrinksleepmovabletype.com/tutorials/monitoring_site_statistics/`.

Link Measurements

The final part of knowing what level of influence you blog has reached is how many and how often other blogs and websites link to your posts. This is more art than science. Search engine optimizers, online marketers, and online advertisers have their own take on exactly how important a link is to your blog versus a link to a post, and a few dozen other ways of measuring imprecise terms like *traffic, reach,* and *influence.*

Measurement Tools

As mushy as link measurement is, it is by far the most important of way of knowing how you are doing. Here are three measurement tools to help you gauge your blog:

> **Your Technorati rank:** Simply go to www.technorati.com, search for your blog, and you'll see some ranking numbers. As shown in the example in Figure 13-3, you'll see the number of links to your blog in the past 180 days (95); the number of distinct blogs linking to your blog in the past 180 days (50); your rank, defined as how many blogs have as many blogs linking to them as yours (64,114); and the number of links to your blog ever recorded by Technorati (216).
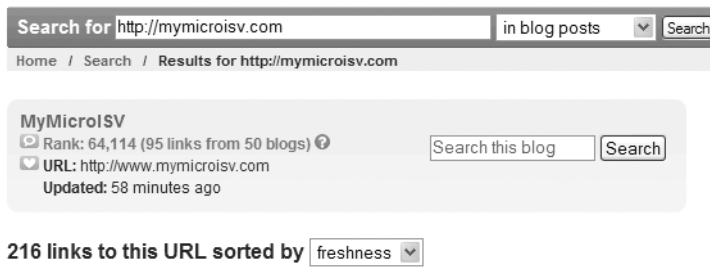

Figure 13-3. *Technorati ranking*

> **Blog Juice Calculator:** While blog link counts are good, what about links from websites, and how likely people will find your blog if they search for a given subject? Enter the Blog Juice Calculator, offered by Text Link Ads. Originally designed to support Text Link Ads valuation of your blog for its ads (see Chapter 12), this handy tool can be found at www.text-link-ads.com/blog_juice. It returns a simple numerical score and HTML you can add to your blog to post your score if you are so inclined, as shown in Figure 13-4.

> **Bloginfluence:** Another useful way of comparing your blog's influence to that of other blogs is at www.bloginfluence.net. This site is useful in three ways: it breaks down your various rankings via Google, Yahoo, and Bloglines; provides links to show your blogs popularity charts on IceRocket, BlogPulse, TouchGraph, and Alexa; and lines up eight searches including your Technorati ranking.[4] Figure 13-5 shows an example of a Bloginfluence score.

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4. For Bloginfluence to work correctly, you need to enter both the URL of your blog, and, if you've registered your blog with http://www.bloglines.com, your Bloglines site ID. The easiest way to get your site ID is to look at your blog's feed within Bloglines.

Figure 13-4. *Blog Juice rating*

Figure 13-5. *Bloginfluence rating*

More Measures

While we're in a measuring mood, I'd like to share with you three more ways to measure your blog. These measurements are a little more out there, but they are invaluable as you start applying the techniques in this chapter.

Page Strength: How relatively hard or easy it is to find your blog via search engines is an important thing to know. SEOmoz is a Seattle-based search engine optimization company that offers a tool for estimating this called Page Strength (`www.seomoz.org/tools/page-strength.php`). For example, my MyMicroISV blog recently got a 3 out of 10 score and this commentary: "Although not a considerable presence, your site/page is making inroads online. Visitor traffic and search engine visibility is within your grasp."

Conversational Index: Stowe Boyd, at his blog `www.stoweboyd.com/message`, came up with this in February 2006: Want to measure the health and likely success of your blog? Divide the number of comments and trackbacks you've gotten by the number of posts. This is your Conversational Index (CI).[5] If your CI is less than 1.0, it is more monologue than blog. The higher the CI, the more likely, in Stowe's opinion (and others, including mine), your blog is going in the right direction. As Stowe said in his follow-up blog:

> *So, to put back into context: The Conversational Index is intended as a leading indicator of present and future blog viability and vitality. I don't know whether an index of 3 would be twice as good as an index of 1.5. Perhaps there is some sort of reverse log scale involved, where 3 only indicates a slightly more engaged and active community than 1.5. But I do know, empirically, that those with subpar CI, where there are way more posts [than] comments or trackbacks, are unlikely to be successful in the long run.*

Socialmeter: Social networks permeate the blogosphere, but is your blog on their radar? The socialmeter (`www.socialmeter.com`) measures your presence in eight ways, as shown in Figure 13-6.

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5. Actually it's a modification of Stowe's original formula (posts/comments+trackbacks) he proposed in his post at `www.stoweboyd.com/message/2006/02/the_social_scal.html`, suggested by Don Dodge and adopted by Stowe in his follow-up post at `www.stoweboyd.com/message/2006/02/the_conversatio.html`, if you really, really wanted to know.
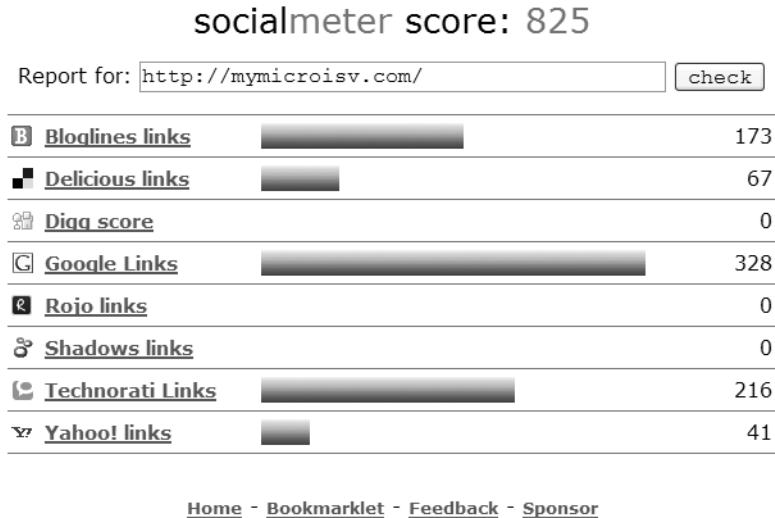
socialmeter score: 825

Report for: `http://mymicroisv.com/`   check

B **Bloglines links**		173
Delicious links		67
Digg score		0
G **Google Links**		328
R **Rojo links**		0
Shadows links		0
Technorati Links		216
Y! **Yahoo! links**		41

Home - Bookmarklet - Feedback - Sponsor

Figure 13-6. *Socialmeter score*

Four Ways to Build Your Readership

Now that we've dealt with measuring your readership and influence, let's talk about how to build it. We'll focus on four major ways of increasing your blog's readership and influence.

Network Formally and Informally

The Internet is all about the power of networks, but it's up to you to harness the power of your informal network of fellow bloggers and to join more formal networks of blogs. Let's look at how to tap your informal blogging network first.

Who's in your informal blogging network? Every blogger you've ever chatted with via your blog, their blog, or email. Every blogger who has mentioned one of your posts and you've had the courtesy and common sense to send a thank-you message. Every blogger who has been mentioned in the same post as one of your posts. That's a lot of people.

There are plenty of books and blog postings out there on how to build your own network, but here are a few pointers to remember vis-à-vis your blog:

Be thankful. When you find that someone has referred to one of your posts and start seeing traffic from that link, drop them a thank you email. For example, I recently blogged about a post at Pamela Slim's excellent blog, Escape from Cubicle Nation (`www.escapefromcubiclenation.com`), and got an email from Pamela that read in part, "I just wanted to say thank you for the kind link to my post today. I have gotten many new visitors from your site as a result, and I appreciate each and every one of them. I wish you much luck, happiness, and adventure in all your endeavors." You can bet I would bend over backwards to do Pamela a favor in the future.

Be interested. Show an interest in the people who are writing about your blog. Make the effort to read some of their recent posts and contribute a comment or two of value. Just as you notice who posts comments to your blog, they will, too.

Be respectful. Give credit when someone else's post sparks your creativity. Respect the hard work someone has put into a particular post by not quoting all of it and instead sending your readers to it. Include other blogger's referral links.

Be helpful. If you see a wanton typo or broken link on a post, drop the blogger a short, friendly email pointing it out. I definitely appreciate people who've helped me as I blog, as long as it's in a kindly way. Don't trash those who made mistakes on your blog—we all live in glass houses.

Be organized. It's easy to lose contact with people in the blogosphere. Make the effort to keep their contact information handy and to keep in touch with them. Networking services like LinkedIn (`www.linkedin.com`) are great for this, but even a simple email folder called My Network will work, if you put the effort into it.

In addition to your informal blogging network, you can find hundreds of formal blogging networks, blog carnivals, and blogging centers that might want you to join them. Let's look at examples of each.

9rules Blogging Network

Blogging networks are all about implied quality. If readers are familiar with the network, they assume someone, somewhere has done the hard work of vetting the blog they are now reading. One of the best at this is 9rules, which started in 2003 and, as of this writing, had some 32 communities of between 4 and 25 member blogs. Run by Paul "Scrivs" Scrivens, Mike Rundle, and Tyme White, 9rules bloggers sport a network badge (see Figure 13-7), get featured at the 9rules website, and help each other.

Figure 13-7. *Guy Kawasaki's 9rules member badge at blog.guykawasaki.com*

Unlike some networks, 9rules periodically has open calls for prospective new members. In response to their last such call while this book was being written, 1,190 bloggers applied (`http://9rules.com/blog/2006/10/9rules-round-5-analysis`). The 9rules list of what it looks for in prospective blogger members pretty much applies to most networks: passion, good-quality writing, consistent posting, relevant topics, and a well-designed blog.

Blog Carnivals

Blog carnivals are a form of ad hoc blog networks. One or several bloggers start the carnival, picking a topic, defining what kinds of posts they want, and setting submission dates. Then other bloggers who have heard about the carnival and posted about the topic submit posts for inclusion in the next roundup "edition" posting.

Readers like carnivals because it gives them a single high-value posting with numerous excellent posts on a subject they care about. Bloggers appreciate the extra attention and readership a carnival generates.

You can kick off a blog carnival, complete with managed submission forms, or find carnivals you're interested in at `http://blogcarnival.com`, as shown in Figure 13-8. Of course, you can organize a blog carnival manually, as well.

Figure 13-8. *A total of 6,668 Carnivals and counting at blogcarnival.com*

MyBlogLog Blogging Center

MyBlogLog (`http://MyBlogLog.com`) is something of a hybrid. On one hand, it's a social network for blog readers. On the other hand, it provides member blogs with detailed demographic information for free, as shown in Figure 13-9 (and even more information is available for $3 USD per month).

Member bloggers can show a badge on their site with pictures of the most recent MyBlogLog members to visit. They can also see on their MyBlogLog profile page what's hot in other blogs in their MyBlogLog communities.
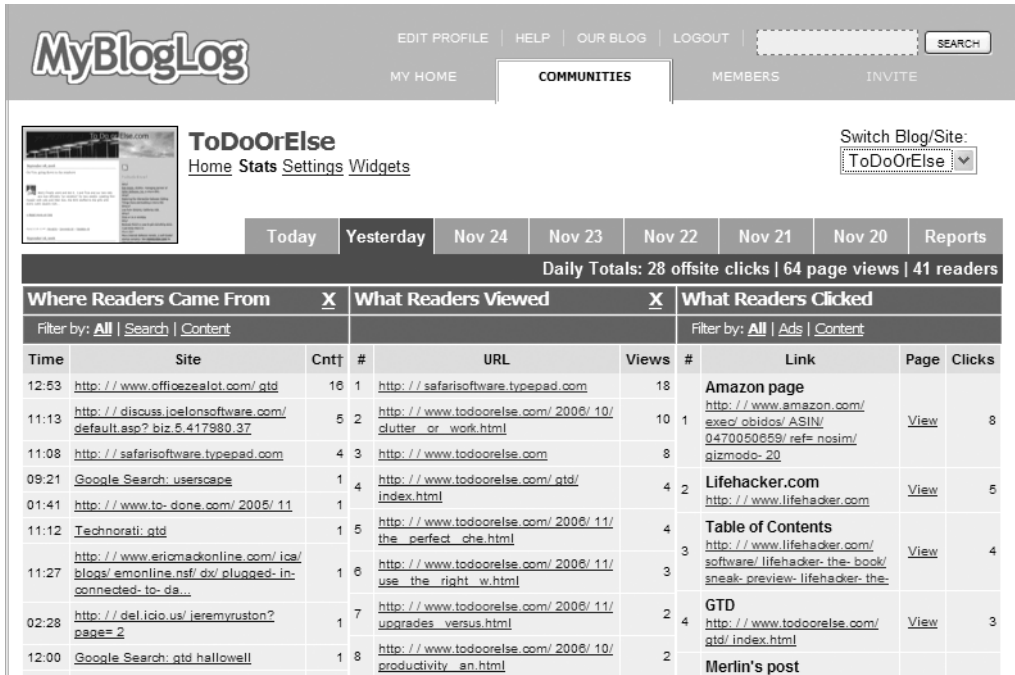
Figure 13-9. *Excellent free stats and community at MyBlogLog*

Eric Marcoullier, CEO of MyBlogLog, explains the MyBlogLog proposition this way:

MyBlogLog is all about helping you connect with your blog readers. When you sign up with us, you empower your readers to develop a closer relationship with you and with each other. After all, who better to promote your business than other satisfied customers?

Who would be a part of your community? Anyone who has a real interest in what your business is about and feels a connection with what you say in your blog. MyBlogLog offers your readers a way to become a more active person in the conversation, with you and with each other.

Additionally, MyBlogLog is the only service of its kind that lets you know what your readers are doing on your site and elsewhere. With our integrated stats reporting, you get key actionable data about how your readers get to your site and where they go to leave, plus you get insight into what they do elsewhere on the Web.

Formal Networking Tips

Blogging groups and networks, with the exception of MyBlogLog, tend to be selective about who they let join. Additionally, some of these networks share not only links and branding, but advertising revenue, and people get considerably more picky about who they are doing business with when money's involved. Here are some common-sense suggestions about getting into formal blogging networks:

Be relevant. Either you fit in a blog network's scheme of things or you don't. That means that you should take the time to get to know the network you want to join first and apply second.

Be selective. Blog networks are not like Boy Scout merit badges—the more you collect the better. In fact, some networks demand exclusivity. Again, canvass the blog networks before rushing out to join one or more.

Know who to ask. Every blog network has someone somewhere to ask to be let in. Find that person, or at least the online submission form.

Endorsements definitely help. Want to greatly increase your chances of getting in? Get to know a blogger already in that network and ask him when it's appropriate to endorse your membership bid. Mercenary campaigns along these lines rarely work. You are best off looking at and contacting your informal blog network for this.

One key to getting into a network is to find the right network. Take a look at the networks listed at `www.blognetworklist.com/networklist.php` and `www.blogherald.com/2005/09/21/list-of-blog-networks-v3-september` for some possible networks to peruse.

Create Good Linkbait

Linkbaiting refers to creating a post specifically designed to draw traffic. This practice has been called everything from savvy marketing to devil worship at one time or another in the blogosphere. Matt Cutts thinks that if linkbaiting is done right, it's a good thing, and I agree. Matt Cutts, by the way is the GoogleGuy—a Google employee well known for *almost* explaining how Google actually works under the server hood. Trust me, when Matt Cutts talks at his blog, Matt Cutts: Gadgets, Google, and SEO, online people listen. Here's his advice on linkbaiting (`www.mattcutts.com/blog/seo-advice-linkbait-and-linkbaiting`):

> On a meta-level, I think of "linkbait" as something interesting enough to catch people's attention, and that doesn't have to be a bad thing. There are a lot of ways to do that, including putting in sweat-of-the-brow work to generate data or insights, or it can be as simple as being creative. You can also say something controversial to generate discussion (this last one gets tired if you overuse it, though). Sometimes even a little bit of work can generate a reason for people to link to you.

The basic idea behind successful linkbaiting is coming up with a really linkable post, and then promoting it far and wide, including on social bookmarking networks (see the next section).

You can find numerous suggestions on how to linkbait. Darren Rowse at ProBlogger has a list of 20 linkbaiting techniques at `www.problogger.net/archives/2006/09/21/20-linkbaiting-techniqes`, and Nick Wilson at Performancing has five suggestions on how to put the hook into your linkbait at `http://performancing.com/node/38`. Here are five tried-and-true ways of creating good linkbait:

The big resource list: This is a favorite on Digg and other networks. Take the time to build a big, useful online resource list about the topics you really know about.

The definitive *X* tutorial: Whether it's building an aardvark nursery or installing a WordPress theme, the right tutorial will attract readers and links, especially if it's a video that you can post to YouTube.

The 20 bloggers who know the most about *X*: If you know who's blogging about the topics you follow closely, create a blog-centric linkbait list of who are really the top bloggers in your given area and email each and every one of them.

An online tool: Admittedly, you need to know how to program for this one, or know a cooperative programmer who can code your brainstorm, but online tools are very high on the linkbait list of star players. For example, Dane Carlson at the Business Opportunities Weblog (`www.business-opportunities.biz`) built a little Web 2.0 mashup using Technorati's API that gives you a cash value based on your blog's popularity, as shown in Figure 13-10. According to Google, the post "How Much Is My Blog Worth?" has over *30,000* links to it. That is serious linkbaiting.

Figure 13-10. *Your blog's comparative worth*

Breaking news about *X*: Everyone and anyone can be a reporter.[6] If there's a niche—large, small, or micro—in which you know what's happening before most people do, news link-baits work.

Do the Social Network Thing

Social bookmarking networks, like Digg, del.icio.us, Furl, and reddit (shown in Figure 13-11), can be a powerful drug for boosting your blog's readership, as well as worthwhile experiences in and of themselves. A lot of social networks exist; Wikipedia lists about 74 as of December 2006 (`en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites`).

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6. Amendment I, U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." So there!

Figure 13-11. *reddit's homepage*

Social bookmarking sites tend to work in the same general way. Something—a website, a news article, a post to your blog, and so on—is added by network members to alert other network members that it is of interest. The more of these votes that one of your posts gets, the higher it is at that moment in that social network's homepage.

While each social networking site has its own values, community, and following, there are basically five key concepts to getting a social network's attention:

Understand the network. Each social bookmarking site has its own way of doing things, its own set of favorite topics, and its own way of looking at the blogosphere. Take the time to research and understand what makes them tick now.[7]

Make it as easy as possible. We covered this in detail in Chapter 9, but it bears repeating again here: Make it as easy as possible for members of the social networks that are important to you to vote for a given post.

Be selective. Not every post you write is a candidate for every social network—not by a long shot. If one in twenty posts is really good, you are doing well. Don't be hesitant to join selected social networks and very selectively promote your very best posts and the very best posts you encounter elsewhere.

Be patient. There's no accounting for taste or the vagrancies of what's hot and what's not in a given social network at a given time. Be prepared to wait for lightning to strike.

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7. One really good resource is Jeff Clark's www.neoformix.com. His analytical posts on the characteristics of top reddit posts and Digg topic popularity (www.neoformix.com/2006/RedditAnalysis.html and www.neoformix.com/2006/DiggAnalysis1.html, respectively) are very good.

Be prepared. If the gods of the Internet—or a handful of active members who are responsible for a large chunk of what goes on the front page of a particular social network[8]—favor you, you had better be prepared. That means keeping an eye on your referral logs, having a few really good posts ready to go to entrain people who come to your site, and having a very clear conversation with your web host company's tech support people in advance about what their traffic surge policies and procedures are. Nothing is more discouraging than clicking a cool item on Digg's front page only to find that blog's server is crashed from the overload.

DHARMESH SHAH, ON SOCIAL BOOKMARKING NETWORKS

Dharmesh Shah's blog OnStartups (`http://onstartups.com`) is one of the best known in the relatively small micro-ISV online community.

Dharmesh has seen firsthand what it's like when a post makes it to the front page of both reddit and Digg, so I asked him what his take is on increasing your blog's readership via social bookmarking communities. Here's his reply:

Most bloggers at some level are looking to increase the traffic on their sites. This is either for financial reasons, ego reasons, or altruistic reasons. In any of these cases, social news sites like Digg and reddit can be an important factor in getting a new blog off the ground. The reason is very simple. For a blog, traffic ultimately becomes a function of the popularity of the blog. Your traffic eventually is going to be based on how many sites link to you, how you rank on the search engines for specific phrases of interest, and the number of subscribers you have to your blog via RSS or email. But the question is, how do you build traffic in the early days when nobody knows about you? This is where the social sites like Digg and reddit can help a lot.

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8. See `www.seomoz.org/blogdetail.php?ID=1228` on this fascinating application of the 80/20 principle (and `en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle` and `www.the8020principle.com` if you've somehow gotten to this point in your life without knowing about the 80/20 principle).

First, a quick overview: Social sites like Digg and reddit are basically community-driven, link-sharing sites. Members of the community submit links to articles and content that they find interesting. Hundreds of articles get submitted to these sites every day. Once a link is submitted, the community gets to "vote" on which articles they like or find interesting. If someone posts a link to your blog article on one of these sites and it rises to the front page (because the community liked it), it can mean thousands of visitors to your blog in a single day. The first time this happens, you'll get a big thrill as you watch your traffic numbers.

In January 2006, I had a new blog called OnStartups.com. Like many new blogs, my traffic was primarily driven by friends and family that I had sent emails to ("Hey, check out my new blog!"). I kept plodding along, writing articles on a topic I cared a lot about (software startups). Then, one day, I saw my traffic levels, which had been about 10–50 visitors a day, spike to over 2,000 on a single day. At first, I thought there must be something wrong with my blogging software (which was internally developed), so I checked my referral logs. I discovered that just about all of that traffic was coming from reddit.com. Evidently, someone had submitted one of my articles to reddit, and it had wound up on the reddit homepage. A few months later, I had an article get submitted to Digg and also make the front page, driving over 10,000 visitors on a single day. The point is, for driving traffic to a new blog, the social news sites work.

Of course, it is not easy to get to the front page of these sites. There is a lot of competition. But at least you have a chance. If you are writing really great content on a topic that lots of people care about, you've got a decent chance of driving some traffic through one of the social bookmarking sites. The good news is that you can be a brand-new blogger and still be able to attract a lot of visitors—i.e., it is not completely a function of existing blog popularity (though even on these sites, it helps). For new bloggers, it is also a great way to experiment and begin to discover what works and what doesn't. You realize that some times are better than others to post (11:00 a.m. ET is the best time for me). You realize that article titles have a strong influence on whether you will get voted up or not. You realize that making it easy for your existing readers to submit your articles to the popular sites makes it much more likely to do so (hence the "submit to reddit" link on all my articles).

Like many new initiatives, blogging comes down to a combination of constant experimentation and determination. You have to try a lot of things to figure out what works. And you have to stick with it long enough to give it a chance.

Think Outside the Blogbox: Squidoo

Started by Internet trendsetter Seth Godin in late 2005, Squidoo takes a bit of explaining. On one hand, you have one-page how-to get started/going/better guides on subjects ranging from advertising to vintage travel posters and everything in between.[9] On the other hand, you have an ultra-easy way of creating a guide to a topic you blog about, complete with Amazon picks, YouTube videos, your favorite posts, NetFlix rentable DVDs, del.icio.us links, custom RSS feeds, eBay postings, and *New York Time* articles to add to your own commentary in text and images.

Figure 13-12 shows a typical Squidoo lens (`www.squidoo.com/africansafaris`).

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9. For example, in today's most popular Squidoo lens, you'd find advice and information on one-deal-a-day sites; funky, chic, and cool laptop bags; popular torrent sites; magic tricks; printable coloring pages; wedding speeches; Japanese tattoos; the meaning, symbolism, and psychology of color; free dog sweater patterns; ninjitsu techniques; the best free online video-hosting sites; music of the '70s; what's with the television show *Grey's Anatomy*; guitar tools; selling your home yourself; and Area 51.

Figure 13-12. *A Squidoo lens on planning a safari*

The beauty of Squidoo lenses is that they are excellent orientation guides to all sorts of human endeavors. For example, if I Googled "East African Safari," I would get back over *3.7 million pages* and be dropped into a vat of bubbling information overload until my brain turned to tapioca. Instead, I can read Justina Lambert's Squidoo lens. Here, she lays out what to look for in safari companies and guides; the pros and cons of traveling in a group; what the Big Five animals are and the best places to see them; recommended field guides; her favorite wildlife parks and reserves; travel guides; photos; weather for Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania; and the answers to several frequently asked questions about safaris.

Now how does Justina know all this and how good is her information? Well, she's one of the three partners who run Kimbla-Mantana African Safaris, which has been in business since 1959, and her links speak for themselves. The combination of Justina's advice and knowledge, coupled with her links, on top of a bed of relevant Google AdWords ads, makes for a very tasty information meal.

What really makes Squidoo shine is its built-in rating and ranking system. It's one thing to see a supposed expert's Squidoo lens, but when you see other people have rated it highly and that it's popular, you have a lot more faith in what you read.

Squidoo is still in its early days, steadily growing but not making the kind of splash of, say, Digg. One interesting thing about Squidoo is that 5 percent of its post-expense revenue goes to charities, and lensmasters can elect to have some or all of their income go to charity as well.

For bloggers who want to build a reputation, Squidoo is an easy way to climb fast in Google's rankings:

- Roger Jennings, a well-known and respected author and programmer, started a Squidoo lens on the Black Scholar. Google returns that Squidoo lens as its second result (`oakleafblog.blogspot.com/2006/09/michael-arrington-badmouths-squidoo.html`).

- The Long Tail is a theory about how commerce and attention work on the Internet defined by Chris Anderson, *Wired* magazine Editor-in-Chief and author of "The Long Tail." His Squidoo lens, The Long Tail (`www.squidoo.com/longtail`) is the fifth result Google returns.

- Margaret Schaut, a lensmaster, says this on the Squidoo blog (`www.squidoo.com/blog/?p=113`): "I decided to Google my Squidoo topics today and discovered several of them are either on the FIRST page of Google, or the second. I have competitors out there who have been at this for a long time, with a lot of backing, and they're NOT ON GOOGLE'S FIRST PAGE, BUT I AM! It just blows my mind."

- Kimberly Dawn Wells, a prolific lensmaster, added this to the Squidoo blog (`www.squidoo.com/custombreastcancermemoryshirts/`): "During some researching, I looked up "personalized breast cancer" on Google and my Squidoo lens is the first result! That's pretty impressive considering the number of breast cancer sites out there."

- A TypePad Widget lets you easily connect your TypePad blog to your Squidoo lens (`www.sixapart.com/typepad/widgets/content/squidoo.html`).

Rajesh Setty (whose blog at `blog.lifebeyondcode.com` ranked as the 9,061 most linked to blogger by Technorati, at the time of writing) has several Squidoo lenses (`www.squidoo.com/lensmasters/rajesh301`) and offers this advice to bloggers:

My internal blogging goal is to have 90% of my posts be relevant a few years from now. So I work hard to ensure that there is some "timeless" content on my blog. However, the big problem is that with time, that timeless content gets buried and new readers may never discover it irrespective of the content's relevance. This is where Squidoo comes in. Most of my lenses will have a collection of links to my previous articles in my blog interspersed with other relevant information. As the lens gets popular, I get more traffic to my blog.

However, I have to say that it is a two-way street. My blog gets [a] reasonable amount of traffic and I link to my Squidoo lenses on my blog wherever applicable to ensure that my blog readers discover the lenses. So my blog works to send traffic to my Squidoo lenses, and my Squidoo lenses in turn work to send traffic to my blog.

Not to forget the power of social bookmarking. Some of my Squidoo lenses have been bookmarked by many social bookmarking sites [which] has led to more traffic to my lenses leading to more traffic to my blog.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SETH GODIN, CEO, SQUIDOO

With ten Internet-marketing related books out, Seth Godin has become the one-man think tank of the Internet marketing revolution. Seth's ideas, thoughts, rants, and posts have shaped much of what has become conventional online wisdom.

Wikipedia's entry for Seth does a very good job of summarizing his enduring message (`http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seth_Godin`):

Godin's ideology combines three elements. First, the end of the TV-Industrial complex means that marketers no longer have the power to command the attention of anyone they choose, whenever they choose. Second, in a marketplace in which consumers have more power, marketers must show more respect; this means no spam, no deceit and a bias for keeping promises. Finally, Godin asserts that the only way to spread the word about an idea is for that idea to earn the buzz by being remarkable. Godin refers to those who spread these ideas as "Sneezers," and to the ideas so spread as "IdeaViruses." He calls a remarkable product or service a purple cow.

What Wikipedia doesn't explain about Seth is that since he started getting his message out there back in the twentieth century, he's been proven right by the success of countless online businesses that have adopted his view of marketing. His blog, `sethgodin.typepad.com`, ranks as number 32 (as of this writing) at Technorati.

Seth's latest venture is Squidoo.com.

Q. *I guess the place to start is, if you are blogging, why should you take a look at Squidoo?*

A. I'm going to start with the big conceptual reason, and then I'll go into two practical reasons. The big conceptual reason is that, because anyone can have a blog, just the fact that you can publish your ideas online doesn't mean very much. As far as the reader is concerned, you might be an idiot.

What happens over time is that people develop a voice, and they develop a reputation, and when those two things meet, they get a readership. If you have a reputation of having insight on a particular topic, and you can deliver that insight in a unique way, then people have an incentive to come back and read more of what you have to say. So Squidoo can't help you develop a voice, but what it can do is help you develop a reputation.

The way that people tend to develop reputations is by saying things that their readers, or the people who are listening to them, believe are true. Meaning that if I say five things, and three of them resonate with you as things that you already believe, you are more likely to believe the other two. What Squidoo does is provide a platform that allows anybody to build a page, which we call a lens, about something they are passionate about. That page can include links to products; it can include little mini essays; it can include links to websites, Google Maps, YouTube videos, Flickr pictures, a collection of ideas from all around the Web. And if your lens is a good one, if you have done a great job of capturing the essence of your area of expertise, then people are more likely to believe your opinions, because it shows you know what you are talking about.

Q. *So that's the big conceptual reason. That makes a lot of sense to me. What about the practical reasons?*

A. Well, the two practical reasons are this: first of all, as a blogger, I was frustrated because I would post something three months ago, something I was really fond of, and because blogs push ideas down as you add new ones, it would essentially disappear; and if you don't see it, it's like it doesn't exist, like I never wrote it. What a lens lets you do is highlight your best blog posts.

So let's say you have a blog about antique cameras. Let's say you restore antique cameras, you collect antique cameras, and now you have a blog about them. If you built a lens about antique cameras on Squidoo, you could include in it three websites that have lots of data and pricing on antique cameras, you could include pointers to auctions on eBay about antique cameras, and you could include pointers to your five best blog posts of "Things You Should Know Before You Buy an Antique Camera." Well, if I see all that in context, I am way more likely to go and start becoming a regular reader of your blog, which never would have happened if you hadn't built the lens on Squidoo to amplify the blog you're building in the first place.

Q. *So it's a way of building reputation. It's a way of amplifying that reputation by basically creating another way that people can find you. It's a way, also, to monetize some of the things you're doing with your blog. I'm curious, how is that working out now that we're about a year on from your launch?*

A. We went out of beta in March. It's about eight months. We hit about 30,000 people yesterday, who have more than 50,000 pages. Some of those people are making well over $100 a month. Some of those people are making way more than $100 a month. And the best part is that more than 40 percent of the people are giving their royalties to charity, and that is why we built the site in the first place. Because the fact is, nobody is going to be able to retire on the money they make from Squidoo. But if 30,000 people end up giving their nickels, pennies, and dimes, all at the same time to charity, we ought to be able to make a significant difference to some of the world's problems.

Let me just go back for a minute to the point about people finding you. Back to the guy with the antique camera page. If you built a blog about antique cameras, and someone types in "antique camera" in Google, they may or may not find your blog. But if you have a blog about it and a lens about it, you dramatically increase the chances that somebody is going to find you via Google. The reason is that your lens is easier for somebody else on the Web to link to, because it doesn't change so often. I've been writing my blog for almost four years, and when you do a Google search on, say, "marketing chocolate," I come up in one of the top three posts or top three matches, for something I wrote two and a half years ago. So my blog is a moving target, whereas my lens is more stable, and it is sort of the filter, and it is the place you want people to start. So I think they work together. Both the tools are free, or close to free, but in the case of Squidoo, free, and you can look at it as just built-in SEO [search engine optimization] for your blog.

Q. *I would like to get your perspective, if you feel in the mood to pontificate a bit here, on where you see the blogosphere going in the next few years?*

A. I think that feeds are the key. I think that Digg did an interesting thing, which is Digg turned the entire Internet into one giant current-events blog. So when you go to Digg.com, it's a constantly refreshed page that grabs everything from all over. So an individual blog is not as important because Digg aggregates them all.

So there are only two kinds of blogs in the world: the blogs I read today in my reader, or because they are linked to those blogs, and the ones I don't. So when everyone has a blog, and I think soon everyone will have a blog or something like a blog, having people who subscribe will become the critical asset. And it is going to be a land grab, because the fact is, if I subscribe to your blog about antique cameras, I am probably not going to subscribe to somebody else's, because I don't need to know that much about antique cameras. So that's another reason to start fast: you have the opportunity now to build subscribers.

Q. *I guess you'd call it a land grab for attention more than anything else.*

A. Exactly.

Building Readership Recap

There's an old adage in the business world: If you want to improve something, you first have to measure it, whether it's the number of widgets coming off an assembly line or the number of readers your blog delights. While it is a little tricky to do so, given your readers could be visiting your blog via their web browser or reading your blog's RSS feed via their preferred RSS feed reader, it is still doable.

If you're going to get serious about increasing your audience, you need to get from the "how many read me" to the "what do they like" data, and that's going to mean going from free tools like Site Meter and a free FeedBurner account to programs like Google Analytics and a paid FeedBurner account.

Once you know your numbers, you can improve them in any number of ways:

- Join blog networks where appropriate and informally network with as many bloggers as you can.

- Do guest posts for other bloggers and invite other bloggers to post at your blog.

- Take the time to research, write, and present really valuable posts for the people who read your blog and others like them.

- Take the time to participate, share, and engage with social bookmarking networks, both by making it easier for those networks to notice your posts and by contributing to the network in general.

- Step beyond the confines of your blog to provide value on the topics you blog about, be it via Squidoo, through newsgroups, or by contributing to Wikipedia.

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, there are no magic bullets when it comes to building readership. However, consistency is a key component. Keep doing what works, add in a few readership-building efforts, and you will see your audience increase.

Your Action Tasks

Having covered how you measure your readership and influence, and four major ways to build your readership, here's a longer than usual list of small but useful things you can do to build your blog. We'll start with some basic, cover-your-bases stuff and move on from there to more advanced techniques.

Know your stats. At a bare minimum, you need to know where to find your stats in your blogging software and/or have a Site Meter badge. As RSS continues to ramp up, get that free or paid FeedBurner account!

Who are you? Don't be coy about your About page and profile if you want to garner readers. Even if you are blogging anonymously, give your readers something.

Master basic social skills. Whether you love or hate social bookmarking sites like Digg and del.icio.us, at least some of your readers love them, so make it easy to vote for your posts. There's a multitude of ways of doing this, but the simplest is Socializer, a free automatic bookmarking tool by Pierre Far (`http://ekstreme.com/socializer`). Check it out.

RSS above the fold. For blogs, "above the fold" means before you need to scroll, and that's where you want your RSS stuff—standard, FeedBurner, or specific RSS reader badges—to reside. Making it as easy as possible for readers to subscribe to your blog and save clicks pays off.

Get listed. Multitudes of blog directories are out there. Three you should make the effort to check out and get listed in are Blogwise (`www.blogwise.com`), Globe of Blogs (`www.globeofblogs.com`), and Blogarama (`www.blogarama.com`). Looking for more blog directories? See RSSTop55 (`www.masternewmedia.org/rss/top55`) for an excellent list.

Get listed, part 2. Don't forget website directories that accept blogs, such as Yahoo Directory (`http://dir.yahoo.com`, paid), the Open Directory Project (`www.dmoz.org`, free), and specialty directories in your industry or geographic locale.

Respond to comments. At the risk of boring you, let me say it again: Blogs are a conversation, and that means you absolutely should respond to comments. Doing so will turn first-time visitors into loyal readers.

Be contrarian—post on weekends. Conventional blogging wisdom is you shouldn't post on weekends because fewer people read blogs then. By the same token, there are fewer posts competing for attention.

Show your back stock. One way or another, get a list of your best/most popular posts onto the front page of your blog. There's no better way of turning a chance meeting into the start of a lasting relationship with your blog.

Give credit and links where they are due. Simply put, the more links out of your blog, the more people will link to your blog. So even when you can't pin to a specific post, link to that blog or website and give credit where it's due.

Post when your readers expect you to post. When you post creates expectations. If you post twice a day for months then not at all for two weeks, your readership will drift away. Know what your posting goal is and keep to it, and don't be shy sharing that with your readers.

Make use of trackbacks. When you're blogging about some major blogger's post, either positively or negatively, use your blogging software's ability to send a trackback to that blogger. You will be surprised how often the trackback recipient will comment on your posts. This technique works only if you're blogging in earnest, not fishing for links.

All done? Here are more ways to get more readers that take more effort:

Make friends with fellow bloggers. That means follow their blogs, be helpful, get to know them, and comment intelligently. Don't ask for links up front. Don't expect instant acceptance. Don't be irrelevant. And don't nag!

Use photos. The right photo triples the impact of a good post. Take them yourself, find them at Yahoo Flickr already permissioned at `www.flickr.com/creativecommons` (2.7 million and counting), or spend a dollar each at `http://istockphoto.com`.

Post your photos at Flickr. People are interested in seeing themselves and other people. If you take digital photos, post them to Flickr and include a Flickr gallery on your blog (Google "Flickr Gallery" for the right widget for your blogging service).

Participate in newsgroups. While newsgroups have faded in recent years, you'll find at least one very active newsgroups covering just about every topic imaginable. Dive right in. And don't forget to include your blog's URL in your signature line.

Use Squidoo. Build one or more lenses to showcase your best blogs about a given topic, or which together form a great tutorial, or just to establish your reputation as someone who knows a thing or two.

Convert old posts into new ezine articles. What's the difference between a great post you did on a subject six months ago and a free ezine article that drives traffic to your blog? About ten minutes' effort on your part at ezine sites like iSnare (`www.isnare.com`), Ezine Articles (`ezinearticles.com`), and especially the SiteProNews directory of article directories (`www.sitepronews.com/article-directories.html`).

Guest post. This technique worked for me when I started `ToDoOrElse.com`. Offer another (more influential) blogger guest posts to keep the content rolling while that blogger is on vacation, overextended, and so on. This technique presupposes you have some sort of relationship going, that the other blogger has either asked for guest posts or seems ready for the idea, and that you have at least a few posts that would fit the bill.

Provide answers. In just about every area, there are current questions that need answers. Think about the subjects you blog on. What questions could a little non-blog research or data-gathering answer?