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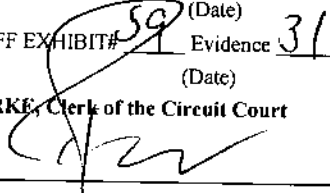
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Why Gawker Media Is Kicking Everyone's Ass



HENRY BLODGET APR 8 2010 7:49 PM 4,938 16

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Courtesy of Foster Kamer at the Village Voice, we get to read Gawker Media CEO Nick Denton's monthly letter to his editorial corps.

In it, Nick explains how to win in the brutally competitive online news and content business. (Gawker Media is big, profitable, and growing rapidly—the latter being a trait shared by almost no mainstream media organizations.)



Thou shalt not write crappy headlines.

Don't like what Nick's saying? Think it's too lowbrow? Think it's too competitive? Then you should probably go work for Bloomberg or Reuters (two of the only news organizations on earth that have a sustainable, protected business model, another being FOX News).

Don't care what Nick's saying? Then you're like 99.9% of other people. One of the biggest mistakes media people make is to assume that everyone else finds their industry as endlessly fascinating as they do.

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That's one lesson Nick highlights.

(As a primer for those who aren't familiar with Gawker, most of those weird names are names of Gawker Media blogs.)

Enjoy!

Here, belatedly, is an editorial review for March. Most sites are on the up. And a particularly good month for Gawker, Kotaku, Jalopnik and Deadspin. But let's focus on the individual stories.

The stories that hit the Big Board in the office are usually pretty well packaged; but there are still so many that could make it and don't because the headline is too bloggy, too insidery, too clever, too complicated or too opaque.

It's tragic: a few minutes of thought about the headline and a bit of maturity could save that story you just sweated over.

Here are the Top 100 ranked by new visitors followed by some observations.

1. Scandal sells. Deadspin's outrageous Tiger texts and Gawker's Peaches pics both hit the top ten. And Kotaku's knife attack story was pretty dramatic. The staples of old yellow journalism are the staples of the new yellow journalism: sex; crime; and, even better, sex crime. Remember how Pulitzer got his start: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_journalism

2. The pseudo-exclusive. We can take ownership of a story even if it isn't a strict exclusive. In case of both Tiger and Peaches, other sites (the porn star's site and Reddit, respectively) carried the original material. But we added context and packaged the stories up. (See Choire Sicha's piece on The Gawker Exclusive: How the Internet Works, but I can't find it on the web.)

3. Drama. Another in the obvious department: readers respond to drama. New guy Sam Smith's story about the rally-winning \$500 Craigslist car is a perfect example. Triumph over adversity. No wonder Hollywood's trying to buy the story.

4. Visuals. I know most of you are writers. But images can't be an afterthought. Of the top ten stories, five were photo-driven and another two were based on video clips. If you can get an image or a document to support a story — or even make the story support the image — the package has way more chance.

5. Explainers. When remotely possible turn news into explanation. Straight how-to and why stories — such as Kotaku's excellent Farmville guide — obviously resonate. But you can turn a news story into an explainer, as Lux did with the sexting scandals. And sometimes you can turn a mediocre news story into something that passes for instant reference simply by removing a verb. e.g. Mark Zuckerberg,

Richard Branson Tells Us The Story Behind His Famous Kitesurfing Photo With A Naked Model

Hugh Hefner's Son Reveals What It Was Like Growing Up In The Playboy Mansion



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Teen Hacker instead Mark Zuckerberg Accused of Hacking Accounts. Imagine you're writing a headline for a magazine (one with tight deadlines) rather than a newspaper.

6. Don't rubbish the story in the headline. Did that Prius really run away? Does Facebook really promote syphilis? When examining a claim, even a dubious claim, don't dismiss with a skeptical headline before getting to your main argument. Because nobody will get to your main argument. You might as well not bother. Questions-as-headlines are a no-no in newspapers. On the web they work rather well. You set up the mystery -- and explain it after the link. Some analysis shows a good question brings twice the response of an emphatic exclamation mark at the end of much the same headline. (More here: <http://is.gd/aYKhN>)

7. Parody. What's missing from the upper reaches of this list? Any headlines laden with irony or parody. You might think it's funny to mock the tentative style of the New York Times. XXX XXXX Makes Us Sad, Angry. For regular readers it's a worn-out cliché; the in-joke is impenetrable to new readers; and, as Remy jokes, these are the headlines that make me "angry, comma, angry." If you want to indulge yourself with Onion-style headlines, work for the Onion.

8. Inside baseball. This note is for the geek sites in particular. We write for consumers, not people in "the industry." So don't refer to Zynga when you can talk about the makers of Farmville, for instance. But, actually, this rule applies also to other sites such as Jezebel. Great story today about how Good Housekeeping photoshopped Michelle Obama's face. But leave out the magazine's name from the headline. Michelle Obama Gets a Photoshop Facelift would have been better. People actually know and care about Michelle Obama. Only media insiders care that much which magazine it was.

Now some of you are probably bridleing. You think the best-performing headlines on this chart are flat and boring., you can inject a bit of attitude into even the most web-friendly of headlines. Ray Wert has a few tips on that. But, yes, this exercise does take a lot of the fun out of the headlines. I can only console you with this: the more people that come through the headline, the more people will appreciate your wit in the piece itself.

Anyone else with observations, pitch right in!

Nick



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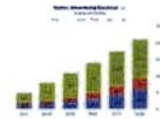
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