

Thursday, January 25, 2007

### The problem with remora websites

In the biological world, remora's attach themselves to larger organisms such as sharks or whales and they "benefit by using the host as transport and protection and also feeds on materials dropped by the host".

I've coined the term "remorasites" to refer to the crop of websites that spring up around any big internet whale and derive their value entirely from servicing that website. The plethora of MySpace profile builders, AOL Instant Message Icon sites, Youtube scrapers all fit this category.

The sites could be further segmented into those that add value to the user experience of the host site, or those that simply extract value from it (leeching).

Examples of the former would be third-party AWS toolkits, which would enable people to easily build third-party websites that can hook into the Amazon product base. Examples of the latter would be the "Video Code" sites that had a heyday about a year ago (all they did was rip html for music videos code from Yahoo)

Building remorasites is a dicey proposition. The value-add ones can rely almost entirely on the existence of "blind-spots" in the host website's awareness or marketing niche. They see a value and then devote the time and energy to adding value, fulfilling a need. Clickbank for the longest time didn't have a "search" function for its product base. A whole host of third-party sites emerged providing clickbank-malls which basically layered a search on top. Now clickbank has a product search. I haven't seen a "clickbank mall" around in awhile. I'm sure they are still around, but a change in the architecture of the host site can sure change things for the remorasites.

I've been bitten by this one myself. Shortly after building FeedBay as a way of playing with the Ebay Developer Tools I began to notice that little [RSS] icon at the bottom of Ebay categories. I'd been obsoleted!

People still do use FeedBay, but from here on in it's a straight case of residual crumbs: anybody looking for customized Ebay RSS Feeds finds FeedBay first, they use it, otherwise, they use the built-in Ebay feeds.

Over the last few weeks I got burned again. When I launched FeedBay, I got a few emails from people asking if they could generate RSS feeds using their own affiliate codes. Now there's a value added service I thought to myself, and promptly forgot about it while I went out and became a daddy, bought my company, moved houses, in short, lived my life until I revisited the FeedBay idea.

A week ago at night after the baby went down, I started coding in the ability for other people to generate feeds with their own affiliate codes. I finished it last night, typed "Ebay Rss" into google and realized I've been scooped again. Ebay already allows affiliates to generate RSS feeds with their own affiliate codes.

So there were a few lessons I learned here:

If you see a value-add niche for a remorasite, MOVE FAST, the blind spot in the host won't last forever. If you have momentum when it ends, you have a chance to hold your own against the overwhelming advantages the host website has. If you are really lucky, part of their blindspot may be have been exposed by your site and to rectify their oversight, maybe they'll just buy yours. Who knows.

People will still use remorasites for functionality available directly from the host if they don't know the host offers that functionality. This then comes down to things like SEO and marketing.

There will always be ways the small operator can stay viable by doing it better, faster, simpler. When I look at the Ebay Affiliate RSS feed a number of value adds still come to mind: Adding in-depth tracking and reporting features, monitoring active RSS subscriptions from the major aggregators. There are still many possibilities to make FeedBay viable, but I'd hafta move on `em pretty quick (see #1). My Copious Spare Time isn't what it used to be.

The major issue about remorasites is that the entire ecology of your website is defined by an external entity in the host website. Whether the relationship is friendly (value added, encouraged via API's and toolkits) or hostile (leech sites) greatly impacts the longterm sustainability of the project. But either way, you are still subject to the whims of the host.

## **Blog Export: Exile From the Herd, <http://www.privateworld.com/>**

You could wake up tomorrow and your entire business case is moot, obsolete or facing new competition from the host itself.

Posted by Mark Jiftovic in Living off the net at 15:06