

Friday, June 30, 2006

Drink your own kool-aid and scatter some acorns

While I have always been quick to point out that there is no such thing as "the New Economy" I have to admit that several playing fields have been more than levelled in the internet age, they've outright cratered.

What makes a lot of the innovation possible is the drastic reduction in the opportunity costs of failure. Examples range from telephony to the recording industry. Where once a state-of-the-art SS7 telecom switching station cost several million dollars to construct, today you can practically hookup a laptop with SER and Asterix to a PRI card and be in the same business for under two thousand bucks.

Yesterday if an artist wanted to record an album, he usually needed major label backing and minimum several hundred thousand dollars went into one album, and even the indie cinderella stories spent in the 10's of thousands of dollars to record their sleeper hits. Today you can do it for, again, under a two thousand bucks.

So today in many cases we have virtually cost-free failure, and that fuels a lot of innovation. People don't have to bet the farm, max out their credit cards and mortgage their house in order to give an idea a shot. They can bootstrap, edge-in or hell, spend one afternoon coding and 10 bucks on PPC and they'll have a good indication of whether an idea may have legs.

Unsuccessful searches are opportunities in disguise

Out of all my ideas I realize the ones that seem to work best are those for which I have personal use for. Rather than sitting around trying to think up something to invent, I end up wishing for something I could use, right now. If it turns out not to exist, or at least I can't find it, the lightbulb goes on. My basic assumption is I am not the only person looking for this, but I just may be one of the few who will do something about it sooner than later.

This occurred to me yesterday when I was explaining the origins of easyDNS to a reporter. It's background was in another company where we kept running into the same problems whenever we added a new client and needed them to make changes to their domain name. So we built a system to solve this problem, and this tool took on a life of its own. Nobody remembers the original company.

Around the same time I was playing with what I called a "context-based junk mail filter", because I wanted something like that but it also didn't exist yet. A couple other guys joined in on the collaboration but eventually, it just petered out and died on the vine. But then one of the guys took that failure, refined it, made it into something new, and you may have heard of the result. It's called SpamAssassin

I'm constantly spinning out ideas and launching things and they don't always get off the ground. I have one website I launched last year and I'm the only person using it. It has lots of members, they never actually activate the service. I personally find it invaluable, but I consider the site, on the whole, to be a flop. It didn't take much more than some coding time and a server.

Failure in this context is no big deal and one person's failure may be an acorn for somebody else's grand slam.

So build things that you find useful for yourself. There is no shame in building yourself a tool even if nobody else uses it. Even if it stiffs, it may plant a seed that somebody else can run with.

It all adds to the sum total of knowledge and experience.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Living off the net at 00:52

Tuesday, June 27, 2006

Want to reduce email spam to your mail server? Stop using backup spooling

It is with regret that we have come to the following conclusion, but here it is: Offsite backup SMTP spoolers and backup mail exchangers have become worse than useless

The problem is spam and the software that delivers it exploiting the weak authentication schemes inherent in the SMTP protocol itself. It used to be an annoyance, then it became a concern, it is now an epidemic and has resulted in the death of the offsite backup MX handler.

What happens is this: spammers try "dictionary attacks" on target domain names, trying to deliver email messages at random usernames at the target domain. The primary mailserver knows which usernames are valid and rejects the rest. The offsite backup MX spooler doesn't know what usernames are valid and what are junk, so it just forwards everything it receives for a domain it is spooling for to the primary MX handler.

Spammers and other malicious parties know this, so they may not even bother trying the primary MX at all, they'll just throw everything at the backup mail spooler which dutifully forwards it all (or tries to) to the primary. It is a dead-easy method of launching a Denial-Of-Service attack as well.

So it is with a heavy heart we have to admit that any utility of having an offsite backup MX handler is in most cases far outweighed by the advantages it hands to spammers and other miscreants.

The good news is this: without a backup mail spooler defined for your domain, originating mail servers simply queue the mail locally for a later retry. So owing to the design of the SMTP protocol, you do not really lose any redundancy when you remove a backup MX spooler from your DNS settings. But you probably cut down on the amount of spam your domain receives through the back door that is the backup MX spooler.

Posted by easyDNS: Tips and Tricks in via easyDNS blog at 16:33

Friday, June 9, 2006

Shareholder Agreements for Start-Ups

If there is a single piece of advice I can give to anybody starting out down the entrepreneurial path with a few friends or partners, it is this: get independent legal advice before you sign your shareholder/partnership agreement.

This document will be the most important legally binding contract in your life, especially if you succeed. My first time through for me was a lesson in what not to do. We had a VC term-sheet before we even launched, so we had to incorporate quickly and we made some serious errors:

we grabbed the nearest lawyer instead of asking around for a good one.
he pushed what he called "a standard cookie cutter" agreement in front of us and assured us "it was fine for our purposes"
we didn't each seek outside legal counsel
we signed it

Years later, when serious money was involved and trouble inevitably followed, we each had a rude awakening when we took it to real lawyers (now that we could afford them) and found out what we had actually signed on for. ("Complete bag of shit" is how my lawyer usually referred to it).

This was a clear cut case of springing for a few extra bucks up front would have saved ten's of thousands down the road, not to mention months of grief. Fact was, I was too cheap and too timid to spend 500 bucks on a couple hours of competent legal time at the beginning. Had I done so, and then had the balls to return to the table and say things like "The shotgun clause needs to be reworked", "There's no easy way out of this" or "This thing handcuffs us together for life and I don't want that", for a bit of awkwardness, time and money we would have prevented enormous problems later.

I consider the first shareholder agreement I ever signed the most expensive (albeit educational) mistake I've ever made.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Venture Capital at 14:05

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

Tuesday, June 6, 2006

Forget Ajax, a look at two good blog tracking and SEO tools

Yesterday I blogged about AJAX, and other uses aside, how I don't think it's useful as a selling feature and mentioned MyLongTail.com as an example, and then I mentioned MyBlogLog.com as another site in a similar niche.

First, as I've commented before (somewhere), the speed at which search engines and specialty filters index and disseminate has reached the point where it happens in near real time, as the comments to yesterday's post illustrate. MyLongTail's Mike Levin left a couple constructive comments within hours and I woke up this morning to find a third comment from MyBlogLog's Eric Marcoullier. Both of these guys no doubt do what any savvy website operators do nowadays, and monitor for mentions of their services via sites like technorati or google alerts. I've found these services to be invaluable for tracking references to my business and my band. On one notable occasion it helped me head off a complete misunderstanding which could have easily snowballed into a PR debacle.

Mike Levin posed the question "Do I get it?" with regard to what MyLongTail actually does, and Eric Marcoullier hoped I would give MyBlogLog a try and it became clear to me I didn't do either of them justice in the original post: I already use both services:

MyBlogLog: is a great tool if your blog resides on a third party server like Blogger or Blogware, like mine did until the weekend. Because you don't have access to the server logs, you get some overview type stats from within the blogging app itself, but MyBlogLog gave me the fine detail on exactly where the hits were coming from, and where the outbound clicks were going (more on this in a second). So I wasn't a hard sale after the three day test period to become a paid subscriber at the premium level (\$3 a month, via Paypal)

So then I moved the blog onto one of my own servers for various reasons and I thought I wouldn't need this service anymore. But on a lark, I plugged the code into my new blog and things got even more interesting for me because of the outbound link tracking. Most of my blog posts contain very few outbound links, so before the move, these statistics weren't terribly interesting for me. But under the new blog setup (using Seredipity with all the third party bookmarking and tagging links enabled), I was surprised to be able to see a nice breakdown of the tagging and bookmarking action around my posts. So I'll happily keep my premium subscription here and will likely add another for the easyDNS company blog.

MyLongTail: The value proposition behind MyLongTail is that it analyzes every inbound hit and search hit and looks for keywords that reside "in the long tail" where it thinks you may have some underdeveloped potential and makes recommendations. The underlying premise is if you write more about those underdeveloped phrases you will incrementally improve your organic search traffic, I hope Mike Levin doesn't mind me hotlinking his graphic to illustrate his point:

Everything I said about AJAX aside, MyLongTail uses it to display the inbound hits to your site in realtime, which is interesting for my company site, which, according to MyLongTail analytics, gets 46.5% of its search engine traffic from our top-10 keywords and the rest (53.5%) from within the long tail.

But for my personal blog, watching inbound hits in realtime would normally be about as interesting as watching paint dry. Usually it only gets a smattering of visits per day.

But owing to fact that today is 06/06/06 TEOFTWAWKI day and as I mentioned over the weekend, a blog post of mine from last year comes up #1 in google's organic search results for various "June 6, 2006" phrases, MyLongTail is getting a nice workout the last few days. 1000+ uniques on saturday, 2400+ sunday, over 8500+ yesterday to what I expect to be a blow-off high today, there is lots of fresh data going into MyLongTail to analyze and I was expecting it to be heavily skewed by this 06/06/06 hysteria. So out of all this, it has so far recommended "sovereign individual" as an under utilized search term for me. Well done. This is a topic near and dear to my heart and something I'd have no problems writing more about. I would have never thought to target it as a phrase specifically.

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

So I see value in both of these tools. MyBlogLog is a sneeze at \$3/month and MyLongTail is still in a free beta, but all indications are I'll stick around once it goes over into a pay service.

Posted by Mark Jiftovic in Tech Wreck 2.0 at 14:00

Monday, June 5, 2006

AJAX Heresy: It's not a feature and nobody really cares anyway

Lately I've been hacking around with AJAX. Most of the time AJAX is used for little more than eye candy but I thought I had found a situation where AJAX would do actually something novel and solve an existing problem.

The problem is on our universal whois lookup site: easyWhois.com, where it has sporadically run into problems over the years where one registrar site or another (*cough* cough Netsol *cough*), would block us for "excessive queries". The idea was to use AJAX to push the query back into the client's browser, instead of doing it from easywhois. The server would be more of a switching station: it would grab the domain to be queried from the browser, find the appropriate whois server for it, send that back to the client who then would connect to that server and conduct the query. Nice, easy, simple and has the effect of difusing all the whois queries across the client IPs instead of at the central server, vastly reducing, if not eliminating blockages at remote registrar whois servers.

So it literally took 30 seconds to get Rasmus [Lerdorf's] 30 Second Ajax Tutorial working and begin to understand what all the hoopla was about. A couple of other Ajax examples later (here and here) and the entire idea took a hit. The idea in it's original form won't work because the javascript XMLHttpRequest only lets me do HTTP GET and POST method connections (as the name would imply). There doesn't seem to be anything like PHP's fsockopen() available to me to get the client to open its connection to port 43 (the whois port). I'd have to use something like Java, and if I did that I may as well load the entire application in there, never mind Ajax.

Throughout this process something became clear to me which I think is perhaps lost on a few people, Ajax is a tool, period. Granted that it is an essential component of "the Web 2.0 Kool-Aid", it is not a feature and I don't see it as an end-user selling point. It became even clearer as I explained to my wife (who is far more technically adept than the average person) what Ajax was and did and watched her eyes glaze over. And it wasn't an incomprehension glaze over, it was a "who cares?" glaze over.

"Ajax allows one to create bi-directional communications from the client to the server without page refreshes"

0.0001% of the population: Wow!

Everybody else: *yawn*....what's a "page refresh"?

So in the course of all this, and what inspired this post, was MyLongTail.com which is self-described as "The first AJAX based system for Search Engine Optimization". Something I came across co-incidentally during my foray into Ajax and which hammered my point home for me. MyLongtail seems to be along the same vein as MyBlogLog.com, in that they are both search engine keyword trackers and IMHO, offer a subset of something like Indextools, which uses the same approach of embedding javascript into the remote pages to collect data and has been around for years.

But I digress, so MyLongTail talks up it's Ajax-ness. If you look at their signup form, you really see a good application of Ajax in form validation. This in itself makes Ajax worth the price of admission because I can see this being a very effective means of providing less cumbersome form validation and probably drastically reduces form abandonment. Who wouldn't want that? Answer: nobody. Roughly the same number of people that would actually care that the technology that enables this is something called Asynchronous JavaScript and XML, a.k.a "AJAX".

In short, I don't see the point in trying to turn your tools into features. We use all kinds of various tools to provide our services and most of our customers couldn't care less what they are. They just want the box to go "Bing!" when they press the "Bing!" button and the rest is our problem.

It is beyond the scope of 99.9% of web users to even be aware of what Ajax is, and of the remainder, less care.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Tech Wreck 2.0 at 15:46

Friday, June 2, 2006

June 6 prediction nailed, another example of the long tail of blogging

About a year ago I blogged about the approaching June 6, 2006 date and owing to its MM/DD/YY date string I predicted that a lot of rubbish was going to surface in form of conspiracy theories around this date.

It looks like I was right, just a small sampling of net.kookiness brings all kinds of hyperbole from the lunatic fringes of the internet like June 6, 2006: 6 Things You Must Know, the Left Behind folks are releasing The Rapture on June 6, and even mainstream Hollywood is re-releasing The Omen on this date.

What I didn't expect was that my original blog post would become the #1 organic search result in Google for various June 6, 2006 related terms and that over the last few weeks, there have been a lot of those and they've been accelerating.

A quick look at some of the search terms people are using include:

- june 6, 2006
- june 6 2006 the end?
- end of the world june 6
- june 6, 2006 and 666
- 6th of june conspiracies
- what is going to happen on june 6 2006
- june 6 2006 end of world
- earthquake prediction june 6 2006
- significance of june 6, 2006
- world ending on june 5th
- wwiii 666
- june 6 2006 bible

and the list goes on. It's pretty interesting. I moved the blog today (wanting to get a handle on all the trackback spam I was getting on the old one, and to put it on one of my own servers), and I'm now tailing the access logs in realtime. Over the last few weeks it was getting up to a couple or few hundred visitors per day to this 1 year old blog post (the average post on my blog gets maybe 5 or 6 visits a day), and I think today it will go over the 1000 uniques mark, I expect a crescendo of activity leading up to D-Day next week (pun is very much intended).

Anyone concerned that the world may end on June 6th should bear in mind there was another subculture of net.kooks who were pretty convinced there would be an asteroid hit on May 25th, and some of these people (as I've remarked before), seem genuinely disappointed that it didn't happen. They keep their hopes up. Maybe the asteroid will hit week.

Posted by Mark Jeftovic in Nutjob Watch at 13:46