

13.3 Driving Traffic to Your Web Site

By this time you have seen how to build and launch a web site. Next is possibly the most difficult challenge in web site success: getting people to use it. This section will talk about strategies to drive traffic to your web site.

13.3.1 Google AdWords

Google AdWords

A service that allows you to purchase keywords, whereby an advertisement you specify is displayed when your keywords are searched for.

Though you may not have heard of Google AdWords, you have certainly seen them in action. Google AdWords are the sponsored advertisements you see on Google's search results page. AdWords allow web site owners to purchase specific keywords. By purchasing these keywords, Google will guarantee that your ad is displayed a certain percentage of the time when these keywords are searched. Figure 13.2 shows examples of AdWords displaying ads on Google search results.



Figure 13.2 Google AdWords

Cost Per Click (CPC)

A form of advertising where the advertiser pays each time their ad is clicked.

In the figure, the web sites displayed in the "Sponsored Links" sections, both directly under the search box and in the right sidebar, purchased "Django hosting" AdWords. If a Google user clicks on any of these links, the web site whose link was clicked will be charged a small amount. This model of advertising is called *cost per click*, or CPC.

Google uses a complex algorithm to determine how much each ad click costs, but most clicks generally cost between \$.25 and \$1.50. For most keywords, there exist more advertisers than spots for advertisements, which means that your ad is not guaranteed to be displayed each time a certain keyword is searched. Google will cycle advertisements depending on the frequency at which each advertisement has been shown. Google also allows its customers to spread their clicks out as much as they would like. For example, customers can purchase \$100 worth of clicks for a keyword and request that the \$100 be spent as quickly as possible, or be spread out over a timeframe that the customer can specify.

Google AdWords advertisements can also be displayed on web sites that run AdSense (another Google product that we'll discuss in more detail later). This allows AdWords to display advertisements on non-Google web sites. Google first started selling ads on their search results page, but once they started selling ads on others' web sites by means of the AdSense product, their business took off and revenues skyrocketed. AdWords makes up most of Google's total revenues because it is such a useful product for advertisers.

Google AdWords are an easy way to get your web site name and description in front of people's eyes, but AdWords cost money and may not be as cost effective as other mediums of marketing discussed later in this section. However, AdWords is the most cost effective way to advertise on the internet. They allow an advertiser to display ads to users who are interested in them, and they are paid for on a pay-per-click basis, which means advertisers only pay when a user visits their web site.

We never purchased any keywords with Google AdWords for Cellarspot, because we didn't have much money to spend on advertising. AdWords may have driven traffic to our web site, but this new traffic may not have necessarily been helpful. I make this claim because we had a problem with converting new visitors to registered users. That is, most new Cellarspot visitors did not sign up for an account. Purchasing AdWords would have increased our traffic, but an increase in traffic probably wouldn't have meant an increase in account registration. For Cellarspot, like most social networks, account registration is more important than new visitor traffic, because registered users are the users who will be spending the most time on social networks. Cellarspot did, however, have Google AdSense, which will be discussed in more detail later.

As of this writing, Marty Stepp, one of the authors of this book, has had AdWords keywords purchased for his name. This means that if you search Google for "marty stepp," you'll notice a sponsored ad with some interesting text. Figure 13.3 shows the ad. You'll notice that the text was not written by Marty; it turns out that one of his friends purchased this ad for him as a joke.

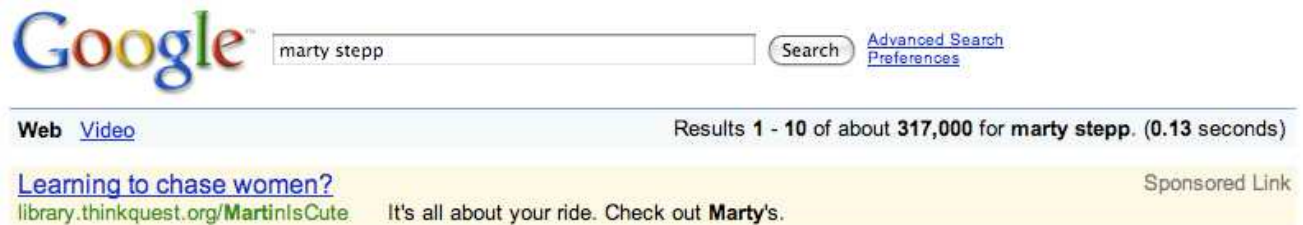


Figure 13.3 Marty Stepp's AdWords

To sign up for Google AdWords, visit <http://adwords.google.com/>. Other search engines such as Live Search and Yahoo! provide similar services as well.

13.3.2 Viral Marketing

A free and very effective mechanism for generating traffic is to create certain features that will help your web site spread virally. *Viral marketing* is marketing that spreads by word of mouth. Friends will naturally want to tell their friends about a web site that they have gotten involved with, and you should make that communication as easy and seamless as possible. Though the word "viral" usually has a negative connotation, it is a cost effective way to increase your web site's traffic. Included below are a few examples of viral features that are commonly found in modern web sites.

viral marketing

Allows a user to get friends involved in advertising a web site.

Invites

Invites usually come in the flavor of a single "Invite" link, which prompts the user for a list of their friends' email addresses. Upon submission, invitations are sent to each email address that was included. The email contains information about the web site, the user who created the invite, and a call to action to create an account. Invites can also help bootstrap a user's activity on the web site. For example, if an invitee signs up for a social network, the chances are good that they will be friends

with the inviter. For this reason, registrations from invites can create friend relationships automatically. Invites are a great way to get new users registered on your web site.

Invites can also be incentivized. That is, if your web site provides some sort of credit or score for its users, then users who invite their friends could receive free credits or increased scores. Giving users incentives to invite their friends will increase the number of invitations that your users send, which increases your user base and traffic. Netflix is a good example of an incentivized invite system. Users who invite their friends to use Netflix get discounts on their Netflix services, which encourages users to invite friends.

Address Book Searching

When a user first signs up with a web site, the chances are good that some of their friends are already on the web site. For this reason, many web sites allow their users to upload an address book or even provide login information to their email accounts, which the web site will use to look for friends that are already signed up. This feature helps to bootstrap a new user's activity on the web site by automatically creating friend relationships. Address book searching is a great way to get your users started using your web site.

Sharing

All web sites have content or material that can be consumed by a user. This consumable material can come in the form of funny images, videos, political analysis, etc. The chances are good that some consumers will want to inform their friends of the material that they have recently consumed. A sharing feature would allow users to send emails to their friends, where each sent email would contain the consumable material, along with some information about your web site. Sharing is a great way to drive traffic to your web site.

RSS Feeds

RSS feed

A special type of content that usually represents recent activity and is subscribable by feed readers.

RSS feed reader

A program that syndicates a number of subscribed feeds into a single consumable list.

RSS feeds are a very effective way to make your web site more viral, but they are somewhat complicated. *RSS feeds* are a special type of content that are subscribable and that usually display some notion of recent activity. They allow users who are interested in seeing recent activity to subscribe to this recent activity with a feed reader. An *RSS feed reader* is a special type of program that allows users to add RSS feeds that they are interested in subscribing to. Every time one of their RSS feeds has a new item, that item is displayed in a list alongside other new items, allowing the user to effectively read new items from all of their subscriptions in a single consumable list. Some example feed readers are Google

Reader, FeedReader.com, and Netvibes.com. Figure 13.4 shows a screen shot of Google Reader.

RSS feeds are most commonly used in news web sites and blogs. However, they also allow other web sites to very easily fetch data from your web site, which means that other web sites can programmatically display your content, making your content visible to a broader audience. RSS feeds provide a "readers digest" version of a web site. They provide a recent snapshot of a web site, and feed readers combine recent snapshots from many different web sites together into a single digest.

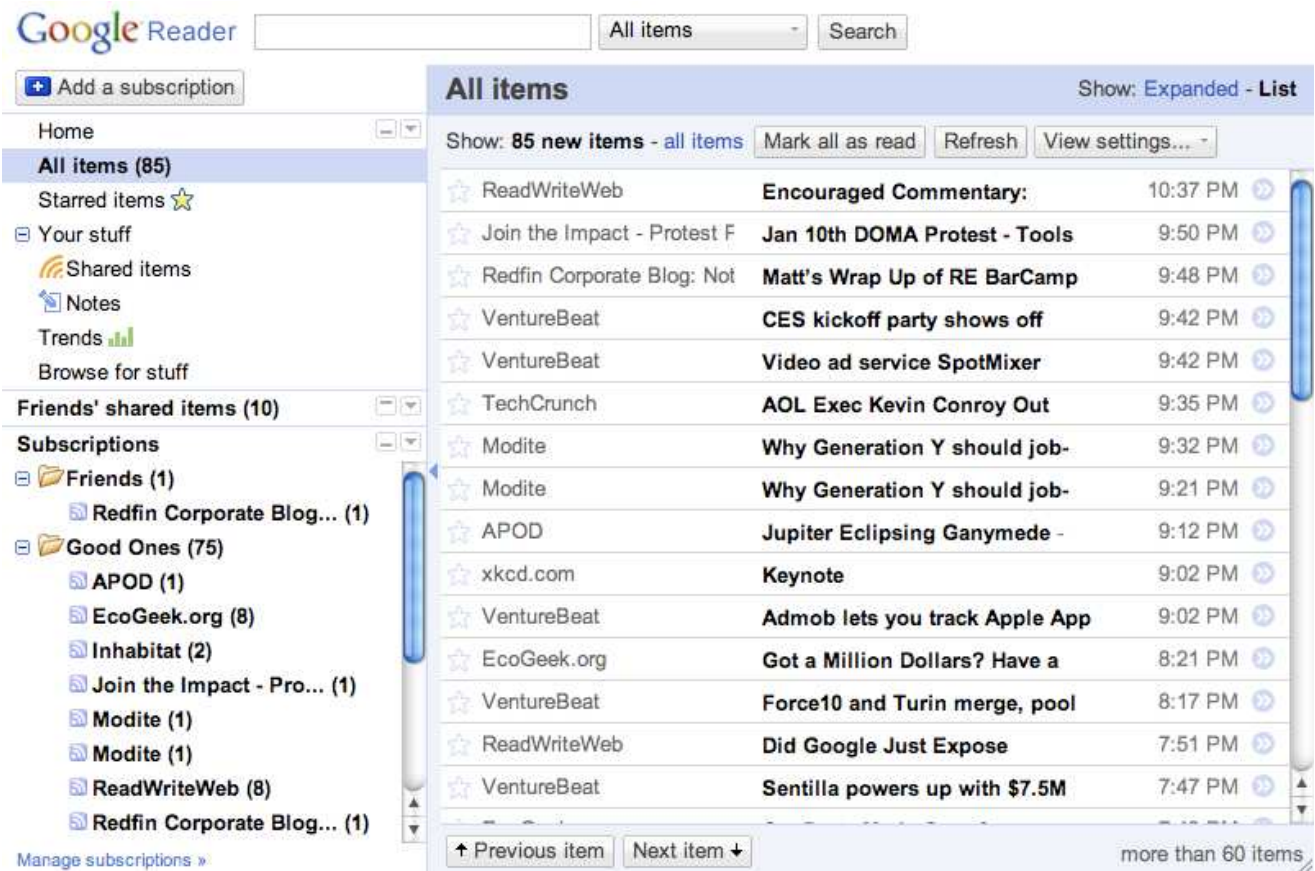


Figure 13.4 Google Reader (an RSS feed reader)

RSS feeds allow your users to subscribe to your web site, which effectively keeps them coming back for more. They also allow your data to be more portable, which broadens your audience. Most technologies such as Java, PHP, and Python also provide tools and libraries to create RSS feeds.

Embedded Features

As was the case with AdWords, you may not have heard of embedded features before, but you have most certainly seen them. *Embedded features* are features of your site that can be included on other web sites. The most known use of this feature is YouTube's ability to let users embed YouTube videos on their web sites. YouTube provides a snippet of HTML code that can merely be copied and pasted into another web site's HTML source code; the copy-pasted HTML is all the user needs to get the video playing on their web site. Embedded features broaden your audience and generate incoming links to your web site, which can drive more traffic and also improve your search engine optimization. Search engine optimization will be covered in detail later in this chapter.

Specific viral features are not always relevant, depending on the goals of your web site. You should decide which of these features is most relevant and include them in your web site. You should also pay close attention to which features are most useful to you and bear this in mind when creating other features. This chapter will also cover ways to determine how users find your web site.

Cellarspot implemented one viral feature: invites. The invite feature noticeably increased the number of registered users we had. Cellarspot didn't launch with the invite feature, because at the time we didn't think it was a priority. However, we convinced ourselves that we needed the invite feature, and its usage proved that viral features can increase traffic to your web site.