

Content Marketing Success Stories



Michael Stelzner didn't always have one of the world's top business blogs.

After recognizing that social media would revolutionize marketing, he launched [Social Media Examiner](#) in October 2009. Within a few months, it cracked the top 100 business blogs on [Technorati](#). In its first year, the website brought in \$1.7 million. And today, with more than 117,000 subscribers and a list that grew by 234% this year, the site now sells ad space in its newsletters for up to \$3,600.

What's his secret? Actually, it's not a secret at all.

In his book, [Launch: How to Quickly Propel Your Business Beyond the Competition](#), Stelzner explains his principles and methods for creating a thriving new business. He also goes into great detail about building an engaged community of email subscribers, which he says is critical to a website's success – even one devoted to social media.

"Email is the most important channel for you to cultivate," he states in *Launch*. With that in mind, we spoke with Stelzner about the book, his success with the Social Media Examiner site and how others can apply his tactics and the lessons he's learned.

"So many businesses have been taught that to get your message in front of someone else, you must pay someone else to do it," says Stelzner. "What I'm teaching in my book, and what I've done, is exactly the opposite of that. I'm teaching people to become completely independent using their content."

Three Lessons from *Launch*

Stelzner attributes much of Social Media Examiner's growth to his three rules for business initiatives:

1. **Help people solve basic problems at no cost – part of his "Elevation Principle"**
2. **Don't sell anything until you've reached 10,000 subscribers**
3. **Promote content, not a product or service**

The Elevation Principle is all about building trust and relationships with your audience, which usually means providing advice and insights rather than sales pitches.

"If your marketing strategy centers on helping people with their smaller problems, many will seek your help to solve their bigger issues," says Stelzner.

Along with the principle of emphasizing help over sales, Stelzner chose to avoid selling anything to the Social Media Examiner audience until the site reached 10,000 subscribers. Waiting that long might seem strange to many marketers, but Stelzner not only waited patiently, he built the site to put the spotlight on others instead of himself.

"I made the strategic decision to make Social Media Examiner a movement, something people wanted to be a part of," says Stelzner. "I deemphasized my role and gave a commercial-free stage to other experts. And people rushed in by the tens of thousands. When we finally turned on the marketing engines, we had a blockbuster experience."

That approach also reflected his commitment to providing high-quality content. Stelzner says his formula is rather simple: great content + other people - marketing messages = growth.

To build Social Media Examiner, he reached out to several social media thought leaders, such as Jason Falls of [Social Media Explorer](#) and Facebook expert [Mari Smith](#), and asked them to contribute one guest post each month. Having a core group of up to 20 regular contributors established the site as a leader in its field. Audiences began flocking to the site and sharing it with their networks.

"Great content is food for the mind. It feeds the deep desires of people. It enriches lives, solves problems, educates and even entertains," Stelzner writes. "Great content has a magnetic quality that points the internal compasses of people directly toward your business."

What constitutes high-quality content? And which types are most likely to be consumed, shared and seen as valuable by a wide audience?

Among other formats, Stelzner suggests:

- Comprehensive how-to articles
- Expert interviews
- Case studies
- News stories
- Reports based on surveys

Another important factor: taking a social approach to your content creation and cultivation, including guest posts and contributions from outside experts.

"Working with outsiders helps establish greater credibility for your content, provides a platform for your peers, and helps you grow more quickly," says Stelzner.

"The right content is highly sharable and can quickly draw important people to your business, enabling you to achieve rapid growth and soar beyond the competition, without the traditional costs of marketing."

- Michael Stelzner

List Building: Five Keys To 234% More Email Subscribers

Compelling content from industry experts lies at the heart of Social Media Examiner's growth, but it's not the whole story.

If capturing the attention and interest of site visitors is the first step, enticing them to sign up for email updates is where the relationship truly begins. That's why sites need to demonstrate the value that visitors will get in exchange for providing their email address.

Here are five keys Social Media Examiner uses to build a healthy opt-in list:

1. Pop-up Form

"The pop-up form has been absolutely instrumental in our success" says Stelzner, who estimates that the form generates nearly 70% of email subscriptions. "Without it, the list would be much smaller."

Although pop-up forms with display ads can be seen as disruptive, email opt-in forms tend to be better received, especially when they appear shortly after a visitor has accessed a site or page, as opposed to the moment they arrive, before they've even seen the content.

Social Media Examiner uses cookies to display the form just once per user, and the design closely resembles the site-wide email opt-in form in the right sidebar, including the call to action "I'd love updates!" and site mascot (see below).



2. Bonus Incentive

Subscribers also get instant access to a free Facebook marketing video tutorial and transcript after confirming their email address. This bonus incentive has a high perceived value (the instructor is subject expert Amy Porterfield, the co-author of *Facebook Marketing: All-In-One for Dummies*). Plus, it also exemplifies the Elevation Principle: helping people solve problems with valuable content at no cost.



To get more mileage from incentives, make sure they are closely related to your email updates and the site content that motivated visitors to subscribe in the first place. If an incentive like a free video, ebook or download doesn't provide enough extra value, subscribers will be less likely to open, read and share those emails, so use incentives that make a strong impression.

Tip: If you have different incentive offers, [run A/B split tests](#) to determine which one generates more email sign ups, or test using an incentive versus no incentive.

3. Confirmed Opt In (COI)

Many marketers still view confirmed opt in as a potential obstacle. They recognize that COI improves a list's quality, since those subscribers took extra steps (opening and clicking the confirmation email) and are likely more engaged; however, the allure of larger overall list numbers can be tough to resist.

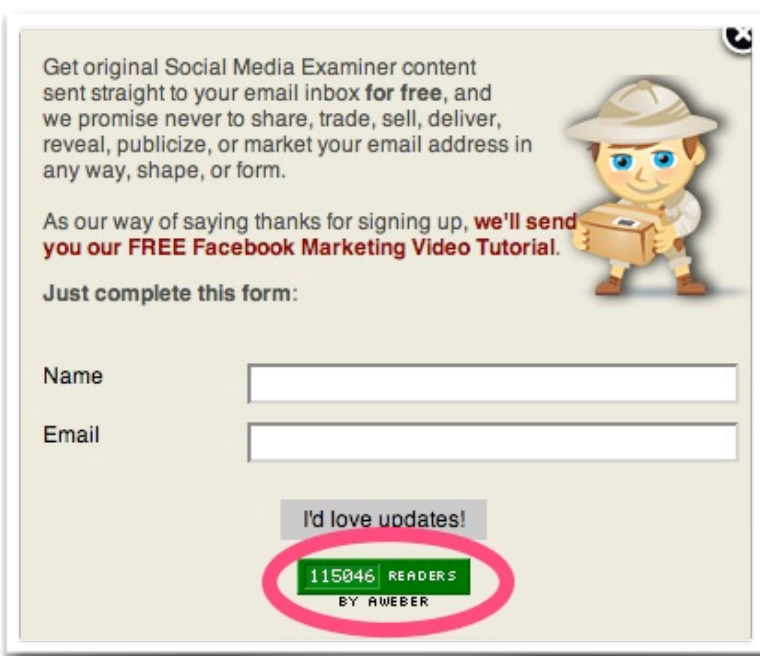
Why is Stelzner an unabashed COI fan? He cites three main reasons: better deliverability, ensuring that recipients are truly interested in the emails, and it's a bigger hit with advertisers. Stelzner also believes COI is a major factor in the high open rates his emails receive.

"At the end of the day, I want to maximize my delivery rate and make sure the people that get my emails really want to receive them," he says. "And it's attractive to advertisers to know that our list is 100% organic growth and double opt in, because that means it's legit."

4. Social Proof

Research and testing has shown that social proof can be a powerful motivator. Deciding whether or not to sign up for email updates becomes easier if you perceive the value in those updates; if you see that 117,000 readers already receive those updates, you may be more likely to sign up than if it were read by only 3,000 others, or the subscriber list was unknown.

If social proof is defined as "the process of validating an action by looking to the actions taken by others," then the classic example is how McDonald's includes "billions served" on their signs. Opt-in email forms can benefit from a similar approach, as Social Media Examiner illustrates with a real-time counter directly below the call to action button (see below).



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WORDS OF PRAISE

"Launch is your road map to success in an ever-changing world." **Guy Kawasaki**, author of *Enchantment*



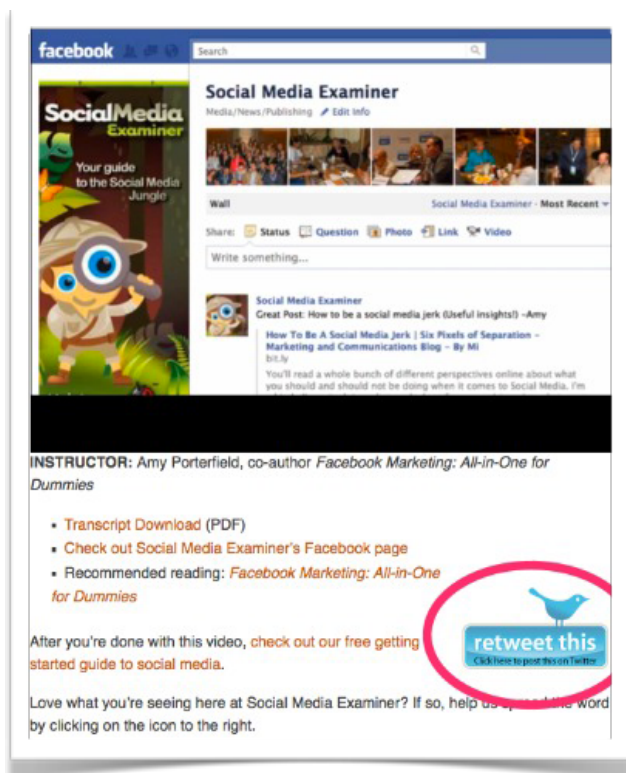
"What Stelzner shares here is proven! He's already built a community that propelled his brand not only beyond the competition, but ahead of an entire industry." **Brian Solis**, author of *Engage!*



Other types of social proof include testimonials, awards, reviews and similar credibility indicators. For instance, Social Media Examiner also includes a list of quotes by prominent marketers recommending *Launch* in a sidebar right below another email opt-in form (see *previous page*).

5. Social Media and Sharing

For a site devoted to social media, taking advantage of sharing options is a given, and there are several spots in site pages and emails where readers are encouraged to tweet, “like” and otherwise refer their social circles to Social Media Examiner (see *below*).



All Social Media Examiner blog posts use share buttons, and Stelzner says those links are a major source of traffic to the site and the email opt-in form.

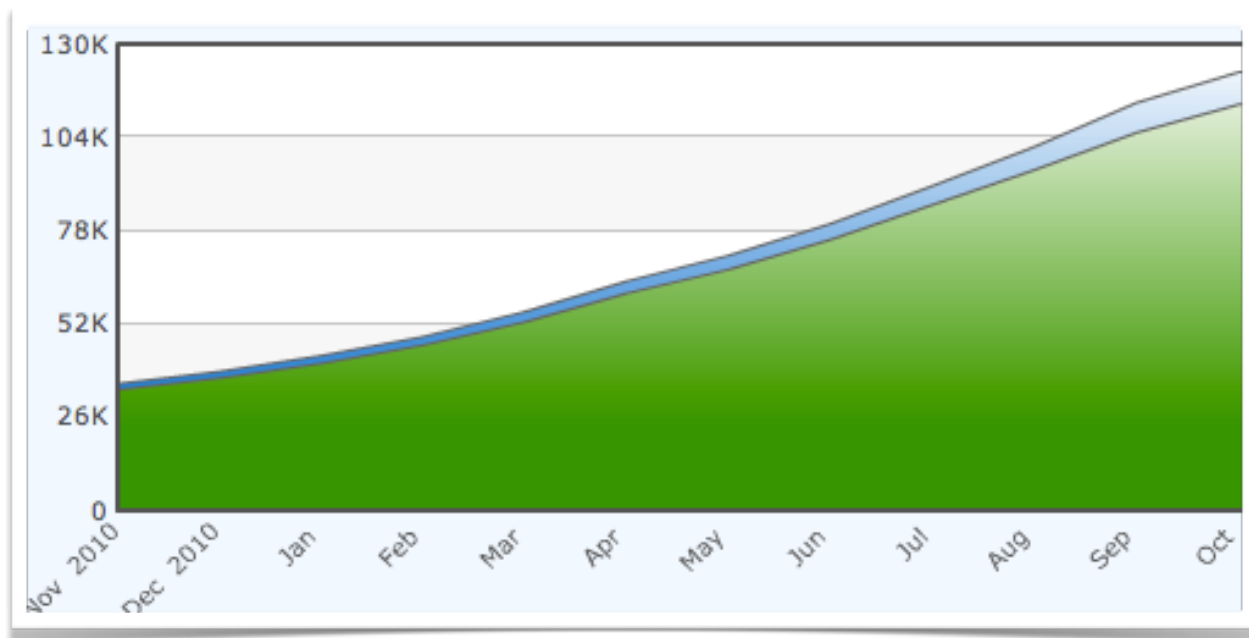
Readers are also encouraged to follow the site on Facebook, with prominent above-the-fold sidebar links on the site and in email broadcasts.

Tip: If you run a Wordpress blog, the [Sociable](#) app makes adding these share buttons easy.

Results And Takeaways

Social Media Examiner currently averages 450,000 visitors per month, and its primary revenue stream is online events, followed by advertising sales.

Between November 2010 and November 2011, the site's email opt in list increased by 234%, due in large part to the five keys outlined above, and is currently at 117,000 and growing.



Your site's content may be quite different than the content on Social Media Examiner, but if your goal is email list growth, the tactics and underlying principles can work just as well when properly applied to your site.

Questions to consider: Have you tested different pop-up forms and incentives on your site? What about credibility indicators and social proof? Are you placing social sharing buttons where they're most likely to help grow your audience?

No matter what type of site you have, creating valuable content, making it easily accessible and sharable, and providing helpful answers and resources is a proven model for successful list building. How is your business applying the Elevation Principle?

"At the end of the day, an audience is what you have to have in order to be a successful business," Stelzner says. "Don't underestimate the importance of developing outstanding content to build the audience. If you don't have the content, you'll never have the audience. You're not going to have an email list if you don't have something that's valuable. You have to create value, and that's where your content comes in."

About AWeber

What do leading sites such as Social Media Examiner, Copyblogger, Which Test Won, ProBlogger and Harvard Business Review all have in common?

They rely on AWeber for easy-to-use email and social media tools to cultivate relationships with their readers. Since 1998, AWeber has been the email engine powering the growth of organizations around the world.

Today, more than 110,000 small- and midsize-businesses, entrepreneurs, agencies and nonprofits are making the most of AWeber's sophisticated segmentation and analytics capabilities, social media and testing applications, extensive template libraries, and industry-leading deliverability and live support.

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