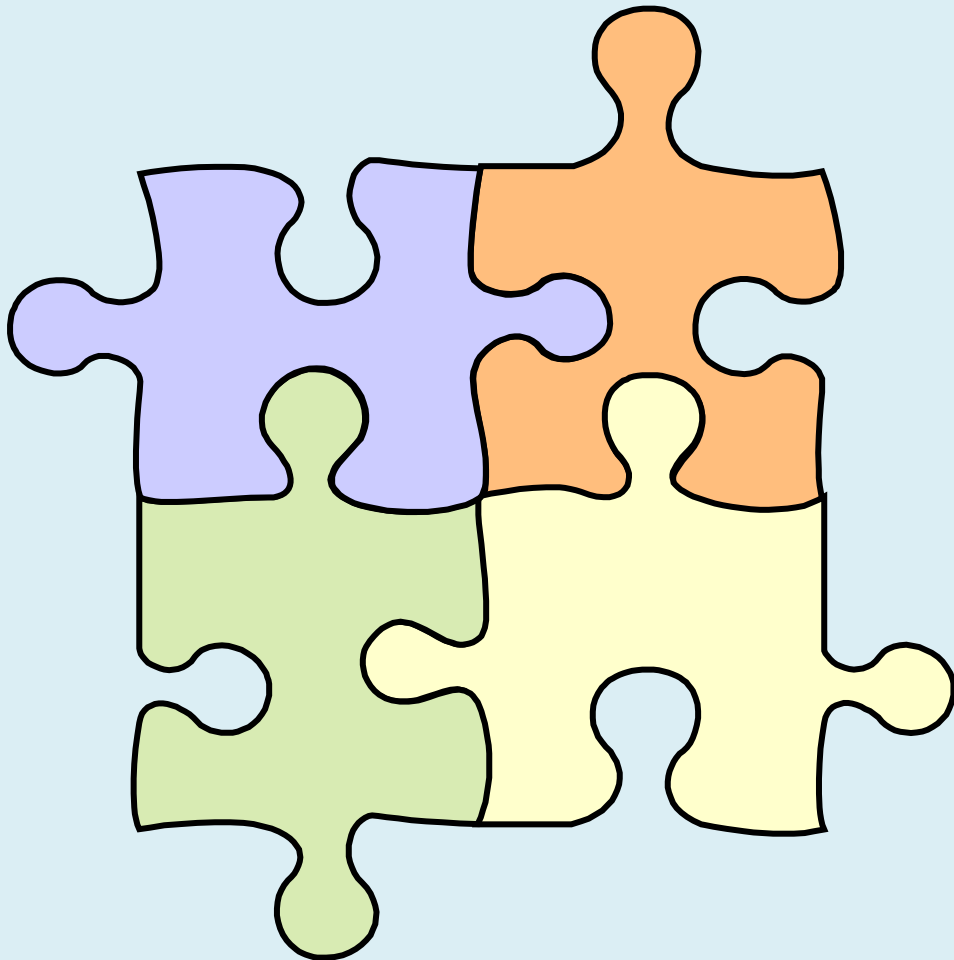


HOW TO ORGANICALLY GROW YOUR PLATFORM



BY HAROON JUNAIDI

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1st Published August 2015

Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	5
Organic Growth.....	5
Chapter 2.....	8
Understanding Blogs and Web platforms.....	8
Chapter 3.....	10
Writing	10
Chapter 4	12
Marketing	12
Chapter 5.....	15
Maintenance & Monetization.....	15
Chapter 6.....	17
The Final Word.....	17

Preface

This book is aimed at helping those who are looking to start a successful web based platform (Blog or a niche site). It not only addresses how to grow an audience but also focuses on writing posts with high traction.

During my own quest to grow a successful blog, I had to do a lot of research. Most of that came in the form of YouTube videos. I also noted that concrete information that is backed up by facts and figures is not readily available. Most of the times you find a golden nugget of information in between videos, but this information is mostly shrouded by haystacks of needless talk to increase video duration.

The other problem with the information available about successful blogs/websites is that most of it is very subjective and is limited to personal experience. As per authors knowledge very little information has been collated that objectively focuses on necessary features of a successful blog. One size fits all policy is very far from the truth in the Blogosphere. The little research there has been, is by SEO companies and search engines to cater for their own interests. And therefore there is need for statistical and empirical study to chalk out methods that are scientifically proven to work.

This book does not aim to provide step by step guide to setup websites. For these trivial matters several other guides, e-books and videos are already available. It does however provide you with the right philosophy, approach and tools to manage your website and expectations when developing your platform. It will give information to the reader on focusing at the right areas at the right time through the life of platform.

Lastly, website and platform development has become a huge niche of its own. A quick survey will reveal that a majority of people working in this niche have an IT background, whereas successful bloggers are from more varied fields. Therefore, the tips and tricks, dispensed by people whose expertise is in IT, are not necessarily applicable for many bloggers or people with a specific niche. The information provided at times is too irrelevant or is too dilute. Therefore it is important to learn from people of a wider background. This book has tried to collate information from successful bloggers and website owners of different fields.

It is hoped that this book will provide a solid launch pad for readers aiming to enter the blog sphere either as a hobby or as a profession.

Chapter 1

Organic Growth

Most of us would like to wake up with a million dollars more in our pocket. Internet is a powerful vehicle that has indeed transformed the fortunes of people overnight. However, one should note that these cases are far and few between. They are exceptions and not the rule. It is in fact this hasty attitude towards quick achievement that is the bane of success in the blogging industry. This book therefore does not offer a methodology of shooting of arrows in the dark and counting on your luck on hitting the jackpot. It instead offers a much more reliable approach. It sheds light on the method that has been leant by nature itself, the method of “organic growth”.

On the internet, a blog pops up every 6 seconds. There is only a tiny fraction of those blogs that go on to be successful. They are able to generate income that can offset the income from a routine 9 to 5 job and sometimes much more. So, what separates the successful blog from the unsuccessful ones? Is it quality or quantity of content?

Well, it turns out that it is a mixture of both. It requires consistent effort and most people give up too soon. Although, there have been instances where a product has gone viral that doesn't offer something of value. These articles, infographics or videos have achieved popularity but lacked quality. Such efforts are not the focus of this book.

Soulja boy's “Crank that” or Rebecca Black's “Friday” may have made them celebrities overnight because unintentionally they were able to press the virality button. However, such is the freak nature of their success that even for them it would be impossible to follow it up with another video.

True success however comes from a hard shift, day in and day out. People searching for shortcuts will therefore not get much out of this book. Although once the ethic of putting a hard shift is ascertained than one can explore working more effectively to make the efforts go further.

To understand the gist of organic growth, one has to imagine the work of a gardener. Just like being a good gardener in the real world requires spending time, energy and having the knowledge of craft. Similarly for cyber gardener, spending time on the website along with the knowledge of writing and marketing and maintaining the blog is equally important.

It should be said that the energy to apply this knowledge should also be in ample reserves. The initial capital of energy needs to be substantial. The idea is that the initial effort takes the website to a level which is noticeable for the readers as well as search engines. The positive feedback from the readers and the generation of revenue from that site will then supply the motivational energy to further the platform.

Gardens don't grow over night and have to be tended. They require sowing, watering, grafting and pruning. A web platform is the same. It does however has the potential to generate incomes that is several folds more than your normal 9-5 job.

By using a high quality seed better produce can be expected, likewise the knowledge contained in this book is important to understand to sow the first high quality seed.

It would be relevant start from my own experience on a different front. The lesson I learned from an activity that seemingly has no connection to the blogging proved invaluable for the success of my own websites.

I was a hard gainer (ectomorph) in physiological terms. I had been training hard in the gym for muscle gain for almost two years but did not get any results.

During this time, I had seen countless videos and bought umpteen products, protein shakes and other supplements and yet there was hardly any change in my physique. The only change I noticed was in my fitness levels which improved considerably.

It was only when I came across a personal trainer that the flaw was identified. He said “ Bro. you can watch thousands of videos but nothing will change. The thing is that the simplest advice is often neglected or ignored. The simplest of rules are also the hardest to follow.” He gave me the example that reducing your sugar intake sounds very simple but in reality it is one of the hardest rules to follow.

He was right. I realized that I had subconsciously ignored all the simple rules that I had heard numerous time. It was true that my focus overtime shifted from the basics. I became instead more committed to efforts that had a tertiary importance. For example I was doing biceps curls like many men in the gym but had paid little effort in simple things like diet, hydration, nutrition and warm up. Moreover I was practically doing no compound exercises.

“The simplest rules are the hardest to follow”. Unpacking this mantra was a revelation to me. From getting up in the right time in the morning to flossing your teeth, these entire tasks are simple to write but hard to do because of their repetitious nature. In making a web platform, there are similar basic foundational tasks that will be looked at shortly.

The core tasks in any activity regardless of the field must be identified. One mustn't allow tasks of secondary or tertiary importance to overrule the core efforts. In this book, the primary steps will be highlighted for the benefit of the reader.

Core Task 1: Creating Quality Content

When it comes to creating a successful platform, quality content is the king. Note that it's the creation of “quality content” not just content that is being emphasized. The appearance of the website, the freebies offered and the SEO efforts amount to nothing if there is no quality content on the website.

Developing high quality, unique and original content week after week if not day after day is the key to success. This of course cannot be achieved overnight. A lot of effort has to be put into this but to help you achieve this effectively, tips and tricks are provided in the later sections.

Core Task 2: Developing a social profile

You can have the best product in the market, but if no one can see it, no one will buy it. It is ironic, that today the onus is on the author to not only produce but set the stall for selling their content. Therefore time needs to be invested in both production and marketing. Some experts would say that the time invested in producing the content should be equal if not more to the time invested in marketing.

As your social profile grows, the time for marketing will get lesser, however diligence must never fade. One must never get complacent in ensuring the product reaching the target audience.

Core task 3: Maintaining the effort overtime

“Rome wasn’t built in a day.” Although earning potential from the web is huge and the time required to be successful can be much less compared to 9 to 5 job over a period of 40 years, but metronomic effort is still required. There are a host of inactive websites on the internet.

Dead and inactive websites are not appreciated by users, advertisers and search engines. It is towards the “happening” websites everyone will flock. Therefore it is important to keep your website fresh and active. You need to keep your audience constantly engaged. This is done by producing fresh content.

These are the three core tasks. Leaving these pillars will make all other efforts see very small returns. Thus if one has to compromise on efforts, the core values should always be maintained. Everything else regarding the growth of your blog is secondary. Nonetheless to run a web platform effectively, we need to progress on all fronts simultaneously to see the best results.

Chapter 2

Understanding Blogs and Web platforms

Blogging has grown exponentially since 2004, which is when it was inceptioned. Since then there have been incredible success stories. Two of the most popular blogs are:

- “Mashable” by Pete Cashmore. It has estimated revenue of 2.1 million USD a year.
- TechCrunch by Michael Arrington. It brings in revenue of 2.4 million USD.

These figures are conservative estimates and true information about these blogs is hard to access unless it is divulged by the blog itself. In an interview Pete Cashmore mentioned that he gets in access of 10 million unique visitors each month.

Some other bloggers that have also made it big are Gina Trapani, Vitaly Freedman & Timothy Sykes.

These successful blogs range from technology and product review to tips and tricks (life hacks and fashion). It should be noted that these sites that started as blogs grew on to become authority sites. Therefore the idea that people will be interested in reading up stuff that describes someone’s mundane daily activities is false. Blogging as we envisage (casual write up of everyday activity), is not the one that can generate any success unless one is a celebrity or a pseudo celebrity.

One of the favourite topics of these successful bloggers is talking about their own pathway to success and a good number of informative videos are available on the internet that can inspire you and your blog to greatness.

Some of these successful bloggers are extremely open about how they carved their success. They list down the details to the nth degree, from the time they spend, the finance they generate to the resources they use.

J D Roth is a great example as well as his protégé Pat Flynn from Smart Passive Income. Both these individuals carved out financial independence first through their niche sites (Personal finance and exam help) and furthered it by sharing the details of their success.

The bottom-line is unless you have a niche, which will be discussed in the next part; it is unlikely that people will take interest in how you feel about things.

The Niche

Having explored the amount of bloggers appearing on the internet every day, one should bear in mind the importance of perseverance. In addition to perseverance, it is your niche (the topic of your website), the scope and theme of your blog that are the major components of your success.

Therefore the first priority should be delivering to the reader something that is not already there. If your niche is unique, it will set you apart. For example your niche can be comparison of electric cars in the market, or reviewing small scale wind turbines etc.

However, if you feel that there is already something on the web that you can improve upon and present better, than that can also be a starting point.

Key things to remember are:

1. If you start on a niche that doesn't exist, than you have a head start in the market.
2. The more saturated your niche is, your success will be determined by how much original content you provide to your readers.
3. Your readers must be able to take something new from each post. Sometimes from a single idea or story you can draw different conclusions. So if you have a unique opinion or a different take about a common story, people would be interested in hearing that.

Therefore as discussed having discussed that unique niche gives you an advantage. Having strong background knowledge in that niche would further that advantage. So choose a topic you love to talk about in public. Sometimes all it takes is your unique idea to come in the market first.

Take the example of "Hotmail" that was launched 6 months earlier than Yahoo mail. Yahoo started off as an online search engine. Despite their superior resources at the time, Yahoo entered late in the market for the provision of free online email service. The six -month late start cost them over ten years to finally overtake "Hotmail". This too was achieved after rigorous and constant improvement in their service. This gives us a clue to the importance of time and entering the market first.

The other factor is superiority of product. If someone comes along and offers a far better product than what you have to offer than losing pole position should not come as a surprise.

Therefore constant evaluation and evolution is necessary. The improvement also comes with experience, as you will learn what works in the cyberworld/blogosphere and what doesn't. It is imperative that you retain focus towards constant improvement but do not make perfection a vice.

A case in point is Apple, who with their far superior product not only knocked Nokia off their perch but almost left them in ruins. Bear in mind that Nokia had built its empire in 15 years. Similarly to maintain your web platform on a high perch, due diligence is required.

Your perseverance will also help your rise. A web ranking website "Alexa" evaluates all the active websites on the internet. There are more than 30 million active websites on the internet. With each post you write, each Facebook like you receive and with every google plus, your website rises above the others. Therefore, the more likeable your product is, the higher the chance of your site sitting among the top websites in that pool of 30 million.

Chapter 3

Writing

Writing good quality article is not as daunting as one assumes. It is important that while you select your niche, priority should be given to the area of your expertise. The more knowledge you have, the higher you the chances of rising up above the others and the sooner success can be achieved. It is the knowledge of the subject that will help you write more in less time.

Often the best method to proceed is “baking” several articles at a time. Think about the toaster in the canteen that has a conveyer belt running through it. As the slices come out one after the other, your articles can come out the same way.

I do not write several articles at one time. I do however work on several articles at a time. That is I will be passively thinking about other articles, while I am finishing off the article at hand. The way this can be done is by making a list of all the articles that you aim to work on. And think about those topics for a couple of minutes. This activity plants a seed in your mind. Now your subconscious goes to work without you even realizing. Your brain will pick up points relevant to the topics as you are reading the newspaper, listening to the radio or having a conversation. You start to work passively on the articles without even realizing. This exercise half bakes the articles for you before you even start actively working on them. It is good to seed topics weeks before you intend to draft them.

There are several advantages to this concurrent approach. Firstly you will avoid a writer’s block. You can jump from one article to another if you feel bored or lose zest. Secondly you would not have to start from scratch. You would already have a half-baked article to work on.

Often our own ideas evolve about a topic over time. Sometimes our ideas change even as we write. Therefore it is important to take note of your own ideas on the topic other than facts and figures. Passively thinking on the topics overtime irons out the ambiguities and by the time you sit down to write the first draft, you are clear in your head about weaving strands of information.

Your blog articles are two types, one that will bring you the audience and second type is the one that will retain them. We will call them Impact and Staple articles respectively.

Impact articles:

Impact article are the ones which provide high value to your readers. Reading them should leave your audience with a great sense of achievement. This sense of achievement is delivered by providing unique and useful knowledge. Such articles include list articles (Top 10 cars etc.) or the “how to” articles.

Sometimes impact articles are referred to as pillar articles. These article should be evergreen i.e. should not be topical. Even if they are read after certain length of time, they should still provide value. These articles are the ones that will ensure a constant flow of traffic to your site and so one should make sure that these articles are on topics that will be “searched” by a user. There should be at least 25- 30 high quality pillar article in your initial 50 posts. Each of these articles must aim to have at least 1000 -1500 words.

It can be daunting even thinking about writing that many articles but one should note that with the write up of every article the next one gets easier. This is because your mind gets into the habit of writing. Furthermore, a template based approach of writing articles makes it very efficient to write more in less time.

It is extremely important that you write on topics that you think users will search for using the search engines. A keyword focused approach is the extremely important when writing the pillar articles.

Similarly articles that counter the popular belief gain a lot of traction. And therefore it is not uncommon to find articles that criticize a product or technology that is commonly used. For example, making light work of apples products might win you a lot of readers. Similarly conspiracy theory articles are loved by a huge number of people and even those who don't believe in them. However, a word of caution here, being controversial may not land you a loyal audience.

Impact articles are also used to diversify the audience and cast net for fresh ones.

Staple Articles

Just like a staple diet, these articles are the ones that you need to feed your audience to maintain their numbers. The average staple article can be 600 -800 words. They could be even smaller in word count if the content is rich. Mind you there are successful bloggers who have been blogging for years and at times only post less than 300 words. However they are good at their craft and that comes with experience

A good trick to quickly write a staple article is to read the comment section of a developing story. You can use this information and produce a much more rounded article on the same story.

One can also use templates such as quote of the day for staple articles. Please note that once you get in the habit of writing staple articles, churning out more article may take only a few minutes of concentrated effort.

Chapter 4

Marketing

As mentioned previously, marketing is as important as your content creation. It is one of the core tasks. Once your content is created, the power of social media can showcase it to an audience of thousands. However, the use of social media only for the purpose of sharing your own content should be refrained.

There are a variety of outlets to share your content on the internet. Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Stumbleupon are all websites where you can submit your link. They are all powerful platforms and depending upon your niche one may more suitable than the other. Experts in marketing suggest that every social media outlet has its own culture. One has to master that culture before utilizing it to their own benefit.

Spamming is taken very seriously by each of these social media outlets. You are likely to get banned or made invisible even to your followers if you use the outlet only for the purpose of promoting your own site. This is why spending time on social media is important. If you want people to share your work, you will have to share their work. If you want to get comments, you will have to leave a few too. Similarly, if you want to be retweeted, you need to retweet too. If you don't like people spamming your profile with their own links.....you get the idea

To reiterate, it takes time to grow your social profile and there is no escaping it. Therefore one should think of their own investment and contribution before trying to cash in. This way you create organic links rather than spam links.

Every organic link that you post is a neon sign in a vast blogging universe that points to your little planet. And so, there are two way to land a reader. Place more signs and make your planet bigger.

The good thing about growing your planet bigger (through larger blog posts) is that your visitor tends to stay longer. This should be the eventual goal. Your signs become more effective as your planet becomes bigger. Furthermore the larger your planet becomes, the more gravity it has, and just like our own planet that pulls in meteorites from space, the gravity of your blog will land you readers from cyberspace without your intervention.

Provided you maintain it regularly, the marketing goes almost on an auto pilot. There will be people who will market the blog for you. The level you want to reach is that every time you post an article, your link is shared by someone before you share it.

According to one statistic *“After 51 posts, blog traffic increases 53% and goes up by 3 times after 100 posts and by 4.5 times after 200 posts. Therefore the sooner you get to the 200 mark, the more effective your blogging effort will be”.*

It is also important to understand the way a search engine works. Google likes to land every user to the right page. It therefore lists sites that are the most relevant and of highest quality. If it doesn't, than google users are likely to migrate to another search engine.

Google however does not have thousands of editors who sit and read every page that is published. In fact, it would be practically impossible to physically read and rate. So how does Google rank pages? It does it through you, the readers.

If something is relevant and interesting, it will get shared automatically by the users through their social media. This creates backlinks. The sharing of URL of your site creates more and more footprints which Google monitors and picks up.

There are plenty of softwares that will share the links for you but it is a bad idea to use them. Many of these softwares end up creating spam links. They will place your links on websites that are totally irrelevant to your content. If Google picks up spam links, it will demote your site.

Google itself wants organic growth of the website. Not only it monitors the level of activity with the passage of time, but also checks if content is relevant.

It is therefore understandable that Google does not give priority to a new website. It values websites that have been tried and tested over time. This strategy eliminates people that are in just to make a quick buck. From experience of many experts, it can take anywhere between three to six months for a website to feature higher in Googles' algorithms.

Sharing of content on social media is just one of the ticks within Google's list to rank a site. If your website link is shared by high profile site such as BBC.com, CNN.com or even Huffingtonpost.com than it prompts Google to trust your site more.

Often it might not be possible to get your weblink on such high profile websites. There are other high ranking websites which allow contribution from various sources. In fact there are websites that will allow establishing links with other website that would like to have contribution from outside.

The important thing is that Google wants quality and if you provide high quality content, than SEO investment would be extremely easy and in some cases unnecessary. On the other hand if your content is low quality, no matter how amount of money you throw at it on SEO, the results will be futile.

Virality

Virality means hyper-propagation of content in short time span. The song "Gangnam Style" is a prime example. The science of virality is being studied mainly by SEO companies.

Seth Godin puts it "If your product is remarkable, it compels make a remark to it". If your product is remarkable than it does indeed compel people to share it. There are a few triggers for virality. People generally like to share content that is entertaining or makes them look intelligent. Content that is controversial or has a shock factor can also to a certain degree get viral. The pursuit of virality will however take you away from focusing on organic growth.

Building Community

Rather than focusing efforts on making the post viral, the organic way would be to gradually building up communities. If you have already been using social media, Facebook or Twitter and have a follower heavy profile than it would help. However what helps more is building community within your own niche.

There are certain websites that want your content and would make it visible to millions of users. These websites (Reddit and Stumbleupon) would also want your organic involvement. i.e. you cannot turn up submit your content and leave. These websites would like you to vet/ appreciate other content and make relevant comments to a discussion other articles.

Both these services are extremely important towards your content promotion. However, if you aim to use them than make sure that you also contribute by rating and commenting on other peoples content. Also if you start commenting and post quality articles than people would follow you, which makes you are part of a larger community.

Building community is the best way of marketing your content.

Chapter 5

Maintenance & Monetization

Initially, your blog/website would require more attention. Consistency is important. You may want to post daily, twice a week or weekly. Whatever schedule you formulate in your plans, you should stick to it.

It is obviously better to produce an article a day compared to an article a week. However one should bear in mind that hundreds of poor quality and useless posts are outweighed by a single high quality and valuable post. Therefore quality should be held supreme. It is obvious that if you churn out high quality content on a daily basis than you will achieve success much earlier.

It is also important that you should start with at least 20- 30 impact articles. In some niche, even with 4-5 high impact articles you can build a sizeable audience. These articles can be later supplemented by other stock articles. Once the blog/website is up and running, the frequency of new posts can be reduced.

It should be noted that unless your site develops substantial traffic, monetization in particular with Google AdSense or other agencies would not make much sense.

Depending upon the advert, you will get paid for an advert if a reader clicks on it through your website. There is a parameter called the CTR or click through rate that needs to be understood.

Let's assume you achieve a CTR is merely 2% (which is considered to be a healthy rate). This means that for every hundred readers only 2 will click through and for average click you get 20 pence (CPR). If your readership is 3000 a month (which requires a lot of effort), even than your expected income would be merely 12 pounds a month.

It is therefore not recommended that you monetize initially because it is highly likely that your attention that should be initially focused on creating content will get diverted towards checking your income.

Quoting from my own personal experience, when I started blogging, I used to monitor traffic every opportunity I got. I realized that I was spending more time in looking for traffic than in either marketing or creating content. It is highly addictive.

Furthermore Google ADSENSE may not be the best tool for your site. There are a host of other options for monetization that should be evaluated. For instance affiliate marketing works better if your site is related to product reviews.

It should also be noted that during the initial phase of your website, you have to monitor traffic to your site. The reason is that when you are trying to develop content, you have to evaluate what works for the readers and what doesn't. However this monitoring time should be limited to once a day. It is easier said than done.

One should remember that your blog is a just like a plant. The better the quality of seed you use, the better fertilizer and top soil is used, the better you look after it water it, the better it will grow till it becomes self-sufficient.

Chapter 6

The Final Word

The blog sphere is getting increasingly competitive. This is mentioned not to discourage the reader from blogging but to have realistic expectations of success.

Organic growth is the best way to ensure the success of your web platform. The initial effort required is high. Once a platform has been established, it will become almost self-perpetuating and just like a plant that becomes a tree, would require minimal attention.

Similarly, there is a certain amount of investment that your platform will require. Although one can offset any monetary investment by their own effort, however, it should be noted that very few individuals are multi-talented. You may be great in producing content, but it would be difficult for you to professionally design webpage. You can invest time and effort in learning web design each new avenue has its own learning curve. Therefore one is better-off in investing in the appearance and the background code of web-platform.

It is easy to build a basic website on wordpress or other web services. Free themes are available to provide basic outer skins. But as the saying goes “there is no such thing as a free lunch”- the use of these free themes from the point of view of security and long term functionality is risky. They are likely to slow down your website and may be non-responsive on mobile devices. Based on these performance issues, “Search engines” will penalize your platform. Therefore certain level of investment is required at the start. Buying independent domain name and hosting will be required to monetize your website. It should be noted that free sites on wordpress, blogger and most platforms do not allow you to any access and control to monetization activities such as putting adverts.

Some people decide that they will invest money back into the website as they generate it. This is a good approach but if you start without the minimum threshold investment, it may take a lot longer for your platform to take-off and recoup your investment. Be enterprising as much as your pocket allows.

Through web platforms many people are generating full time income and many more are making substantial amount of passive income. The internet is no doubt a great new frontier where more and more people are spending time and money each passing day. With this ever growing market, comes a great opportunity. The trick is to approach it in the right manner.

Useful Links:

Smartpassiveincome.com

Michaelhayatt.com