Independent Creatives: The Monetization Problem

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Abstract

The argument presented is that art by itself isn't good enough. Art confined and built with other metrics taken into account while solving a problem is a potential solution.

I. Introduction

The question that all independent creatives ask is, "How do I get paid for my work?" The better question to ask is, "How do I exchange my work, the problem that I just solved, for cash."

II. Attraction: The Bird Feeder Principle

This is not a principle in and of itself. It is something that I made up to remind myself of the general concept: there needs to be a reason for people to be exposed to your product.

The type of people that are interested in your product is going to be dependent on the type of product that you have in your bird feeder. If you create free content, then you will gather an audience which is expecting free content. If you present paid content, then you will gather an audience which is expecting paid content.

This is the inherent flaw in social media as a product advertisement — it attracts an audience whom wants and is accustomed to a free product.

Social media was advertised as "grow an audience, then monetize them". This is incorrect. The type of people that you attract to your product are people whom want free stuff. Only a small percentage of that audience are of the mindset to exchange money for product.

The advantage is to the social media platform itself whom has an audience. They can sell advertising because now they have a bunch of people showing up to *their* bird feeder.

Free product is not a bad thing. I address this issue in a later section. The purpose here is for you to become aware of the type of people whom are being attracted to your content. Will they develop into a monetary exchange later? No. Because they are people whom are interested in free products.

Understand whom you are attracting. Then ask yourself, "for the time, money, energy and aggravation combined with the inability to do other things, is this worth it?" This is not simple as there are many other facets to the problem. One of which is 'community'.

III. Exchange

We are not limited to the financial exchange of cash for goods. There are other exchanges. Time being the most valuable.

When we look at our product offerings, we need to look at multiple ranges. There is the immediate product, there are longer range products, books in my case, and potential types and other merchandise which all need to be integrated into an overall strategy.

The time and effort that one is placing into one product may connect to other products.

Time can be exchanged for advertising, the

traditional money exchange mechanism for entertainment media. There are also social connections. The value being of common consumers of your product are indirect sales people of your goods and potential purchasers of other products. Business is problem solving and taking a commission for it. If you can help someone solve their problem, they may purchase your product. As time is a finite commodity, it is usually highly valued . This is what drives advertising prices upwards for popular TV shows. As the number of available entertainment streams increases, there will be a decrease in ad revenue for each outlet. Supply and demand. This may not be the most dependable income stream. First, though, we need to make a product.

IV. The Product

After having defined your problem and having thought of a solution to that problem one needs to manufacture that product. There are a variety of factors to take into account. It is not good enough to look at the physical cost of production verse the price to sell the good. A creative also needs to take into account how long it will take to produce that product.

In the animation side of things this form of entertainment is costly to produce in respect to time. Time becomes the overriding metric due to the audience's workflow. This is sometimes addressed as "audience habit" or "audience patience". It is the length of time the audience will give to a product between episodes. A product needs to be within the audience's normal routine to stay relevant.

If the time-cost of your product is beyond the patience time amount allocated by your audience, then the momentum of that product is lost. There are many similarities between product momentum and physics; it takes time and energy to get a mass moving. It also takes longer to slow down – and more difficult to get moving again. Studios know this. That is why it is difficult to get a show restarted after it has been canceled.

Google and YouTube reward creators whom update their channels on a consistent basis because of this as well. They know that the audience forms habits of visiting their favorite YouTubers. Yet this isn't enough. One needs to understand how their audience is consuming their content to stay relevant.

Google has made mobile friendly websites a priority to their search results.[1] They have even created a web page to test "mobile friendliness".[2] This is in due part to the web surfing habits of its users. More than half of of the web traffic comes from mobile devices.[3] This includes Twitter and Facebook traffic. Google's argument, I suspect, is that if they want to stay relevant, then they have to supply its users with a product that fits their workflow. Business is problem solving and taking a commission for it.

This ties into the time-cost equation.

If it takes you eight months to create a product, but the audience finds other things to do in two, then you are, in essence, creating a new product for a new audience at every launch. A few twigs continually feeding the fire is better than a log every six months. Evaluate your time to market with your product. This will have impact.

V. Cost

Cost is more than just financial. It is also time and skill. The rough equation is:

$$cost = effort + time + materials + skill$$

If you can create an animated piece in eight months, but have a nonexistent audience as a result, then you don't have a good product. On the other hand, if you can create a simple comic every week, then you are pitching your product to a warm audience. The goal is workflow. You want your product to be in the workflow of your audience. Make it a habit for them.

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[1]https://www.marketplace.org/2015/04/20/google-will-prioritize-mobile-friendly-sites/
[2]https://search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly
[3]https://techjury.net/blog/what-percentage-of-internet-traffic-is-mobile/

You can only do this if you produce work in a timely manner.

Large platforms solve this problem by having a very large number of creatives to create their content. You are a platform. You now have the same problem that they have: how to get people to your product and how do you get money for it?

Let's use another example. Let's assume you are a manga creator. You can draw these highly detailed panels that will amaze audiences for years to come. The only problem is time. An alternative is to hire more skilled people which is not always feasible. There is also the option of drawing a lesser detailed product but having it done on time. The goal is to tell a story while keeping the production rate high enough to keep the audience receptive to new material while building longer production time products which have higher profit margins. This process allows long time-cost products to be manufactured then sold to this audience. The little wheel of production turns the larger wheel of merchandising.

So how do we create products with a consistent release schedule? Let's read on.

VI. Methods and Importance of Creation Mechanisms

Normally as artists we gravitate towards a particular medium without any thought to the financial advantage of one medium over another. This is not beneficial to the *business-artist*.

Referring to the previous animation example, a product that is only occasionally released will not do as well as a product that is continually released (all thing being equal). If we are going to stay relevant with our audiences, then we need to work within *their* workflow. This means time constraints.

Older generations had longer time cycles. Today's generation have thousands of potential YouTube channels to watch within the same 24-hour time constraints of the previous generation. The modern audience needs the ability to filter large amounts of data quickly to find solutions. Structuring our products to allow ease of filtering is key. Cover art is important because it conveys so much information in a minimal space. Understanding our audience is important. To understand our audience is by understanding ourselves for we are our best audience. Document your decision making habits. Become observant to not just <u>what</u> you are doing, but <u>why</u>.

VII. Implementation

Today's artist has a myriad form of artistic expressions available to them. With today's infrastructure we can distribute music, images, movies and books to a world audience. I can read a manga created in Japan as easily as one created in Brazil. We have the ability to distribute complex forms of engaging entertainment, but can we produce it within the time constraints as dictated by our audience?

VIII. Methods of Implementation

i. Puppets

Real-time recording, puppets have the advantage of high frames-per-second creation. Voice recording is sometimes done simultaneously with sound effects and music being added in post. Titles are usually added later in post as well, although a vaudeville-style of performance may generate other options.

ii. Animation

Still the most popular with audiences, they have the advantage of a no-limit world creation. The cost to create a mundane world is the same as is it to create a high fantasy one. The issue is cost. Animation is a very expensive endeavor in both time-cost and skill-cost.

iii. Single Image

The fan fiction post, the Pin-Up girl, the poster, these are all various forms of the same idea, a single image well rendered. Pinterest, Twitter, Tumblr, Pixiv and DeviantArt are the more

contemporary versions. The result is the same, the viewer gets to see a single image. The difference is that the poster artist might have made some money off it.

iv.   Manga

Manga splits the difference between single images and animation. It tells a story moving through time. It is more efficient from a time-cost perspective, but it still requires skill. As the rate of production is higher, more product can be released within the same time period as an animation product. I have not included the American comic book because I am of the opinion that it has lost general audience awareness.

v.   Podcast

Previously known as 'the radio drama', this form has made a significant comeback in recent years. It has not yet reached mass appeal. Additionally, this form has the same problem with regards to money exchange. Advertising is an option.

vi.   Live Action Film

What makes Hollywood. It's expensive and difficult to do well. Trying to get people to purchase your indie film is a book unto itself.

vii.   Theater

Physical stage theaters still do exist. It is limiting due to the distance an audience will travel for a performance and it requires the audience to conform to the show's schedule.

IX.   Solving a Problem

What problems are your solving?

- Saving others time: Doing research and presenting it clearly
- Saving others money: Doing reviews of products within legal requirements
- Giving them a drug hit: Make an action movie

Or are you part of their infrastructure, providing them with information to make better decisions? This is the approach that "Hollywood Reporter", "Deadline" and "Variety" use.

Clearly defining this problem is a requirement for a successful product. If you do not know what problem you are solving, then you cannot introduce that product to that audience. Marketing is about matching a problem to a solution.

X.   Exchange Problem Revisited

There are two forms of exchange: monetary and non-monetary. We can redefine this as tangible and non-tangible.

Tangible exchange is what most people think of. An audience physically purchases a product: either digitally or physically.

Non-tangible is more elusive yet the most valuable. These are the connections and habits formed by a potential buying audience. These are people being aware of your problem-solution and through their connections allow more people to access your solution. People know other people.

Popularity isn't enough, though. If we are going to pay our physical bills then we need physical money. The non-tangible may create infrastructure for our product, but without a tangible product to sell, we cannot produce sustainable content.

XI.   Is the Non-Tangible Relevant?

If the non-tangible will not pay our bills, then why pursue it? Referring back to the 'Bird Feeder Principle', if we attract the type of audience whom has a problem for which we have a solution, then we can increase our ability to physically sell an item.

This is sometimes called a "sales funnel". But without a product at the end of it, there is no sale.

Solutions need to be used more than once to be of value in today's entertainment market. A

movie needs to be watched more than once, a book needs to be read more than once.

The reasoning is that a single viewing can now be accomplished with streaming. With a single monthly fee translating to many one-watch movies, this saves the audience money when compared to the buy-once watch-once method.

If we are going to compete in the modern entertainment market, we need to create a product with enough mass to sustain multiple viewings. We need to solve the problem more than once.

XII. Forms of Non-Tangible Product

Online discussion, habitual visitations to your source of information or the increased likeliness of returning to your product page in the future are all forms of non-tangible purchase.

The non-tangible functions by having a single point of contact for the audience. This single point might be a social media platform or a website. The usual first contact point is a search engine. This is why search engine results are so highly praised – they are part of the audience's workflow. An audience whom has a problem and is actively searching for a solution. This is a different type of audience from several decades ago. They are more active in the process because of the tools available to them.

The traditional advertising method was passive based. They displayed big signs hoping that a certain percentage of viewers would be seeking a solution that their product solved.

The current audience is one whom is active in their problem solving. They are participating in the act of acquiring a solution to their problem. This is a different audience. How we position our mini-products and tangible-exchange products is fundamentally different than decades ago.

This is all nice and dandy. We can continue discussing the merits and changes of advertising over the decades as many do. It is all without purpose. For without a product that sells, the discussion has no merit.

Define your problem. Create a solution. Find an audience whom has that problem and introduce them to your solution.

Now how do we make this sustainable? Let's discuss.

XIII. The Sustainable Creative

The independent creative is an entrepreneur. If we are going to have a sustainable business, then we need to continually sell our products. This is the core problem to the independent artist today - we have been lied to.

We were told that if we participate in a social media platform that we would be rewarded with a tangible sale. This is incorrect. All we did was support another business' problem of creating product.

These social connections[4] and the consistency of product creation, if within the realm of our interests, are at the core of these platforms. It is what makes them work. This is the power and importance of search engine results and those "See Also" sidebars. If the platforms can match solutions to problems, they win. They can only do that if they know what solutions are available to them and what the problem is. They are, in essence, matchmakers. The problem for us is how to take that matchmaking process and turn it into a tangible sale when mass audiences are accustomed to free stuff.

XIV. Tangible Products for Tangible Problems

There are a variety of reasons why an audience will support an artist. Some will support an artist just on the merits of art itself. That is not the approach that I am taking so I cannot argue the merits of it. Instead, I am more interested in creating entertainment products to a smaller audience.

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[4]See "The Content Trap: A Strategist's Guide to Digital Change" by Bharat Anand.

The reason I chose entertainment as a product is that it is sustainable. There is a continual demand for it, decade in and decade out. It has many forms of expression and has merchandisability components. In some cases, it has a long shelf life.

What makes for a good entertainment product? Repeated use through non-purchase.

A good movie can be watched more than once. A good music album can be listened to more than once. A good set of books can be read more than once. But what makes a person want to read a book or watch a movie more than once? That drug hit.

It is likely that people watched 'Rocky' more than once. Or 'Bladerunner' or the classic release of 'Star Wars'. Why? It gave them that 'Top Gun' feeling. They were part of the process to restore peace and justice to the galaxy. They were there. Without this emotion, without being part of the process, there is no drug hit. Without a drug it, it becomes a disposable product.

The disposability aspect is fine for platforms as there will always be new content for people to consume. It is not good for us as independent creatives because it does not drive traffic, and potential sales, to our websites. It is watched once, then forgotten. It becomes very difficult to build one product on top of another product when every product is a dead end. So why are these platforms supporting this behavior? Because the audience gets that hit from somewhere. If it's not your product, then someone else's. The platform doesn't care because they are getting the same number of views. Your brand and the ability to build upon that product suffer. If we are going to be successful, then we need to be that platform. We need the ability to have our audience to be part of this galaxy which is saved. They need to be part of the story. If we give them that drug hit, they'll be back. This is what social media platforms do. That is what we need to do.

XV. Implementation Within the Audience's Workflow

There are different ranges to audience exchanges. Some are initial contact ranges - the ticket person for example. There are supporters - sellers of popcorn and soda. Others organize - ushers. Yet others support the production environment: lighting, sound, doors, security. There are the performers and those that support them. Your product can be in any one of these categories.

We normally think of performers, but who supplies the wardrobe? And who supplies the ideas for wardrobe? This is what I refer to as 'workflow'. Being part of that workflow, from raw goods or ideas, through to finish product is where the money might be. There are considerations, however.

First, we all live on commission. If the end product is a non-monetary exchange, then everyone else down the line will, nominally, have a commission on free. This generally translates to nothing. This is not always a bad thing. A lot of community events and festivals are based on this idea. We, as an individual, add something to the whole. What we get back is something larger than ourselves.

Second, we need a product which is worth financially exchanging for. A reference book which can be used many times over by the wardrobe department is one such product. A stable source of materials is another. We do not have to be the performers, we can be the suppliers to the performers. Research your area of interest. Understand the workflow for that end-product. Is there a component or process within that workflow that you can create a tangible product for?

XVI. Conclusion

Art isn't easy. Never has been, never will be. It is still a business. Business is the medium of the artist. As artists, we need to study business. Taxes, information organization, connections with others. All are part of that process. We cannot stay isolated with one aspect of our

business and expect the other components to
magically appear when needed. We need to
have a full business solution for the products
that we create. The creation is only a small part
of the overall business. Study well. You will
need it.