

# The Most Important Stakeholder -- YOU

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*"Everyone is self-employed, although not everyone knows it." - Matisse Enzer<sup>1</sup>*

It used to be that the when you joined an organization, you were there for most, if not all of your career. For better or worse, those days are largely over. Jobs and employees are increasingly mobile and more staffing is being done on a per-project base. Due to this pattern of changing stakeholders, the only thing that stays constant is you. This means that today's testers need to manage their careers, their image, and in fact their entire brand more closely than prior generations.

There is no secret formula for success, but there is a well trod path through the brambles if you look closely. This paper sheds some light on the path and explains some of the waypoints along it; discovering your issue, communicating your message, assembling your tribe, becoming a microbrand and the maintenance of it.

## What is your Value Proposition?

Testing is a task that requires critical thinking which is why humans will always need to be involved in it. As unique, professional, critical thinking humans we will all have different views and understanding of how the world works. These different angles on the testing issues and ideas are your unique value proposition to the testing world. It is also what you need to leverage.

Sometimes a defining issue or idea lands in your lap, but more often you have to intentionally seek it out. Philip E. Agre writes that becoming a leader in your field is achievable in 6 steps<sup>2</sup>. The first 4 are directly related to discovering and honing the planks of your platform.

1. *Pick an issue* - Ideally, you want something that is not really a current issue, but an emerging one. It could be a technique, a language or style of doing something.
2. *Having chosen your issue, start a project to study it* - It is not enough to just select an issue and then not thoroughly learn about it. If you fall into that trap you will look like an idiot far too often. I recall being in a presentation where the authors were throwing around 'heuristics', 'context' and 'oracles' like candy and were clear they didn't get. They desperately wanted to, but they had only done step 1 at that point.
3. *Find relevant people and talk to them* - There are very few purely original ideas so odds are someone has had similar thoughts. Find them. Find people too who

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<sup>1</sup> <http://discuss.joelonsoftware.com/default.asp?joel.3.318928.29>

<sup>2</sup> <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/leader.html>

disagree with their stance; you can often learn more from dissenters than the converted.

4. *Pull together what you've heard* - You are a thinking human being. Take what you learned and assemble it for your consumption. Don't fall into the trap of just saying someone else's issue and ideas of on it are yours as well. Sheep don't lead. The wolf leads.

One thing to keep in mind when picking an issue or idea is to pick one that resonates with you. Do not pick one solely for career purposes; it will sound fake and people will see through it. You also need to live with your choice, potentially for the remainder of your career. If you don't identify with it at a very deep level you will switch unnaturally often and undermine any brand good will you have built up with the prior one.

I only recently realized the value of dedicated idea development in this manner. Consequently I have three that tend to appear in my writings and talks:

1. The application of sports coaching techniques to technical team leadership
2. Increasing the efficiency of testing through use of scripting languages
3. Organizational commitment quality and change

Which one is the most prominent depends largely on what is going on with the projects I am involved in.

## **Spreading Your Message**

Having a developed issue is important, but it has little value if you do not communicate it. As recently as 10 years ago, the main ways for spreading an idea were getting published in academic journals, publishing a book or be a constant on the conference circuit. Each of those had then, and still do, significant barriers to entry for people not already established.

Thankfully, the rise of the web and social media has made spreading your message easier than ever. The three main mediums of interest right now are mailing lists, blogs and Twitter.

- *Mailing Lists* - Mailing lists have existed for almost as long as there has been email, but it wasn't until the mid 1980s<sup>3</sup> that they took off. For almost any topic related to testing there is a mailing list, or as often is the case, there are multiple. Here are some tips I have learned through years of mailing list participation
  - Join a couple that both relate to your issue and that oppose it.
  - Introduce yourself upon joining so other members know who you are and that you are there.
  - Learn the group dynamics of the participants. Are there personal, political or philosophical disagreements among the core participants?

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<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LISTSERV>

- Be modest when starting to reply. Until you have built up credibility within this community your comments may not be interpreted correctly or even appreciated if you come out of the gates at full speed.
- *Blogs* - While blogs haven't been around nearly as long as mailing lists, they are a powerful tools for further refining your main issue and ones related to it. I have used a blogging platform for as my main avenue for idea and issue dissemination for over 3 years. In that time I've learned the following.
  - Write often, but don't force a post due to a self-imposed schedule.
  - Write for yourself and for your issue, not for or about someone else's
  - Be patient. Readership numbers take time to develop.
  - Don't spend too much time on a single post.
  - A blog is not a peer-reviewed paper. If I cannot write a post in a single sitting then I have not mentally broken it down into its consumable pieces
  - Use full content RSS feeds
  - Engage those who comment on your content
  - Avoid 'Me too' repetitions of other people's posts. If you do a 'Me too' post, make sure you add value to the original idea
  - While free blogging services are convenient, over time their limitations become apparent. Host your own platform, preferably using an identifiable domain name you control. My blog for instance, is located at <http://adam.goucher.ca>.
- *Twitter* - Twitter is a micro-blogging platform that has taken some wind out of the blogging world, as people who used to actively blog now develop and spread more of their ideas here. That loss is offset by the increase of conversation that occurs around ideas. Here is what you need to know about Twitter.
  - Messages, called tweets, can be no more than 140 characters
  - You can follow people which means you see all their tweets
  - People can follow you
  - It used to be polite to follow someone who follows you. The rise of spam and advertising bots and the general explosion of the medium means this is not practical anymore.
  - To mention a specific person, you use @ followed by their username. Example, @adamgoucher refers to me and I will see it even if I do not follow you
  - To send a private (direct) message, use D before the username. Example, 'D adamgoucher your message'
  - Tweets can have tags in them to make them easily searchable. Tags are indicated using #. Example, #CAST2009
  - When you receive a tweet which you think would benefit from a wider audience, you can re-tweet it by putting RT in front of the message.
  - While using the web is a convenient way of sending and receiving tweets, the use of a dedicated Twitter client will make managing the stream of information (a little) more manageable.

These electronic means of communicating your idea are great because they ignore time zones and geography but there is still great value from the traditional means as well.

- *Articles* - As testing matures as a career, there is an increasing number of publications dedicated to it, both in print and online. Contact the editor and see if they are accepting articles and if so, propose one on your issue. Not only will the expose your idea to a large audience but being published looks good on a resume which in turn helps you get the next gig. Just remember to not give up if you get rejected the first time. Rejection is part of the process and almost all authors were rejected at some point in their career.
- *Speaking* - Speaking is another great way to develop and spread your ideas. Not only do you have a captive audience to get immediate feedback from, but as a speaker you typically get into the conference at a steep discount, if not free. Speaking has a bit of a hierarchy based upon your history with each looking more impressive on your resume: track speaker, then tutorial, then keynote. The easiest and least daunting way to start your speaking career is to begin with a local user groups and regional conferences. Most people speaking at events like the Star conferences have given multiple talks before having something accepted onto the program there.

## **Assembling Your Tribe**

Seth Godin defines a tribe a “a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea”<sup>4</sup>. Tribes are an interesting concept on their own, but when growing and managing your career they are vital.

Inevitably, you will be a member of a number of tribes, but you also need to cultivate a tribe around you. If you have been successful in spreading your message, you have already started to build your tribe without knowing it. Now is the time to start doing it intentionally.

Why build a tribe? The main thing I use my tribe for is as a sounding board for new ideas or refinements of my existing ones. But I have also had a number of other opportunities come directly from tribe members recommending me to someone else. These include job offers, as well as review copies of books, speaking engagements and even co-editing a book. All of these help you spread your idea further by increasing your reach and drawing more people to your communication channels.

Building a tribe can be both interesting and frustrating. As mentioned above, of my three issues, the I care most about is how business and sports lessons apply to testing and so it would make sense that my tribe would also be interested in that the most. However, the blog posts which get the most hits, and I receive the most email about, are on automation which would suggest that I large contingent of my tribe are scripters.

Let’s go back to Seth’s definition. Notice how he does not say that the idea is the same idea for all members, not does it say that it is necessarily the idea that most interests

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<sup>4</sup> Tribes, 2008

the leader. Don't worry about it. One thing you should not do is let the tribe lead you. Continue down the path that led you to earn the tribe initially. Authenticity and passion are important traits of a tribe leader and you will lose more members by losing either of those aspects of who you are. If people don't like where the tribe is going, they can choose to leave for another that better serves their needs.

A mistake which is made even easier with rapid communication Web 2.0 tools is the infatuation with the size of your tribe. In *Blog Blazers*<sup>5</sup>, Stephane Grenier asks a number of popular bloggers a series of questions. The first one is always "What makes a blog successful to you? Is it traffic, reach, revenue, etc.?". The book interviews many people who blog professionally so the answers tend to skew towards specific numbers of readers, advertising revues and the like, but a number were more interested in building influence and profile within their communities; David Armano<sup>6</sup> is one of them:

*In a word - influence. Influence is the most important way I can think to gauge a blog. It's not easy to measure influence, but popularity has something to do with it. The broader a blog's reach, the more influence it has. The more people a blog influences, the more successful it is. It's about size - you can influence people in niche groups.*

I would consider a tribe a niche group as David describes.

More evidence that it is the quality of the tribe members rather than the size of the tribe is the idea brought forward by Kevin Kelly about 1000 True Fans<sup>7</sup>.

*A creator, such as an artist, musician, photographer, craftsperson, performer, animator, designer, videomaker, or author - in other words, anyone producing works of art - needs to acquire only 1,000 True Fans to make a living.*

*Assume conservatively that your True Fans will each spend one day's wages per year in support of what you do. That "one-day-wage" is an average, because of course your truest fans will spend a lot more than that. Let's peg that per diem each True Fan spends at \$100 per year. If you have 1,000 fans that sums up to \$100,000 per year, which minus some modest expenses, is a living for most folks.*

So what other strategies can you use to further build your tribe? Squidoo is a website by Seth Godin which he has leveraged to further build out his tribe. He even has a 'lens' on Tribe Building Tactics<sup>8</sup>. As of early May 2009, there are close to 100 tactics listed; here is just five which are relevant to the goal of managing your career and identity, though the whole list is worth reading.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.blogblazers.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://darmano.typepad.com/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000\\_true\\_fans.php](http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true_fans.php)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.squidoo.com/tribebuilding/>

- *Be the Example* - Walk the walk and talk the talk...people only follow those who take their own advice and show they mean what they say.
- *Build the Story of the Tribe. Set the Vision* - Define the tribe's journey, goals, interactions, future, and how teamwork will get them where they want to go in a story that epitomizes what the tribe is about. Weave every person, skill, and resource into the story.
- *Be Authentic* - Phony is as phony does. Show how genuine you really are
- *Educate* - Educate your tribe to help them see things in ways they never imagined. Use simple concepts to help them understand complicated ones. Break things down and explain what is under the hood. They'll be forever grateful someone took the time to do this for them.
- *Create a manifesto* - Your tribe already exists... it just hasn't been defined yet. So create a manifesto. Give voice to the frustrations of your tribe members. If you strike the right tone - if they feel you can relate to them - this manifesto will be the viral tool that gets your tribe members to raise their hands and say "I am."

According to Seth a group becomes a tribe when it has an issue and a way to communicate. You already have already developed your issue, and are communicating it. The tribe is just waiting for you to lead it.

## **Becoming a Global Microbrand**

If you consider your tribe as you leading a group of people around an idea, then the global microbrand takes this one or two steps further. In the global microbrand situation, you are the idea and the product. I first encountered this idea from Hugh MacLeod<sup>9</sup>. He has defined it as:

*A small, tiny brand, that "sells" all over the world.*

The key difference between a tribe and the global microbrand is what Hugh has put in quotes. The purpose is to sell something. Hugh has been able to do this successfully for a Saville Row tailor<sup>10</sup> and a small South African winery<sup>11</sup> and in the process has done it for himself as well.

A popular pattern in a tester's career path is to become management then become an independent doing consulting or per-project work. Having a tribe is certainly handy in this situation, but having a global microbrand is essential as it is what brings in the most clients.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gapingvoid.com>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.englishcut.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.stormhoek.com/>

The techniques for building the global microbrand are not dissimilar from those used in tribe building. There is a fine line that gets walked though as you do not want to alienate the people who are there for leadership around your idea and those who are there as potential customers. One person that I think juggles this successfully is Nati Shalom. He is the founder and CTO of a company called GigaSpaces and his blog<sup>12</sup> posts are often in-depth discussions around scaling, performance and cloud computing which help build his tribe of people who are also interested in those topics. But they also tend to include a solution that utilizes his company's products in addition to other solutions, adding a selling component to the communication. His post *Its time for autoscaling - avoid peak load provisioning for we applications*<sup>13</sup> nicely illustrates this balance.

## Maintenance and Expansion

Recognizing and building your brand means you also inherit one of the more annoying aspects of it; maintenance. Corporations have been doing this for years and you too will have to as well for your growing microbrand.

Largely this is about finding what is being said about you and correcting any misconceptions about your idea and your thoughts around it. The principle means for this is Google. Google has billions of pages in its index, the trick is to get only the ones relevant to you out of it. Here are some tips

- *Exactly this phrase* - By putting your search criteria in quotes it uses all the words as a single query. Example: "Adam Goucher"
- *Boolean* - Multiple words have are an implicit 'and'. To get an 'or' you join words with and or. Example: "Adam Goucher" test or quality
- *Link to your site* - If you want to see who links back to your site, you prepend it with link:. Example: link:<http://adam.goucher.ca>

Google also has the ability to search news and blogs.

Maintenance is not just about addressing negative publicity. It is also about continuing to grow and expand the microbrand. At this point of development, most people in your community know your ideas and can deduce your thoughts on the surrounding ones. The expansion of your microbrand at this phase is commonly achieved by increasing your leadership profile in addition to continuing the techniques that have been employed to spread your message, and adding new ones. The key here is to add, not replace. Too often people will start speaking a lot at conferences and stop blogging. Or start using Twitter and stop participating in mailing lists.

Some ideas for increasing your profile include

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<sup>12</sup> <http://natishalom.typepad.com/>

<sup>13</sup> [http://natishalom.typepad.com/nati\\_shaloms\\_blog/2009/03/its-time-for-auto-scaling-avoid-peak-load-provisioning.html](http://natishalom.typepad.com/nati_shaloms_blog/2009/03/its-time-for-auto-scaling-avoid-peak-load-provisioning.html)

- *Volunteerism* - There are a number of groups and associations you can become involved in. Not only does it increase your microbrand, but you give back to the profession
- *Direct community leadership* - This could mean literally leading something like the Association for Software Testing, but it could also mean helping to moderate an email list or web forum/community
- *Teach* - It may seem self-serving, but by teaching people your ideas, you will own the mental association of those ideas in their memory. When students later have a problem in your area of expertise, they will be able to approach you to assist in a solution. Teaching is also a wonderful way to further develop your ideas as people exposed to something for the first time will lack your biases and thoughts on the issue resulting in questions which could evolve your own understanding.

## **Be Patient**

Like most things in the testing world, the ideas presented are heuristic. That is, they might work for your situation, but they also might need some tweaking. The order is also highly subjective. I have presented it in the order that worked for me and in which I have purposely developed my brand in a stepwise manner. If a different order works better for you then it is imperative that you do the alternate order.

They also take time, which is a nonrenewable resource. If you write for a blog for an hour a day, volunteer at a conference once a year, allow yourself to be distracted by Twitter a couple times an hour, then you are sacrificing something else in the name of your brand. The degree of success you achieve in your career is highly related to the amount of effort you put in though.

The important thing though is that you start spreading your ideas about the craft of testing, *now*. Your career will thank you, and your fellow testers will as well.