

WRITING FOR THE NEW WEB

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Let's see. I need to write something for the Welcome column. I guess eventually it might get posted online, which means I'm writing something for the new web.

I'll consult some search engine metrics to look for a topic – maybe something that people are doing a lot of searches about but no one is doing a lot of writing about. Better yet, I'll try to find two or three searchable topics and amalgamate them together into one title. I'll need to make sure some keywords that echo those topics are embedded in the title and somehow peppered into the contents. I'll start with a pithy introductory sentence:

The phone rings. It is Avery, calling from shipping.

Where are all the widgets? Didn't we just pay \$2 million for that new inventory tracking system?

Then I'll state a few facts I found somewhere, or maybe some facts I already know. Maybe it is stuff the reader knows too – the new web isn't always about new information but is also about lending significance to what everyone knows but hasn't stopped to consider.

But I can't really stop with that. My article needs to be long enough to look weighty and significant to the search engines. It can't just be a two-paragraph snippet. But I only have time for a two-paragraph snippet, because I have to write six more things today. I'd better get some quotes. Quotes can easily pad a 200-word article into a 1,200-word article with almost no additional effort. Just email an expert. In fact, on the new web, the *definition* of an expert is someone who loves to be quoted. I'll find a steady crew to cover me with quotes on specific topics. Or even if they are not experts, does it matter? Is anyone going to stop reading to check their credentials? As long as I mention their name and job title in an important way, they will look like experts. And they don't really need to be dishing profundity either. The quote just has to say one or the other of the following:

Most people don't realize this one problem is actually a problem, but if they don't think it is a problem, they are going to find out soon enough that it actually is a problem.

or

I tell all my clients the future is coming fast, and if they don't latch on to this new thing (whatever it is I'm talking about), they're going to be left in the dust like choking pteranodons at an evaporating lake.

It doesn't really matter if these quotes actually add value. In fact, they probably won't, because these experts will save their real revelations for their own articles. The goal is just to keep rolling with the theme – kind of like the first paragraph is the singer and the quotes are the saxophone solo.

And I'd better put in some links – not too many, because each link saps some of the search engine power of the article, but a few links are OK – hey, how about if I link to sites that will link back to me? Maybe we can make a deal where we link to each

other and give each other power? In fact, why don't I hire someone to go around asking people if they will link to my story – build up the perception that I know what I'm doing and if you link to me, it will be an indication that you know what you are doing? This mini-agent could even get me a space for a guest post in someone else's blog, where I will write something authoritative and then link back to my original story.

I'll need a whole tweet strategy for how to follow up on the article, and I will craft tweets with the highest probability of leading to retweets. Maybe I can get some other authors to tweet about my article if I agree to tweet about their article? That won't exactly be like bribing them to recommend my work; it will just kind of be more like ... an act of community.

Will anyone ever actually read this story? I suppose, they'll skim the headlines at least. They might pull some details from the first paragraph that will infiltrate their consciousness as they light over 25 other articles in 10 minutes before they start to check their email. And they won't really mind the long blob of text after the first paragraph because they'll just click out of it.

Don't worry, we don't write like this at *Linux Pro* and *Linux Magazine*, and we never will. But we (and other niche pubs like us) compete against a growing mass of online publishers who do. This soup of prose has become the background noise that we sing into when we reach out to like-minded readers who might be listening.

Am I complaining? Not really – staying vital and being heard in this environment is actually a very intriguing professional challenge. Am I worried? No time for that. But I'll tell you one thing: Anyone who says that online publishing is just another delivery model that is otherwise equivalent to print publishing should spend a day on my side of the wire.

Joe

Joe Casad,
Editor in Chief

