

The Hijacking of Web 2.0

By Bill Hely

"Web Two Point Oh". It was such a cool sounding term that the marketing "gurus"—ever desperate for a new wagon to jump on—couldn't help themselves. But in appropriating the term as their next big thing, most failed to even understand the meaning or origin of the term. This article will correct the misinformation and relate the facts in terms the non-technologist can follow.

In Australia we have a saying: *"Don't piss in my pocket and tell me it's raining"*. Its meaning, I think, is fairly obvious.

Well, online I see a lot of internet marketing gurus pissing in the pockets of less experienced or would-be marketers.

The gurus are shouting about something called "Web Two Point Oh"; about how a marketers on-line life depends on knowing the new Web 2.0 "secret"; how you'll never make a buck online if you don't know "the secrets of Web 2.0".

Fortunately, Mr. Guru does know the secret. And he'll share it with you. For a price. Usually a very hefty price for a seminar *"which you absolutely must attend or your competitors will leave you languishing in their dust"*.

The end result is that a lot of gullible people are shelling out good money for "a secret" that has been invented by the gurus so they'll have something else to sell.

Now to be fair, some of these guru marketers are themselves victims of the hype, and have come to believe that Web 2.0 is something other than what it really is. Some of these people, because of their vast experience in marketing and online business, really do have valuable information to share—information that is worth paying for. But what they're selling is NOT the "secret" of Web 2.0.

What many marketers are excitedly proclaiming as "the next big thing" is nothing more than a slow, boundary-less transition from elementary and primitive programs, services and techniques to more sophisticated versions of the same. It's been going on for years and will continue as long as there is an Internet or anything resembling it.

It's really nothing different to what has happened to *everything* since the advent of man:

Throwing rocks → spear → bow & arrow → firearm.

Or the progression from DOS 1.0 → Windows 1.0 → Windows Vista.

Or command-line Unix → Apple OS Leopard.

Blogging is a good example:

Personal web page/diary → Chronologically organized blog.

In other words, the natural evolution of sound basic ideas and technologies. Did you have to learn a new technology to create your own blog? Nope. Someone else did all the under-the-covers stuff for you. And ever will it be.

Now I admit "boundary-less" is arguable. Some will say that the transition to a new web paradigm occurred with the dot-com crash circa mid-2000. I wouldn't protest too much

against that position, though it was a boundary that occupied a fair span of time, and a boundary suggests a precise point of demarcation, which there wasn't. But that's just semantics.

So what is web 2.0?

It's generally accepted that the term was first coined at a meeting between the staff of O'Reilly Media (a major IT book publisher) and MediaLive International (producers of IT tradeshows and conferences, including COMDEX and NetWorld+Interop). The first use of the term is credited to Dale Dougherty, a co-founder and VP of O'Reilly Media.

As CEO Tim O'Reilly says on his company's website:

"...the Web 2.0 meme has become so widespread that companies are now pasting it on as a marketing buzzword, with no real understanding of just what it means".

I'm not going to attempt to precisely define Web 2.0 here. It's more complex than that, and Web 2.0 is not a single "thing" or concept. However, anyone keen to understand the real meaning and implications of the term should definitely read Tim O'Reilly's detailed article at:

<http://www.oreilynet.com/lpt/a/6228>

If for no other reason than self-protection against the hype, I urge every Internet marketer to print the above article (it's about 16 pages), find a quiet place, and read it. It's pretty much plain language, but if there are technical bits you don't understand just skip over them. It's the general overview of the whole Web 2.0 paradigm that's important.

The hype

A few of the guru marketers jumping on the Web 2.0 band-wagon do credit the O'Reilly/MediaLive session for coining the term, which would indicate they may have read the article I referenced above. But then they immediately skip to misusing the term and assigning their own meaning to it.

I recently heard one well known marketing trainer and mentor ask rhetorically:

"Why are marketers just discovering web 2.0?"

The real answer, sadly, is that although there is really nothing for the marketer to discover, the gurus have only recently latched on to a new buzz phrase from which they can profit.

Even those that believe their own spiel are completely missing the point.

The reality

Web 2.0 is all about web services and web applications, and those applications and services are becoming available by virtue of **technological progress**. This is not a

"new" thing. As already discussed, technology has always continued to steadily develop and, barring the whole human race getting rebooted back to the stone-age, it always will, with the occasional quantum leap as something totally new appears.

The term "relationship marketing" is also part of the new buzz. While relationship marketing can benefit from the application of new and improved technologies...

- Web 2.0 itself is not synonymous with relationship marketing
- Relationship marketing wasn't born with Web 2.0
- Relationship marketing doesn't depend on Web 2.0 or any of its technologies.

Noted copywriter John Carlton seems to be one of the few "big names" in Internet marketing prepared to place honesty before profitable duplicity. I don't know Carlton personally, but a couple of things he's written of late give me an insight into his character.

One of those things was something along the lines of:

"What's next? Web 3.0, Web 5.0? I don't care. It's still a human to human interaction."

And again:

"One of the weird things about this 'emerging' Web 2.0 hoopla... is the bone-headed idea that it's all about cutting edge—and mostly brand-spanking-new—technological goodies. Well, it ain't."

I recently heard another well known marketer/copywriter say that the popular Craig's List website is Web 2.0 "because it's interactive". NO! As the O'Reilly document makes abundantly clear, interactivity alone doesn't define a site as fitting the Web 2.0 paradigm.

As John Carlton alluded in his comments, whether you use audio or video or the written word to communicate with your customers and prospects, the old-style copywriting and salesmanship tenets still apply.

I heard another marketer say: "Web 2.0 for marketers is not about the technology". Also wrong. If its not about the technology then its not Web 2.0. Web 2.0 (un-hijacked!) is all about the technology.

Another guru-statement: "Web 2.0 is about community". Again, no its not. Many successful marketing and monetized sites are certainly moving in the direction of community/interactivity, but "community" alone is not Web 2.0.

"Ruby on rails": more buzz, more hype

Another prominent marketing trainer has been making a big song and dance about "Ruby on Rails". I mean, Wow! What a cool name. Doesn't it just shriek "make me a buzzword?" The man in question certainly seemed transfixed by it.

But after the first ecstatic gush of hype it becomes abundantly clear to anyone who's properly informed that, once again, the guru is out of his depth and clueless.

Ruby on Rails is utterly irrelevant to marketers. However, since it's now being bandied about as "a Web 2.0 thing", I'd better address the question: What is Ruby on Rails?

For a start, it's two different things.

Ruby is a free, extensible, portable, object-oriented, interpreted, and relatively easy-to-use scripting language. There are many scripting languages (JavaScript and VBScript being the best known) and Ruby is but one.

Next point: it's not new.

Created by a Japanese programmer and released to the public in 1995, Ruby predates the Dot Com Crash by about half a decade.

Rails, on the other hand, is an open source web framework written in the Ruby scripting language. Although a relatively new product (2004) it is a descendant of earlier projects.

Put very simply, a web framework is a library of programs that handle typical and/or frequently repeated tasks (e.g. displaying error messages). Instead of the programmer having to write common utility code afresh for every application he develops, he can simply call the relevant code up from the library (the framework).

A web framework can be much more than that, but you get the idea. There are many web frameworks (anyone not heard of Microsoft's dotNet Framework?) and Rails is but one.

Fact is, there is probably very little, if anything, that can be done in Ruby/Rails that can't be done in PHP or ASP or any of several languages. However, **for the developer** (not the marketer), certain technical decisions will come into play, such that under some circumstances it becomes preferable to use Ruby/Rails rather than something else. By the same token, there will be times when garden-variety PHP or ASP would be the best choice of language.

If any of that is over your head, rest easy. It's very relevant to some web developers and other technologists but, all the manufactured hype notwithstanding, it just doesn't matter a damn to a marketer. Here's how simple it really is:

You may be familiar with the term "PHP", a script language often used for creating and/or programming web pages.

Now, as a marketer, did you ever encounter a pressing necessity to know all there was to know about PHP? No? Well you can feel just as indifferent about this Web 2.0 hype also.

Another term the gurus are bandying about as being synonymous with Web 2.0 is...

AJAX

Much touted as the core of Web 2.0, AJAX isn't "a technology" either. An acronym for "Asynchronous Javascript + XML", AJAX is actually a group of several different technologies, none of which the marketer need know anything about (though CSS is quit simple to learn and very handy if you do even a little of your own web page markup).

Do you really think you're going to have to learn the likes of XML, XSLT, XHTML, XMLHttpRequest, DOM, etc. just to remain a competitive Internet marketer?

And if you do think you'd like to have a shot at that stuff, be aware that there's a whole lot of other stuff you'll need to learn first before you can even understand most of it—just as pre-med comes before brain surgery. You'll have no time for marketing, because you'll be a full time propeller-head.

I should say here in passing that I'm not understating the importance of AJAX and its components to the developer. AJAX technologies, properly applied, are capable of producing some very impressive cutting-edge user experiences.

Summary

In the final analysis, neither Web 2.0 nor Ruby/Rails nor AJAX nor any other new-century catch phrase introduces anything new that the Internet marketer must-know for commercial survival.

It is not the business of any sensible marketer to stipulate what technology is used to create his web sites. Unless you are a technologist turned marketer, you do not have the knowledge to make such calls. The tech who is to create your sites will need some input from you, such as what server operating system you will be hosting on (Linux, Windows, etc.) but, with some rare exceptions, the coding technology should be left to the technologist.

All that matters to the marketer is the end result; the means is completely irrelevant!

What you need to do is...

- (a) Keep abreast of trends and developments in a general sense, by watching what others are doing and considering if it has value for you;
- (b) Be able to articulate the end result that you want with respect to your website or web application;
- (c) Have access to good tech types who can take the vision you express and translate it into reality. The "how" is not your concern. Let the technologists worry about the technology, while you—the marketer—focuses on ideas and presentation and general concepts.

Keep in mind that "keeping abreast of" doesn't mean "must implement". You use whatever ideas are appropriate to your product, target market, circumstances, etc. You don't use some wiz-bang new technology just because you can.

When has it ever been any different?

The bottom line

The cat is now out of the bag, as more and more entrepreneurs and their acolytes pick up on, and spread, the misinformation that originated from the uninformed or duplicitous few. Thus, going into the future, there will be more and more references to "Web 2.0 sites". In general usage, Web 2.0 will no longer mean what it originally meant when the term was coined.

It seems inevitable that Web 2.0 will transition from referring to the technology behind a site to meaning, in the non-tech world at least, a type of site identified by social, interactive and dynamic features.

This re-definition is not a matter of any momentous concern. Web 2.0 is a catchy phrase and as good a name as any to broadly describe a type of website.

The important thing for the marketer to understand is that some quite advanced technologies make these sites possible, and it is not within the capabilities of untrained people to engage in these technologies at the engine room level.

From a purely technical perspective there are degrees of "Web 2.0ism". Some sites are packed with AJAX technologies while others utilize just a smattering to ease or optimize certain tasks.

In their early 2007 incarnations, and from a purely technological standpoint, Flickr.com is an example of "low-end" Web 2.0, whereas del.icio.us and digg.com appear to incorporate a higher concentration of Web 2.0 technologies, but neither is exactly packed with AJAX. Examples of sites apparently incorporating a still higher percentage of Web 2.0 technologies are HousingMaps.com and Inetword.com.

While a certain level of Web 2.0 site (in the revised meaning sense) can certainly be created by a lone developer, some gurus would have you trying to invent the next YouTube or Google. Although the chances of that happening are about six billion to two, I don't want to dissuade you from pursuing ambitious ideas. But I do want to warn you against believing that anyone can do it if they just know a few "secrets". Especially if these "secrets" come at the cost of a thousand-dollar seminar.

Contrary to what some "marketing experts" are touting, the PDF eBook and the static website are not dead. Many "flat" (Web 1.0 ???) sites will continue to do very nicely, because not every product/idea benefits from interactivity, scalability, etc.

Harnessing the collective intelligence and input of site visitors is a very Web 2.0 idea—and it's an idea that has created, and will continue to create, vast fortunes for a few innovative entrepreneurs. But it's an idea that simply is not applicable to many sites, and that few marketers will ever have the insight to turn into a fortune.

Not every message lends itself to, or is improved by, or benefits from, the latest and greatest in technology.

As for the costly "Web 2.0 Secrets" seminar or course or whatever, will you learn anything if you pay up and attend? Probably. But never forget that a clever presenter

can have you believing that *"How to Make a Shit Sandwich"* was a worthwhile use of your time and money.

Before you sign up, just reflect again on the words of master copywriter John Carlton: Technological advancements notwithstanding, "It's still a human to human interaction."

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