

# Media experiment aims for a million hits

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Can a Web site attract millions of visitors in a relatively short amount of time without spending any money on advertising?

Russel Mcgurk, a 22-year-old British student, decided a week ago to find out. Motivated by the knowledge he's about to enter an increasingly competitive job market and wanting to "stand out from the crowd" when job hunting time rolls around, Mcgurk launched [www.themediaexperiment.com](http://www.themediaexperiment.com).

"I study multimedia, so I'm used to being on the Internet," Mcgurk told United Press International in a telephone interview between classes.

And this isn't his first time toying with the thought of making his mark online. "Since I was 14, I've had loads of ideas for Internet-based businesses," Mcgurk said. "I had the idea of selling mp3s online when I was 14."

The goal: a million unique hits. This means Mcgurk is aiming to attract a million separate viewers to the site, even if they only peek once.

He decided to accomplish this with a two-prong method. First, via the press: public relations wires carried the news release he wrote announcing the site's launch.

The second method is to get people who've already been to the site to come back. This way, Mcgurk figures, they'll become fans and tell their friends.

This word-of-mouth advertising, dubbed "buzz" by those in the industry, is an elusive but valuable thing.

Sometimes, businesses get lucky, and find just the way to generate it in their target niche. Web grocer Kosher.com achieved this with an online cartoon featuring a song about Kosher food and dancing characters designed to remind the customer of his uncle from Brooklyn.

Noah Lautin Davis, Kosher.com's publicist, said the clip "(drew) comment from hundreds upon hundreds of blogs and (drew) great traffic to the site."

But not every site can profit from jingles about gefilte fish.

"I have plenty of ideas on how to get visitors to return to the site," Mcgurk said. "I'm going to have a visitors' space on the front page, where people can decide what they want to see."

One thing United Press International was surprised to not see, given Mcgurk's course of study, was any hint of a multimedia element. The site's no-frills design and green-gray-black-white color scheme may even be a disappointment for those who would be drawn in by the buzz.

For now, at least, Mcgurk is relying on content. The site features a blog, and he launched the first of his weekly sub-experiments on Monday.

In this week's project, site viewers have the opportunity to design the site's logo. Mcgurk will pick his three favorite designs, then let the viewers vote. He figures amateur designers will tell their friends about the opportunity, and voters will keep coming back to vote.

The results thus far, however, are a little less than encouraging. Tuesday morning, day 7 of the experiment, the hit counter registered 2,674, for

an average of roughly 400 hits per day. At this rate, he'll reach a million in about ... seven years.

Mcgurk may be on the right track with his idea to entice visitors to return, but branding expert Rob Frankel said the student is also operating on some false assumptions.

Web site traffic can "absolutely" be achieved by word of mouth, said Frankel, author of "The Revenge of Brand X: How to Build a Big Time Brand on the Web or Anywhere Else."

But "there's an inverse relationship at work," he continued. "The more money invested in marketing, the faster it happens; the less money invested, the more time required."

"Everyone tries to do press releases and other traditional means of marketing," he said.

"But it's expensive (and time-consuming) to bring in new customers," he continued. Better to make sure the ones you have will keep coming back.

And not only that, he said, but also provide the customer with a kind of community and things to talk about related to the brand.

Frankel said that for instance, a kitchen appliance company could offer forums for recipes or special cooking techniques. Customers would talk to each other, keep returning to the site, and quickly develop brand loyalty. And if they share the recipes with their friends, the company gains another loyal customer who already has been proven to have similar tastes and interests.

For companies, this kind of relationships are gold, and the terms in which Frankel spoke about achieving them were unequivocal.

"Branding is not about getting your prospects to choose you over your competition; it's about getting your prospects to see you as the only solution to their problem," he said. It is a statement which, as a consultant, he has trademarked.

Mcgurk is also on the right track with his idea to link to other Web sites that agree to link to his in return. DropShots, an online photo album, forged this kind of "joint venture partnership" successfully with a video editing software company, Dropshots CEO Darren Hardy wrote in an e-mail.

"We have the same target market and can benefit from our respective value. The customers win, getting specially negotiated discounts on the reciprocating products and the businesses win, doubling their exposure at no out-of-pocket marketing expense," Hardy wrote.

Of course, creating buzz for its own sake is harder than creating buzz around a product. For now, McGurk plans to work on the site and on the weekly experiments, and to see what happens.

"If other businesses would like to profit from my idea, that's okay," McGurk said. As for patents, business consulting, and any other way to profit from this venture, McGurk said: "Maybe in the future. It has to become a success first."

"Then, I'll take it from there."

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