



On Rails and Reality

As with any Next Big Thing, much of the industry fear about Web 2.0 and the arrival of the user-generated Web is overblown.

From the panic-mongers proclaiming the death of advertising at the hands of bloggers to the hand-wringing over the impending collapse of all media at the hands of the YouTube generation, there is certainly enough noise in the marketplace to lead a perfectly capable and experienced marketer to scratch her head and wonder "How much is hype and how much is reality?"

The answer, I'd argue, is summed up in a game-changing innovation called Ruby on Rails. But I'll get to that in a moment.

The recent explosion of user-generated content is merely a continuation of the trends that started the online revolution over a dozen years ago. Back up 20 years, and only multinational brands could reach around the world, using millions of dollars in marketing muscle. But starting a decade ago, with the advent of the Internet, anyone could suddenly reach a global audience, on a more modest budget, by engaging a capable web developer or technology boutique. And today, the tools for creating, developing, producing, and sharing content have become so friendly, so powerful, and so cheap – and very often free! – that it no longer requires much technical expertise or money to reach the world.

As a marketing technologist, I'm often asked: Is this sudden and relatively rapid distribution of the

means of communication a threat to our business or an opportunity? And to me, the implications are clear: As the tools for creating online applications and the technology for reaching consumers gets better and more powerful, marketers must adapt and learn to leverage these efficiencies to drive down costs and drive up message efficacy.

“As the tools for reaching consumers get ever more sophisticated, it’s imperative for marketers to leverage the efficiencies to cut costs and boost message efficacy.”

This is where Ruby on Rails comes in. Ruby on Rails is the poster child of this new world. Rails is a web application framework that gives developers unrivaled levels of productivity. Many successful Web 2.0 applications are built on Rails, such as [BaseCamp](#) for online collaboration; [MailBuild](#) for newsletter management; [Fluxiom](#) for asset management; and [Shopify](#) for e-commerce — and yet Rails itself is less than three years old. How did that happen?

Rails allows developers to create and launch complex Web applications in unprecedented time. Rails also facilitates and automates many tedious but critical elements of development, including testing, documentation, and deployment. And best of all, Rails is supported by a large, vibrant, and open online community of developers, where sample code, fixes, and support are merely an email or post away.

It's not coincidental that the Rails framework was created by multinational team of developers spread across 8 time zones and 3 continents, and based on an elegant new programming language, Ruby, developed by a Japanese programmer. It's also not coincidental that the beauty of the end product has something to do with the fact that the core Rails developers work on Macintosh computers, as opposed to the ubiquitous but less elegant Windows platform or the ultra-geeky Linux platform. You get a framework like Rails and the software built on it when you put the power of developing web applications in the hands of a group of people that have traditionally tended to be graphic designers and user-experience specialists. The result? Rails is markedly more focused on developing websites, than programming in a computer language. The difference may seem semantic and trivial, but the productivity gains are marked and real.

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Unless you're a techie like me, by now you'll be wondering: why should any of this matter at all to a marketing executive? Well, it matters because Rails, along with other new Web 2.0 technologies, changes the rules of the game. Applications that once would have been unthinkable engineering monstrosities are now within reach. You are free to pursue functionality and features without being chained to old-fashioned IT infrastructure. Instead, you can now create real brand-building, culture-changing, online marketing initiatives easier, cheaper, and faster than ever before. The payoff? Ruby on Rails introduces a very real paradigm shift for productivity and efficiency, to

which your internal interactive groups and web agencies will have to adjust. It will change the way you think about scale and cost for developing online applications. While you may not get your IT department to jump on the bandwagon right now, the need for speed, innovation, and a competitive edge in the marketing space clearly creates a mandate for adopting new approaches and new technologies.

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What's it all mean to you as marketer? Before Ruby on Rails, barely three years ago, you would never have dreamed of being able to launch an e-commerce site which accepts both Euros and Yens in a matter of days, or e-commerce enabling your existing site in hours, or managing and sharing marketing assets worldwide without any infrastructure investments. Before Web 2.0, you wouldn't have dreamed of posting all your TV spots online for free, where brand loyalists view them endlessly, link to them repeatedly, and host them exuberantly on their own sites.

Sound far-fetched? These are not just dreams, but today's new reality: with the advent of Rails three years ago, Web 2.0 was truly born.

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