



Eric T. Internet Duct Tape

27

“If you can make other people interested in what you’re writing about, then search engines will follow.”

—Eric T.

As described by Eric T, the semi-anonymous Canadian engineer who runs it, Internet Duct Tape is a blog about making technology work for you instead of making you work for technology. Eric also enjoys making things work that were never intended to work.

Internet Duct Tape (sometimes referred to as IDT) is part philosophy, part how-to, and all about sharing knowledge and helping other people. It has

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Internet Duct Tape blog. At the top, the title "Internet Duct Tape" is displayed in a large, bold, serif font, with the tagline "blogging / programming / technology / lifehacks" in a smaller font to its right. Below the title is a navigation bar with five buttons: "MOST RECENT", "BLOGGING", "PROGRAMMING", "LIFEHACKS", and "PROJECTS". The main content area features a "Welcome to Internet Duct Tape" section with a brief description of the blog and its focus on making technology work for users. To the right of the main content is a sidebar with several sections: "Internet Duct Tape" (a short bio), "Email Updates" (with a text input field), "Navigation" (a list of links including "Most Recent", "Search", "Site Map", "Most Popular", "Tag Cloud", and "Random Posts"), and "Information" (with a dropdown arrow).

made the Technorati Top 100 Most Favorited list more than once, and has been linked to every major blog and technical website—including Download Squad, Digg, Slashdot, Fark, del.icio.us, and so on. At its peak in February 2007, Internet Duct Tape was getting more than 120,000 page views per month. Things have slacked off since Eric T. demoted blogging from his primary activity to the status of a secondary hobby. But it's still visited by thousands daily.

If People Are Interested, Search Engines Will Follow

In addition to blogging, Eric T. connects with other Internet users through a variety of free software tools for bloggers, presented under the aegis of IDT Labs. His applications (many of them designed for Firefox) include tools to use with Flickr, del.icio.us, Digg, Facebook, Google Reader, Technorati, and WordPress (his blog's platform). All are available for download.

How long have you been blogging?

I started playing around with blogging in 2003. I was just doing the usual—starting a blog, sending a couple of friends the link, and talking about what I was doing that week or on the weekend. I never really reached any kind of mainstream, but friends checked it out.

“The best way to learn something is to share the information with other people.”

Then in April of 2006, I was laid off for the first time. I decided I was going to try this reputation management thing, and try to build an online presence. So I started a blog with more of a technological bent, and it started getting pretty popular. That's when I found myself enjoying blogging for the sake of blogging. So, my taking it seriously started around April 2006.

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You have good traffic, but you're not monetizing this. You don't have ads.

Not yet. I may do that in the future, but now I'm doing it for the sake of learning, enjoying connecting to other people, seeing comments come in, seeing how people link to me, and so forth. I find it's a very good tool for learning about things. The best way to learn something is to share the information with other people.

Writing is one of my favorite things. When I get hit with a problem now, instead of being really frustrated by it, in the back of my head I think, “Wow, this will be a great post!”

Do you have much time to look at other blogs?

I do make time for it. I find that when you first start blogging, there are two paths you can take. One is a very clear path, where all you really concern yourself with is writing for yourself.

The other path is one where you're more outgoing, where you've connected with a lot of other bloggers, and you start getting involved in communities and connecting with other people.

And you start reading lots of blogs. I find there's like a cycle, where it kind of goes through a bell curve. As you go through that, you reach the high point where you're reading lots of blogs and you're almost never posting to your own blog. But then you realize you're reading a lot of the same things over and over again. Then it becomes more insular again, where you pick the best of the blogs you're reading, cut back the rest, and you start focusing on your own [blog].

How much time do you think you spend blogging?

When I first started, I'd spend lots of time at it. I think everyone gets heavily interested in blogging, and they spend a lot of time on it. Now I've cut back on it, to where I'll only do a couple posts a week. It used to be that I felt like I had to read every post on every blog that I followed.

Now if I miss posts, I know it's not that big of a deal. I do it more at my leisure, when I have time available. But it's still a significant hobby—it's probably still 10 to 20 hours a week.

That is a significant amount of time for a hobby. Do you comment on other blogs?

I do, when I have time for it. I definitely have my order of preference in commenting. It depends on how well I feel I know the other blogger. If I've been commenting on someone's blog for a year, I'm more likely to comment on that blog again than I am a blog I discovered just last week.

I've recently hit a problem with the spam software that everyone uses. For whatever reasons, it's identifying my comments as spam. That led to an involuntary cutback, because it's just not worth the effort commenting and

then having to send an e-mail saying, “Can you make sure that didn’t get marked as spam?” So that’s one way to cut back, but I don’t really recommend it.

Do you practice search engine optimization (SEO)?

I do to some extent. I find it pretty amazing that it does work. Around Valentine’s Day last year, I wrote a post about romantic Valentine’s Day movies just because I thought, “Hey, it’s Valentine’s Day—this will probably be really popular.” Six months later, it’s still within the top five search results on Google for “romantic movies.” Sometimes it’s number two! Which is pretty crazy when you think that [“romantic movies”] ought to be a very-highly valued search term and that someone hasn’t bought it from Google.

Valued by marketing people, you mean?

Yes. I followed the rules of SEO when I wrote that post. I was doing things like adding text to my images with keywords and making sure my title was “friendly” so people would want to click on the title. It does work.

“The sad thing about all this frantic activity is that it’s not really adding value to the conversation or making a positive impact on people’s lives.”

I find you can call SEO something else completely: “Socially Engineering Others.” It’s a more appropriate name because it’s logical. If you can make other people interested in what you’re writing about, then search engines will follow.

I think a lot of people don’t realize that when they’re starting out. The problem is that there is so much misinformation [about] blogging out there, and there are so many people telling you what to do. If you actually really

looked at things, you might see that they’re not as knowledgeable as you think they are. The number of search engine optimization [SEO] blogs that are written by someone under the age of 25 who are telling you, “I’m an SEO expert!” Well, you know, you read the same websites I read! [laughs]

And they're going to make \$1 million at it.

Yes. Because I was so interested in blogging, I hit a point where most of the blogs I was reading were blogs about blogging and making money online—stuff like that. You reach this point where it's kind of its own little subculture of all these people who want to sell you each other's self-help things. And that's how they make money online: by talking about making money online! The sad thing about all this frantic activity is that it's not really adding value to the conversation or making a positive impact on people's lives.

And of course, it is possible to have a positive impact through blogging. When I look at the communities where I've written posts about "I had this problem with my computer, and this is how I fixed it"—when I look back on it, 200,000 people have read that, and there are hundreds of comments saying, "You saved me. I thought my baby (or my cat) had broken the computer, and that fixed it!" It's nice to have that impact—more so than, "I made a hundred extra bucks this month."

I find that when you dig into the numbers, there are people who actually make money from blogging, but they are very few and far between. You basically kind of bastardize your hobby—[you] devalue your hobby and make some change on the side.

Have you ever tried to make money with your blog?

I tried out that ReviewMe thing. That's one of those brokerage sites where they'll broker people who have products with people who want to write about products. I tried that out, and I did a couple of them—it's not worth the effort, if you look at writing a good review of something and what you're actually getting paid for it.

There's one called PayPerPost [PPP], where people are paying bloggers [about] \$5 to write about their product. You have to look at how inane of a post you have to write to make it worth \$5! I understand that some people could be drawn to it, depending on what's going on in your life. There's a very big culture of stay-at-home mothers—mommy bloggers—and for them, if you're staying at home with the kids anyway, and you're not working full time, I could see some of those motivation options. They might actually make a really huge difference in their lives. For other people, instead of chasing this, you should change your career to something you're really passionate about.

Instead of chasing money, finding things that you'll be very successful at and very interested in naturally is healthier.

Something you said earlier, when you were talking about “Social Engineering Others”—a great term!—if you attract people, search engines will follow. Do you mean search engines will pick it up because people are linking to you?

Yes, that's what I meant by that. People are linking to you because you have good quality. There's search engine optimization, and the other term that's being thrown around these days: social media optimization [SMO]. So many websites created in the last two or three years have been about sharing content between each other, right? There are sites like del.icio.us, where [it's just] people who have put their bookmarks on the Internet. The intent is to find someone with similar interests or who is an expert in a certain subject matter, and a subscriber can just search through the bookmarks and find all sorts of interesting things that could have taken you hours to find with search engines—if you even could have. So that's an entirely new factor. But you have to know that search engines take sites like that into account with special algorithms.

You have sites where you can pay for people to vote for you. That's not worth it. There are also people who submit everything they ever write to these sites. Again, is it actually worth your time to do that? In general, chasing traffic must be balanced. What I like to think of as one of the greatest lies is the old “Write good content, and everything else will follow.” It's a mixture—you need to find the happy medium between promotion and writing good content.

By promotion, do you mean actually going out and being active?

[It's] being active in communities, buying advertising somewhere, or asking people to link to you. One very common thing for promotion was (it's starting to die down a bit now) creating blog themes, like blog templates. You would release a template for Blogger or for WordPress that included a link to your site. That was a great way to promote [your blog]—some search engines would count that as if the person using your template had linked to you.

Promotion has the end goal of writing something other than for yourself so people link or come to you.

There was a great blog that shut down a while ago called Creating Passionate Users. On almost any page, you could find a great quote, just to remind you that the question you should be asking yourself is, “What am I doing to help someone kick ass that day?” A lot of people forget that. I forget that.

You’ve made it to Technorati’s Most Favored list, and then lost the listing, started all over, and made it again.

I came up in Top 100 Favored sites with a different site. The Top 100 Most Linked To—I never reached that list. I think I got close to the top 1,000, and I was pretty proud of myself for that. Then I changed my domain name, which broke Technorati, and I had to start all over again.

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Did your existing readers find you?

I went from zero to however many pretty fast—from nothing to pretty high pretty fast. Again, the thing is, once you’re established, it’s very easy to stay on the top. It’s getting there that’s the hard part.

A lot of people are trying different things to get there, things that don’t work.

I find the one thing that almost always works is helping people. If you help people with something they need help with, or if you give them something they weren’t looking for, that’s always going to work for reaching out.

You mean in terms of what you’re providing in your posts?

Yes, in terms of giving them information that actually helps them do something better, helps them learn something they wanted to learn, or even lets them know something they didn’t know about at all—that’s very useful and helpful.

Whether you’re working your way up the rankings or at the top, what do you find difficult about blogging?

The hamster-wheel effect, in that you’re never done with it. “Okay, I’ve finished blogging,” you tell yourself, but there’s always more to do. Even if

you've written a post every day of the week, you have to go moderate your comments, and your comment spam is the most horrible thing in the world to deal with.

And once you're done doing that, there are more feeds to read, and there are always more sites to read. And now that you're reading more sites, you're inspired to do new things.

Or you want to go out and write comments on these, your favorite sites. I have some friends who are just running something like a "four friends group blog," where they just write what they want to write and they don't care about traffic readership—much more of a relaxing atmosphere to blogging.

I think probably the worst thing that was ever invented was Blogstats, because you can just get so caught up in these arbitrary numbers that don't actually mean anything. If you're monetizing it—if you're trying to make money from blogging—then at least it is a dollar amount in a bank account. It's easier to justify paying attention to it.

It's so easy to check the stats. That's the problem. You can get them on your cell phone. They're everywhere.

What do you find gratifying about running a blog?

That's a good question. When I look back over the time I've been blogging, every now and then I'll go back and catch something I wrote a long time ago—and I'll look at it and think, "I like what I did there." Also, in terms of diversifying, I've developed skills I wouldn't have developed otherwise.

Just this past month, I participated in a web design competition. I didn't place anywhere—it was just something that inspired me to learn. I've been finding it very creative and very interesting to do.

My personality: I'm very much a generalist, a breadth person more than a depth person, so I find that blogging has been very good because it is so diverse. Blogging isn't cultural in general. It's very diverse—there's always something new to learn—and I find that very interesting. Actually applying everything I've ever learned is much harder!

When you're a generalist, there's not enough time for everything, and you're always busy learning something new.

The joy is actually in the learning something new, not in your becoming an expert in something you already kind of knew. Doing web design for the past month—spending time doing some web designs that weren't going to

become really popular and weren't going to set the world ablaze—it was something I was learning, something I wanted to do. But, yeah—it took time away from other things I was already good at.

If you look at blogging in terms of site promotion and how to become a popular blogger and all, there's one thing the experts don't mention (actually, some of them do mention it). And that is to pick one thing and do that well, instead of always changing your mind and trying something new—which is what I like to do.

I have a thought about blogging I'd like to interject. This is probably the worst thing in the world about blogs, and the number-one reason why they won't be mainstreamed: they are horribly self-referential. Blogging is a culture all to itself. It's a culture that talks about itself and writes about itself—and again, I say this as a person who does that all the time.

How do you feel about gaming the system—bloggers trying to trick or force their way in?

I think gaming is a bit of—I used the term “socially engineering others”—I think there's a line there between gaming and “socially engineering others.” On one side, you're applying techniques like copywriting, and doing very effective writing that has a clear message—like convincing someone to take an action based on what you're writing. On the gaming side, it's doing things like literally creating multiple accounts to vote up a story—creating a voting bloc to kind of keep the algorithms on your side.

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And there are people who solicit others for that, who claim to teach it and so forth.

There's this website called SEO Black Hat, and it's all about methods to affect the search engines in a way that you want to—stuff like that. And I think that they sell forum memberships for several hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars per year—just to access their forums that have all these hidden

things—so their blog is just a way for people to come in and click through the forums. They get members that way. It falls under the same heading as the selling-making-money-secrets thing.

You've made the Technorati list twice. You've helped hundreds, if not thousands, of people. You've learned a lot and had some fun. Based on your experiences, what advice can you offer?

Know what you want to get out of it. That sounds very glib and simple, but knowing what you want to get out of it is actually the hardest question, and something you should ask yourself repeatedly every few months or so. Is this what I want to get out of it? It's a huge time sink. What are you doing it for? Are you doing it to build an online entity? Are you doing it to create opportunities and connections with other things? Are you doing it to make money online? Purely for fun?

There are a lot of different ways to blog, and a lot of different things to do with it. If you know what you want to do with blogging—what your goals are and what you want to get out of it—it's a lot easier to catch yourself when you're getting caught up in all the other areas.

In one word: focus. Have a focus and stick with it. If your focus changes, that's fine too.

Points to Review

Much of Internet Duct Tape's success seems rooted in simplicity. In Eric T.'s approach to blogging, there are no complex rules to follow, no mantras to chant, and no search engines to optimize. Instead, he emphasizes helping people, learning, and staying focused. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Know what you want from blogging when you start, and focus on that aspect.
- Pick one thing you know how to do well, and do it.
- The best way to learn about a subject is to share what you learn as you learn it.
- If you have a problem, consider making it a blog post.
- If your readers have the opportunity to get to know you, they will comment more.
- If what you write interests other people, search engines will naturally follow, leading more people to you.