

Why Craigslist **WORKS,** by Craig *continued* ▶



by Craig Newmark

I'm Craig Newmark.

I started craigslist back in 1995. Craigslist began as an email list that I sent to a small group friends. At the time, I was working at Charles Schwab, then later living as an overpaid software contractor. I'd often hear about cool events that were going on around San Francisco, like the Anon Salon or Joe's Digital Diner, and I figured it I'd let others know about what was going on too. I was an early evangelizer of the 'Net back then. It seemed a good way to connect people up to each other, and I think a part of all of us wants to feel connected to others.

A lot of people say that the internet is about technology. For me, it's about people, and people connecting with each other in their day-to-day lives. In that way, the internet hasn't changed at all since I started craigslist ten years ago. We help people to find each other and we give them a voice, and somehow, people really do feel a sense of community that they belong to. Ten years on, now we're just connecting more people in more places: we think of ourselves as a family of community bulletin boards that helps people connect to get everyday stuff done. We've said that often, and it's true.

Although each site looks similar on the surface, because all postings are contributed by local folks for local folks, every city has a very distinct local flavor. We've resisted calls to combine all of our local sites into a large national platform, such that I don't

think anyone could say we come across as one big monolithic entity. We try to avoid that, and we hope to provide an alternative to the big, impersonal media sites that are out there.

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To put things in perspective, in January 2005, craigslist received about 1.8 billion page views, from 7.6 million users. We are now in nearly 100 cities worldwide. What we do isn't complicated or fancy, and it feels very real when you're on the website. The atmosphere in our virtual communities is a bit like a flea market. It's noisy, unpredictable, appeals to all sorts, and never ever is it dull.

Craigslist has always been very simple and down-to-earth. We take a common sense, honest approach to running the site and running the company (I love to quote one journalist who said that our site has the “visual appeal of a pipe wrench,” intended and taken as a compliment), and I think that's what really works about the communities. People are often surprised when they learn that there are fewer than twenty of us who work at craigslist. Keeping things simple and down-to-earth helps us to do our jobs the best we can.

Very important to me is the culture of trust that we've created and maintained on our community since craigslist started. People are generally trustworthy, and I think in this day in age that's something to acknowledge and encourage. We do everything in our power to foster this culture and the goodwill of people on the site, and we're pretty obsessive about providing exceptional customer service. Personally, I like to give people a break whenever I can, and I've found that most others almost always want to do that for each other, too, when given the opportunity. Overall, people seem to be overwhelmingly trusting and trustworthy, and in the few cases where this breaks down, they're very good at at policing themselves. Sometimes we do have to give people a second chance, those folks who may be new to the site and not clear on this culture of trust that we have created. Our users are great at helping each other out and moderating each other, and we give them a lot of responsibility to do that.

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Unless we listen to our community very carefully, they'll find another site that works better for them. We have many public discussion boards on our site including a feedback forum. We really listen to suggestions and complaints on the boards, and we don't make any big changes on the site without first discussing it with the community. Everyone has a voice on the site, and we listen to them all equally, which seems to be the most democratic approach.

Although we consider our mission to be primarily one of public service, and we strive to maintain craigslist as a non-commercial community commons, we've been incorporated as a for-profit company since 1999, when it became clear that working on a purely volunteer-basis wasn't working anymore. We've kept our original craigslist.org domain as a symbol of our public service mission. A few years ago, I decided to just become an employee and I demoted myself from management. These days, my job title is customer service rep and founder, and I work a very full week in the customer service department. Jim Buckmaster has been our CEO for four years now, and Eric Scheide is our CTO.

In 1997, I was **approached** by **Microsoft** to run **banner ads** on the site. That **didn't** really **feel right** to me.

Back in 1997, I was approached by Microsoft to run banner ads on the site. That didn't really feel right to me, and we've continued to choose not to run banner ads, or any of the other monetization annoyances that you see elsewhere: they're just too distracting and obtrusive. We do charge businesses who want to post job ads in San Francisco, NYC and LA. We'd had a lot of requests from users to charge for these postings, as a way to improve quality, and their support was confirmed when we put it up for public discussion in our feedback forum before moving ahead. Generally speaking, the feedback we've heard regarding charging is that we should charge businesses a small fee

for effective services they'd pay a lot more for elsewhere. These postings account for less than 1% of all postings on the site.

The craigslist community has grown exponentially since I started it as a hobby, but our philosophy about how we run the community hasn't changed at all. And as we expand into other cities and countries, we will continue to run the site by these same principles.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig is a hardcore Java and Web programmer who grew up wearing a plastic pocket protector and thick, black glasses, taped together, the full nerd cliché.

He started craigslist in early '95 as a means of connecting people better by letting them know about cool or useful events happening around San Francisco. It rapidly grew and built a large community of people who wonder if there really is someone named Craig involved with this.

He ain't no big deal.

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