



9seeds Earning Laptop Real Estate

John Hawkins' business lives online, but it thrives on the speakers' circuit.

Hawkins founded Web development firm 9seeds to help small businesses and bloggers make the most of WordPress, the personal publishing software that powers over 70 million Web sites. Hawkins is a frequent speaker at WordCamps, casual conferences organized locally by WordPress aficionados across the world, from San Francisco (the first WordCamp, in 2006) to Mumbai, new this year. Hawkins speaks at about 10 WordCamps a year.

He was already a WordCamp veteran when 9seeds launched in 2009 . . . with no formal marketing strategy. "Our plan was to keep going to WordCamps because we enjoyed them," Hawkins shrugs. "Then we realized that people were calling us because they heard about us at WordCamp. It wasn't a planned thing; it was organic business development."

9seeds' enthusiasm for the WordPress community spurred new business, and referrals. Teaching WordPress tricks to eager audiences has built 9seeds' credibility and goodwill in the user community. "Speaking is an amazing amplifier.

If you teach someone something, they love you for life," Hawkins says. "If you solve a problem for them, every time they do that function again, they think of you – and think well of you."

Once he's done at the mic, Hawkins uses stickers to amplify 9seeds' presence at each WordCamp. It's a low-key branding device that respects the collaborative, community vibe of WordPress.

"WordCamps are so community-driven that if you're wearing a shirt with your logo on it, it's like you're trying to sell people something," Hawkins explains. "I don't really want to sell to people at WordCamps. I'd really rather convey the point that if you need us, we're here."

Hawkins first witnessed the branding power of 9seeds' sticker from the back row. "It was WordCamp Chicago; a woman sitting a few rows in front of me pulled out her laptop, and there was a 9seeds sticker on it. This is someone I've never met before, and here's my company on her laptop," he says. "It was one of the coolest feelings ever. Seeing one of our stickers out in the wild was incredible."

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Tech entrepreneurs use the back of their laptops to showcase the brands they value. “If your sticker has an interesting look to it, the chance of getting some laptop real estate is much higher,” Hawkins says. “A \$1,500 piece of equipment, and they’re putting someone else’s logo on it,” he muses. “It’s interesting to see the mix of things people put on their laptops.”

Often, it’s the combination of brands that builds a sense of community. In Las Vegas, 9seeds’ hometown, the “Downtown Project” revitalization initiative has spawned dozens of tech startups – as well as restaurants, retail shops, and other downtown businesses. The tech entrepreneurs gather on Thursday nights for “Jelly” events designed to build downtown camaraderie. Many of them use stickers to build their own brands – and their nascent business community. “Stickers say ‘Here’s our stamp on the world, our piece of this bigger movement,’” Hawkins explains. “Seeing the logos of all these business together creates a cumulative, community-building effect.”

It’s the same for a fledgling industry, like the WordPress community. At WordCamps, Hawkins has gotten in the habit of handing out 9seeds stickers with his business card. “Stickers are more interesting and fun. People will just shove



your business card in their pocket; but your sticker? They’ll check it out, and you burn your logo into their memory,” he says.

That’s especially important when community-building takes awhile to prompt a sale. “People don’t come back the Monday after a WordCamp and say ‘I need to re-do my Website.’ But they remember us months later, when they need us,” Hawkins says. “It’s a long play. But it’s a great way to plant the seed.”



Five tips to building community

- 1** Contributing to community now builds sales later. Plug your brand into a collaborative environment and people will think well of you now, and remember you when they start shopping. This kind of goodwill also drives referrals; “that’s really important when our customer base is small businesses,” Hawkins says.
- 2** Stickers extend your visibility at community events. This is especially effective in a start-up environment, when other businesses in your industry or town are establishing themselves at the same time, too. Group energy builds community.
- 3** It’s a conversation starter, not a sales pitch. When Hawkins spotted 9seeds’ sticker on a stranger’s laptop, it gave him a natural opening to strike up a conversation about his business.
- 4** Stickers are friendlier than a business card. A sticker telegraphs enthusiasm for your industry, while keeping your brand top of mind. That carries more goodwill than a traditional business card – and more power: “It’s easier to trigger interest in your brand and have people seek you out than it is to give people your contact information and expect that to trigger their interest.”
- 5** Be patient. It may be months before someone needs your service. Sticker branding “is a long play,” Hawkins says. Think of stickers as a seed that may bloom when you least expect it.

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