Viktor Grant
Internet Communities Expert

Viktor Grant

is a recognized expert in the creation and maintenance of virtual communities. Viktor is an Internet architect and entrepreneur responsible for pioneering multiple technologies in the computer industry and on the Web, including multiuser roundtable chats, artificial intelligence based e-commerce systems, viral marketing services, video magazines, real time credit card content publishing, online book selling, and copy protection systems.

His thirty years of programming and project leadership experience began with writing the world's consumer grade copy protection software program for the Apple II while still a teenager.

I: What problem have you devoted your life to trying to solve?

VG: Simply stated, we all are aware that the planet is undergoing changes, and that we're probably being a very wasteful society. A lot of people are not fully aware of information overload and digital waste.

Google is trying to organize the world's information, but has anyone really asked whether this information is worthy of being organized? I would say that most of it would be better off deleted than archived, or at least cleaned up.

The problem that I'm focusing on is helping people optimize and increase the value of their Web site so that they provide a greater value to their community. There's a lot of junk out there on the Internet, and as a mentor of mine once said, "We're cleaning up the Web one Web site at a time."

I have been focusing on information overload and waste for the past fifteen years—building software and systems that streamline the process and make it easy for you to manage your content in a way that is a pleasure for people to understand what it is you're trying to communicate.

I: Why should people listen to your Internet advice?

VG: I've been around for a really long time. I started off doing search engine work for ad agencies in New York back in the 90s when search engines first came out. Before that, I was working on the MSN project, Microsoft Network, in 1994. It's always an exciting moment when you get a personal invitation from Bill Gates and his staff to join in an educational software summit. Then they unveiled this amazing technology.

Go back in time and think about what the world was

like in 1994. The Internet was not really prevalent. We had AOL, which was really the big kid on the block, and there were a few other online services around, and Microsoft was just about to launch Windows 95 and a new online service for it.

Microsoft asked me to produce live events for them around the human potential arena. I brought in people like Jack Canfield and Deepak Chopra. It was really funny working with Microsoft PR because they would say, "Viktor, why do you keep bringing this Indian guy on our show? He seems to bring in thousands of people, but we've never heard of him."

We would run chat rooms back in that day, and I just want to share a little story with you about the global brain. Many people talk about the global brain. One of my colleagues and mentors, Peter Russell, wrote a book called *The Global Brain,* but this was really the first time that we actually saw the global brain in action. Let me clarify that.

What happened with Deepak Chopra is that we would bring in a live event; I had Deepak on the phone and a typist would transcribe his interview in real time—she typed 160 words per minute. I would interview him, and whatever he said would be typed into the chat box, and then we had about 2,000 to 3,000 simultaneous connections going and people would ask questions. I had about ten volunteer hosts that would queue up the relevant questions for me, and then I would ask those in my interview with Deepak.

It was really exciting, it really worked, and it generated amazing online content. But here's the amazing thing about the global mind: What I observed happening is that I would think of a question I wanted to ask and within a few seconds, someone from the audience would ask the same question I had been thinking—it was haunting. It was almost as if the interview ran itself.

We tried this with other interviewees when we had maybe 500 or 1,000 people connected and that phenomenon did not occur. But as soon as we crossed the threshold of 2,000 people simultaneously connected, we would see this happen over and over again.

In many cases, the environment we had at MSN was much more of a connected community than we have today with things like Facebook and Twitter. All of these things are great—Facebook and Twitter are fantastic technologies—but they're too big. There are too many people on them and there are too many distractions that occur.

One of the things that was happening in the online world back in the 90s is that we could actually see friendships forming. When you had a user ID, that was it. You could never change it. In today's Internet world, you could have a zillion Web sites with a zillion different identities. No one really knows you and, hence, no one can really trust you.

We started to build profiles and relationships with the people who were in this online community at MSN, and the same people kept coming back; people held their own chat rooms after an event. One of my dear friends, Andy, runs a computer store in Berkeley, California, and at that time he had a chat room called "Andy's Torture Chamber." You could enter that chat room and he would have a group of people who would do nothing but insult you. It was a hoot! You could always count on having a good time.

Of course we experienced other things through these connections. We had several online weddings. We even connected with someone who was going to commit suicide and, because our hosts were there in the middle of the night, they were able to talk him out of it. These were the kinds of things that took place in that virtual community. We had a fairly stable community of about fifty thousand to sixty thousand registered users; it was an amazing group of folks.

It ended in 1997 when MSN moved to the Internet, but I'll tell you, everything that I've done since then has been trying to re-create the ability to bring such a mass of common-minded people together in one place at one time. It's unfortunate that people who are on the Internet today don't experience that kind of community. I feel really grateful for having been there in those early days.

We once conducted an interview with the late Timothy Leary, and that's when we had the roundtable

Viktor Grant continued . . .

that you mentioned in my bio. In the roundtable event, we created a contest—almost like American Idol today—where we had two hundred to three hundred people asking Timothy questions. He had finished writing a book about cyberspace. I believe the question was, "What is cyberspace?" The people who came up with the most compelling, intellectual answers were allowed to remain in the roundtable discussion. Then the final twelve winners went on to engage in an interactive dialogue with Tim Leary live and in person. It was a pretty amazing event.

That's where I got my start. I have something valuable to teach and to share because I was around before the Internet became prominent; I witnessed the beginnings of the Internet, and I also know a lot of the people who are the pioneers of this new Internet revolution that has come upon us. I can offer a fresh perspective that can only come from years of experience.

Most basic users who are on the Internet today have probably entered the fold within the last five years. There are still people out there, as hard as it is to believe, who don't even have Web sites today. I think what we're seeing, though, is a revolution when it comes to mobile technology. Now that the Internet is no longer a fringe thing, it has become a mainstream communications global technology, and the next big evolution of that is what we're seeing right now—a connected society where you're always on and you're always connected.

We are entering an era where there's so much information coming at us so fast that we don't know how to process it all. When you suddenly receive a million e-mails, to the point where you don't even want to check your e-mail anymore, that's when you need a new kind of technology to process your information. There is something called intelligent agents, which we can cover in another interview.

I: Why did you create Earthgrid? What are its origins? Why the name? And what is a grid?

VG: Earthgrid was born on December 2, 1997. I was designing a search engine for things that change all the time. Before that, I was doing consulting with a variety of clients, including the ad agency that was handling the online activity for the great author Tom Clancy.

They had a serious problem, so they called me up and said, "All of these fan clubs have sprouted up about our client, Tom Clancy, but the problem is that when you do an Internet search for Tom Clancy, you don't get Tom Clancy, you get all this other stuff, and most of it is just not meeting his quality criteria. Is there something you can do about it?"

We started working on that, and what I realized was that the positioning of information and what people search for changes all the time. For example, how many times have you searched on Google for something, only to find that the events that are popping up have already happened? In fact, some may have even happened two or three years ago, but it's still on the Internet.

What I then realized was that we needed a search engine for time-sensitive information. We needed a way to get information to people for events, concerts, parties, social meetings, or even a local Chamber of Commerce meeting, and then, once it was over, that information would be gone.

There's no need to keep track of the information that's outdated and old. What starts to happen is you get overloaded. If 99% of the Web is comprised of information that is all in the past, then you omit the present and the future altogether.

My team started working on a tool to be able to message people to inform them of upcoming events, workshops, and seminars, and then create a search engine around that. We encountered a few

problems, the biggest one being e-mail. E-mail was growing in volume and spam was rising. The latest statistics at that time were suggesting that 88% of all e-mail was spam. Therefore, the probability of getting someone's attention was very minimal; we needed something else to be able to interact with people, so we started developing a mobile text messaging system. Keep in mind, this was probably ten years ago, and phones back then were large, bulky, and the screen was only about an inch wide. That was the mobile text messaging system that we had.

Right around 2003 we ran a test for a group in Los Angeles that was putting on a concert in the Hollywood Bowl. We put out a text blast that said, "Hollywood Bowl event planning committee meeting 6:00 PM," and then we included a restaurant address with the words, "Free food." Thirty-five people out a hundred showed up with one-hour notice. I guess it was the free food!

You couldn't even conceive of doing that on e-mail. You'd have to send people two or three e-mails several days before an event. This was an emergency meeting. It worked perfectly in LA because everyone was sitting in their car in rush hour traffic anyway, so to get to Santa Monica and go to this fancy restaurant, they thought, *Maybe I'll just get off the freeway.*

We're going to be a connected society, but we're going to have to start trusting our sources much more. The reason that message worked was because the source that sent it out was a trusted source. The recipients knew they weren't being sold discount life insurance on their phone—they knew it came from a person they knew and trusted, who had an identity, and had built a reputation.

> *"We created Earthgrid to solve a problem that I saw on the horizon: We would be soon inundated with information we wouldn't be able to process and organize, and the net effect of that would be immunity."*

We created Earthgrid to solve a problem that I saw on the horizon: We would be soon inundated with information we wouldn't be able to process and organize, and the net effect of that would be **immunity**. Immunity, in this context, means that you can send out an announcement, and it can be really great, but people are so immune that they won't even notice it. By the time they do notice it, it's already too late. You can actually see this starting to happen with information technology today.

There are several great "seeds" that the planet gives to various people simultaneously around the globe. For instance, Myspace was conceived of in 1996, and Facebook was conceived of in 1997, according to public record. Earthgrid was also conceived of in 1997. We were all coming up with this idea at the same time, and I can't say I take full credit for it. I would say it's really the planet's concept. Several of us just thought of it at the same time.

It works in the same way as the Deepak Chopra interview that I referred to earlier. These seeds are planted in various people around the planet, and then it's almost like you're compelled by some invisible force. People ask me, "Why are you doing this?" It's as though I *have* to do this.

It brings to mind a spiritual story of Francis of Assisi. He had to build a church one brick at a time. He said, "God told me to build this church, and this is where I'm going to build it." Pretty soon, he got everyone in the community to help him add bricks to the structure. That's how it works in every area; when something's time has come, people sense it, and everyone starts to work on it.

What's interesting is that we were all working on different aspects of this technology. Myspace, hands down, took the music industry by storm. They were focusing on multimedia and visuals and really kitsch graphics. Facebook focused on the social aspects of college initially and expanded from there to other social groups.

At Earthgrid we were focusing on the business work group. Let me qualify what a business work group is. Why we call it a grid is inspired by Buckminster Fuller, who was one of the great thinkers of the twentieth century. He talked about geodesic grids as a way of exploring what he called "the geometry of consciousness."

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Viktor Grant continued . . .

He said that the minimum system is made up of four events. You could also think of it in reference to a minimum team being made up of four people. When I was hanging out at Microsoft I started noticing that four-man teams were the critical group that you wanted to get together. As a example, when I was living in Hawaii, I was conducting community meetings. About eighty or ninety people showed up, and I would follow a process I called community procedure where I would create four-man teams. Then we would generate community projects like gardening or starting a community farm or a community center.

Each team of four would focus on one project. We started seeing that we needed a system for these teams to communicate with each other in a nondistracting way. Nondistracting also implies one of the core concepts of Earthgrid, which is the destructive principle. The **destructive principle** basically states that when an idea is outdated and no longer viable, it should be eliminated to make space for a current idea to burst forth.

What happened was that people would share ideas, write messages to each other, collaborate on concepts, and then come up with a statement. We called this statement an announcement, and when this announcement was two or three sentences in length, and as soon as all four people on the team agreed with it, magic happened. The project that they created together took on a life of its own. It gained support from other members of a larger community, and it just started to take off.

The process of holding those community seminars and workshops among the local community participants is what we model at Earthgrid today. Let me explain a few distinctions: I talk about Earthgrid, but there are really three Earthgrids. It's easy to remember the difference between them:

1) www.earthgrid.com is about cloud computing, onscreen editing, state-of-the-art Web sites, and commercial Web sites. We realized that before these groups could express what they were doing in the world, they needed a Web site to memorialize their project so that it would get noticed by everyone else.

2) www.earthgrid.net was the mechanism by which they would bring all of their ideas into the fold, and that has always been free. My goal is for it to remain free. Basically, they're free mini Web sites, very much like Myspace but without all of the graphics and animation. It's really for business. It's a way to say, "Here's my project, here's what I do, here's what I'm all about, and here's how you can connect with me." That's the essential purpose of these Web sites. We've had tens of thousands of people create free Web sites. It's a way of giving back to the community.

Inside of Earthgrid.net there is also a search engine to help members find each other. Once connected, there are messaging tools that the work groups can use to communicate with each other. We've recently been working on developing the www.earthgrid.net mobile platform so that these groups can use their cell phones to quickly send messages to each other.

Whenever you send an SMS on your cell phone, you have to look up that person's contact information in your phone. Oftentimes, you get distracted during the process; you see other contacts, and you may not even get the message sent.

The mobile system we built is automated, and everyone is responsible for maintaining their own profile, which links their mobile number, e-mail, bio, and Web sites to their Earthgrid username. As I discussed earlier in the MSN example, this was the key to building trust in the community. And using this messaging system allows everyone to easily keep in contact by messaging via usernames versus numbers, with everyone in your workgroup at your fingertips.

If you were to switch carriers or change your number, simply log in, change your profile, and the new information replaces the old. That service is totally free. You can find out more at www.earthgrid.net.

3) www.earthgrid.org is the third element. It is dear to my heart because it involves working with charitable and humanitarian organizations. We are focusing on doing things that are good for the

planet, but even more so for the people residing *on* the planet. A lot of people say, "We have to save the earth." I say, "The earth is just fine. What we have to do is listen to what the earth is telling us, and we need to save ourselves."

A number of charitable and humanitarian groups are doing great things around the world, but they don't always have the best looking Web sites. So we have created news feeds over at www.earthgrid.org that are growing in size and scope. There are also links to thousands of articles on Internet marketing at www.earthgrid.org.

Between these three Web sites, you pretty much have everything you need to get involved, or as we say, "Get on the grid." It's an ambitious project. I can't really know where it's going to go, but I'll tell you, it's certainly accelerating. We've been at it a long time—fourteen years—and we're going to keep at it for a long time to come.

I: What advice do you have for our readers who have Web sites and want to improve their conversion rate, SEO ranking, or sales?

VG: Let me share a bit about Web site optimization. The first principle I want talk about is conversion rate. There are a lot of coaches who help people come up with better language, better copy, better ways of positioning themselves in the business, etc. I help you increase your conversion rate.

Let me explain. One of my clients recently had an e-mail campaign with about 25,000 names on the list, but he had some challenges. When he first sent out to that list, he had so many spam complaints that the ISP complained to us saying, "You're sending out too many e-mails that people don't want."

We started cleaning up the list and we refined the language of it. We took what was an abysmal failure and, by the time I was done with it, we produced a 35% open rate on that e-mail. It completely sold out his event. That's what happens when you start to apply some of these principles.

The first thing you need to do is to come up with an irresistible offer. The irresistible offer has to seem like you're not really selling but providing information. In the case I just mentioned, we started a buzz through other means, such as social networking or telephone, in the LA community that people were expecting this offer but, for some reason, it wasn't getting to them. They were all eagerly anticipating the offer letter, so when we finally got that e-mail out, we had an audience that was hungry for it, and they responded powerfully to it. Using a word-of-mouth campaign prior to sending out the actual e-mail offer is an amazing strategy for increasing your conversion rate.

I tell this to all of my clients: Remember, e-mail is to *inform*, NOT to *sell*—avoid sales language in your e-mails and instead, put it on the Web page that the e-mail leads people to.

Next, the e-mail has to lead somewhere. It should only contain one link. You can repeat that link several times, but don't include several links. The best format we've found for e-mail marketing is to put the link at the top of the page, then place a large graphic, a little bit of text, and then repeat the link at the bottom. When you click on the link in the e-mail, it takes you to a specially designed Web page that explains your irresistible offer.

There is a principle called "above the fold." Above the fold means before people scroll. If you go to Earthgrid, click on support, and go to the newsletter, there are about seven other strategies that explain this principle in more detail. There is a chart and a tool that we use to monitor people's mouse movements when they visit a Web site. Research shows that placing your mouse and following

the visitor's brain is a great way to tell if people are reading or not reading, where they're going or where they're not going.

After thousands of studies, it was discovered that the sweet spot is exactly 550 pixels from the top of the screen. If you go to www.earthgrid.com, you'll see there is a Sign Up Now! Button located exactly 550 pixels from the top of the screen. You will increase your conversion rate immensely if you just put a button there.

People like clicking on pictures; they don't like clicking on text. This is a recent development. Some of the most powerful Web sites are loaded with pictures that are clickable. When you go our Web site, you see the Sign Up Now! button. You'll see that it is beveled, it has a shadow on it, and it has an exclamation point. There's no question that we want you to click there.

Once visitors to your site click that button, you need to present them with an irresistible offer. Here's the catch though: Many people have junk e-mail addresses. When people come to your Web site, you have to build a mailing list. How many times have you gone to a Web site and been asked to submit your name and e-mail address for a free report? I have a special e-mail address I use where all my free reports go. Why? Because I like sitting down and reading all my free reports all at once. I don't want free report e-mails interjecting with my business mail because it's too distracting.

I'm not the only person who is doing this. Lots of people have Gmail accounts, Yahoo accounts—how many e-mail addresses do you have?

I: About five or six. And I have a junk e-mail too.

VG: Exactly. If you're wanting to build an e-mail list with a name and e-mail address, how would you get people to give their real address?

That brings me to another tip: Have a links page. If you go to our links page at www.earthgrid.com, you'll see that there's a form. This form is technology that we pioneered. It asks you for your Web site, your URL, your descriptive text, and for your name and e-mail addresses so we can contact you to follow up and exchange links with you.

At the last count, we have registered over eight thousand Web sites to exchange links with Earthgrid just by filling out the form. We also noticed that we get the webmaster's name and e-mail address this way. And these are not necessarily small companies. We've had webmasters for *New York Times* best-selling authors fill out this form, and now we have the direct e-mail address of the person responsible for the Web sites of a lot of the *New York Times* best-selling authors. If we ever want to set up an interview, we now have their correct contact information.

You can actually think of Google, or any other search engine, as a giant link exchange. All you're doing is exchanging your Web site for a link from Google back to your Web site that Google organizes according to its rules and regulations. Back in the early days people used to have links pages. Essentially what they had was their own search engine or their own directory.

Finally, and this probably the biggest secret for anyone to understand about SEO, go to www.dmoz.org and take a look at that Web site. A lot of people ask, "How do I get in the Google Directory?" Guess what? Google lifts its data from www.dmoz.org. Go to www.dmoz.org and fill out that form. They have specific rules, and let me explain a few things about this. I think everyone today should have at least three Web sites, and I'm going to give you the exact delineations of these three Web sites.

Three Web Sites You Need to Have

> **1) An Authority Site:** This site establishes you as the authority in your particular area of interest.

2) A Mini Site: This site is for your primary product or service. You can link to this site from your authority site.

3) An Article or Editorial Site: This site provides information, content, tools, articles you've written, etc. This is the content-rich site you want to submit to www.dmoz.org. Then you want to make sure that there are links from this site to your other two sites.

All three of these sites should be on different servers with different IP addresses. If they're all on the same server with the same IP address, the search engines will see them as part of the same site and will not give you the reciprocal link credit. That is why you need to have three separate Web sites.

Search engines are not evil creatures out to prevent you from getting in the Top 10 as many people believe. They're trying to provide the most relevant information around a keyword and offer freedom to explore information that is of general interest to the public.

In a perfect world, the ads on the right-hand side are reserved for commercial businesses, and those business should be paying for that listing on the right-hand side. They don't really have a right to list themselves in the main body of search results unless they are providing information that helps people in regards to general things, such as establishing themselves as experts in their field. Those are the kinds of Web sites that generally end up in the Top 10.

While a lot of people are trying to get Top 10 placement for their Web site, they're not, because they think that search engines are only computerized—they're not. They have tens of thousands of employees or volunteers who look at Web sites all day long and rate and number them.

One strategy I like to use with clients when doing SEO is to trigger an audit of their Web site by doing things that alert the search engines to want to see if there is someone trying to beat the system. Then, when the individuals behind those search engines visit your Web site and say, "Oh my—this is just the most beautiful Web site! It's better than the one we currently represent . . . " then bam! You're on the first page!

I: Excellent. We could not publish this magazine or run any of our sites without Earthgrid! Do you have a special offer for our readers?

VG: Certainly. Simply go to the go to www.earthgrid.com and click Sign-Up Now!

When you sign up for our new Earthgrid PowerSites cloud web design tool, we have a special offer that is exclusive to the readers of *Insights*. Call us and we'll explain it to you.

Now, I'd like to close by saying to everyone that I hope you'll make the personal and professional investment of time and money to upgrade your Web site by applying the strategies I've outlined in this interview. When you do this, not only will you be cleaning up digital waste, you'll also be making it easier on Web site visitors to give you money for your services by having a Web site that makes sense and looks great!

You can find more information about that at www.earthgrid.com. Mention "GetEI" when contacting Earthgrid for your exclusive GetEI upgrade.

To learn more, visit
www.earthgrid.com

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