



— WAYS TO —
TAKE CONTROL
— OF TECHNOLOGY —

BY TIM GRAHL

Quick disclosure: The information below is going to save you hundreds of hours of wasted time. Time spent doing what most writers dread and resent.

Because when it comes to this whole “online marketing” thing, one of the biggest hurdles we face is that dreaded word: technology.

There’s a way to wrangle technology so that *you’re* controlling *it*, instead of the other way around.

The problem with technology

I was at lunch with some friends one day, when we started talking about germaphobia. I described my intense fear of public restrooms. One guy at the table commented, “The problem with germaphobia is, it’s a deep hole that never seems to have an end.”

That’s true about technology too. There is no end to how deep that rabbit hole can go.

You can set up a simple website with something like

SquareSpace or WordPress. Or you can learn advanced PHP/HTML5/CSS3 and hand-code your own. Better yet, you could learn how to set up a custom LAMP stack to serve your website. (If you just went cross-eyed, I’m with you. I don’t even know what that last one means.)

But the same questions still remain:

- I know I need a website, but how do I structure it?
- I need to do email marketing, but which email marketing service do I sign up for? And how do I get that damn signup box on my sidebar?
- I don’t want to manage six different social media platforms, so how do I get them to all automatically sync up?

And those are just the big things. There’s a million smaller things that can constantly confound, derail and distract us.

Setting priorities—and knowing when to let go

How many of us have done the equivalent of wasting three hours of our life tweaking the font color for our website's footer? Or fiddling with an email template? Or trying to get the background to look *just right* on our Twitter profile?

I've done all of those time-wasting tasks and many, many more. Then one day I realized that I had to keep myself from going too far down that endless technology rabbit hole. I realized that I needed to focus on getting things done and launched, instead of endlessly tweaking things that don't matter that much in the long run.

So I developed a list of rules to help me get the most out of technology, without wasting a ton of time on it:

Rule #1: Decide if that techno-action is *actually* important

Here at Out:think, we like to build beautiful websites. But here's the truth: ugly websites can work great too. And an ugly website will always work better than no website at all.

Achieving the "perfect" look via technology can be time-consuming. Don't waste time on things that aren't *worth* the time. Constantly tweaking the background on your Twitter profile is a waste of time. Trying to get the email signup box on your sidebar to be 10 pixels taller is a waste of time.

Before you fall deeper down that rabbit hole, decide whether that particular issue is important enough to spend time on.

Rule #2: Find the 80 percent solution

At one point, I was looking for a tool that would allow one of our clients to run simultaneous live meet-ups all across the world. When we made a list of what we wanted it to do, it was pretty extensive. Then we found a

ready-made platform called Meetup Everywhere.

It only fulfilled about 80 percent of our requirements. But it was something we could start using now, instead of spending time and money on building our own custom solution. WordPress.com is far from perfect. But it enables you to get a website up and running, quickly and inexpensively. Gumroad has a lot of limitations. But it allows you to start selling stuff online quickly.

Learn to sacrifice your ideal tool for one that offers most of the features you need—and that enables you to get started right now.

Rule #3: Stick with what works

For all of you productivity lifehackers out there, this is a sacrilege. But I've found that if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

I use the Byword app when I write articles for the Out:think website. I upload each post straight onto my WordPress site, then my editor logs in and fixes my egregious spelling and grammar errors.

Are there better tools out there for writing articles?

Probably. Do I care? Nope. The Byword app gets the job done just fine, so I stick with it.

I love Scrivener for writing, but I have writer friends that just stick with plain old MS Word. Why? Because they know they'll get distracted by all the "features" in Scrivener and stop writing.

Stop looking for the Next Best App that's just hit the marketplace. You waste far more time fiddling with the new stuff than you would if you just sat down and worked with a simpler tool that gets the job done.

Let all the lifehackers are out there hunt for the next new, super-efficient writing tool, while *you* get some actual writing done. Don't live right on the edge of technology. Let other people beta test and constantly hop from one new thing to the next. Wait to see which of the new tools turns out to be the winner, further down the road.

Rule #4: Decide what is “good enough”

I want my writing projects to get shipped. Done. Out into the world. A live website with some spacing and color issues is better than one that never gets launched. A published ebook with a couple of spelling mistakes is better than one that sits in your drafts folder, unpublished and unread.

Let's call perfectionism what it really is: fear of shipping.

I'm speaking to myself on this one, as much as to anyone else. How many times have I continued tweaking something because I was afraid to let it out into the world?

How many times have you done that? Are you doing that right now with one of your projects?

Don't fear that moment when you ship your work out. It's what you're here for.

Rule #5: Start with the tutorials

When I was a kid and got a new toy, I would often tear into the box and start trying to randomly put the pieces together, trying to figure out on my own how it all fit together. Usually, that method didn't work very well.

I've learned it's better to start with the boring stuff like reading the instructions before diving in. The same goes with all of these online tools.

If you're about to get started with MailChimp, start by watching their extensive video and tutorial library. It doesn't take that long, and it's time that's well-invested. The same goes for WordPress or LeadPages, or whatever new tool you're learning on your own.

These are complicated platforms. You can learn to do a lot yourself, but take your time and start where the professionals advise you to start. Watch the tutorials, such as the WordPress tutorials on YouTube. They're designed to make it all simple to use, and they work.

Rule #6: Know when to get help

There is a time limit on how long you should spend messing with something. Need to publish a blog post? Learn to do it yourself. Need to send out your weekly newsletter? Learn to do it yourself. See Rule #1. But if it takes you eight hours to do something a professional could do in 25 minutes, it is probably best to get some help.

You can't do everything yourself. And if you try, you'll never get anything else done.

Think about the long-term effects: If it's a task that will need to be done a lot in future, learn to do it yourself. The time invested in learning that skill will pay off over time. But a very technical task that only needs to be done once should probably be outsourced to a professional.

Are you building your website from the ground up, or custom-coding a new email template? These are things a professional should probably do, unless you plan on doing them regularly.

Are you going to blog regularly and send out weekly email newsletters? Those are tasks that you can learn to do yourself, while saving on the hassle and expense of hiring someone to do it for you.

Technology is an amazing thing. If used correctly, it can allow us to get more done and reach more people than we ever thought possible. The Out:think website alone has allowed me to connect with many great authors whom I would never have met otherwise.

However, technology can also be a major distraction and a time-waster that keeps us from doing our greatest work. It's easy to fall into that rabbit hole of endless new writer tools and choices.

Use these rules to take back control, so that technology works as a tool to help you get more of your writing out into the world.

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