

How You Can Build an Audience of Buyers and Eager Advocates

Interview with Anthony Bucci

TT: Welcome, Anthony. Thanks for being with us today.

AB: It's a pleasure to be here, Tom.

TT: I'd like to begin by talking about how RevZilla got started and, in particular, what the strategy was behind marketing the business back then. What did the business look like when you first launched it?

AB: The business was launched in an apartment by three guys in boxer shorts building software and running a motorcycle gear store. Our backstory is that we were geeks who were really into bikes. And when I say geeks, I mean that in the best sense of the word. All of our backgrounds are in software technology, e-commerce and consumer brand marketing.

The three of us who founded RevZilla are all young guys. We were all doing different things with our careers, and the time came where we felt we just had to roll the dice. We believed we could build a better mousetrap when it came to selling motorcycle gear. Bikes were a hobby for us at the time. We just didn't think there was anybody out there that could do as good a job as we could. All of us had careers that had taught us how to take a brand and create an online experience with both great technology and great service.

Our goal was to become the Zappos of motorcycle gear. We were not looking to adopt the Amazon model of "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" where you compete on selection and shipping speed. That's just part of what we wanted to offer our clients. We also had passion, enthusiasm and a great deal of knowledge to share. We knew this model works really well for specialty retail. Whether it's motorcycle gear, fishing gear, camping gear, mountaineering gear or any other niche, specialty retail is where the customer interaction is driven by enthusiasm.

TT: It's very obvious when one visits your site that the passion, enthusiasm and a great amount of knowledge about bikes is there, and that you want to share it with your prospects, clients and customers. What really captured my attention was the 1,700 videos. Is that the primary way you share your message? Why 1,700 videos?

AB: The videos reinforce our message. We founded this company on the core principles of passion, enthusiasm and knowledge, and the videos are a tool that help us

communicate our message. If you look at all the branded touch points of the company from a marketing standpoint—communication through messaging, communication with customers over the phone, in the forums, on Facebook—in all those different places, we're setting a tone. We felt video was a good medium to help make our brand more tangible.

When we started doing video three years ago, all we had was a Flip camera. We couldn't afford to hire a model. We were all from the Northeast (Philadelphia) and we were concerned that we might not relate to people from other parts of the country. Fortunately, we got the feedback we were hoping for—that we seemed to know our stuff and were obviously enthusiastic about what we were doing. Thankfully people said I was likeable on camera, [laughing] because if they said I wasn't, we would have had to possibly regroup and perhaps find somebody else to be the face of the company.

Fortunately (and unfortunately), I've become the face of our brand. I think a lot of people associate the brand with me. It's a big responsibility. I mean, if I ever mess up my public or professional persona, I could take the brand down. You always have to use care when introducing a level of notoriety to a company. You have to create a foundation that provides a complete and consistent conversation with the customer that is really beyond the video.

TT: How do you decide what to share with your audience on the videos? How do you decide what information they want or need?

AB: That's a great question, and the answer can come from one of two places. First we try to decide what information is net worthy or meaningful (and that can be either positive or negative) about a product. Secondly, we spend a lot of time going over questions we get from customers. We want to provide enough education so they will feel comfortable making a \$200-500 investment over the Internet.

Now, a lot of our products can be found in a local motorcycle shop. A lot them are exotic. They might be from Europe. People can get really excited about a product after reading about it online or communicating about it in a forum; but they don't get the chance to actually touch it, smell it, or try it on. That makes it imperative that we try to create a texture for the products we carry, while also developing a bank of knowledge and providing a level of comfort—all things someone needs to consider before they actually select a product.

I realize that's a very open-ended answer, but I think whether you're looking at a helmet, gloves, a jacket, or even an exhaust pipe—each category or brand of product may have different foundational elements that need to be shared at a high level in a brand video.

TT: You guys do a great job. I was watching a video of yours earlier that was featuring a boot with a Velcro strap—that once you tie the laces, the Velcro strap keeps the laces out of your way. You're not going to get that from just looking at a product description on a typical retail site. Even though I don't ride motorcycles, I could still appreciate the benefits that a rider could get from buying those boots. A prospect can really pick up valuable information that would make them more inclined to buy from your videos.

AB: I appreciate that. I know it's certainly been an organic process for us. We've moved from very low budget (but knowledgeable) videos up to what I now believe are a bit more polished. Our presentation has come a long way, and we've really figured out how to determine the level of granularity we need to portray. We're always looking for things to include that could be more meaningful to the prospect. But yes, there's definitely an arc there. We have shot videos for helmets that are twenty minutes long, and people actually watch the entire twenty minutes. You've basically watched a TV show at that point.

Then we might have a video about a \$30 pair of gloves that's only a minute-and-a-half. We'll talk about the key things you should know if you buy the gloves, including the fact that you're more likely to get the sizing correct when you buy them over the Internet. So, there's a lot of shades of gray .

TT: Before you step in front of the camera, do you know what you're going to say; or do you have a script? After doing 1,700 videos, do they come naturally?

AB: We don't script anything. I'm considered the "head product expert" at RevZilla. It's my job to learn the product through and through, and I think our customers look to me to be their advocate for what's important, meaningful, and on the cutting edge when it comes to products that will really excite them.

Of course, in the early days, we never scripted anything. We always wanted it to feel like a conversation. We've come a long way. What used to be a twelve-minute video might now might be down to five minutes. For lack of a better term, when we started I was taking a discombobulated journey through the information. We really try to make things as clear and concise as we possibly can, while including as much as we can without repeating ourselves.

Although we don't script, I'm very prepared for shoot day. That means we've ridden the product, spent time with the product, and multiple people on our staff have torn the product apart and put it through its paces. I think with any video, preproduction is the production; so, to your point, we are very prepared.

TT: Do you set aside certain days or times for recording videos, or does your system allow you to do them any time you feel like getting in front of the camera?

AB: It's both. We shoot one or two days a week (it's time-consuming to do) and we can also shoot off-the-cuff. Up until the last six months, we shot the video in our store; but that required much more of a scheduled process. We would have to close the store or try to do it after hours. It was really tough to do.

Once we started recording such a high volume, we decided it was time to invest in a studio. Now we're at the point where if we've done our homework, we understand the product, and we're excited about shooting the video; we can turn the lights on, mic me up, and be shooting in ten minutes. It's really great, but it took us a long time and a lot of investment to get to where we are now.

TT: Let's talk about other types of marketing content. Once you have information you want your prospects and customers to see, how do you make sure it gets in front of the right audience?

AB: It's a twofold approach. Some of our videos attract someone who is prequalified. They already know what they're looking for, and they might just stumble upon our video because they're researching that product or a similar product. Then there's the videos where we're just flat-out geeky and we share all of our strategy.

Any marketing we do has to add value for the prospect or customer. Whether it's on Facebook or in a forum; whether it's part of an e-mail blast or highlighted on our site, or we talk about it on our hold music, when you call RevZilla, whatever you experience has to add value. By value, I mean is it new? Is it on sale? Is it meaningful to you? Are you learning something? If we can't add value, then it's irresponsible for us to put it in front of you, because then we're wasting your time.

This philosophy is partly because of the next generation/Internet age of so much signal to noise that's become out of control. We realized how essential it was for us to develop trust, and to do so by not barraging people with too much content; but instead, making sure that the nuggets that are most important to them get shared with them in the way they choose to opt into the conversation. Forums, Facebook, social media, YouTube subscriptions, e-mail blasts on our site—I really think there are a lot of touch points, and the challenge becomes managing those in a coherent way.

TT: I'm curious to hear some of your insights about marketing with e-mail. You do have an opt-in at the bottom of your home page for offers. How often do you use e-mail to communicate with your prospects, clients, and customers?

AB: Communication through e-mail means a constant conversation, and all good Internet retailers know that your e-mail house list is worth its weight in gold. These are people who have come to your site and told you that they value what you do, want to

follow the conversation, and want to hear from you. It goes back to responsible marketing—adding value to the conversation in either a general or segmented way. One or more times a week someone will hear from us, depending on the strength of the offer, sale, value, and information that we're conveying.

TT: Did you recognize early in the business that this is a powerful and essential way to communicate with your audience? Or is it something you realized once the business had evolved?

AB: My career in e-commerce started in the early 2000s. Previous to RevZilla, I worked with companies like Speedo, Trump, Calvin Klein, Vineyard Vines, Oneida Flatware, Spencer Gifts and L.L.Bean. I was able to strategically help these companies add technology and take online marketing to what was considered the next level in the mid-2000s. I had the benefit of knowing that there were certain levers one could push with regard to tried and true e-commerce marketing that would really make it work. And since the inception of e-commerce, e-mail has continued to be at the forefront of that conversation.

TT: Do you believe e-mail marketing will continue to become even more popular? Be more effective?

AB: The challenge, now, is relevancy. During the last decade, we've seen open rates fall. These days, if we send a couple of e-mails to a Gmail user (and they don't open either one) Gmail will almost always put them in the prospect's spam folder, even if that user has never requested the e-mail be classified as spam.

The challenge for e-commerce businesses and marketers is now all about engagement. It's not about e-mailing 500,000 people on Monday. It's about creating content that is so compelling that people will open the message, click through, and interact with us. That they find value. Because should they start identifying the conversation as noise, not only will we be penalized by them, but now they're sending a message to the intermediary (the e-mail provider using artificial intelligence) to divert our e-mails away from them. That, of course, lowers the value of the message.

So, e-mail is now a signal to noise challenge. But even if you rewind ten years (when everybody received far less e-mail and was more open to it) responsible marketers still viewed it from the standpoint of offering value—otherwise it's just spam.

TT: That's a great point. I know we're a bit challenged on time today. Do you have time for two more questions?

AB: I do, and I'd be happy to spend another five or ten minutes with you. I think this interview will help a lot of people that are either just starting out or somewhere in the middle of the curve.

TT: Great, and I appreciate you sharing, as well. This question is more general. What's the primary mistake that you see business owners and entrepreneurs make when marketing their companies?

AB: The biggest mistake I see (it's at a high level, and it affects everything from team to culture to hiring to presentation to marketing—all of the touch points that define the DNA of a company) is when a company tricks itself into believing it can optimize for the short dollar for a short amount of time and fix it later. They have no idea how much damage they're doing to their brand, their brand perception, and ultimately the loyalty of their customer base. Great marketing really requires discipline. Whether you're an executive or in middle management, you have to take the route of optimizing for the longer term to align your interests with those of your customers. Optimizing for the longer term is a basic foundation of marketing.

The reason I bring this up is because the Internet has created a lot of companies who believe they can get in, advertise the quick hit, advertise the quick discount, "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" and make it up on volume. I think people do themselves a great disservice thinking they can be the Amazon of their industry. If the Amazon model works in your industry, Amazon is going to come eat your lunch, because that's what they do. They compete on efficiency and price.

If you're in a niche that is not wildly popular like consumer electronics—once you get out of that spectrum, you really have to think about how to create a brand for yourself so as not to become just another layer in the conversation. You need to become more valuable to your consumer base than just that. I believe that's one of the biggest mistakes people make that will keep their business from growing quickly and will create a very high churn rate with your customers. It's optimizing for the wrong things.

TT: That's an excellent point. This is my final question. My first interaction with RevZilla online indicated to me that you guys are obviously experts in your industry. What would you recommend business owners and entrepreneurs do to establish themselves as the go-to source or an authority in their industry?

AB: One of the most important things to realize is that you can't be an authority in a vacuum, and if you want people to think you're great, you have to be consistently great. People always ask us what our secret sauce is. My answer is always that we focus on being really consistent. We set a high bar, even if it's more expensive to do so. If you want to establish yourself as an expert in any field, you have to consistently be part of a

meaningful conversation. So for us, Facebook, forums, video, product knowledge—all of those things have to work in symphony with each other.

Now, you can't simply tell people you're an expert. You can't simply tell people you have a great service. As a marketer, you're going to advertise at key touch points within your funnel and as part of your process online. People will ignore marketing to a certain extent; but when it comes down to it, they're going to interact with you if they have a question, or they want to place an order, or they have an issue.

The capacity to handle those situations will allow you to influence or potentially engage customers who might also be very well connected within an industry. It builds more credibility that grows organically and slowly develops over time. I don't think there's a magic bullet. The days of Internet companies that blow up, hockey stick their growth and then do quick flips (particularly with specialty or retail) don't exist anymore, because there are too many guys out there doing it right. Now it's time to think about playing the long game.

TT: Another thing I thought was really interesting about you guys is that your own customers help establish you as the authority in your industry. I copied this line from your About Us page. It says, "You can find compliments from past customers (as well as some complaints) by reading reviews of RevZilla at ResellerRatings.com. As well as some complaints? I was like, Whoa! I'm sure there's a few people who think that's crazy. Being that open is apparently very appreciated.

AB: Yes. You have the choice to be transparent. It's funny. I'm such a geek myself that sometimes it's hard for me when I'm reviewing new technology to be purely analytical and talk about both the upsides and the downsides. Of course, that's really important from a credibility standpoint, whether you're a person, a brand or a business.

If people think you're micromanaging the perception of your brand to a degree that nothing negative is ever allowed to come out, then people will take what you say with a grain of salt. You have to be willing to admit you screwed up, and you have to be able to assure your customers and prospects that you are willing to fix any problem that come along.

TT: No doubt, especially online. Negative news seems to spread a lot faster than positive news, so if you're willing to address it head-on, it can work to your advantage. Well, all right, Anthony. Before we end, I want to give you the opportunity to give a plug for RevZilla and tell people how to find your site in case anybody has any questions or wants to get in touch with you.

AB: Sure. I'm very easy to find on the Internet. You can Google me and I will come up all over the place. You can find us at RevZilla.com. For those of you that ride bikes and

are interested in our approach, all I can say is that for better or worse, we're very unique. We operate as a very different type of company, and we know there's a lot of customers out there who appreciate what we do.

If you're curious to find out more, we're very transparent. You can read all about our story. Everything I've talked about today is represented on our site. Please don't be bashful if you have questions. That's what we're here for. We are the Sherpa of motorcycle gear, and our goal is to remain in that position.

TT: That's awesome. Well, all right, Anthony. I appreciate the time and certainly the incredible transparency with which you shared what has gone on behind the scenes in order to make RevZilla the success it is today. Thank you so much.

AB: No problem, Tom. I appreciate you reaching out and I enjoyed being here today.

[End of interview]