

An Interview with Michael Naef, Founder & CEO Of Doodle.com

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book ever written on the subject of Social Media. And today we are here with Michael Naef, the Founder and CEO *Doodle.com*, the online scheduling website. And Mike is here all the way from Zurich, Switzerland with us today. That's pretty exciting. And we'll be speaking about Social Media and online scheduling and so Michael, let's get started. Can you tell the listeners a little bit about your background and who you are?



MN: Well, yes, hi everybody. As you said, my name is Mike Naef. I am the Founder of *Doodle* and before I founded the company, I started computer science and education here at ETH in Zurich and I worked in various companies as an information security professional. And that's it!

LS: (Laughter) so what made you found *Doodle* but first of all tell our listeners a little bit about what *Doodle* is.



MN: *Doodle* solves the scheduling problem. It helps finding accommodations and times for our group's event which can be an important conference call, a family reunion, a barbecue, whatever, and in that *Doodle* focuses on delivering a very simple and usable service with is free to end users.

LS: I like that; to have one kind of a clearing place where everybody can see what your schedule is so they can book meetings and family things, and that's kind of exciting. What prompted you, what made you wake up one morning and say, "You know what! I'm going to create *Doodle*!"

MN: The service was conceived and implemented in 2003 and the idea for this service was born from my personal need. I wanted to make an appointment with some friends; I don't know whether it's for a beer or a dinner or anything. And this process resulted. As many of you know a large number of emails being sent around and phone calls, no common dates and times being found. So I implemented *Doodle* and the service attracted a large and growing user base also. In 2006 I decided to professionalize the service, which led to the company founded together with my business partner, Paul Sevinc.

LS: Wow. So just like a lot of software and solutions that we're finding on the internet, it really kind of sprung out of a personal need and then turned into a professional product.

MN: Yes.

LS: Can you tell me, specifically, can you give me some examples of how people are actually using *Doodle*. What are the different things that you're seeing happening?

MN: People are using it for all kinds of use cases. At the moment in Switzerland alone we have, like, more than ½ million people who use the service each month. They use it both for business and private events and they most appreciate *Doodle*'s simplicity and the low entry barrier, because you don't really try to download anything or install the software to register for the service. So they use it for the examples I mentioned, business meetings, family reunions, ski weekends (in Switzerland, obviously), all kinds of stuff.

LS: And you're absolutely right about the easy use. I love that interface. It's really simple. It's just click and type. You said you have ½ million people using it in your area. So this is actually internationally used, as well.

MN: Yeah, the ½ million is in Switzerland. Internationally we're approaching something like 2 million users at the moment. *Doodle* is used in many countries worldwide and we are actually also translated into 25 languages currently. What's interesting is that most, or all of the languages are translated by volunteers from these various countries, all except the major languages, which are German and English, which we provide ourselves.

LS: And that's also something that excites me. First of all, (a thought just ran into my head as we were listening to you speak) you're competing with companies like *Google*, for example, who run their own "calendar" but yet you've got a 2 million membership. That's incredible!

MN: Yes, we are not competing with companies like *Google* with their calendar or *Microsoft* with their calendar or let's say *Lotus* with *Notes* and their calendar, because we don't even provide the calendar; and that's important. We won't ever provide a calendar, but we provide the missing link between calendars and between people who use different calendars, or don't use a calendar at all, or use a paper-based calendar. Because we help them coordinate the process of finding the dates and time.

LS: See, I really like that distinction. Can you tell our listeners a little bit more about that distinction, that you don't provide, necessarily, a calendar but that you provide this interface. Can you explain a little bit about that?

MN: Yes. Maybe, as I've just explained how *Doodle* is used; how people use *Doodle*.

LS: Please.....

MN: The typical use case is that the organizer visits our site and creates a, so-called, poll which offers a number of dates to choose from. Then your organizer is [06:02.2] a unique web link, which *Doodle* provides, which he or she can send to the participants. And these participants use this link, then, to access the poll and answer with their availability. The organizer uses that same link to monitor the polls progress and determine the best option at the end. So that's it, in a nutshell, and this should show that we don't need the calendar information built right into the tool, but we based it on the participants providing this information to us.

LS: Yeah, I really like that because it isn't just another calendar scheduling website. It really does provide a very unique niche, a very unique solution.

MN: Yes.

LS: And the other thing that I heard you mention, which keeps coming up is this. I had the pleasure of interviewing Matt Mullenweg, the Founder of *WordPress*, and Jack Herrick of *wikiHow* and they have volunteers also. I hear this theme that when you have a good product that is accepted by your audience, that you get volunteers! Volunteers come out of the woodwork and put the time and effort into it to continuously make this a better product, and they don't get rewarded, they don't get paid. This is really a volunteer-base. You say that that also applies to you.

MN: Yes, it applies to us, too. As I said most of our languages are translated by volunteers and they actually write to us and say, “Hey, I’m sitting here in Portugal and I’m using *Doodle* with my friends and family and they would love to have it in their own language. So can I help them translate it to Portuguese?”

And then we send them the text they have to translate from and they send them back in. And we also think this is important to our users because we provide a very simple service, and one could think that’s it’s okay to have it in English only, but it’s important to have it in the local language of the people who are using it. Because we...our target audience is not the internet professional, but everyday people who might not be familiar with an English application.

LS: And that’s also a really good point and it seems to also be a recurring theme in the interviews. Too often Americans are U.S.-centric. We think that it’s the “United States”! And then there are other people, too. And we have a tendency not to realize the importance of localizing software to get adopted. Ten or 15 years ago I had a company that had three international sales offices; one in Sweden, one in Norway and one in Oslo; and I spent a great deal of time translating my software into Swedish and some of the other Scandinavian languages just because that’s the right thing to do if you’re going to interface with those people. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t! And that’s great that you get these volunteers that are willing to jump up and do that.

MN: Yes, that’s what I think, too! I also think that localization is very important and I think that as a Switzerland-based company we are in a perfect position for that, because as you might know Switzerland is a country with four official languages. So we are quite use to providing just about everything in several languages.

LS: Yeah, that’s a really good point. And again, it’s a recurring theme. We need, all of us throughout the world, need to be sensitive that Social Media really is an international set of tools and applications.

Is there a particular success story, is there a particular company that you can talk about or someone who actually used *Doodle* and had a good success that would make us say, “Wow, I want to go do *Doodle*?” Is there something you can tell us?

MN: We have loads of success stories and some of them are listed as testimonials on our website also. And I just had a call from one of them who said that, “My work is driven by conference calls and it is a pain to arrange an appropriate time among several parties. We have ended this heartache and trouble with this brilliant polling system.” So this is the type of feedback that we get. There are also people telling us that they’re using *Doodle* to schedule a meeting with people at seven different hospitals where they need 100% attendance. And they’re very happy with *Doodle* because it allows them to schedule a meeting and coordinate and accommodate the time within minutes, usually.

LS: And again, that’s absolutely true. Just for example, scheduling our conference. Right now it’s only 8 o’clock in the morning in Phoenix, Arizona while it’s after 5 o’clock in Zurich, and it took us a little bit of work to figure out Greenwich Meantime. And if we had two or three other people that had to participate in this call, especially if they were global, it really would be a difficult process. Is there anyway that you can, in your scheduling, take into consideration time zones?

MN: Yes, we do offer that. There is one step in the process for setting up a poll where you have to mention, or define, which time slots your are offering. And there you can either use time zones or not, and when you use

them we will re-calculate them to the appropriate times in the time zones of each participant so they get their time correct automatically.

LS: And I really do appreciate that you have that tool in there, because my partners are in California, I'm in Arizona; I do a lot of business in Chicago and New York. I have some designers in the Ukraine, so international conference calls can really be a nuisance. All you have to do is make a wrong calculation and you totally blow the call. So that's a useful tool! I appreciate that being in there.

MN: Okay!

LS: Great! Is there anything else you'd like to tell our listeners to make them understand better and get them excited? Anything else? Any other features or functions and benefits of *Doodle*?

MN: Just because you mentioned Social Media tools and asked me beforehand how we integrate into other Social Media tools, I'd be happy to mention some of the options that we're offering them.

LS: Please!

MN: For one, *Doodle* allows you to import events into your regular calendar also. So you can import events into *Outlook*, *Google Calendar* or your *Macintosh iCal* application. That's one thing. Another thing is that you can also incorporate the poll summary into your own webpage or blog and you can subscribe to polls feed with the *Google Reader* or any other feed reader or portal pages like *iGoogle* and *Net Bites*. And maybe the latest breaking news, when it comes to Social Media is that this Monday we released our *FaceBook* application. So this allows you also to schedule events with your *FaceBook* friends directly. This is a function that *FaceBook* didn't offer up to now.

LS: Those are exciting features. I love the idea of matching up and imbedding your service, your product into other Social Media tools that people are comfortable with. Because too many tools on the internet are completely independent and you have to jump around between websites to use them. That's a really good feature.

One last question, if you don't mind. How do you monetize it? How do you cover the overhead?

MN: Our main revenue stream is advertising. We're publishing ads on the page. This is not too obvious on the international pages, but the base we have in Switzerland with that huge number of users each month is a perfect base to monetize the traffic.

Our secondary stream is something we call "*Corporate Doodle*" which is hosted *Doodle* instances which we provide to corporations and organizations with their logo and their name and their brand, in effect.

LS: That's great too! I'm hearing that more and more, that rather than charging the people for a service fee or a membership fee or some kind of a monthly fee, that the advertising alone is the way to go about monetizing.

MN: Umm huh.

LS: That's a great idea. So, Michael, just to conclude here, can you tell our listeners where they can find more information about *Doodle* so that they can start using it?

MN: Yes, sure. That's very easy, it's www.doodle.ch.

LS: Ah, a "ch". Again, we're US-centric here so we just assume "dot.com". So it's *Doodle.ch*.

MN: It's *Doodle.ch* and that's how we started and that's where we are now. And it also fits because we're a Swiss service and this is a...Switzerland is always related to punctuality and reliability and stuff like that, so these are attributes that we like also to be attributed to *Doodle*; but we are working on the dotcom domain we're confident that we're going to have it in a few weeks' time.

LS: That's excellent. Or even a dot.us. That's great!

MN: That's an option, too.

LS: Again, Michael, thank you so much. I would really like to thank Michael Naef, the CEO and Founder of *Doodle.com* for being here with us today, again, all the way live from Zurich, Switzerland, and sharing his incredible insights on the Social Media applications of online scheduling, *Doodle.ch*

Michael, that you so much!

MN: Thank you! It was as pleasure!

LS: This has been Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*. Be sure to check out the other valuable Social Media tactics, tools and strategies that can be found in *The Social Media Bible* book and at its companion website, www.thesocialmediabible.com.

And for more information about me, Lon Safko, please by all means visit my website at www.lonsafko.com.

And, again, Michael, that you for talking to us from across the world this morning. Thank you.

MN: Sure! Thank you and take care.