

## An Interview With Leah Culver, CoFounder Of Power *Shut Down As Of December 15, 2008*

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book every written on the subject of Social Media, and today we are here with Leah Culver...how cool! She is the Cofounder of *Pownce* and we'll be speaking today about microblogging, Social Media, and of course, a lot about *Pownce*. So, Leah, wow! It's really great to have you here today, thank you.



**LC:** Thanks' so much, Lon.

**LS:** This is cool, let's get started. Leah, can you tell our listeners a little bit about yourself, what your background is, who you are, what you are doing?

**LC:** So I'm one of the founders of *Pownce* and I'm actually a developer, a software developer. A little bit about my background is that I have a Computer Science degree from the University of Minnesota and I now live in San Francisco where I work on *Pownce*.

**LS:** Oh, okay! That sounds pretty cool. So that's how you got involved in *Pownce*, by being a programmer?



**LC:** Yep! So I wrote the website.

**LS:** Ah, okay, that's cool. For some of the people out there...believe it or not some people have never heard about what *Pownce* actually is...Can you tell our listeners a little bit about, or a lot about what *Pownce* is and what it does?

**LC:** Sure! It's a social networking website and it's for sending messages to your friends. And when we say messages we mean that you can also send links, files and events; so you can send a lot of media and share things with your group of friends.

**LS:** And I think that's pretty cool that it's not just about texting like some of the other Social Media communication websites, but that right on your website you come out and say, "Yes, we do messages but also links, music, photographs," And you can actually send a file of up to 100 megabytes?

**LC:** Right, right, and if you have a Pro Account you can send even bigger files, so you can share lots of different stuff with the people you care about.

**LS:** Well, see...I think that's an exciting twist on what you're doing, because it's not just these messages like, "My airplane is five minutes late" because so often you are at a conference or you're even having dinner with a friend and you grab your cell phone and take a photograph. It would be nice to be able to link all of that with a short, little communication.

**LC:** Right and we're working on...we have an icon up and we're working on more mobile ways to take photos off to our site and send them out. So that's one of the things that we're definitely interested in.

**LS:** Can you tell me a little bit about...is it mainly PC based; is it both mobile and PC? How does that work?

**LC:** So, that part is kind of interesting. We actually have a website which you can access from any type of computer, or we also have a mobile website. So if you're on, like a Blackberry or, like a Nokia phone, you can go to our mobile site. We also have iPhone application which you can get from the iPhone Apps store; and we also have a desktop app which you can download and it works on Windows, Mac, and I think it now works on Linux.

**LS:** Oh wow, all three major platforms!

**LC:** Yeah! So lots of different ways you can communicate and get access to messages and send new messages.

**LS:** So it's really going across all of the typical digital technology; laptops, PC's, iPhones, mobiles.

**LC:** Yeah, we're trying! (Laughter)

**LS:** Well, that's pretty exciting! Now, in you messages...some of the other messaging services have 140-character limitation. Is that true for you, also?

**LC:** No. We do have a limit, but it's pretty high, so you can, pretty much write a whole blog post and send it in if you want to.

**LS:** You know that's another kind of a keen thought. So you can actually...does *Pownce* interface with other Social Media sites? So can I, like, update *Pownce* and update other people and have, let's say, my WordPress blog site pick up on it?

**LC:** So that's also one of the things we're working on. We have an API which is a resource for programmers, other developers, to build things on top of *Pownce*. So, for example, someone has written a WordPress plug-in, if you use that plug-in it will post all of your *Pownce* posts to WordPress. So developers can get super-creative with what they want to create for republishing or having ways to publish back to *Pownce*. So it's kind of cool. There's actually a wide variety of things that you can do.

**LS:** That is pretty cool, too, because WordPress is such a major force right now in the Social Media atmosphere, and to be able to have that plug-in so that you can read your past messages and get photographs from it; I think that's really important. I think that's great!

**LC:** And we're working on all sorts of other tools. We're working with developers on...we're happy to have it all over the web.

**LS:** That's great. And one of the things when I was reading some of your blogs, (and I think your blog in particular) and I was looking at some of the comments; and here's something I don't hear a lot of and I'm happy to hear that it was on yours. What is said was that the developers listen to the users ideas. I thought that was really cool.

I mean, you're out there, you're doing Social Media (I mean your tool is a Social Media tool) but your two-way communication and user-generated content and wisdom of the crowds...you're actually listening to what the people want and your developers are developing those types of tools.

**LC:** Right, I think it's super-important. It's really important to keep on the community site. So there is a community and you have your group of friends. It's important that people are able to express themselves the way that they want to. Feedback means a lot to us, both inputs and outputs at feedback. So we look both at what people are saying and, then, what they are actually doing on the site.

**LS:** That's cool, and can you tell me a little bit about your demographic. I mean, who actually is using *Pownce*?

**LC:** Oh my gosh, it's a huge, wide-range of people. I don't know that there is actually one particular type of people, but I'm pretty split in and within some in the U.S. and people abroad, so it's really a wide variety of people.

**LS:** And that's one of the things, too, that in the interviews that I've done in the past, is that eventually what always comes out is that most of here in the U.S. are, kind of, U.S.-centric. I mean, when we think of technology and we think of all of the different Social Media sites, we really kind of focus just on the U.S. applications. But you actually have user throughout the world?

**LC:** Yes, definitely. We have a lot of users in Australia and a lot of users in France.

**LS:** Really.

**LC:** So it's definitely kind of fun to see those communities and interact with them, and we are working in the future towards making things easier for them and really encouraging more community abroad, as well.

**LS:** I love the international. Do you find that people are willing to translate your website and work with you to make those translations so that your tools can be used in their country?

**LC:** Well, we're just starting to look at that now, and it's a long process, so it's a little bit tricky. But, of course, people have friends in all sorts of different countries and the online community is very global. So we'd love to support that at *Pownce*.

**LS:** To expand out, that's great! What do people use *Pownce* for? What's the typical application, or what's some of the stranger applications that you've seen through *Pownce*?

**LC:** (Laughter) Well, usually people will either send messages or links, or a lot of photos or Utube videos? So if you find, like for some typical use cases, you know, you find a funny Utube video and you want to share that with your friends. The typical way most people have done that is by email and IM. Email can feel a little bit heavy and bland and IM is, kind of, real time. The other person has to actually be there for it to work.

So the nice thing about *Pownce* is that you can just post it on *Pownce*, it will get sent out to your group of friends, and they can go back and leave comments on it, so it's pretty cool.

On some of the weirder use-cases, we've had everything from marriage proposals to Utube people posting about a project for making bacon. (Laughter)

**LS:** Really!

**LC:** Keeping people updated on the status of bacon making website. So it's a pretty wide range.

**LS:** That really a wide range. That's kind of cool to think about, that someone actually started their lives together by text messaging using your service. That's kind of cool.

**LC:** They actually sent us a photo of the ring, but the actual post was in French, as part of our French community. (Laughter) And I didn't actually get the message, but one of my friends did and they forwarded it to me and said, "Hi, I can't read...I don't understand French but I think ..... it was very good.

**LS:** No poly vu Francais. That's pretty slick. Is there any kind of statistics that you can share with us; users, or anything?

**LC:** I don't normally talk about statistics, but it is a pretty active community, so um....

**LS:** That's okay, I understand. That's quite okay. There's competition out there.

One other thing that we did kind of talk about with one of your people a couple of months ago is that you were just beginning to implement a business strategy for covering the overhead. Is the strategy that you are using the typical freemium where you get a minimal amount of service and you get that totally for free, and then there's incremental charges. What's the business model right now; because we want you to stick around? We want you to make money.

**LC:** Right, I love the word "freemium"; it's hilarious. But we do have paid accounts, so you can upgrade your account and with the upgrade you get to design a custom theme. You get to see no ads on the entire site and you get to upload larger files. You need a little badge next to your photo. So it's only \$20 a year, so we have quite a number of users that have paid accounts.

We also do...we're experimenting with different types of advertising on the site, as well.

**LS:** Okay, well I mean who cannot afford \$20 a year? Geez, that's what, four or five Starbucks!

**LC:** Well, with the regular accounts, not pay accounts, pretty much you have the full functionality of the site, but the paid account just adds a little extra for people who use *Pownce* a lot.

**LS:** Yeah, and I think that's a great business model, because if you just want to get in there and try it out.....for the book I probably identified over 150, close to 200 different Social Media websites. And when I make the presentations around the country and I explain all these different websites, people get overwhelmed. And my advice is always, "Don't get overwhelmed, pick one in each of the categories and try them out."

I would imagine when people use *Pownce* and the can set up a free account, and then they see how valuable it is that going to that next logical, inexpensive step is probably a fairly easy transition.

**LC:** Yes, and I agree that there are a large number of these Social Media sites and I think it's just up to the person and what they like to do. So trying them out really is the right idea. See what the features are like and usually you'll find a couple that stick, so.....

**LS:** Yeah, and that's nice that you gave us that opportunity to do that, and as you mentioned earlier it's fully functional so there's really no practical limitations, even of the free account. But if you really want to be a "power user," I mean \$20 a year is quite doable. That's pretty cool.

**LC:** Yeah, and I encourage anyone out there to check it out and try it out. Add a couple people as friends and see how it goes.

**LS:** Cool. Can you think of any applications where a business might want to use Pownce, or has used *Pownce*?

**LC:** Sure. I've actually...there's been a couple of small, like web firms that use it internally to send files back and forth. So if someone is working on, like an illustration or document, or something, they can just send it to someone else to check it out. That's pretty popular for smaller businesses. And I am sure that there can be applications in the future for businesses using it for either internal communication, or to communicate with customers. We are seeing a little bit of that on the site right now, so on the main site having people/corporations be communicating with people by *Pownce*, which is pretty cool.

**LS:** Yeah, I think that's really neat. That's a great application. I didn't even think of it, but if you are working with a design team, whether it's an engineering design team, a web programming design team, or even marketing communications; someplace where you have to send a file or even a PDF or Word document you can just quickly attach it and send it off. It's all encapsulated.

Can you set up groups?

**LC:** So we have sets where you can. It's sort of like an email list where you can choose a group of people to send something to, but it's a little more.....it seems to work for groups where people can opt in. It's more like "create and click" and you can send it out to them. We are thinking about doing groups in the future, but it's just been put on hold a little bit right now.

**LS:** Okay. Well, that's pretty cool, too. And actually when I use the term "group" I was thinking of "email groups" where I can send one file to a group of people.

**LC:** Yeah, we definitely do that. We do that internally here at *Pownce*. But like with my group of people that work at *Pownce*, and I'll send out something to them that's work-related, and we also show who's received each message. So you can see on the side when you go to the main page for the message, you can see who else has received it. So you know exactly who's getting it and who's received it, and seeing your replies for that. Which is really nice.

**LS:** That's really cool, too, because on email sometimes it's difficult (or even impossible with some email programs) to set it up where you can actually set up what's called a "receipt" so that you're guaranteed that that person actually got that.

**LC:** Yeah.

**LS:** That's really good to have. I like that idea.

If someone wanted to get started using *Pownce*, is it a difficult process? What do they do?

**LC:** It's actually pretty simple. You can go to *Pownce.com* and you just enter into the basic info about yourself. Then you can through a step where you can add a bunch of friends. So you can import your friends from other social networks. So say if you use FaceBook you can go through a little step that finds out which of your friends on FaceBook are already using *Pownce* and you can use them as friends. So you can start off with a couple of friends, and then you can also invite people.

So you can send messages out to your other friends and say, "Hey, try this out." And then you have a couple of people and you start getting messages and you can start sending messages right away. So it's pretty simple to get started.

**LS:** Okay, so you basically just go in and set up a profile like you do on other Social Media websites, and then click "okay" and you're doing it.

**LC:** Yep! You can send messages as soon as you get started.

**LS:** I like that! And also, I had a chance to interview Google OpenID. Are you participating in OpenID?

**LC:** It's definitely something we are interested in, but right now it just hasn't been...we haven't gotten around to it quite yet.

**LS:** Sure.

**LC:** But we are interested in supporting these web security and web standards, and making it easier for people to start using different websites.

**LS:** That's also cool. Now on the webpage can you put any photographs or information on your webpage at *Pownce*?

**LC:** Yeah, so when you create your profile, you can have your own profile image; like your avatar, your little icon with your photo. And you can put in a little bit of info about yourself. As soon as you start sending messages, if you send them publically they'll be available on your page. So *Pownce.com/username*; and anybody can see that public page and anything that you sent publically will be viewable there. So if you want to post photos, if you want to post videos; anybody can go and see those if they are public.

**LS:** Okay, so you have, kind of, a blog roll, or a message roll, or photographs, so people can look at, chronologically, how you are communicating?

**LC:** Yep. It's a little bit like a blog and a little bit like email. So it's kind of a weird mix of the two, right! So you do have, kind of, a public place where you can just kind of display things, but you also have a method for sending the same things to other people.

**LS:** Wow, okay, that's pretty cool. Now what else do you have? What's going on at *Pownce*? What are your plans for the rest of this year and 2009? Is there some features, options; anything that you can tell our listeners to get them excited about some of the things you're planning?

**LC:** Sure! We're actually working on a redesign right now of the website, to make things a little bit simpler. You can see more messages per page and there's also a couple new features I can't talk about, but they're really cool! It's to encourage more conversation and more sharing on the site.

**LS:** Okay, so we need to keep checking back to find out what those really cool secret things are?

**LC:** Yeah, definitely. They are coming pretty soon. We are also working on a new version of our icon application that allows you to update your location. So you can tell people where you're at!

**LS:** Oh really!

**LC:** Yep, so you can completely do it on the website, and it's a little bit, kind of a more-hidden feature; but we're trying to really bring that out with our icon application. (And this is because) it's something where you are mobile and you are going on different places.

**LS:** Ahh, okay! So are you taking advantage of the GPS function on iPhone?

**LC:** Yep!

**LS:** See, now that's really cool.

**LC:** (Laughter).

**LS:** ...because you're walking down the street and it's a Friday night, or Saturday night and wouldn't it be cool to just pull out your iPhone and be able to send a message to your "homies" to find out who is close by; and then everybody gets together.

Is that the intent?

**LC:** Yes, even better than that. You can pick a photo at a place your at and you can send it and it will say where the photo was taken, which is very cool!

**LS:** Really!

**LC:** Yeah, I'm very excited! I'm very excited about that.

**LS:** And that's going to be coming down the road here real soon, right?

**LC:** Pretty soon, a couple of months.

**LS:** Okay, and do you update us on all your new ideas? As a member, do you send out updates? How do we find out about them?

**LC:** So you can access everything on *Pownce* and I do mention pretty much everything that comes out, or you can follow our blog; probably just following one and not two.

**LS:** Okay. Well, can you give us an address where your blog is?

**LC:** Sure, so my *Pownce* account is Pownce.com/LeahCulver (all one word), and the *Pownce* blog is blog.pownce.com.

**LS:** Okay! That's pretty cool. So is there anything else that you'd like to say about *Pownce* and why it's as terrific as it is?

**LC:** Oh, just that I hope your listeners sign up, try it out; send some photos, send some videos and start sharing with their friends.

**LS:** That's great, I'm sure they will because *Pownce* is really a cool application.

**LC:** Thank you so much!

**LS:** Thanks. I would really like to thank Leah Culver, the Co-Founder of *Pownce*, for being with us here today and talking about Social Media and *Pownce* and some of the cool things that are happening at *Pownce*.

So Leah, truly thank you so much!

**LC:** Thank you, Lon.

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

And for more information about me, Lon Safko, by all means please go over to my website at [www.lonsafko.com](http://www.lonsafko.com).

And again, Leah, thank you so, so much for being with us here and sharing all that information. Thank you.

**LC:** Take care, Lon.