An Interview with Marc Canter, CEO - Broadband Mechanics

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of the John Wiley & Sons, *The Social Media Bible*, the largest book ever written on the subject of social media. Today we're here with Marc Canter from *The People Aggregator*, and we will be speaking about social networks and social networking. So let's get started.

LS: Marc, could you tell our listeners who you are and what *The People Aggregator* is, and maybe we'll touch on that little project you have done in the past.

MC: Okay. So, hi, my name is Marc. I'm the CEO of a company called *Broadband Mechanics*. The product is for the people that I [00:45.0] which is the *White Label Social Networking* platform. And we use it to build out social networks for brands like Bell Canada, or the Sacramento Kings, and untold others. I cannot tell you about right now because I'd have to kill you.

My past is that I have been in the business for about 25 years. I started a company called *MarcoMind* that became *Macromedia*, so I'm a toolsmith by trade, and watched the blogging world and the world of what I call the "open mesh" evolve over the past few years; open social networking, and [1:20.6] and structured content, and digital wide style aggregation.

It all leads to saying basically, "open" is the new black.

LS: Okay. And that kind of is what we are seeing, is what we spoke about earlier, about the power going to the people and the opening up and the two-way communication, and customers actually having a say, and non-censored! Which is something that I only just realized. For once we have a medium where we can say what's on our mind without being censored.

MC: Right. I mean, certainly in the world of expression and blogging that is kind of obvious. But the other thing is where the user's data, their profile record, their social graph, should be owned by them. We shouldn't be locked inside of *Facebook* or *MySpace*. So we are starting to see the standard, like *OpenID,* and a new effort from Google called "*OpenSocial*" which they are using to build lots of great solutions with.

All these are standards that are emergent. We are even seeing Microsoft opening up, believe it or not!

LS: I cannot believe it, or not! But that's going to save us a lot of work, too, because if we can disseminate our information more widespread, it's going to make it a lot easier for us to build our social networks. Because I know just trying to keep up the profiles in seven, or eight, or ten different websites. That takes a lot of work.

MC: Yeah. Again, I'm a toolsmith and we've been trying to build some tools to help solve that. We call one of them a "persona editor", which helps to stay on top of managing all of your different personae. Okay?

The other thing is we are seeing a big trend going from giant, centralized social networks, these kinds of horizontal networks, to 10's of thousands of niche vertical networks. Right? And a typical person will be in a membership of one or two horizontal networks, or maybe even five or ten niche networks. So whether that's

the school you go to, or the after-school activities of you dealing with your friends and kids, the affinities like Reggae or Chocolates.

So the trick here is to have a world, have a blueprint, and a world within, that can practically adapt to the fact that Microsoft is going to do live mesh and Google is going to do this, and Yahoo is going to have their own thing, and after a while we have to leave some crumbs on the table for a smaller-software guy. We want to get involved and we want to mesh into this huge world, and perhaps build our own eco-system.

LS: And that's a really good point, because if you look at the major players in the Social Media eco-sphere, you are really talking about revenue in the billions, with a "B", as opposed to us little guys that are trying to eke out a living.

MC: Right. And we see more and more consolidation over the years. I mean, this is where us "old-timers" can tell you, "Back in the 80's, when it was between *Microsoft* and *Apple*, right.

That world has changed now. So, along the way the other thing we've seen the rise of is "international", and maybe the governments of Singapore or Dubai want to do some of this stuff and they do not want to use Yahoo or Google, right! And maybe you see innovation coming out of Russia. I mean, this is no longer just a game that is played off of Silicon Valley.

LS: That's another really good point about the global network. One of the things I looked at is your *People Aggregator* website today and I was amazed, not that there's just blogs from all over the world, which is fairly commonplace, but what I saw was blogs in their native language, the Conghi and Arabic, and it was really amazing to see that.

MC: Yeah, and this is totally the world we are going in. Even at this point, *Facebook* is 2/3 international. Okay. So I think you are going to see more and more.

Oh, by the way, needless to say the Russian government is tightly coupled to these cyber-terrorists, because when they were having a fight with [05:23.5] and they were invading Georgia, sure enough, it's also accompanied by a cyber attack. Right? So we are starting to see the realities of technology and politics, virtual economics. When the oil industry is attacked and they claim that they are making too much money, they can turn and say, "Well, look, the software business. They make even higher margins than we do." As if that matters. Right? This is somehow supposed to deflect the attention.

You know, we are finding the technology to be intrinsic and imbedded everywhere. It's no longer, "You can keep your head in the sand." And so, the issues of all software being about people and open standards, if users want to control the rights to this general notion of social media, as we move forward it will affect everything.

LS: And that's one of the things that I appreciate when we have these conversations, is you're really not just looking three years, or five years, or even 10 years out, but you really do have a vision of what the 20-year-picture is going to be. And I think you did that with *Macromedia* and the stuff that you were doing in the 80's as well.

MC: Yeah, it also [06:32.9] with a visionary. You know, when we started our company right in the beginning of 1984 it was right when the *Macintosh* came out. And we were convinced that by 1990 (that was the "the big

year" you know) everybody would have video and audio and computers would be multi-media and we were right!!!!   We were off by 10 years.

LS: Exactly!

MC: And then we put out this tool, and it was going to do animated advertising and all this great interactive stuff; and we were off by 16 years!

When I saw the web first and it was simple HTML graphics, I felt as if we were going backwards, because we did have graphics and video on our screens in the early 90's. They were coming over the wire; they were coming off of a CD-Rom. And it took about 10 or 15 years for the world to catch up.

Just now, with *Flickr* and *YouTube*, we now have a full media on our machines, right? And so we are seeing a number of different factors. One of them I call "persistent content". So, like the BBC or NPR, are going to put up all of this content into the clouds and it's going to be there, available, full-time. And we've got *Who-loo* and we've got *iTunes*, and it's all there and we are competing in all this knowledge and it's sitting there in the clouds waiting for us.

So whole new kinds of applications and services will be born that rely upon that stuff, you know, and then to be able to rely upon storage and computing grids and all this incredible stuff that, even five years ago, was only a dream and a glimmer in our eyes.

So if we jump forward four or five years in a natural helix, of course there will still be "normal" people who still just use email. You know, it takes a long time for stuff to disseminate through society.

LS: This is absolutely true! As a matter of fact, back in the 80's when I was developing computer systems for the physically disabled, I was using *HyperCard* and *SuperCard*, and at the point actually, my company was your largest developer using those tools. So, I was out there with you.

MC: You know, people come up to me and say, "Oh, you helped me start my career."

LS: You did! And actually your software went to the computer, the first computer to save a human life, so thank you!

MC: Well, I do know that. You know this thing called carpal tunnel, you know that disease in the hands? Well, I know that the doctor who first figured it out and first described it to people was from San Francisco General. And I know he used *Videoworks* to do those animations.

LS: Oh, really!

MC: Yeah!

LS: It's amazing how many lives you touch.

MC: Yeah, yeah. And so you know, now I kind of have a little of the "Orson Wells Syndrome". You know, it's like many people never exceed past first "successes." You know, some people have a chip on their

shoulder, and I have a large log! So I carry around this weight and so it's hard for me to think small. So we're working on a book called, "*How to Build the Open Mesh*". It's kind of a treatise, or road map, for how people can work together and cooperate. So whenever you see a bunch of people doing the same thing, then that's a good mesh standard. Right?

Here's an example. How to create a dashboard, a reusable user and interchange objects we can mix and match and choose. Whose blogging tool do you want to use? Which IM client? *Twitter* or *FriendFeed*? Or you can configure your environment on the fly. I believe that's where we will be in about 10 or 15 years. So the trick is how to get them "here" to "there".

LS: And that's a really good point. A lot of people really are just (there is quite a few) learning to send email. If someone was reading *The Social Media Bible* book and they wanted to understand more about *People Aggregator* and the *Open Mesh* and the things that we've just kind of talked about, where would they begin? What would they do?

MC: Well, okay. So currently it is offered as a White Label, which means that when we sell it to marketers and brand and ad agencies, and stuff like that, the company site is www.broadbandmechanics.com. The demo site is www.peopleaggregator.org. Oh, excuse me; dot.org is where the source code is. We give away the first code for non-profits. And also, my blog is www.marc.blogs.it. Marc blogs it!

LS: That's cool. That's really cool. So, tell me more specifically what your main product is? Let's say, *People Aggregator*.

MC: Alright. Well, *The People Aggregator* is the social networking platform. So if you go look at a site called www.onone.com or www.bellvideostore.ca or www.mykingsworld.com... Now let me see what else. www.gtchannel.com, www.itrend.com. They're all networks. These are all built with our platform, so we both sell the license, the source code, or we actually run it as a software service model, so anybody who wants to get into the social network and visit us or add social features into their existing site, can use our platform.

So with Bell Canada, they had a movie downloading site and they had already built out the basic catalogue and transactions, etc., but we add in social features into their movie downloading site. So now you can make comments and reviews and rate things and do tagging, and declare yourself a fan of a movie. And that's all code that's coming off of our server if the Bell Canada movie downloading site is coming off of their server.

LS: Okay, so can you name a couple of the people like Bell Canada, some other people who are using it and maybe what they are using it for, as an example?

MC: Right. So Bell Canada is www.bellvideostore.ca. Another is a large media company called *Radio One*, so they have a site called www.radio-one.com. And they have a bunch of sister sites, because we also have an aggregation engine in the CMS publishing system. So, we have a bunch of sister sites that we also built for them.

GT Channel is a great kind of niche network for car enthusiasts, people who are into drifting. Then there is what we call a *Meta* network, called www.socialworld.com. These are for people who put on events, who produce concerts, and so they can get their own network and we built it for our customer called *Auctiva*. So they sell tickets, and do ticketing on line.

LS: That's great.

MC: Now you can get your own network and promote and use the network to promote your concerts and events, and then the *Auctiva* web services are there so you can buy and sell tickets to your event.

LS: Yeah, *Auctiva* is great! I did it with a seminar company that I owned, and *Auctiva* really provides a great service.

MC: Well, yeah. So they are a client of ours. So they came to us and we built them out a meta-network. What that means is that they'll go to a campus, let's say the University of Texas or really anywhere, and they'll create one whole meta-network for the campus. And they, like the frat boys come along, or like the D.J.'s, or even, like the school itself, or, you know, some other kind of party-promotion company. And each of those companies can get their network. And *Auctiva* will host and run the whole thing for them. So in our case we built the thing to spec for Auctiva and then they built it themselves.

LS: Wow. So that's..

MC: That is all available through us. And so by a little consulting and up-front help we are a boutique shop and we have developers around the world; in India and Italy and Germany and New Zealand.

LS: Holy moly! What about tying in with the other Social Media tools? Like *Twitter* and *Flickr* and others.

MC: Alright, so we had, for over two years now, a feature called *OpenId*. That allows you to long in and have a simple signoff. We have also been importing both *Flickr* and *Delicious* into the social network.

Now the hot new feature for this summer is the notion of importing whole social graphs from these networks. So both *MySpace*, *FaceBook* and *Google* have made this functionality possible. And in the fall we will be updating what we have given to Bell Canada and some other sites that we are still working on.

They will be featuring these imports from the Social Network. And when you come in you can bring a whole host of, not only just your profile record, but your list of friends and your photographs and your music and you interest. All this information from them will be automatically moved over from one social network into ours.

LS: Very powerful!

MC: Yeah, and that's again, a part of the trend with this mesh and that the users have been demanding this stuff, yet three or four years ago I was one of the only guys who was asking for it. But nowadays it is a pretty standard feature that everyone is providing. It has been about a year since *FaceBook* came out with their platform and then that influenced *MySpace* to do this, and pressured *Google* to do that, and *Microsoft*. And so they are all trying to "Keep up with the Jones'"

LS: Yeah, I remember last year when I met you at the Arizona Entrepreneur Conference, you were talking about *OpenID* and a lot of the things that we are talking about here today. And it was new to, really everyone. But you are right, over the last year people are catching on. The funny thing is that customers are demanding it and companies are simply giving the customer what they are asking for.

MC: Right, and so this book I am working on, which is really a series of treatises and reference designs, is really about, "Okay, now that we've got that, what is next? What do we do with it?"

You know, single sign-on is great but it is not really a solution. You have to focus on benefits and how these things are going to help, not only the users but how is Open going to help vendors like our customers. Why would they want to open up and let users move back and forth?

So you have to be very explicit with these and show real solutions.

LS: That's a great point. That's a really good point. Again, you started to talk a little bit about the company. You say it is kind of a boutique shop. When did you found it, who founded it? Why did you found it?

MC: Well, this current iteration was founded in January, 2005. I have used the name since 1999, so this is really version 2 of *Broadband Mechanics*. And it has also had a clear, contiguous line of influential property since I left *MacroMedia* in 1992. So I am the major shareholder and I do not necessarily get along with, shall we say "Venture Capitalists"...

LS: (Laughter)

MC: and the rip off models that they like to propound.

LS: Venture capitalists, you said?

MC: Yeah, yeah, it is just not my game. I've been there, I know their game, I know how to "out" them at that game. And so I sort of "bootstrap" as they say. Enter the cornerstones to create companies to allow me to continue to do what I am good at, which is to build solutions with software.

LS: Bring the software into the future vision that you have.

MC: Right. I mean, in one sense I am kind of like a minister without portfolio. Like I do not have a 100 people reporting to me or anywhere near the resources I want to implement half my ideas. So I give a lot of them away as I very much believe in *OpenId* just as much as "open ideas".

LS: I like that! That is cleaver. Well is there anything else you would like to tell our listeners about what you are working on that you think might help them?

MC: Yes, the most fascinating thing about this interview would be to listen to it in a year, or two years.

LS: Wow.

MC: Because one of the challenges you have, as far as printing a book or directory, is that how fast that information gets out of sync, right?

LS: Yes.

MC: And so as much as you like to put out a "dead-tree" version, really by only having an online version can you make sure that it stays up to date. And this media that we are recording right now, these bits that are going out and getting digitized, they are also a time-stamp as to where the world was as of August, 2008.

And so if we return here one or two years from now and stand back and look at the evolution of things…

I mean, who would have thought that three years ago that we would be here today? So, to me history is a very fascinating thing and that time is one of the major dimensions we need to focus on.

LS: That is a really good observation. I mean think of in the past where Westinghouse was telling everybody that Edison was going to electrocute everybody. Or the Wright Brothers would never get off the ground. Or Henry Ford, Get a Horse, or even Thomas Watson's quote where he said, "Who would ever want a personal computer?"

MC: Yep! (Laughter)

LS: We are at that threshold again, and you are leading the way!

MC: Thank you very much.

LS: So, Mark, one more time. Can you give our listeners some websites or places that they can find this information?

MC: Yeah, well I am a heavy-duty blogger so Marc.blogs.it. M-A-R-C dot B-L-O-G-S dot I-T is my blog. And from there you will see links to the "*How to Build an Open Mesh*" to my platform *People Aggregator.net* and to all the solutions that we have been building.

LS: Awesome, Mark. Truly I would like to thank Marc Cantor from *Broadband Mechanics* for being with us today and sharing those incredible insights and visions of the future.

This is Lon Safko, the co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons. 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 on our website at www.thesocialmediabible.com .

For more information about me, Lon Safko, or to learn how I can speak at your company or your next event, please visit my website at www.lonsafko.com.

And really, thank you Marc and thank you everyone for being with us here today.