

An Interview With Tony Mamone, CEO & Founder of Zimbio

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 Tony Mamone, the CEO and founder of Zimbio, the interactive magazine with ten million readers a month. So, hello, Tony! Holy Moley, it's great to have you here today.

TM: Thanks a lot Lon; it's great to be here. Thanks for inviting me to take part in The Social Media Bible.

LS: Ah, this is terrific, truly, gosh. So today let's talk a little bit about Social Networks and user-generated content and  about what your website does. Holy Moley, honest to gosh really, ten million readers a month!

TM: We keep growing; it's just a fun thing to be a part of and definitely infectious here in the office just to watch our stats every month going up and up.

I think we did about 13 million unique visitors last month, so...I guess we need to change the tag line to "more than ten million readers a month."

LS: Wow. Can you tell our listeners, first off, a little bit about who you are, what your background is, how you got involved in this?

TM: Sure, well, starting with Zimbio; Zimbio is an interactive magazine. We focus on topics in popular culture, so we cover things like style and entertainment and sports and current events.

My background...I guess there's a long story and a short story; I'll go somewhere in the middle. I'm an engineer by training, but have now moved more into a business role. I have an interest and passion for internet content and have been involved with it for quite a while now, starting off with a project that launched the site Find Articles.com, which was a poor man's version of Lexus Nexus, so it was way to search magazine achieves and look up full text articles of popular journals and magazines.

I loved that project, really enjoyed working on it and the site was ultimately sold to C-net. And a few years ago I decided I wanted to get my hands back into an entrepreneurial effort and create something from scratch, and as I thought about opportunities with my partner we saw real opportunities to do something interesting and innovative in the magazine publishing space.

So, hence, Zimbio. And a big part of what we do here at Zimbio is we are trying to create the most popular and influential magazine published here in the world. We start with our flagship properties in [02:37.2] .com. It's quite different from tradition print magazines. In a lot of ways it's, from a reader's perspective, it's not too dissimilar from what you would find a People or a Vogue, or an Elle or a Newsweek, but the way we create it is fundamentally different.

We try to leverage technology to automate a lot of the publishing, and we tap into our members and our readers to actually write and create much of the content.

LS: Wow.

TM: And so it's been a really fun project and so far, so good. I don't mean to jinx things but growth has been great and we're really having a great time working on a project that we feel good about.

LS: Well, I mean...those numbers are staggering! I mean, any magazine would kill for that type of subscription. I mean, I don't have to tell you, but if you look at the typical "Better Homes and Gardens" with three million subscribers, or a Discover magazine with about 1.5 million subscribers; I mean you're an inordinate magnitude larger than some of the most popular magazine in the world!

TM: That's true. We...it's hard to get specific stats, but our best guess is that we're one of the ten most popular magazines on the internet right now. There are definitely a few that are above us...folks like People and Time and Newsweek still trumps Zimbio, but we've passed a lot of great brands.

We are more popular than folks like Entertainment Weekly, or Sports Illustrated, or Us Weekly Online; and so we focus heavily on digital distribution. We don't have a print version right now. It's not necessarily something that we're going to want because as we look forward and look at what magazine publishing needs to be in ten years, we believe that the core focus will be digital; and will be, sort of...strip away the need for paper and ink and will sort of move towards the digital distribution model. And so we've just really focused our efforts there and we're doing quite well.

LS: And I completely agree with you. If you look at any of the magazines, they realize that subscribership is down because people are getting their news and their content online.

We have this big push towards "green" in which we're trying to save trees, not find new ways to turn them into paper. And newspapers, I think, and even publishing...book publishing...but you look at newspapers and you see one after the other are either closing their doors or cutting way back because the internet really is the way to go.

TM: That's true and, you know, I think the internet is the core focus and it will be the growth engine for the industry. At the same time, I think that print has a place, especially with magazines. There's just something fun about flipping through the glossy pages of Rolling Stone or checking out photos on the beach. You know, I think there will be a place for print, I just believe the core focus of the industry and the growth engine for the industry will be digital.

LS: I completely agree. If you want up-to-date, short, sound bytes, the internet is a great place. I mean, that's why I'm putting...I put the last better part of my life...the last year...into The Social Media Bible...because there is still a place for books as well.

TM: It sure it!

LS: The demographic? The Social Media Bible is kind of geared towards business and we'll address that a little bit later; and I know that you guys are really geared towards the individual, the person, the social reading...but who is the demographic? What type of people come to your website?

TM: Well, when we started the demographic it was a very, sort of internet-savvy user. People that were surfing out and finding these Social Media sites and as we've grown, as you sort of approach ten million plus readers a month, you start to look a lot more like a mass media play; so at this point our readership is really a broad-spectrum of folks who tend to be in, sort of, 18 to 34-year-old range. That's where our core concentration is, but they are really evenly spread between males and females and they're also a worldwide audience.

So about 50% of our audience is here in the United States, but we also have an awful lot of readers in Canada and the U.K. and India and Australia, and other English-speaking markets.

You know, our aspirations are that hopefully in the not-too-distant future we will start to offer other languages as well and we'll truly become a global brand. So it's a pretty big spectrum of folks that check out Zimbio and for different purposes. But as you said, it's really a consumer magazine and consumer destination site. An awful lot of people are checking it out.

LS: And that's great and you brought up another point, which I often forget to ask, but almost always it inevitably comes up in the interviews and that is 50 percent of your readership comes from outside of the United States. So often, in technology, especially internet and Social Media, we are kind of U.S.-centric in our views; that is everything is invented in the U.S. and takes place in the U.S. But in fact, 50 percent of your readers are outside of the U.S.

TM: Exactly, so you know, we've got lots of folks in Ireland and all over Europe. And it's kind of fun for me as an employee of the company. I get to come in every day and check out what the most popular stories were. And I lot of times it's a [07:56.2] United player, or a rugby player in Australia, or it's a actress who's quite famous in a different market that I haven't heard of. So it's sort of a neat way to stay up-to-date, not only on popular culture here in the United States but popular culture worldwide.

LS: And that's an interesting perspective; it's global.

TM: India is only 15 people, so we're a very small shop based in San Carlos, California and yet we're reaching this audience that's literally spanning the globe.

LS: That's absolutely amazing! And let me ask this question, if you can answer it in any kind of a tactful way. How do the other magazines, publications view you? I mean, are they looking...have you had offers of acquisition, or partnering, or threats...or.....what is the relationship?

TM: You know, I think the magazine publishing industry, and really publishing in general is such a robust industry; there are so many publications out there and most readers tend to have many different magazines for many different sources that they like to read. So, you know, it's not a one-stop shop. It's not quite as cutthroat as other industries can be. You know, there are plenty of people who read Zimbio and they also read a handful of other online magazines, and they subscribe to print; and so there's a little less of the, sort of, cutthroat nature that you might find if it were a [09:20.7].

That said, you know I think many of the print magazines and the magazine publishers are starting to look at new media companies as a wave of growth that they're not seeing in their traditional business.

So as folks like The New York Times and Time, Inc. start to evaluate their businesses and see that certain profit margins are going away and certain lines of their business aren't growing, you know they're a big company and they're looking for strategic areas of growth. Hopefully Zimbio boils up on their radar screen as an example of something that's working.

LS: Yeah, because it just seems to me, as an entrepreneur...I built 10 companies in my career that the acquisition, the exit strategy really could be acquisition; because with that type of readership...I mean, again, you're trumping many of the major magazines throughout the United States. I would think that an AOL/Time Warner or one of the larger news groups would be very interested in working with you.

TM: They maybe; I guess. For my day-to-day job when I come into the office I don't think about what the exit strategy for Zimbio is. I think about what we're trying to build. And that is a longer-term view; it's not this year, it's five to 10 years from now. What do we want the company to be and what do we want the brand to represent and how are we going to build an audience and how are we going to attract a readership and a contributor-base that's going to volunteer and continue to work on and improve the site and the content.

And that's just such a fun project that, you know, I'm not at all anxious and not in a rush to find an exit for the company. I'm really just having a great time building it.

LS: I love to hear that kind of dedication and the fact that you really care about the quality.

When people come to Zimbio, what are they looking for? What type of content do you provide?

TM: You know if you walk up and down the magazine aisle at your supermarket and check out the headlines on the covers, it's a pretty good representation of what you'd find on Zimbio. We tend to cover...we actually cover a very broad spectrum of topics. You can find things on home décor, you can find things on pets, and you can find things on health topics and business topics. But our core focus is on four main categories: style, entertainment, current events, and sports.

And if you look into each of those categories on Zimbio, one thing that's unique about the way we cover this is that we tend to cover very specific and niche topics within those categories. So instead of covering celebrities, we cover very specific celebrities. Instead of covering sports, or even certain teams or leagues, we cover the actual athletes.

And what we try to do when you come to an athlete's section on Zimbio, is we try to show you a very diverse perspective, so you get a collection of photos and articles about a specific person or specific athlete, or a specific actress, a specific politician...and it allows you to, sort of, deep drill and deep dive into one person who is making the news and making headlines, or that you're interested in.

LS: I think that's a kind of clever approach. I mean, two things that I heard here was is that when you're walking down a magazine aisle, pretty much all of the major topics that you could buy a magazine for, you represent; which is smart because you're aggregating the best of the best.

And I also like what you said here about the personal approach, where it's not just about an team or an industry, but you get right down into it and you show the human side of the representatives of those industries.

TM: Exactly. There's a real craft to this and there's a history. If you look at the history of media, there are many different publications that have discovered that people like to read about other people. That's where it really gets interesting, and especially for a magazine where it's mostly [13:00.4] reading and you're sort of just browsing because you've got some time and you're interested in a topic. It's just great to get into the details of how people make decisions, and which people are involved in which stories. That's an angle that we like to take and it's really worked for us here at Zimbio.

LS: And that's a perfect segue to my next comment, and what we talked about earlier before we started the interview, was all of the interviews I've done for The Social Media Bible...that I'm not an expert but in order to write the book I needed to enlist the experts. And really what I cared about was I wanted to know what Vint Cerf, the inventor of the internet...I wanted to know what his thoughts were on how the internet was invented and where it's going. And I wanted to talk to Biz Stone about why he invented Twitter and where he thinks it's going.

And I agree with you. I think just hearing the words from the individuals themselves are so much more powerful than regurgitating a press release.

TM: Exactly.

LS: Excellent, wow. I love this!

Content...content is always a problem for every magazine and it's even a problem, to some extent, for The Social Media Bible; getting enough people to contribute. Where did you get all of that incredible content?

TM: Let me tell you a little story about the history of Zimbio and how we started, and sort of lead up to how we generate our content today.

When we first started, we really fully embraced user-submitted content. That was the core and 100 percent focus of the site as we launched. And we were encouraging people to submit articles and photos and write polls, and so forth. And for the first six to 12 months of the company's history we continued to just focus on user-generated content.

It allowed us to grow and allowed us to get started and the nice thing about starting a company that's focused on using user-generated content is you don't need a lot of front cash, or capital, in order to get started; and so you can begin to build a community and nurture that community...and it starts to take shape.

And as we started to grow, we really started to reach out to some of our readers and try and get a better sense for what value they were finding in the site. And as we talked to folks and as we watched them use Zimbio, we discovered that they were, sort of...they were indifferent to the source of the content. What they were interested in was high quality content and they wanted to see diverse perspectives on each story. So one thing that we offered that other folks didn't was that if they came to read story about Obama street art and the graffiti artists that were drawing these amazing pieces of art about Barak Obama's candidacy, and they saw three or

four or five, or even more, different authors writing about it. And that was intriguing to them and was something that they liked. As we, sort of, dug under the covers and peeled back what was going on there, we discovered that sometimes user-generated or user-submitted content was the best source. But other times there was traditional media sources out there, which we could license or find that would add to the mix.

And so where we have evolved to is we now offer a hybrid between citizen journalism and traditional media. So on Zimbio you'll find articles written by everyday people just like you, who want to share their opinion and have taken the time to write an article, or submit pieces of content that they feel are important and noteworthy. And you'll also find licensed articles from traditional sources, like The Guardian, or Associated Press, or Reuters, or Businessweek. And we try to mix the two, so that for each reader who comes to the site we can offer them the best of content that we have at our disposal. And that includes professional photography, it includes articles, news, and it includes opinion pieces by our membership.

LS: That's an incredible business model. I love that idea. I mean, talk about user-generated content! I mean citizen journalism and traditional media mixed; and I don't think there's a lot of websites out there that you see that. I mean, you see websites that contain blogs and you see aggregation websites that pull stuff from AP, from Reuters; but to have that mix I think is a fantastic idea. How...there's only 15 people, though, to vet all of this flood of information.

TM: Well, that's where our technology comes into play. It allows us to leverage the time and energy we use. A lot of the publishing is done in automated fashion, and then vetted afterwards, which is a big help. The other thing that goes on is our community self-polices and self-monitors and tries to improve things that we publish. So like traditional wikis, we open up for community contributions and what we found is readers themselves will find content that isn't quite what they think it should be, or maybe has an error that they know how to fix; or they think there is something missing that they can add. By opening up to the community and allowing everyday readers to just, as least, tell us when something is missing; and if not, fix it themselves.

We've really been able to scale at a pace that we wouldn't be able to do manually.

LS: And that's another thing that I just love about Social Media; it's one of the things that intrigues me. It is that how many people are dedicated to user-generated content and how they self-police and the high level of integrity that they have.

I interviewed Jack Herrick, the founder of WikiHow, and he's developed over 40,000 how-to articles on his website; and they all have been through user-generated content.

TM: It's a pretty amazing thing and it's something that's always counter-intuitive as a business executive, or as an entrepreneur, as you start to think about, "Gosh, how are we going to possibly manage 10,000 articles a day, and 5,000 photographs a day...a huge glut of content that we're publishing on a daily basis. How are we going to manage that? And you have to take this leap of faith that says, you know, in general people are interested in a great experience and they want to share with their fellow readers a great experience.

There are some folks out there that are, you know, the traditional spammers and you need to make sure that you have protections in place for the community to not get bogged down with this small percentage of folks who aren't in it for the right purposes. But the vast, vast majority of people who contribute to Zimbio are really just sharing their opinion and are interested in building a great experience for everyone.

It's a leap of faith you have to take and you have to open up the site and have trust and faith that the community if going to evolve in a way that will ultimately lead you to a great property.

LS: And that is a leap of faith. I've done five books in my career and then when I was doing the sixth one and I realized that it was going to be based on user-generated content, it really scared the heck out of me. I'll be honest, I felt like I was going to lose control. But when I tossed it out to the community I was shocked about how much people were willing to give of themselves.

Well, like this conversation we're having today. You volunteered for this content. Thank you.

TM: The entire Social Media Bible, is large part, is a Social Media experiment. So we're talking about it. You know, contributions from many different people that make it an interesting read, and that's true of Zimbio as well. When you go to different sections of Zimbio there's many different contributions; some of them traditional published content, some of them just opinion pieces written by everyday people. That's what makes it an interesting read. It's kind of fun.

LS: Well, we really are democratizing publishing.

TM: We are!

LS: I love this! This is cool. You tossed out a couple of statistics. People love numbers. Are there any other statistics that you can share with our listeners, about stories, or photographs, or any numbers that you can share?

TM: Sure, so the top line statistic is that we have about 13 million readers a month; about 50% of them here in the U.S. and 50% of them elsewhere. And on average people are checking out articles and photos. That's the dominate that people are interested in. There are other types of media on Zimbio; you can view videos, you can vote on poles, etc.; but most people come and check out the latest photos of their favorite celebrities, or athletes, or politicians. And they like to read articles associates with what they are doing.

You know, a couple of unique things about Zimbio...one I mentioned is we publish a lot of content. That's part of the trick and it's part of the compelling value that we offer our readers is that every day they are going to find lots of new articles and new pictures.

LS: Something for everyone.

TM: ...something their interested in, so we publish about 10,000 articles a day.

LS: Wow!

TM: ...most of those are submitted by our volunteers...submitted by our members. We publish about 5,000 pictures a day and most of those are actually licensed, so what we've found as we went about building Zimbio is that articles and text were great things to get form the community, but when people are reading a story about the [22:13.3] Film Festival and they were reading about the different awards and the different actors and actresses who has won awards, the articles themselves could be written by everyday people and it was very compelling to read about what someone thought of a film, but when you wanted to look through photos, if you

relied solely on the photos taken by the audience...people standing on the street corner trying to capture a photo of Angelina Jolie walking up the red carpet...it just wasn't as compelling as the photo you could get from a professional photographers who had access to the front row and was right there in front of Angelina Jolie and who got the close up.

And so as we went about building Zimbio, we found our way and figured which types of content were best to get from the community and which types of content were best to license and actually pay a little bit more money and raise our costs a bit to dramatically improve the user experience.

And so most of our articles are written by the community members, but most of our photos are licensed by professional photographers. And so that's kind of an interesting mix that we found really works for people.

LS: That does make a lot of sense, and it is the best of both worlds, and you're providing something for everybody. That's great.

TM: That's our hope. That's what we were trying to do. That is making sure that when people come to Zimbio they have a great experience. The brand cements in their mind and they come back and check us out again.

LS: Excellent. And you mentioned costs. There is cost associated with those photographs, so one of the inevitable questions in all the interviews is, "How do you make any money?" Is it strictly from advertising, do you have a premium subscription? How do you cover the overhead?

TM: Zimbio is a very traditional media model. We package and distribute content and then monetize it through advertising. So it is an advertising model. I think the "cooler" difference in our business model and in our business plan is that we have a dramatically lower cost structure than most print magazines. So we don't have the print cost, which is the most obvious cost to eliminate. But we also have worked very hard to build technologies in a technology platform that allows us to do what we do with far fewer staff members than you would find at a traditional print shop.

And so, really, it's an advertising model that generates revenue and there's revenue growth coming through that. But a big part of our ability to generate profits is to keep that cost basis low. And that's something that you'll hear as you talk to all Social Media companies. A lot of what each of these companies do is they try to make sure that they can generate the revenues of the traditional shop, but they keep their cost basis low; by tapping into the user base, by tapping into the volunteers.

We are just trying to build rationally.

LS: That makes a lot of sense. So your production and distribution costs pretty much don't exist, but your advertising revenue is standard. So that the delta is really where the profit margin is.

TM: Exactly. It's all about revenues minus costs, right? So we try to generate profits by keeping the revenues at a good pace and keeping our costs down.

LS: Excellent! What's the charge if I want to come in and I want to read an article about a sports figure? Is there any charge to the viewer, or the reader?

TM: No, Zimbio is completely free for readers. Our hope and goal is to keep it that way. We believe that there is just power in getting a larger and larger audience to read your content and to talk about and check out your articles and photos. And that's very powerful for an advertising audience.

Most advertisers are looking for ways to reach their target audience in scale. And so what we try to do is offer a free service that's really compelling, and build up that audience. And then we sell advertising space to media buyers who are looking to get in front of that audience.

So for readers, it's a completely free experience.

LS: See, and I think that's a great business model and it always amazed me that you'd have to plunk down \$4.50 for a magazine, and then have to put up 50% of the content being advertising. Where here the experience is 100% free and it's paid for by advertisers, but I find online advertising not nearly as intrusive as print.

TM: Well, it can be intrusive. It depends on how you run it. We put a lot of priority and thought in making sure that the advertising that we run on Zimbio is not intrusive and doesn't distract from the reading experience.

And ways that we do that are to make sure that the ads are relevant and that they are clearly delineated and placed on the page that doesn't distract from the core content that you're checking out.

LS: Yeah, I love that. And a great site, by the way. I really enjoyed going through and I've got it bookmarked. You have a fan here, by the way (Laughter).

TM: Thanks a lot. That's good to get fans!

LS: Absolutely. What else can you add? Is there anything else that I didn't think of that you might want to add that would help our listeners understand better about what you do at Zimbio?

TM: I guess just one other piece of color is to talk about the folks who actually contribute the articles and contribute a lot of the content on Zimbio.

LS: Yeah!

TM: We've got a community of about 35,000 volunteers now who are very actively involved in building Zimbio. Some of them submit one or two articles a month, some of them submit several articles a day.

Without that community, we couldn't be what we are. And these are all people who volunteer their time and volunteer their efforts. They are submitting content and trying to build a great experience and they are trying to reach an audience themselves. So it's their own opinion and their own voice. That's really the root of what's behind Zimbio.

There's the staff here in the office, but there's just this much, much broader community of people who are all helping to build the site Zimbio.com. That's kind of the neat part of what's behind the covers. If you sort of peel it back, there's this whole group of folks who, all over the world, are submitting articles and writing stuff and sharing it with their community.

LS: I love that. Thirty-five thousand people contributing...I mean you can't go wrong with that. That is Social Media and truly the epitome of user-generated content.

TM: Yeah, it's neat. So we keep trying to grow it and we keep trying to listen to that community and do what the community needs in order to build a platform that allows them to share their opinions and share their voice.

LS: Doing a great job...and I think you've got 13 million people that agree (Laughter).

TM: Thanks!

LS: If somebody wants to find Zimbio, where do they go?

TM: Well, you can come to the web; we're at www.Zimbio.com and you can start there, and find just about anything that you're looking for.

LS: That is totally awesome.

I would really like to thank Tony Mamone, the CEO, and Founder of Zimbio, for being here with us today and talking about Social Media, user-generated content and the incredible project that he's built there at Zimbio. So, Tony, thank you for being here today.

TM: Thanks a lot, Lon. I appreciate it.

LS: This has been cool.

This is Lon Safko, 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, of course, its companion website www.TheSocialMediaBible.com.

And for more information about me, Lon Safko, please go over to my website at www.LonSafko.com.

And again, truly, truly Tony, thank you for being here today.

TM: Thanks a lot, Lon.