Dissecting the Success of Nina4Airbnb

A White Paper on The Foundations of Marketing and How You Can Apply The Lessons to Your Campaigns

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What's This About?

In April, I launched the most exciting campaign of my career. After a decade of working with high profile personalities and Fortune 500 brands, I applied what I learned about marketing and storytelling to build a campaign that would show Silicon Valley companies the value I would add to their teams.

Within two weeks, the website that hosted the campaign received nearly half a million hits, my resume was viewed over 14,000 times and I achieved my goal of interviewing with Airbnb and dozens of other high profile companies. With global media attention and millions of impressions through social media, the experiment was a hit.

I've worked on several high impact campaigns, and this is the most exciting one because it succeeded without a budget or a support team, proving that the success was completely tied to executing the foundations of marketing.

I never formally studied marketing, but I've always had an insatiable curiosity about what grasps people's attention. I taught myself the foundations by harnessing that curiosity, and I'm sharing my approach to creating Nina4Airbnb with the aim of adding value to other curious minds and sparking more interesting campaigns.

The Background / The Challenge

I moved back to California in 2014 after a decade in the Middle East where I had built my career. In 2009, I co-founded a company that grew into the leading social media agency in the MENA region with a client roster that included Pepsi, Saks Fifth Avenue, Mercedes Benz and Samsung. We had 52 talented team members the day I exited, and it continues to grow today. Before that I was part of Queen Rania's communications team and had the opportunity to lead one of the most exciting and innovative campaigns at the time where through YouTube she engaged a global audience in a 5-month conversation about stereotypes related to the Arab world.

The success of those endeavors became irrelevant almost as soon as I landed in a new market. I wanted to work at a high impact tech company with a stellar team. I found myself struggling to get any interviews where I could contextualize my experience to recruiters.

After one year of utilizing traditional tactics, it was time to shift gears. As a marketer, I had to think of myself as a product and identify ways to create demand around hiring me.

This whitepaper outlines how I tackled this marketing challenge, and points to the foundations that are essential for a campaign to succeed. On the final page, you will find a practical checklist of how to start your next campaign.

The Start

Once I framed the issue as a marketing challenge, it was clear how I should start. Before developing a strategy, and before thinking of the tactical approach, I had to analyze my opportunity by identifying my assets and shortcomings.

My Assets:

- I know how to design results oriented campaigns
- I'm familiar with conversation drivers
- I have a decent size social media footprint

Benefits of targeting Airbnb:

- Airbnb is a global company with growing recognition
- There is acute media interest in stories related to Airbnb
- I'm an active community member in Airbnb and understand the brand
- Executives at Airbnb are active on social media without being oversaturated with conversations directed at them

My main weakness was that I didn't have a budget to attract others to work with me on this project. But as anyone who has built a company can attest, that is never an excuse and always an invitation for creative problem solving.

Setting The Goal

I love designing and managing experiments. My approach was to deal with this as an experiment – if it failed, as in if no one talked about it, then it would be ok because it's almost as if it didn't happen. Unlike my previous work, I would have no clients to answer to. I'd be at the same starting point. If it succeeded, I'd have the opportunity to start interviewing with companies that I'd be very excited to work for.

Mission: To create demand around hiring me as part of a high impact team.

Objectives/Goals: Showcase my attributes as a creative, driven and talented professional.

Strategy: Generate mass conversation by associating myself with a high value brand.

Tactics:

- Focus on one company that has a global appeal;
- Create a high level industry report that would add value to their organization and wow onlookers;
- Make the report easily accessible;
- Share it with relevant contacts and directly with the target company.

Aiming For A Reaction

Across all the marketing campaigns I've worked on, there are two forces that are guaranteed to generate conversation: an incentive based approach, or creating something that has intrinsic value. Creating something that has intrinsic value means that it needs to solicit a strong reaction – amusement, sadness, shock, or awe are a few top examples.

With both approaches, the volume of conversation is directly proportional to the perceived value of the prize or to the perceived intrinsic value.

The incentive based approach is usually the "easy" one. With even the smallest budgets, you can package something that people want. Side note: always keep the prize in line with the product.

My initial idea was to use my experience creating promotions to design a campaign around myself, and because of budget constraints, I had to think of prizes that wouldn't cost much.

I had something valuable: an in-demand Airbnb listing in San Francisco. To win a week's stay, hosts would be invited to tweet promotional messages about why and how I would be a good candidate to work at Airbnb.

It was novel, and it could activate hosts around the world, and potentially attract media interest.

Eventually I pivoted into the second approach where I aimed to create something that would solicit an emotional reaction. (The reason for the pivot is detailed in the next section).

Most consulting firms would charge a small fortune to create an expansion plan or even present an argument for why a company should or shouldn't enter a new market. Because I know there's real value in the information presented, I believed it would solicit a reaction if it was analyzed and presented for free.

The combination of details, novelty and value made the report conversation-worthy.

Measuring The Progress

If you realize that there are too many obstacles along the way, reassess your approach

My initial approach of creating a promotion to incentivize Airbnb hosts and community members to talk about my work could have helped me achieve my goal. It was an exciting concept with a lot of tactical work, but as I

began to execute the project, my progress was hindered by too many factors outside of my control.

Rula Nabil, a fantastic designer who works at The Online Project (the leading social media agency I co-founded), created the interface for the site that would host the campaign. The next step was to build it and attract participants.

Weeks after the design was complete, the first line of code had yet to be written. Despite having access to a network of skilled engineers, the project was proving to be too complex.

I also started facing challenges in sourcing the participants. I reached out to Huzefa Kapadia and Jasper Ribbers, two high profile Airbnb community members who wrote a "Get Paid For Your Pad". The book is a practical guide for Airbnb hosts and over the years of promoting it, they've built great relationships with hosts around the world. Even through their network, though, the adoption rate for my campaign was low.

The experiment was proving to be too complicated and potentially costly. I had already invested time and some money into the idea, but from my experience building and managing products and campaigns, I knew the results were the only thing that mattered – not the process.

When I realized that too many factors were outside of my control, I reassessed the approach and pivoted into a much cleaner, simpler and ultimately more effective and authentic approach.

Simplifying Everything

Whether you're designing a communications plan, a product launch, or a promotion, the rule of simplicity remains the same: make your message impossible to misunderstand.

With my original idea of creating a promotion for hosts, there were too many messages in there and too many opportunities to lose sight of the main goal. I had to communicate the value of the experience to the hosts, I then had to communicate to them how to engage their friends, and I would then rely on them to communicate that to their friends.

There was also the risk that their friends would not be active on Twitter or understand how to vote for them through Tweets (the promotion was hosted on a microsite and votes would be tallied through a Twitter hashtag).

Other than having too many obstacles outside of my control, the original idea also had too many messages and too many steps.

In order to achieve my goal, I had to create something that was clear, simple to understand and easy to share.

Like most good ideas, the final form of this experiment was born out of a conversation. I was speaking with a former colleague who had just heard Jeremiah Owyang present at a conference in Dubai and was amazed at his rundown of the impact of the sharing economy.

Something clicked for me during that conversation. I had been exposed to the trends in San Francisco for so long, that I forgot that the lifestyle here is not the norm everywhere else. What we take for granted – ordering our groceries through Instacart, summoning car pool rides through Lyft and Uber, borrowing jewelry with Rockbox, running errands through TaskRabbit – all of these activities are the standard in San Francisco but have yet to cross the chasm in most of the world.

On the flipside, most of the world has yet to learn about the real Middle East outside of the gloomy narrative that the media projects. There are opportunities I'm aware of only because I grew up there, did business there and understand the culture.

I had the chance to combine my unique vantage point to wow both sides of the pond with something new, and turn a perceived weakness (my lack of local experience) into an actual strength (highlight my worldly view).

Suddenly I saw my opportunity to create something that would generate a high volume of conversation without an incentive. I stumbled upon the perfect storm: a passion driven campaign, tied to a high value brand, which would inspire people.

Picking a Name

In one of my favorite business/ marketing books – Positioning, the Battle for Your Mind – the authors dedicate an entire chapter to highlighting the importance of picking a good name. It's necessary when you're starting a company and equally valuable when you're designing a campaign.

Names should be descriptive and easy to remember. In the era of 140-character Twitter conversations and hashtags, campaign names should also be short and easy to spell.

In the case of this campaign, I was lucky in that my name is short and easy to spell, as is the company's name that I was targeting. Tying the two together was a no brainer as it immediately positioned me alongside a high value and recognizable brand.

Be Unique

I spent the past year using the traditional tactics for applying to hundreds of openings at dozens of companies.

As a job applicant, I was working in a black hole of information and I couldn't tell if my resume was even being read for some of the roles I was applying to. One thing I knew for sure was that I wasn't standing out by using the same tactics as everyone else in a city that is oversaturated with brilliant talent.

Our brains are designed to recognize novelty, so the entire approach for creating Nina4Airbnb was to do something novel that would allow me to capture recruiters' attention.

Paying Attention To Details

Research indicates that you only have 7 seconds to make a first impression. With the window so small, I had to make sure that my target audience would be wowed without reading a word.

To do this, I divided my target audience into segments to determine which details would be worth including.

Segment 1: Executives, hiring managers and team members at Airbnb

I left Easter eggs (intentional inside jokes and hidden messages) all over the site to achieve this.

The first and most obvious was the overall look and feel, which was designed to resemble Airbnb's site. This is an agency tactic that we learned while developing pitches for clients. When we presented to potential clients using their own branding, we had a higher chance of closing a deal. The tactic can be risky if you don't understand the brand well, but when you do, it signals your familiarity with the company and aligns you in their eyes as part of their team.

Within the first page, and across all my social media assets, is a second less obvious Easter egg. In my profile picture, I'm seen wearing a Coca Cola t-shirt. It's intentionally cropped yet visible. I used this image as a hat-tip to Airbnb's CMO who is the former Senior Vice President of Integrated Marketing Communication And Design Excellence at the Coca Cola Company.

A series of subtle messages are embedded within the "Why I Belong At Airbnb" slide. Knowing how much the company values their internal culture, I needed to come across as a fit. The headings are directly taken from their

values. The proof points reflect this too – including using the phrase "get shit done", which is taken straight from them.

The next slide is more visual and includes a series of photos that I took while visiting their office. The first image of me with the logo is used to emphasize my connection to the brand. The next two are photos from their unique interior design, which are used to reestablish my familiarity.

The final photo of that slide is probably my favorite. Two Airbnb employees started an internal project known as "Okay Coffee." They run a humorous Instagram account where they showcase team members drinking average cups of coffee that they serve daily. I used this image from their feed, which coincidentally had my name on a coffee cup, to emphasize my appreciation of intra-preneurship.

Segment 2: Hiring managers at other high impact companies in Silicon Valley

Although the visuals of the report are all targeting Airbnb, I needed to make sure that I could highlight my attributes to all potential employers in the valley. The slide "Where I'll Belong" is intended to achieve this by highlighting my relevant experience.

Segment 3: The Middle East

Most of the media focus on the Middle East revolves around war, extremism and crisis. In reality, though, that is not what the every day life of all of the Middle East is about. The global media still hasn't caught on to some of the great stories coming out of the region even as the entrepreneurial scene has been flourishing.

By injecting the report with details about the "other" side of the Middle East, I was able to give a reason for people from the region to take pride in the content and spread it.

A second level of detail for this target segment was to include partnership opportunities by mentioning specific organizations and events taking place. This gave me a great excuse to contact the people behind those organization and events and encourage them to read the report and share it.

Segment 4: The Press

When I released an image to the press, I made sure to use a photo that combined the Airbnb logo and me. The casual t-shirt and a hoodie is an obvious hat tip to the laid back culture of San Francisco and Silicon Valley, but more importantly, it allowed me to ride on their brand's tailcoats to achieve wider recognition for the campaign.

Knowing When It's Good Enough (The MVP)

Once I saw the opportunity to create this report, I knew there must be other people out there who had similar ideas. I had to do it fast and publish it before the novelty aspect was lost.

In product development, there's a concept known as the Minimum Viable Product (the MVP). I didn't need it be perfect, I just needed it to be good enough. I immediately identified the qualifiers that I needed to achieve: a valuable dataset that could support an interesting story, and a visually appealing way of presenting that story.

Many developers and engineers who sent feedback on the report commented about the way the site was built. They couldn't understand why I chose to build it using images only. It made the site 'clunky' and limited SEO opportunities. I completely agree with every one of them, but neither of those concerns was important in this case.

The best coding in the world would be useless to me if it took too long to go live, or if someone else launched a similar concept while I was spending time and money to build the site. I had to move fast as soon as the design was done, yet I had no coding experience.

I discovered several fantastic (and free!) website builders. Wix was the most flexible one for my needs. While many of the website builders only have predesigned templates you can fill with your own images and text, Wix has that plus the ability to start on a blank page and design the layout however you like.

The best part was that it also gave me the opportunity to easily redesign the site for mobile. This was important since I would be sharing it directly with my primary target audience through Twitter, which meant they'd be most likely to view the site from their phones.

Seeding the Content

Most global campaigns use a combination of paid, owned and earned media to seed their content. Without a budget, I didn't have the luxury of sharing the content through advertising, so I had to bank on the owned media in the hopes that it would generate earned media opportunities.

The owned channels that were within my control in this case are my social media channels. I shared the content through Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter to cover a wide base of my contacts.

Email was another valuable owned channel and proved to be the most effective for seeding the content.

I intended to share the report with 500+ of my personal and professional contacts as well as the organizations and individuals mentioned in the report. I compiled all of their addresses into a MailChimp list and drafted an email that encouraged them to read the report and share their reaction via Twitter using the hashtag #AirbnbME. As Murphy's Law would have it, though, Mailchimp blocked the email because the language in it seemed to have violated their terms and conditions. Oops.

My next option was to select 50 of the 500 people and send them emails directly. I was nervous about this hiccup because my initial assumption was that of the 500 people I would contact, half of them might open the email within 24 hours, a quarter would click through and read, and a small fraction of them might take the action I was asking for. With a smaller pool, the numbers were not in my favor.

I was happy to have this assumption proven wrong: 80% of the contacts that I shared the report with responded within 24 hours and shared it through their own social media channels.

Picking The Right Platform

I shared the report on all my social media channels (except my blog because I didn't feel it would add value to have a post about it there since most of my readers are my Facebook friends).

In every campaign, it's important to have a primary platform that you focus your efforts on. Though I shared the report through all my owned channels to widen my initial reach, the true power of the spread of the campaign came via Twitter.

Twitter is the only platform where I could have reached the founders of Airbnb and engaged them in public and visible conversation. Though Facebook is working to include more features that might make this possible in the future, the flexibility and openness of Twitter conversations was the essential driver in the success of Nina4Airbnb.

Incorporating Social Proof

Social proof is the positive impression created when someone finds out that others are talking about or doing something. I knew that I had to use several forms of social proof in order to make the report attractive to my target readers.

The first form of social proof was the idea of proof in numbers. It didn't matter who was doing the talking, so long as there was chatter. I aimed to

get that by having my contacts share their reactions to the report. I also asked them to use a specific hashtag so it could all be easily discoverable.

The second form of social proof was to solicit expert mentions.

In selecting the 50 contacts I would share the report with, I made sure that a significant number of them were high visibility Twitter users who were also high profile tech personalities. These were people that I had already built relationships with over my career, and I was hoping that because of the relevance of the approach, they would be more willing to share it. And when several experts begin talking about something on the same day, others are bound to become interested.

Finally, there was the unexpected third, and arguably most powerful form of social proof: the celebrity endorsement. Once Queen Noor tweeted about the report directly to Brian Chesky, Airbnb's co-founder and CEO, the report became impossible to ignore.

Timing It

There is a predictable pattern to viral conversations. They take place in high volume during a concentrated period of time and then they level off quickly. When I shared the report with the initial group of 50 contacts, I asked them all to take action within 24 hours. This would guarantee that the buzz would begin picking up on the first day.

I also took advantage of different time zones. Because my contacts in the Middle East are 7 – 10 hours ahead, I could get them to start talking about the report while people in the US were sleeping, so that when they woke up there was chatter that had already started.

Finally, I shared the report publicly via my social media accounts on Tuesday morning. I assumed based off of experience communicating with recruiters that Mondays are harder to get their attention. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are usually more ideal, and Thursdays and Fridays are too close to the weekend.

Having fun

The day I started working on creating this report and turning into a campaign, I found myself thoroughly engaged and enjoying the work. Though there were many obstacles, I had so much fun designing and executing this campaign!

Luck

I can't discount the role luck played in the success of this campaign. I mentioned all of the factors that I could control to design the experiment correctly, but there were many beyond my control.

I was lucky that nothing major happened in the news that day which could have overshadowed the chatter as the campaign picked up steam.

(Thank you @DickC for not resigning in April!)

The Results

My goal was to focus on only one result: getting a job with a high impact team where I can do really cool work. In the end, that's the only KPI that matters.

Still as someone who looks at marketing as a combination of art and science, I of course had to look at the numbers surrounding the campaign so I could analyze the chatter funnel, and learn ways to improve future campaigns that I work on, which is something I recommend everyone do.

These are the numbers:

- 445,000+ Visits to Nina4Airbnb
- Hundreds of thousands of Tweets and millions of impressions
- 30,000+ New visitors to my personal blog
- 14,000+ LinkedIn profile views
- 2,000+ Emails and messages of support from around the world
- Global media coverage
- An interview with Airbnb
- A pipeline of interviews with dozens of other high impact companies

And as an active Airbnb community member, I'm of course proud that the campaign spread awareness about their platform and their values in a way that paid campaigns can't achieve.

The Practical Takeaways

1. Be clear about your end goal. Everything you do should support getting there.

2. The two factors that generate conversation are either an incentive based approach or creating something that has intrinsic value.

3. Measure your progress against your goals. If you realize there are too many obstacles along the way, reassess your approach.

4. Simplify everything. Make your message impossible to misunderstand.

5. Pick a memorable name. Keep it short, descriptive and easy to remember.

6. Be unique. Our minds are trained to recognize novelty.

7. Know when it's good enough to launch.

8. Pay attention to the details and include touches that will add to your story. Authenticity and coherence are key.

9. Seed your content. Use your own network to get people to start talking.

10. Pick the right platform. Focus on the one that is most in line with your goals.

11. Incorporate different forms of social proof.

12. Time it right. The timing of a campaign will determine how long its life cycle will last.

13. Have fun!

14. Analyze your results. Measure the data around your campaign and analyze the chatter funnel so you can learn how to improve your next one.

For more marketing insights or to connect with me directly, follow me on Twitter @NinaMufleh