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The 'Riffs Interview: 12 Secrets of the insanely viral 'OATMEAL' creator Matthew Inman


By Michael Cavna

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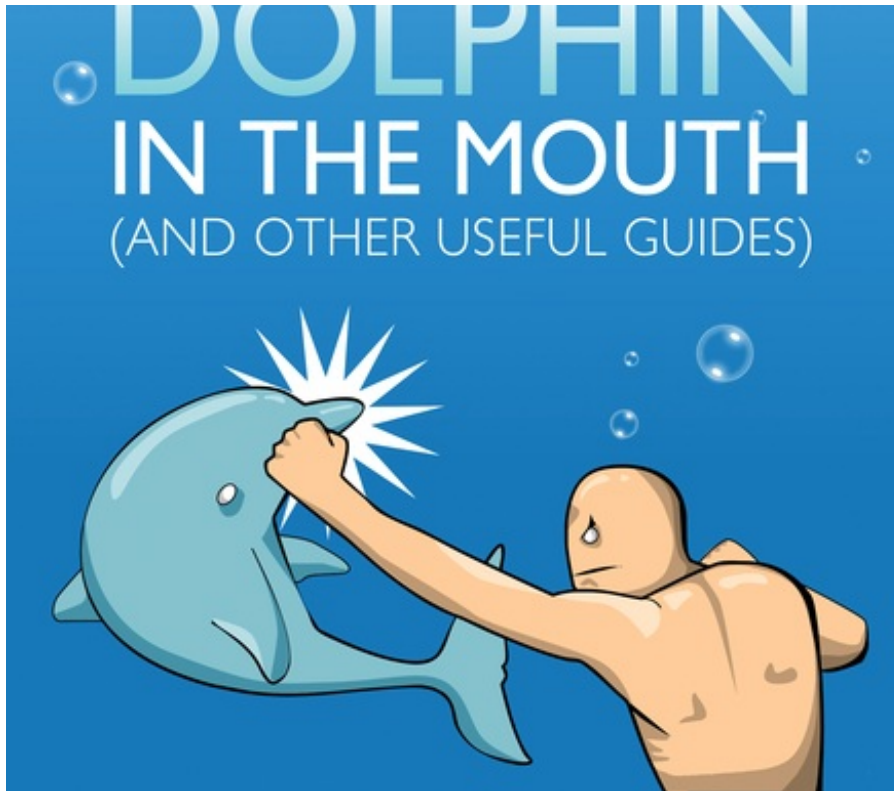
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MATTHEW INMAN shares at least one striking trait with **Mark Zuckerberg**, beyond the fact they are once-introverted, sandy-haired, whipsmart men in their 20s.

Both the Facebook founder and the founder of **"THE OATMEAL"** seem to understand their missions on the Web with uncommon clarity and assuredness.

Zuckerberg's story is globally well-documented, but it's only been over the past year or so that Inman's tale of keen vision and restless creativity has gradually begun to emerge. But then, the spotlight tends to shine a little hotter on your backstory when your one-man website pulls in more than 4-million unique visitors a month, according to Inman's publisher, and your brand-new book, **"5 Very Good Reasons to Punch a Dolphin in the Mouth (and Other Useful Guides)"** (Andrews McMeel), leaps to the upper rungs in



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Amazon sales.

"The Oatmeal," of course, is the extremely "sticky" site that features Inman's quizzes, blog and, most notably, his viral "comics" -- which range from multi-panel lists and sequential art to educational infographic posters. "The Oatmeal," in other words, is whatever is cooking on the burners of Inman's blue-flame brain.

And what a collection it is, from lethal office bobcats to ill-tempered pterodactyls to the ill-fated mating of the [male angler fish](#). In the process, you might well learn little-known facts about what you ingest (the artist's ["posters" about coffee, beer](#) and cheese are popular) and what you believe in (Inman memorably trumpets inventor Nikola Tesla and explains why Thomas Edison's competitive shenanigans were stinkier than a Peterbilt full of body parts). And his illustrated lists range from [the phases of dating](#) to types of ["crappy interviewees"](#) to ["How to Suck at Facebook."](#)

That, in fact, is an enormous element of the "Oatmeal's" lure: The topics are fairly eclectic, but the comedic tone is as consistent as something spun by a room of "Colbert" writers. Inman's comic rabbit-holes may seem random, but so often his "guides" are well-researched -- and the Seattle web designer has an uncanny knack for that just right word.

In that regard, the engaging Inman, 28, *[right]* can impress as less like Zuckerberg and more like his generation's **Scott Adams** -- a sharp-eared writer who employs a distinct comic voice; a simple and self-styled graphic presentation; a sense of how to tap online advances for creative and commercial gain; and an incisive understanding of what his readers *want*.

But while the "Dilbert" creator is an MBA, much of Inman's



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MICHAEL'S FAVE SITES

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business sense comes from countless hours at the computer screen, learning to design sites at age 13. A



northern Idaho native, Inman left town upon high-school graduation at 17 and made a beeline for Seattle's tech industry. The past decade saw him grow creatively dissatisfied as his talents and knowledge grew. [He co-founded SEOmoz](#) in 2003 as a web designer/developer/search marketer, leaving it in September 2007; he also says he built (in precisely 66.5 hours) a "full-featured dating website" that became the highly trafficked [Mingle2](#).

Inman's illustration ["How to Tell if Your Cat Is Plotting to Kill You"](#) convinced him in the summer of 2008 to launch a site that spotlighted the sundry contents of his comic brain. Taking the name "The Oatmeal" from his video-gaming handle (he liked to play Quake online), Inman launched the comedy site in 2009 and posted whatever random subject matter interested him -- and the hits started coming.

With "The Oatmeal" now a staple on Digg.com and two more books in the works, Inman has carved out a commanding online perch as comics creator and graphic illustrator, Comic Riffs recently caught up with Inman -- who is on book tour -- to discuss comic writing and social-media strategies as we uncover **12 Secrets About the Insanely Viral 'Oatmeal.'** They are:

1. EMBRACE THE INTERNET AND ABANDON NEWSPAPER SYNDICATION:

"My advice [to aspiring cartoonists] is to abandon the traditional route," Inman tells Comic Riffs. "Abandon newspaper syndication -- there's no comparison to a mom-and-pop website. The best advice is ... to get on the Internet, give [your comic] a tone and support that 'branded' feel. ...

"My suggestion is to tackle things that are relatable and be immersive in social media. ... StumbleUpon and Digg are very powerful."

Industry/Media Sites

- [National Cartoonists Society](#)
- [Cartoonbank.com](#)

- [Association of American Editorial Cartoonists](#)
- [Comic-Con](#)

2. YOU WRITE COMEDY, BUT YOU *INVITE* COMMUNITY:

"Building and hanging on to an audience is the biggest role of social media," Inman tells us. "Then every time I make a comic, I can broadcast it out to them. That's been really helpful. I have this audience waiting for me. It's been awesome. ... You need to be funny and continually make them laugh. But when I started, I also had this [casually inviting] tone: 'Hey, guys, I just made a new comic -- check it out!' "

3. GARY LARSON'S ADVICE IS WORTH THE PRICE OF A LUNCH TAB:

"I had lunch with him two or three months ago -- **Gary Larson** is my hero," Inman says of the "Far Side" creator. "It was awesome, and one thing I really wanted to get out of him [had to do] with reader comments. I feel like my humor and my feelings toward my own work have changed because of commentary about my work. ... You're affected by it when there's a surge and a quarter-million fans on Facebook [respond].

"But Larson, he basically worked in a cave. I loved hearing that. I thought: It would be thrilling to be like you."

(Note: Another Pacific Northwest neighbor of Inman's is the team behind "Penny Arcade"; Inman says the webcartoonists are right up the street.

4. MATTHEW INMAN CONSIDERS HIMSELF A CARTOONIST. EXCEPT WHEN HE DOESN'T

"I think some of my work is traditional cartooning -- a series of panels, a final-panel punchline," Inman tells us. "But some is more like comedic writing, blogging -- whatever you want to call it."

5. THE OATMEAL's FAVORITE "OATMEAL" EVER IS "THE BOBCATS." BUT ASK AGAIN LATER;

"Lately, my absolute favorite is 'The Bobcats,' " Inman says. "It's unique from the rest of my stuff, with recurring characters.

"I also like 'Why I'd Rather Be Punched in the Testicles Than Call Customer Service.' And 'Mother[Expletive] Pterodactyls.' And 'Punchline Aliens.' Some of my favorites are the least-trafficked ones -- not the home runs."

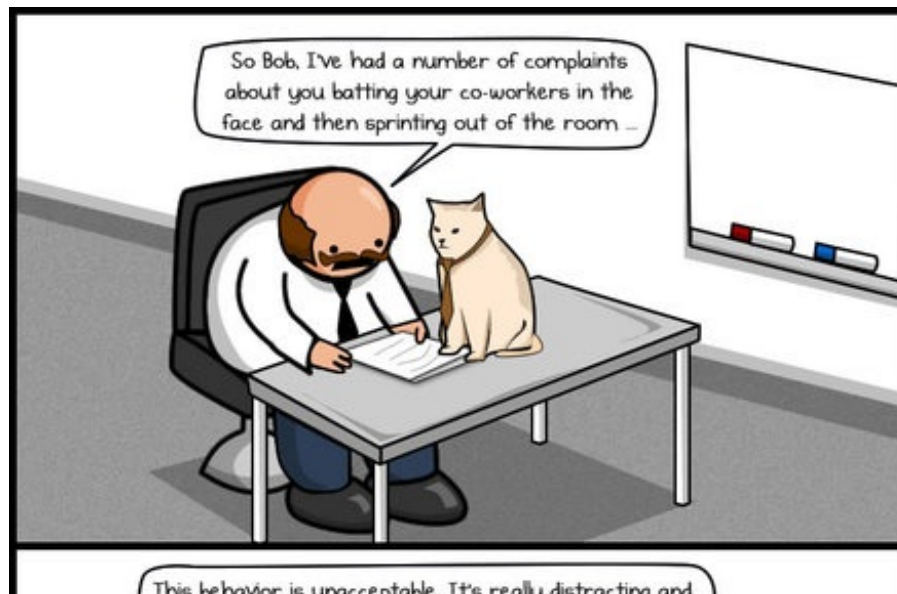
6. FOR A LONG TIME, INMAN DIDN'T "GET" HIS BOOK'S COVER COMIC:

"The punch-a-dolphin one -- that one was never particularly one of my favorites," Inman tells 'Riffs. "But after two years, I thought: 'A-ha, I get it.'"

7. "OATMEAL" COMEDY, LIKE A ZOMBIE TYRANNOSAURUS, IS NOT BULLETPROOF:

"I continually put up things that [the folks at Digg.com] like to read, but occasionally I do a crap comic, and they bury it off the home page," Inman tells Comic Riffs. "It's a reminder that the Oatmeal isn't invincible and that Digg is still fair."

[THE BOBCATS:](#) (click to see more)





The Oatmeal <http://theoatmeal.com>

8. "OATMEAL" VIRALITY IS NOT A HOUSE OF SEO CARDS:

"A lot of people say: 'How do you do it?' I just make things that people like ..." Inman tells 'Riffs. "SEO has no bearing on the Oatmeal -- I did SEO in my old job [so I know] -- but social media has played a gigantic part in what I do."

9. INMAN WISHES MIGHTILY THAT HE COULD SAY SAYONARA TO ADVERTISING:

"Merchandising, I felt, was the best way to go about" monetizing the site, Inman says. "I'd love to drop advertising altogether. Especially when something is not a product that fits well with my site. ... I'd rather sell books and sell posters than get clicks from a machine ad."

"The highest-selling item in my store," he notes, "are the posters. The educational ones, like the grammar posters, are funny but good to have up on your wall. [In fact] the entire public-school system in Sydney, Australia put hundreds of my posters in their classrooms."

10. "THE OATMEAL" WILL NOT SHILL FOR COKE AND DEODORANT. AT LEAST NOT IN AMERICA.

"I got an offer from a deodorant company to write" something for their advertising, Inman says, noting that he turned down the product commission flat. "It's pretty much got to be a truly exceptional client. If it were Comedy Central, I'm all over that. Maybe if it [involves] an actor or actress I like. But Diet Coke, that's not gonna happen.

"The money would be great, but the detriment to my comic would not be. ...Although if they wanted to hire me in Japan -- like Gwyneth Paltrow [selling] jewelry overseas -- I might do it."

11. TOKYO-FLOP? "THE OATMEAL" DOES NOT PLAY IN JAPAN:

"I speak Japanese," Inman tells us, "and my girlfriend is from Japan. ... But Japan is one country that doesn't 'get' Oatmeal humor. I got only [blank] expressions from my Japanese instructor."

12. "THE OATMEAL" IS LOOKING TO DIVERSIFY. (HOLLYWOOD, YOU KNOW HIS DIGITS.):

"One thing I would love to do is animated shorts," Inman tells Comic Riffs. "One- to two-minute specials. Fun, YouTube kind-of-things. It's for more of a creative outlet -- I like to diversify the way I draw. Videos are insanely time-consuming, but I would [like to do it] -- but for now, I've two more books next year -- a cat book and the Oatmeal, *Volume Two!*"

MATTHEW INMAN DISPENSES WISDOM: :

THE OATMEAL DOES CARSON DALY: :

By Michael Cavanaugh | March 11, 2011; 2:00 PM ET

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