

completely.

This is a very ambitious vision. Historically, Gawker has been pretty weak with respect to technological innovations, and so it's reasonable to take an I'll-believe-it-when-I-see-it approach any time that Nick Denton claims to have invented a revolutionary new technology. As Wert said to me, forums have been around on the internet since the 90s, and no one's managed to reinvent them yet. But a few companies like Reddit and Quora have pointed in interesting directions, and Wert was quite open about wanting to ape Reddit's AMA ("ask me anything") feature for his new advertorial conversations.

The idea is for these things to be more a PR/marketing product than a brand-advertising product. The idea is to get challenger brands, in particular, to take part: they tend to be very open and transparent about what they're up to, and they love the idea of engaging with the public as much as possible, if they can do so in a reasonably controlled environment. When that kind of a brand has some kind of news they want to share, doing so through a Gawker Media sponsored post will be a pretty effective way of getting the news out to a large number of people while at the same time sending the message that they're trying to be as transparent as possible and are happy to answer lots of questions in a friendly and conversational and open manner. The metric for success, says Wert, isn't going to be the number of pageviews they get; rather, it will be the amount of earned media they get — the degree to which other media outlets pick up on the initial announcement and the rest of the information that the company reveals in the comments section.

The conversation will probably only go on for a day or two, but after that the post — and all its associated comments — will live on in perpetuity, a much more open and accessible record of the announcement than any press release could be.

The problem here, for Denton — and the reason why he got an editorial guy to run this new project — is the old one: how to persuade his websites' readers to read the sponsored posts and to engage in their comments sections. Wert's stated ambition — and you can hold him to this — is

- January 2012
- December 2011
- November 2011
- October 2011
- September 2011
- August 2011
- July 2011
- June 2011
- May 2011
- April 2011
- March 2011
- February 2011
- January 2011
- December 2010
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- August 2010
- July 2010
- June 2010
- May 2010
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- March 2010
- February 2010



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What's more, this move of Denton's is to a large degree a reversal of his stated aim back at the end of 2010, when he did his big network-wide redesign. Back then, I [explained](#) the departure of sales chief Chris Batty, now at Quartz, as being a function of the fact that Batty was a huge fan of the sponsored post, while Denton's redesign "essentially sacrifices the idea of having a sponsored post on the home page—something Batty was almost religious about—and replaces it with interstitial videos which aren't nearly as sharable, aren't extensible, and quite possibly won't even have permalinks." This move of Denton's, then, is a step backwards, in many ways, towards the Batty vision which he rejected two years ago.

Still, I do like the fact that Denton's constantly trying new things, constantly trying to reinvent what an online media company can and should be. Really ambitious brands, indeed, won't need Wert's help at all: they'll have the ability to dive straight into existing non-sponsored editorial posts and respond to commenters directly, much as they're already responding to people who talk about them on Twitter. But I suspect that the brands which do that will actually be more receptive, rather than less receptive, to Wert's sales pitch — they will already understand the power of conversation.

And in general, I like Denton's bigger idea of building a comments system designed more for the majority of readers who don't comment than it is for the minority of commenters themselves. I

[April 2010](#)

[March 2010](#)

[February 2010](#)

[January 2010](#)

[December 2009](#)

[November 2009](#)

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conversation.

And in general, I like Denton's bigger idea of building a comments system designed more for the majority of readers who don't comment than it is for the minority of commenters themselves. I don't believe for a minute that the new system will attract the big-name commenters — Dov Charney, Brian Williams — that Denton really wants. But I do think that the new system will make very high-end comments threads much more common. And when those things do appear, they're wonderful.

I used to help run a site, back in the early days of the blogosphere, called MemeFirst. The posts were short; the comments threads were long, and generally very high quality. We didn't have much of a signal-to-noise problem, because very few people knew we existed. We were basically just a group of friends using the web as a discussion aid. But the fact is that even though there are many more readers than there are commenters, there are also many more commenters than there are posters. And collectively, those commenters are faster and funnier and more knowledgeable than the staff of any website.

Nick Denton wants to be the first publisher to develop the ability to effectively tap into that collective wisdom. And then, he wants to try to sell his new-found ability to advertisers. If — and only if — Denton can do the former, I suspect that Ray Wert has a decent shot of being able to do the latter.

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