

1

Hacking Is a Good Thing

When most people hear the word *hacking*, they think of something bad.

They picture cybercriminals who break into computer systems to steal credit cards or deface people's websites. They recall sensational news stories, such as the hacking of Sony Pictures Entertainment in 2014, which resulted in the studio's private, internal e-mails being published all over the Internet—to the horrified embarrassment of many Hollywood elites. Or even more serious hacking of government systems by foreign spies.

Hackers, the perpetrators of such digital mischief and mayhem, have frequently been the villains in movies themselves. In *Live Free or Die Hard*—the fourth movie in that storied Bruce Willis franchise—hero cop John McClane battles a hacker bent on bringing the United States to financial ruin by wreaking havoc on the stock market, the power grid, the transportation grid, and other key, computer-controlled components of the nation's infrastructure.

At this point, you may be wondering whether you've mistakenly purchased a book that intends to teach you how to electronically steal your competitors' marketing plans or knock out their marketing systems. Is that what is meant by "hacking marketing"?

Rest assured, no.

There's actually another much more positive meaning of the word *hacking*.

In software development circles, hacking is the art of invention. When a programmer creates a particularly cool piece of software, especially in an inspired burst of coding, that is hacking. When an engineer devises a novel solution to a supposedly intractable problem, that is hacking. When a maker—someone who builds do-it-yourself robots, electronics, and other cool gadgets—fabricates a new homemade design, improvised from ordinary components into a functional work of art, that is hacking.

Picture Mark Zuckerberg, up late at night in his Harvard University dorm room, madly cranking away on building the first version of Facebook. He imagined new ways for people to connect with each other through a website, unconstrained by prior conventions—and launched the golden age of social media.

That is hacking.

In fact, Facebook would take hacking to a whole new level in business management.

Facebook and the Hacker Way

Facebook was founded on the principles of hacking—the good kind of hacking. And that approach to getting things done helped propel it into a \$200 billion company.

Indeed, when Facebook filed for its initial public offering in 2012, Zuckerberg wrote an open letter to prospective shareholders, in the S-1 registration statement that the company filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, describing his vision for the firm.¹ It famously included a section, on pages 69–70, under the heading “The Hacker Way” that explained the company’s unique culture—and why it was such a powerful source of competitive advantage.

Zuckerberg countered the negative connotations of hacking as typically portrayed in the media. “Hacking just means building something quickly or testing the boundaries of what can be done.” In a little more than 800 words, Zuckerberg described the essence of hacking as a creative force and how it was embedded into the culture and management principles of his company.

“The Hacker Way is an approach to building that involves continuous improvement and iteration. Hackers believe that something can always be better, and that nothing is ever complete. They just have to go fix it—often in the face of people who say it’s impossible or are content with the status quo.”

He repeatedly emphasized the importance of rapid iterations. “Hackers try to build the best services over the long term by quickly releasing and learning from smaller iterations rather than trying to get everything right all at once.”

He championed a software-empowered bias for action. “Instead of debating for days whether a new idea is possible or what the best way to build something is, hackers would rather just prototype something and see what works.”

He defined the company’s hacker-inspired values around being fast, bold, and open.

For Zuckerberg, being open meant instilling a high level of transparency in the way the company was managed internally, stating a firm belief that the more information people have, the better decisions they can make—and the greater impact they can have. “We work hard to make sure everyone at Facebook has access to as much information as possible about every part of the company so they can make the best decisions and have the greatest impact.”

Although Zuckerberg wasn’t the first person to champion the hacker ethos—hacking emerged at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the 1960s, 20 years before he was born²—this letter to investors, traditionally conservative Wall Street types, was remarkable in presenting it as a mainstream business philosophy. It was a brilliant piece of marketing, positioning the

company as an exciting innovator in the digital world. But it was also a management manifesto, declaring that Facebook intended to run its whole business—not just product development—with a hacker mentality.

Idealistic? Perhaps.

But you have to acknowledge Facebook's incredible success. It created a new kind of company, a social media juggernaut, that has had far-reaching, global impact. It sprang from a college sophomore's side project into one of the highest-valued public companies in the world, all in less than a decade. Along the way, it fended off intense competition—in a market that disruptive innovation continually roils—from dozens of aggressive start-ups and even the world's other largest Internet company, Google.

Why This Matters to You

However, odds are your business is not a social media platform like Facebook. Hacking probably sounds like something that's meant for companies with tinkering engineers and Silicon Valley code jockeys. How is it relevant to regular businesses? And what does it have to do with marketing?

Those questions inspired this book.

First, Facebook demonstrated that the spirit of hacking could be adapted and applied to general business management, not just technical innovation. It's not just for techies.

Second, Facebook proved that such a management philosophy was scalable, even for a public company with thousands of employees worldwide. It's not just for start-ups.

And third, even if your company isn't a purely digital business like Facebook, you are now operating in a digital world. Marketing, in particular, has become heavily dependent on digital channels and touchpoints to reach and engage customers—in both consumer and business-to-business markets. As a result, you are affected by digital dynamics, regardless of your industry,

size, or location. You have more in common with Facebook than you might think. That might seem like a scary thought at first. But it's really an opportunity.

Digital environments enable far greater agility, innovation, and scalability than were ever possible in just the physical world. But harnessing that potential requires different approaches to management—approaches that leverage digital dynamics instead of fighting them. Luckily, we don't have to figure this out from scratch. We can draw upon more than two decades of management practices that have proved successful in purely digital businesses and professions—particularly in software development—and adapt them for modern marketing management. Modern marketing actually has more similarities with software development management than you might imagine.

This book will show you how to tap those parallels to your advantage.

Hacking marketing is about bringing a little bit of that inventive hacker spirit to the management and practice of marketing. In a digital world, that proves to be a very good thing.

