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36 Startup Tips: From Software Engineering to PR and More!

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Written by [Alex Iskold](#) / December 27, 2007 12:05 AM / [32 Comments](#)

This is a collection of startup tips covering software engineering, infrastructure, PR, conferences, legal and finance. They describe best practices for an early-stage startup. We hope that you will find these tips useful, but also please remember that they are based on subjective experiences and not all of them will be applicable to your company.

These tips originally appeared as separate posts on the [BlueBlog](#), the blog of AdaptiveBlue. [Ed: Alex Iskold is founder and CEO of AdaptiveBlue, as well as being a feature writer for RWW.] Since the posts were quite popular, we decided to share them with the ReadWriteWeb audience during the holiday season.

8 Software Engineering Tips for Startups



Since software is at the heart of every modern startup it needs to be elegant, simple and agile. Instead of having an army of coders it pays to have a handful of smart, passionate engineers who love what they are doing instead. A small, passionate team can generally accomplish more than an army. Even as the company grows you can still accomplish a lot with a small team.

Tip 0: You must have code

Working code proves that a system is possible, and it also proves that the team can build the system. Having working code is a launchpad for your business. After it is ready, the business can happen. In the old days, tech companies were funded based on an idea written on a piece of paper, but those days are long gone. Today, a startup needs to have not only working code, but an assembled system and active users in order to land venture capital money. Software engineering transitioned from the post-funding exercise to the means to being funded.

Tip 1: You must have a technical co-founder

Any startup starts with an idea and just a few people. A lot of startup co-founders these days are techies, passionate about technology and life. It was not always like that. Just a few years back a purely technical founding team would have had a hard time raising money because there was a school of thought that only people with MBA degrees could run a company. Now, having a technical co-founder is a benefit.





















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Tip 2: Hire A+ engineers who love coding

Until recently, building a large scale system that worked was like black magic. Most software projects languished for years, and had large engineering teams who had little consensus on what needed to be done and how to accomplish it. The resulting systems were buggy, unstable, and hard to maintain and extend. The problem was that there were just too many people who were not that good working on writing software. Startups cannot afford to have less than A+ engineers.

Tip 3: Keep the engineering team small and do not outsource

A team of 2-3 rockstar engineers can build pretty much any system because they are good at what they do, love building software, focus on the goal, and don't get in each other's way. A team of 20 so-so engineers will not get very far. The mythical man-month book debunked the notion of scaling by adding more programmers to the project. The truth is that most successful software today is built by just a handful of good engineers. Less is more applies equally to code and to the number of people working on it.

Tip 4: Ask tough questions during the interview

There is nothing worse than being soft during an interview with a prospective employee and hiring the wrong person into the company as a result. This is bad for you, but more importantly bad for the person. In the end you will end up parting ways, but it would be best to just not make this mistake to begin with. So be tough and ask a lot of technical questions during the interview.

Tip 5: Avoid hiring non-technical managers

You do not need these type of people on a small team. If everyone is sharp, knows what they are doing and executes on a task, why do you need a manager? People who try to overlay complex processes on top your objectives are going to slow you down and make you frustrated.

Tip 6: Cultivate an agile culture

Modern startups need to move very quickly. There is no room to plan for 6 months and then execute because someone else will get there first. The new approach is to evolve the system. Of course you are doing planning for the next release, but you are iterating quickly, doing frequent builds, and constantly making changes. Coding becomes sculpting.

Tip 7: Do not re-invent the wheel

A lot of startups go overboard with their infrastructure. This includes two types of things - rebuilding libraries and building your own world-class scaling. On the first point - there are so many fantastic open source libraries out there that it just does not make sense to write them in house. Whether you are using JavaScript or PHP or .NET or Python or Ruby, there are likely already libraries out there that can help you. Re-writing existing libraries is a waste of your time and you are not likely to do it better.

[Read the complete post on BlueBlog](#)

5 Infrastructure Tips for Startups

It is much easier to build web-scale startup these days because of great hosting services like Rackspace, web services from Amazon, and tracking systems like Google Analytics. In this post we take a closer look at these solutions from the perspective of a startup.

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Tip 1: Use the best hosting provider you can afford

As a startup, you are always looking for ways to keep costs down. One of the first areas that seems to be a good place to trim costs and save money is on web hosting. However, skimping on hosting is a mistake that will cost you a lot of time, which is more valuable than the money you will spend. It is okay to go with a cheaper provider when you are just developing the code, but your production needs to run on a rock solid system.

Tip 2: Use Amazon Web Services

You are still likely to need a regular hosting provider, but you should be aware of an increasingly important alternative - Amazon Web Services. This offering from the e-commerce giant is a must-consider piece of infrastructure for any startup. Specifically, four services make it easier to build large-scale web applications: Simple Storage Service, Elastic Compute Cloud, Simple DB, and Simple Queue Service.

Tip 3: Use Google Analytics in standard and creative ways

Early on, startups need to track things. Tracking results are useful for metrics, which in turn help measure growth and success of the company. Without tracking, it is difficult to determine what is going on. Google Analytics is packed with features, but more importantly it has an API. The reason this is important is because you can actually build your own dashboard that offers a different, customized view of the same information.

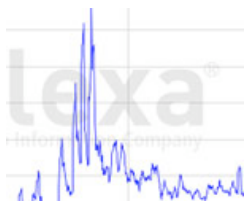
Tip 4: Start with defaults, then tune the system

In 99.9% of cases you are better off starting with defaults, and in 99.9% of cases you are not going to end up where you started. The trick is to go from those defaults to custom settings in the proper way. Probably the worst thing you can do is premature tuning. Like premature optimization of source code, this leads to ugliness. Why guess before you even know what is going to happen to the system?

Tip 5: Hire or contract a good system administrator

This is the simplest tip of all. Like programming, business development and accounting system management is a specialty best left to professionals. I know my way around Unix, I even used to be a system administrator 15 years ago, but I am not up to par. When you reach a certain size and scale, you need a dedicated person running the hardware and OS show.

[Read the complete post on BlueBlog.](#)

11 PR Tips for Startups

PR is a tough game. When the market is red hot, it's hard to get noticed because there are a lot of companies competing for air time. When the market is cool it is hard to get people to pay any attention because they are not interested (tired after the hot market). And for startups it's even tougher to have effective PR because a startup can't throw a lot of money at the problem. In this post we look at how startups should approach PR.

Tip 1: Hire a PR firm

This may come as a surprise, but you do need a PR firm. An early stage startup can't always afford one, but that does not mean that it is not necessary. The number one reason you need a

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PR firm is because of their connections. They know people, because this is what they do - network.

Tip 2: Do not expect PR people to intimately learn your product

This is not their role. They are connectors, they are the bridge between you and the media. They are responsible for putting you in front of the right press. This is their job. It is your job to pitch your product, to explain why it is so awesome and why everyone should be using it.

Tip 3: Get PR people who understand your space

PR companies have specialties, not all of them are right for you. For example, if you are in the consumer Internet space, do not hire a PR firm that specializes in mobile technologies - they're not the same thing. If you are a consumer Internet company, you need a firm that knows blogosphere inside out, because this is how you reach your early adopter crowd.

Tip 4: Launch your product at a conference

The reason for this is that you are likely to get a lot more media coverage and instant attention than if you launch just any old time. But the conference needs to fit. For launches, you can do one of two things: launch at a specialized conference such as DEMO (which we recommend) or you can launch in a non-startup conference which has a launchpad feature. For example, Web 2.0 events typically present 10-15 startups, as do conferences like Supernova. It does not make sense to launch at a conference that does not have any startup participation because it won't be the proper context for your launch.

Tip 5: Create demos, videos, pictures, and slides

A newflash: press releases are dead. We have found them to be completely ineffective. To the point of zero leads. Zero. Instead, you need to prepare a new kind of media. Remember that people are spoiled these days, so they will have high expectations. If you think you can show up and tell them that you got the best new technology, hand wave, and then expect a write up, you are dreaming. You need to prepare. You need to distill your product and the message into something easily digestible, and you need to be very clear.

Tip 6: Do not launch or release big news on Monday or Friday

This may or may not be obvious but there are only 3 days when things get done: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. These are the best days to launch your product, in that order. Monday could work, but in the afternoon, because in the morning people still can't believe that the weekend is over. Fridays are really bad for PR - everyone is just waiting for the weekend.

Tip 7: Emailing after an introduction is more effective

One thing you have to understand about A-list bloggers like Michael Arrington, Richard MacManus, Om Malik and their colleagues is that they are getting thousands of emails each day from startups. It is physically impossible for them to process and respond to all that email. You may find that unfair, but this is just a simple fact. So once again, this is where a PR firm or at least a friendly connection via LinkedIn will come in handy. If you are introduced, the chances are far better that you will be heard. (No guarantees that you will be written up.)

Tip 8: Set an embargo and stick with it

This is something that we had to learn over and over again. Everyone wants an exclusive. Each blog that does news, wants to be first with the news. This is just the name of the game. If you do give an exclusive to one, you are running a big danger of not getting coverage in others. The way around this issue is to setup an embargo (meaning they can't blog about your launch until certain time) and then brief everyone prior to that and give them time to write about you.

Tip 9: Make sure people do not write without a brief from someone in your company

There has been a trend lately of writing based on a press release. While this does get you coverage, it is likely to do more bad than good. It is not just that you want to be heard, you want to be heard correctly. The key to that is to get a chance to tell your story directly to a reporter. A post based on a press release is likely to be wrong and harmful, while a post based on a one-on-one interaction is more likely to get it right.

Tip 10: Understand that major media coverage will not happen overnight

Chasing an article in a major magazine or newspaper like Wired or MIT Technology Review or the New York Times is not worth it. Their reporters will not write a feature until it becomes crystal clear that you are a huge success and are worthy of a feature. Instead of spending efforts on that, you are better off making the product really great and getting people to use it and evangelize it for you. The mainstream media will find you.

Tip 11: Community is the best PR strategy

It is very difficult to achieve continuous PR unless you do it via your own users. A thousand passionate users who have blogs and social network profiles can promote your product and expose you to more people than coverage on top blogs and magazines. For better or worse, news today is cheap. A post stays on the main page of a blog or newspaper site for a few hours and then scrolls out into a black hole. Google occasionally brings an old post to those who seek it, but realistically, news just flies by and no one wants yesterday's news.

[Read the complete post on BlueBlog.](#)

7 Conference Tips for Startups

We have been to quite a few conferences already and more than a few people have asked me which conferences are good. The problem is not that some conferences are bad, it's just that some conferences may not be the right venue for your startup. In this post we are going to share with you our experiences in the tech conference world.



Tip 1: Launch at DEMO

DEMO is a great venue because its sole focus is to launch companies. Despite the fact that you will be one of over sixty participants, you will be given the stage and attention. The show is very intense, as it takes place in only two days. Each company is given exactly 6 minutes. The stage presentations are mixed with pavilion presentations which are a few hours long.

Tip 2: Sponsor/attend a few high impact conferences

ETech, SWSX and Defrag are our top picks so far. Make sure there is a fit between the conference and your product. Check out who else is sponsoring, and get feedback and blog posts from last year's attendees before signing up.

Tip 3: Rent the best equipment you can afford

Whatever it takes to make your product look good. It simply does not make sense to spend money on the sponsorship and try to save on the equipment. Save on the hotel and airfare instead.

Tip 4: Save money by staying in a hotel near by

You can stay anywhere reasonably close. The only thing you'd be missing is hanging with the people at the bar in the evening. Then again, that could be useful because drunk people talk more.

Tip 5: Don't grab people to look at your product

Some people do it, I am against it. How would you feel if you were grabbed and pressured into watching a demo?

Tip 6: Don't tolerate upsells

This is a sensitive topic, but it is a very important one. Unfortunately a lot of people at these events are not there to see you, they are there to use you. Consider people who are looking for a job. It is perfectly reasonable for someone to come over and hand you a resume. It is not reasonable for them to take up a lot of your time or to ask a lot about your company. Get their information quickly and tell them you will be in touch.

Tip 7: Organize PR around the conference

Conferences are a great and maybe rare chance to interact with reporters and bloggers face-to-face. However, it is not a straightforward practice. Reporters are humans and as such, they play games. If you approach them head on they will say no for no particular reason. Somehow you need to make them feel special, which is not easy. It is a good idea to get a press list and contact reporters in advance and arrange appointments. You may get a no over the phone, but they might just come by your booth anyway when they have a free minute. If this sounds like dating, it very much feels that way too.

[Read the complete post on BlueBlog.](#)

5 Legal and Finance Tips for Startups

You are unlikely to think about lawyers and accountants when you dream up a piece of software that will change the world. Yet, if you want to build a real company you need to take care of the basics. While not the primary focus of your business, administrative functions are very important because they have impact on your daily life and the long term growth of your business. The main trick is to be aware of what needs to be done and do it quickly and effectively.





Tip 1: Setup a real company

The first step to setting up a business is to declare it to the world. Lots of startups in the garage might think that setting up a company does not make sense until you get the business off the ground. The idea of first writing the code and then incorporating is just plain wrong. First you need to figure out what kind of company are you creating and what is the ownership structure. Setting up a company is cheap and quick and it is an important starting point for your business. What you get in return is: legal protection, alignment of everyone's expectations, and basic knowledge about how companies work.

Tip 2: Get a Delaware LLC or Inc.

Likely the best way for you to setup a company is to create a Delaware Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) or a full C-Corporation (Inc). Delaware has traditionally been an attractive place for companies to set up shop because of its tax laws. The important difference between an LLC and an Inc is in how they treat taxes and the number of shareholders. The LLC is generally much simpler to maintain and it allows pass through taxes, which is good for companies that have income in the early days. Revenue can be treated as income to shareholders and only taxed once. In an Inc the tax is paid twice, first by the corporation and then again by the employees, as part of their regular withholding.

Tip 3: Don't save money on a lawyer

A lawyer? Are you kidding me?! Why would we need a lawyer for our brand new startup in a garage? As it turns out, there are a whole bunch of reasons and there is not much wiggle room here. Because a company is a legal entity having a lawyer is essential. For starters here is the list of things and documents that your lawyer should do for you in the first days and months of your business:

- Incorporate your business
- Create [articles of incorporation](#)
- Create [corporate bylaws](#) and maintain [board minutes](#)
- Create a [shareholder agreement](#)
- Create employment agreements
- Create a [stock options plan](#)

Tip 4: Get an accountant and, more importantly, a bookkeeper

Just like the legal aspects of a startup cannot be ignored, neither can the financial aspects. And unlike the legal stuff, which is mostly a one time deal, finances are ongoing and require continuous attention. To deal with finances you need two kinds of people: accountants and bookkeepers. The accountants are skilled in complexities and intricacies of tax law. They also conducts audits or reviews of the company, typically once a year. Accountants typically do not keep books because they are expensive (kind of like lawyers, maybe a bit cheaper). Instead the books are kept by bookkeepers and so to find a kick ass bookkeeper is another really important thing you need to do when you start a company. You can go either with an individual or with a service. I always prefer an individual because there is an opportunity to develop a relationship and get more personalized service.

Tip 5: Turn boring into learning

You have to take care of legal and financial aspects of the startup, so why not turn it into a learning experience? The legal and financial aspects of your company are important and interesting, and there are a lot of new things and ideas that you will encounter that are likely to

impress you. Learning about them will help you in the long run.

[Read the complete post on BlueBlog.](#)

Conclusion

One of the reasons for this post is to open up a wider discussion. What works for you? What software engineering, infrastructure, public relations, conferences, legal and finance tips can you share with us about your startup? Use the comments below to share your thoughts.

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1. Amazing Article, each and every single tip was worth it

Posted by: [Yako](#) | [December 27, 2007 4:10 AM](#)

2. Great stuff

Posted by: [Wills](#) | [December 27, 2007 5:16 AM](#)

3. You've just list all the main points on early stage startup practices... very well thought of!

Nhick

<http://www.itrush.com>

Posted by: [ITrush](#) | [December 27, 2007 5:40 AM](#)

4. What a great list! I can't say more.

Thanks.

Posted by: [Small Business Marketing](#) | [December 27, 2007 5:59 AM](#)

5. Great article Alex!

a must read for every beginner entrepreneur..

Eyal

<http://www.sutree.com>

Posted by: [SuTree](#) | [December 27, 2007 6:26 AM](#)

6. Real cool article.

I have a track in twitter for *startup* and everybody is talking about this!!!

"..Startups cannot afford to have less than A+ engineers." Oh Yes!

"Don't save money on a lawyer" Sad, but true!

and **Amazon Web Services Rock!**.

Posted by: [cristian sepúlveda](#) | [December 27, 2007 7:06 AM](#)

7. "Tip 9: Make sure people do not write without a brief from someone in your company"

This is a wise tip for bloggers as well. I try to never write about any company/product without some contact from the source. There's nothing worse than writing a great article that is - just - wrong...

Posted by: [Jon](#) | [December 27, 2007 8:39 AM](#)

8. These are great tips. During the first dot-com boom, I saw so many MBA managed companies hiring the wrong technical team to build the products. They'd over architect and end up spending millions of dollars to build a binary addition to the garbage heap.

What you need is a very simple system that can scale well and is flexible, because your software will change to meet the demands of the customer. Technical sales teams want to sell you on an elaborate system that costs millions because they get the millions.

Your needs to be agile and flexible. The waterfall method is dead.

Release early and release often. The only way this will be feasible is if you hire your own

technical team.

Posted by: [Randall](#) | [December 27, 2007 9:32 AM](#)

9. Alex,

Any suggestions in the following scenario:

I can code but am not a rock star coder. And design is by no means my forte.

In this scenario, what is the best way to come up with the initial prototype ?

Should the coding / design be outsourced ?

If so, how do I go about finding the right web dev/design agency ? There are just so many of them out there that it becomes difficult to weed out the good ones.

Any suggestions in getting that initial prototype ready ?

Posted by: [Pranav](#) | [December 27, 2007 9:43 AM](#)

10. The list is a keeper, but:

it suggests that an LLC or C corp is perfect insulation between corp liability and personal. It's not an impermeable wall.

Founders and directors are often held accountable for debts and obligations taken on by the corp.

LOB operations, like purchase orders and delivery promises are somewhat insulated.

Posted by: [Alan Wilensky](#) | [December 27, 2007 10:14 AM](#)

11. *"Just a few years back a purely technical founding team would have had a hard time raising money because there was a school of thought that only people with MBA degrees could run a company."*

Luckily that's over now!

Daniele

<http://www.mapopix.it>

Posted by: [Daniele](#) | [December 27, 2007 10:25 AM](#)

12. Alex,

In the conferences listed out there, i believe you have missed out Proto. www.proto.in is the biggest startup event happening in India for the product development companies. Will send you more details if you are interested in covering the January edition.

Thanks.

Posted by: [Narain](#) | [December 27, 2007 10:27 AM](#)

13. Good list except "Don't outsource" - Outsource is good option when you don't have VC money.

Posted by: [Jack](#) | [December 27, 2007 11:05 AM](#)

14. Popdup.com is a new startup on social networking + bookmarking website for video,news,pictures and shopping..

We can connect,share your favorites on the web..

<http://popdup.com>

Posted by: [Nandakumar](#) | [December 27, 2007 11:17 AM](#)

15. Great article, thanks! Just a quick question: "Google Analytics is packed with features, but more importantly it has an API", where did you get this information? I cannot find any official information on the Google Analytics website regarding this API, thanks.

Posted by: [David / IC](#) | [December 27, 2007 1:23 PM](#)

16. Great tips, although I would say it's difficult to follow a few of them if you're a start up without funding. Most people will probably need code (tip #1) and traction before obtaining funding, but without funding most people cannot afford a PR company, a lawyer and costs to travel to/launch at a conference.

Our approach, and I'm guessing a few other people's would be to launch, get some users and traction, undertake PR ourselves, which if successful would allow us to obtain funding, and then look at doing most of the things you suggest e.g. PR, lawyer, accountant, sponsor events etc afterwards.

Tips are great though, particularly in your software engineering section. Thanks.

Posted by: [Chris Dunst](#) | [December 27, 2007 1:31 PM](#)

17. I agree with Chris Dunst. I am in a similar situation. I think it will be wise to register a company, work on a project, grab some users, get VCs and then look for PR and lawyers.

Posted by: [xoail](#) | [December 27, 2007 3:45 PM](#)

18. @Alex maybe you must get a partner to found the company together. To pay for services isn't worth the money before prototype. maybe the first FIRST tip is to build a Great founder Team.

the DIGG effect still is worst than twitter effect. this link appeared all day in twitter's updates, but after appear at digg, the site gone to the hell!!!

ReadWriteWeb Administrator: You must follow infrastructure's Tip number 2: Get Amazon Webservices...!!!

Posted by: [cristian sepúlveda](#) | [December 27, 2007 3:51 PM](#)

19. I would agree with most of the tips except for a PR firm

Posted by: [Yakov](#) | [December 28, 2007 1:30 AM](#)

20. Amazing article, thanks!

Posted by: [Del Ben Oscar](#) | [December 28, 2007 8:02 AM](#)

21. Order of Operations for the bootstrappers:

Build a prototype so you know the idea will work technically, but keep it to yourself. Then get the LLC, S or C-Corp (c-corp if you are going to go after funding and/or have more than 75 employees). You never know who may try to sue you. Protect your assets.

Show it to those you know, maybe get NDA's if you want, try to build a team to support further development of the product and company.

Next, get a website up and show the world what you have. Release a beta version. Generate buzz. Get some users, prove to the world the system can work.

Work out the bugs, make the platform solid.

Start charging if that's your business model or bank the ads if that's your monetization. Get some PR. Generate traffic. Get a steady flow of traffic coming in.

When you feel confident start hiring people -- SLOWLY. One mistake some companies make is hiring too many people before you have enough work for them to do.

Sell your company for millions.

Posted by: [Randall](#) | [December 28, 2007 9:34 AM](#)

22. Thanks awesome stuff.

Posted by: [Ali Raza Shaikh](#) | [December 28, 2007 3:44 PM](#)

23. Great advices. Thanks a lot

Posted by: [carrenter](#) | [December 29, 2007 3:08 AM](#)

24. Set impossible deadlines. THEN MEET THEM.

You will build great results. Believe me, you will also build a great team.

Jay, from Bangalore

Posted by: [Jayakumar Hariharan](#) | [December 29, 2007 4:56 AM](#)

25. Great list for all entrepreneurs to refer to whenever they are looking to start their venture.

thanks for the updates.

Posted by: [click india classifieds](#) | [December 29, 2007 6:02 AM](#)

26. Hire A+ engineers who love coding,

yeah, if you know how a small startup company can attract A+ programmers. I think Joel Spoelsky explained this at best about attracting programmers to come and work for small startup company. And guess, it is rare by chance.

Posted by: [Wendy](#) | [December 29, 2007 5:27 PM](#)

27. You probably need some funding if you are going to pay for all the services suggested in your article. Well, what if you have no funding? You surely can't afford a PR firm. So you need to find other ways to do PR such as by writing and distributing news releases yourself and trying to activate the blogsphere. A good read is The New Rules of Marketing & PR by David Meerman Scott.

Posted by: [Chris](#) | [December 29, 2007 9:20 PM](#)

28. On the image at the top of the article..

Who writes out all of their variables names, and then shortens socket to s?

Posted by: [Harmless](#) | [December 30, 2007 8:22 AM](#)

29. @Harmless man you are picky!

Well I do not do that, but this is just a picture of a code. I picked it because of nice perspective.

Posted by: [Alex Iskold](#) | [December 30, 2007 8:31 AM](#)

30. Great post!

I would reinforce tip one for software engineering, I think a technical co-founder is almost a must have. Developing an innovative product, setting tough milestones and hitting those milestones is a very tough trick to pull off if none of the founding team are involved in the development.

As a side note, recently when I was setting up my new start-up I called one of the developers from a start-up I worked at in 2000 to get an estimate of how much work my new project would be (it was a similar sized app to what we are developing now). I asked as a comparison how much it took our start-up in 2000 off the ground. He told me they had about 30 employees working for about a 9 months, and my heart sank. Then he laughed and told me their job titles: CEO, CTO, Head of Product, Head of Software Development, Biz Dev etc. They had about three guys in the corner actually coding the site!

Posted by: [Nigel Eccles](#) | [December 31, 2007 2:18 AM](#)

31. The most interesting thing to me about this is someone actually finding a use for linkedin.com ...

Posted by: [Kalamazoo Web Designers and Web Site Development](#) | [January 1, 2008 6:47 PM](#)

32. Great post. Very good information and reasonably accessible. Now off to the races!

Troy Malone
Chief Evangelist
<http://www.pelotonics.com>

Posted by: [Troy Malone](#) | [January 2, 2008 11:54 PM](#)

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