

# Giving Stuff Away on the Internet

**Scott Adams**

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I spend about a third of my workday blogging. Thanks to the miracle of online advertising, that increases my income by 1%. I balance that by hoping no one asks me why I do it.

As with most of my life decisions, my impulse to blog was a puzzling little soup of miscellaneous causes that bubbled and simmered until one day I noticed I was doing something. I figured I needed a rationalization in case anyone asked. My rationalization for blogging was especially hard to concoct. I was giving away my product for free and hoping something good came of it.

I did have a few "artist" reasons for blogging. After 18 years of writing "Dilbert" comics, I was itching to slip the leash and just once write "turd" without getting an email from my editor. It might not seem like a big deal to you, but when you aren't allowed to write in the way you talk, it's like using the wrong end of the shovel to pick up, for example, a turd.

Over time, I noticed something unexpected and wonderful was happening with the blog. I had an army of volunteer editors, and they never slept. The readers were changing the course of my writing in real time. I would post my thoughts on a topic, and the masses told me what they thought of the day's offering without holding anything back. Often they'd correct my grammar or facts and I'd fix it in minutes. They were in turns brutal and encouraging. They wanted more posts on some topics and less of others. It was like the old marketing saying, "Your customers tell you what business you're in."

At some point I realized we were collectively writing a book, or at least the guts of one. I compiled the most popular (mostly the funniest) posts and pitched it to a publisher. I got a six-figure advance, and picked a title indirectly suggested by my legion of accidental collaborators: "Stick to Drawing Comics, Monkey-Brain!"

As part of the book deal, my publisher asked me to delete the parts of my blog archive that would be included in the book. The archives didn't get much traffic, so I didn't think much about deleting them. This turned out to be a major blunder in the "how people think" category.

**FYI**

Scott Adams has been publishing *Dilbert* since 1989. He regularly releases episodes to the public at [dilbert.com](http://dilbert.com). He blogs about comics and other issues at [dilbertblog.typepad.com](http://dilbertblog.typepad.com).

A surprising number of my readers were personally offended that I would remove material from the Internet that had once been free, even after they read it. It was as if I had broken into their homes and ripped the books off their shelves. They felt violated. And boy, I heard about it.

Some left negative reviews on Amazon.com to protest my crass commercialization. While no one has given the book a bad review for its content, a full half of the people who comment trash it for having once been free, as if that somehow mattered to the people who only read books on paper. In the end, the bad feeling I caused by not giving away my material for free forever will have a negative impact on book sales.

I've had mixed results with giving away content on the Internet. I was the first syndicated cartoon-ist to offer a comic on the Internet without charge ([www.dilbert.com](http://www.dilbert.com)). That gave a huge boost to the newspaper sales and licensing. The ad income was good too. Giving away the "Dilbert" comic for free continues to work well, although it cannibalizes my reprint book sales to some extent, and a fast-growing percentage of readers bypass the online ads with widgets, unauthorized RSS feeds and other workarounds.

A few years ago I tried an experiment where I put the entire text of my book, "God's Debris," on the Internet for free, after sales of the hard copy and its sequel, "The Religion War" slowed. My hope was that the people who liked the free e-book would buy the sequel. According to my fan mail, people loved the free book. I know they loved it because they emailed to ask when the sequel would also be available for free. For readers of my non-Dilbert books, I inadvertently set the market value for my work at zero. Oops.

So I've been watching with great interest as the band "Radiohead" pursues its experiment with pay-what-you-want downloads on the Internet. In the near term, the goodwill has inspired lots of people to pay. But I suspect many of them are placing a bet that paying a few bucks now will inspire all of their favorite bands to offer similar deals. That's when the market value of music will approach zero.

That's my guess. Free is more complicated than you'd think.