

# BIG DEAL



ON BEING FAMOUS TO ALMOST NO ONE

Robert Hoekman, Jr

**Big Deal: On Being Famous to Almost No One**

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**Author's note**

Many of the names in this publication have been changed for the purpose of protecting the privacy of those described.

# Introduction

Celebrity, however minor, is a drug, and behind every addiction is the story of a person who craves one. This is mine.

My name is Robert Hoekman, Jr, and in certain rooms, under certain circumstances, at certain moments, surrounded by certain people, and when all these very certain things come together, I am a big fucking deal.

In most rooms, however, under most circumstances, during most moments, among most people, I'm no one. Anonymous. No less or more important or interesting than any other stranger who walks in the door. And all I have to do to become anonymous is cross the street.

So for a long time now, I have avoided crossing the street. Because I have very much liked being a big fucking deal.

Andy Warhol said we'd all be famous for fifteen minutes. Someone else said we'd all be famous to fifteen people. I've always wanted to be famous; my life's ambition prior to achieving professional success was to become a rock star. I didn't become a rock star, of course; I'm not famous because I am part of a great band, or because I've played drums for all the biggest names. Rather, I am famous for something almost no one has heard of, which is to say I'm not actually famous at all. I'm barely even micro-famous. I'm *nano*-famous. I'm not even sure I should use the word "famous."

See, within the seven-billion-person population of the Earth, there is a minuscule percentage of people who live almost exclusively in first-world countries who make thirty-thousand dollars or more per year and sit at desks and stare at computer screens day in and day out practicing the high art of web design. And within that group, there is but a fraction who care enough to read books on the subject. And within that fraction, there is but a sub-section who are invested enough to spend a few hundred or a thousand bucks to take several days away from their work and friends and spouses and pets to attend a conference about web design to gain a fresh batch of insight and inspiration directly from the experts who wrote those books. It is within this context, and this context alone, that I am a big fucking deal.

Micro-fame isn't the sort of fame you've heard about; it doesn't bring with it a trail of TV interviews and tabloid reporters. It's smaller. And stupider. It's a special sort of fame that begins and ends within the confines of a postage-stamp-sized segment of the population.

In other words, *big deal*. I'm a narrow-scope celebrity in a profession only a tiny sliver of humanity even notices or cares about. I have expertise on my subject, sure, but that hardly warrants the amount of time I've spent in the past few years feeling important for it. I'm not Einstein. I'm not Hemingway. So far, I'm not even worthy of my own Wikipedia page.

But being famous to fifteen people can feel just like being famous to fifteen million when you spend all your time in the same room as those fifteen people. And with regard to how notoriety can affect your life, what matters is not the size of your audience, but the size of your ego and how you go about the work of feeding it. And as long as you keep showing up in the right rooms, your ego will remain well fed. Mine certainly was.

See, these conferences typically take place inside the event rooms of 3- and 4-star hotels—rooms with stages and lecterns and clip-on microphones and gigantic projection screens and seating enough for three- or four-hundred people, sometimes more, sometimes less. Inside that event room, I am a guy to know. An expert. An outlier. And for nearly six years, I have spent most of my time in that room—both literally and proverbially—standing on that stage, wearing that clip-on mic, preaching about design with that gigantic screen behind me, spreading the gospel to a crowd of three- or four-hundred people, sometimes more, sometimes less. Afterwards, I have prowled the streets with another collection of strangers and fellow speakers toward another conference party where I have downed another collection of drinks and another round of catered hors d'oeuvres. I have spent four days and three nights in the epicenter of any one of the world's finest cities having critic-quality dinners and overpriced cocktails paid for by conference organizers and publishers and corporate sponsors, soaking up the sights, and taking home memories from a set of unforgettable moments, all for the low, low cost of practically nothing because the conference paid for my flight and accommodations.

For the past six years, I have been flown all over the world, put up in great hotels, fed great dinners, introduced to amazing people, offered a microphone, and paid for taking it.

I know, it sounds great. And in and of itself, it is great. I won't lie. But this microcosmic version of fame comes with baggage just like that other, much bigger kind, and it is no better of an escape from the demons that lead to its pursuit. And because I've spent all six of those years surrounded by the precious few who care what I have to say, I have learned firsthand just how bad things can get when you claim a spot at the cool kids' table for all the wrong reasons.

This book is not about how to develop your professional career, and not about the low art of self-promotion. It's the story of my experience with nano-celebrity and a reflection on what I learned in the process. It's a story of professional success, personal failure, and soul-searching redemption. Most of all, it's the story of how I stopped letting my self-esteem hang on the validation of others. This is not a book of advice. While teaching a man to fish is certainly more valuable than giving him one, the real value is in the story of how you learned not to jab yourself with the hook.

This is the story of my jabbing myself with the hook.

To start, a little context: what exactly is my particular claim to professional fame?

Well, what I am known for is web design. Specifically, I am known for being a user experience strategist. This means I help companies figure out what their Internet-based products and services should do and why, what their customers' experiences should be like, and how they will use these products, and then I help my clients achieve that. It's an all-encompassing combination

of web and mobile interaction design, research, analysis, usability assessment, psychology, and blah blah blah. You'd be hard-pressed to find five people in your neighborhood who have any idea what my title means. It's not important. You only need to know this so you know why all my stories involve the web industry. My story could just as well have come from any industry.

In my eleven years as a web professional, I've written four books. I updated one of them to produce its second edition, and another was updated by a coauthor, so while I've written four from scratch, my name is on the spine of six. Before I wrote my first book, I contributed two chapters to another, consulted on one, tech-edited several, and ghost-wrote three chapters of one more. I've also had a few dozen articles published by various industry sites. It's because of all this loud-mouthing that I started being invited to speak at conferences. Speaking led to more clients, clients led to more writing, and writing led to more speaking.

My notoriety for this work has come mostly by accident. I never intended to become famous for my profession. When I started my career, I didn't even know there was such a thing as a famous web designer. I was a drummer, not a designer. I was the guy at the back of the stage, not the one with the microphone. I hid behind my drum set. I didn't talk to the audience. I didn't know the names of famous web designers. I didn't know what might make one famous, or where one might go to learn more about them. Was there a magazine, like *GQ* for web geeks? Did they hang out at bars together in northern California? Did they live in mansions and spend their days conjuring up ways to make sites bigger and better? I never wondered these things. I only bothered to learn to build a website because I wanted to build one for my band. I didn't expect to fall in love with that hideous beast I had always called work; before I discovered design, work was something that got in the way of my career plans. But design work was different. It required thought and creativity and problem-solving, and it was its own reward. I dove in. I said Yes to every project and opportunity that came my way. I took a lot of risks. I was unqualified for most of them. So with every move, I worked hard to become as knowledgeable and skillful as I needed to be. I pushed myself night and day to learn more. To *do* more. And after five years of working 80 hours a week on project after project for one company after another, all helmed by incapable visionaries promising glory and success beyond my wildest dreams and then failing miserably to deliver, I'd gotten pretty good.

And that's when it started.

With each step I took forward on my own volition, three doors opened as if by magic. One book turned into six. One article turned into sixty. One conference turned into a hundred. One reader turned into thousands. One little career turned into one giant mess.

It's a classic story. Boy earns success, boy lets success go to his head, boy turns into a jackass, boy fucks up his life, boy finally comes to his senses.

Coming to my senses, in this case, took long bouts of depression, a life-changing book, and months of therapy. It took supplanting my arrogance with genuine self-esteem. And it's because I finally feel as good and as troubled and as worthy and as flawed as everyone else that I now feel lucky for the fortune I've had. It's because I have finally stopped pinning my self-worth on the

opinions of others that I can now confess my demons, admit my faults, and stand up straighter because of it.

Indeed, I have come to resent the ways my success has spoiled me. I am shedding my royal robes and getting back to work on the camel.

And I'm starting right now.

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It's March 14th, 2011, and I'm sitting on a plastic chair in the green room on the fourth level of the Austin Convention Center reviewing my presentation notes for the talk I'm about to give. I'm in Austin with a few close friends, a boatload of professional acquaintances, and 20,000 complete strangers for what web industry professionals call “spring break for geeks”: the gargantuan annual event known as South By Southwest (SXSW). My MacBook Air is humming along. I'm wearing my favorite shirt—a black, Calvin Klein, button-down with the sleeves rolled up just enough to look like I'm about to get serious. I am calm. I am in control.

A 20-something volunteer wearing a SXSW t-shirt lets me know it's time to go. She leads me into the hallway, down the escalator, around the corner, down the long hall, and in through one of the three sets of double-doors that lead into Ballroom A. The room is two-thirds full. It's still fifteen minutes before my start time.

She leads me up the aisle, I step up onto the stage, and I begin a ritual I've completed so many times before. Plug the projector cable into the laptop, make sure the first slide displays correctly, acquire a bottle of water from whoever will bring me one, get the clip-on mic from the sound man, and then wait. Today, I take an additional step of giving the sound man my iPhone and the request to replace the house music with my own playlist. I am using this music to set the tone, to take control of my session room before I even start speaking. A minute later, I hear the first wailing guitar notes of Paul Kelley's “Stolen Apples.”

I sit down at the table on stage and look out into the audience. Looking back at me, looking around for friends, and looking at laptops and iPads and smart phones, are the faces of about 1,100 people. Over the next few minutes, 300 more file into the room. Conference volunteers guide them to the remaining open seats. More people come in and stand against the walls. Some sit on the floor in the back. I don't know this at the time, but outside, there is a line to get in.

For me, this is a dream come true. The first time I sat in Ballroom A was while attending a session here five years ago. I daydreamed then that one day I'd fill this room. That the subject of my work would become important enough to my industry that my session would be one of the biggest at SXSW. That 1,500 people would show up to learn about it. That I could be the guy to teach them.

Today is that day.

Today is also the first time in my five years on the conference circuit that I feel like I'm standing on stage for the right reason. It's a reason I never had before. Before, I did it because I wanted to be important. At times, because I thought I was.

I take a deep breath. Then several more. On the black cloth-covered table, I tap out the drum part to the second song in my playlist as Lucinda Williams sings "It's a long way to the top if you want to rock and roll."

Minutes to go. I am calm. I am in control.

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It took every day before this one for me to feel this sure-footed at this moment. Wisdom comes from experience, after all, and experience is just a kind word for all the fucking up you do before you learn to get it right.

This book is my confession—to you, to myself. But even more, this book is a bloodletting. It's my way of making sense of it all so I can rid myself of the disease once and for all.

I struggled with every sentence. For as righteous as I hope to be through these words, the eye of a needle, it turns out, is pretty fucking small.