

# Growth Hacking Is Bull

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## QUOTE:

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Doing SEO, SEM or social media marketing isn't "growth hacking." It's just marketing. Problem is some marketers & start-ups don't get that.

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The phrase "growth hacking" upsets me more than I should let it. Why? Because it takes me back to 2007, when I was about to graduate from college and start my career in online marketing — the same year Jason Calacanis started his highly-publicized crusade against the online marketing industry and, in particular, against professionals specializing in SEO and social media.

The whole thing was not only misguided, showing his complete and utter ignorance when it came to online marketing, but ended up being wholly farcical, as Calacanis would later become the very embodiment of the prototypical "snake oil salesman" he railed against with the launch of Mahalo.com.

Of course, Calacanis' story only serves to highlight a larger trend. The startup world and the technology blogosphere have spent the better part of the last decade misunderstanding online marketing, making broad generalizations about marketers and maligning the industry as a whole — only to now realize how essential online marketing is to their own success.

So, what do you do when you find yourself in a situation such as this one? Rebrand, rebrand, rebrand! And thus, the term "growth hacking" is born.

## What Growth Hacking Is Not

*"How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg? Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg."*

Growth hacking is often defined in opposition to traditional methods of gaining exposure and acquiring customers. Instead of using traditional media such as print, radio, and television advertising, you use new media such as content marketing, search engine optimization, and social media marketing.

## What does "growth hacking" entail, then? Let's see:

- Creating a search-based user acquisition strategy through content marketing and search engine optimization and marketing

- Embracing social media technologies and building a presence on platforms like Twitter and Facebook
- Using search to inform your product development roadmap
- Optimizing your websites for user experience and conversions
- Using cost-effective methods of advertising through in-depth analysis of analytics and extensive A/B testing

Not only are the tactics above *not* growth hacking, but they are also nothing new — this is online marketing as we've known it for years. It is not something proprietary and there are no secrets to it. SEO, SEM, SMO, SMM, content marketing, analytics, A/B testing, sales funnel/sales loop workflows and conversion optimization are fundamentals of online marketing and have been since the emergence each of these platforms.

Being well-versed in online marketing and executing these strategies for growth and user acquisition is just good sense. Applying a data-driven and programmatic approach to your online marketing strategy is not new, either — pick up any book on search engine optimization, and you'll gain some insight into how much good SEO relies on developer resources and collaboration within a company.

Integrating marketing (especially search and social) into every level of your organization and using it to inform your product development roadmap and user acquisition strategy is online marketing at its best.

### **Growth Hacking Demystified**

If anything, growth hacking can be defined as a wake-up call for the startup industry and technology blogosphere to start taking online marketing as we've known it for years more seriously. To suggest that the secret of growth hacking is the mindset not the toolset, detracts from its effectiveness. One of the fundamental principles of online marketing is the emphasis on a company-wide, holistic strategy that combines both mindset and toolsets.

Nabeel Hyatt, a venture partner at Spark Capital said, "If I'm given 1,000 visitors and I'm trying to convert as many as possible to customers, that's lead gen optimization. If I'm tuning the product to convert 1,000 visitors into 10,000 customers, that's growth [hacking]."

Well, he's wrong. If you're not focusing on turning 1,000 leads into 10,000 leads, you just have a crappy sales funnel and you should take another look at this chart.

Far from a disruption, the use of "growth hacking" is a juvenile response to an "I told you so" from the online marketing industry.

Not only is growth hacking a meaningless phrase used to rebrand online marketing by the very people who've spent the better part of their careers maligning online marketing, but at its worst,

it is actually harmful to your company. Growth hacking perpetuates this myth that you can magically achieve hockey-stick growth by using short-term “hacks.”

## Deconstructing Growth Hacking & Growth Hacks

Adam Breckler, Co-Founder and VP of Product at Visual.ly and self-proclaimed growth hacker, pointed to the following as successful examples of growth hacking. Let's take a look at a few of the notable ones from the list and see whether they are truly different from online marketing as we know it.

1. **Paypal's Friend Referral Bounty.** Paypal gave \$10 to each new customer and \$10 to the customer who referred them. This is called *referral marketing*.
2. **Hotmail Tagline.** Hotmail would add a signature at the bottom of outgoing messages saying, “Get your free email at Hotmail.” This is called *email signature marketing* and is one of the most underutilized marketing tools.
3. **Airbnb's Craigslist Integration.** AirBnB enabled cross-posting of your listing to Craigslist. *Cross-posting* as a form of marketing has existed since the days of forums and newsgroups. This is nothing new.
4. **Dropbox Incentivized Referral Program.** Dropbox gives you free storage for inviting your friends to Dropbox. Once again, this is called *referral marketing*.
5. **Instagram Cross-Posting.** Instagram enabled posting images to Twitter and Facebook. Once again, this is *cross-posting* as discussed above.
6. **Mint.com Content/SEO Strategy.** Mint developed a content marketing strategy based on search and social. This one is explicitly pointed out as *content marketing* and *search engine optimization*.

Finally, let's take a look at entrepreneur and self-proclaimed growth hacker Gagan Biyani's take on the difference between growth hacking and marketing. Biyani concedes that “growth hacking is not a new practice, just a new term,” just as we've explained above, but to suggest that manipulating Google's search ranking algorithm is the same as search engine optimization (and growth hacking) is an egregious assertion. Take the Rap Genius fiasco as an example — that is not search engine optimization or marketing, and it is not growth hacking. It is just spam.

I also take issue with the idea that a growth hacker is a marketer with a unique toolset. All the tools listed below are in every good online marketer's toolbox regardless of the type or scale of company you're working for.

1. **Viral Acquisition** — is a commonly used strategy by online marketers at the bottom of the sales funnel to engender customer loyalty and acquire customers through referral marketing or word-of-mouth.
2. **Paid Acquisition** — search ads, display ads, affiliate marketing, Facebook ads, mobile ads, and search engine marketing are all forms of paid acquisition used by online marketers.

3. **Content Marketing** — is a fundamental underpinning of any search optimization and marketing strategy, and it is hard to have a social media strategy without content marketing.
4. **E-mail Marketing** — is one of the most basic tools at the disposal of an online marketer and predates most social media.
5. **Search Engine Optimization** — “Startups that use SEO effectively build scalable infrastructure that applies to tens of thousands or millions of pages. Most of the SEO theory on the web is focused on ranking for just 5-10 keywords.” On the surface, I believe the argument is distinguishing between short-tail and long-tail SEO, but at the scale we’re talking about it seems more like something that would get you banned rather than let you capture the long tail. Either way, any complete SEO strategy focuses on both short-tail and long-tail keywords.
6. **A/B Testing & Analytics** — As I’ve mentioned before, A/B testing is vital to any organic or paid search campaign and necessary to optimize sales conversion workflows.

The next time you see a resume come across your desk that says “growth hacker” tell that person you’re interested in a seasoned online marketing professional and not some kid who can spew nonsensical buzzwords.

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” — William Shakespeare