



## Get Big: Approaching Industry Influencers to Build Awareness for Your Indie Game



Getting noticed in the vast digital world, with its myriad social networks and other channels of influence, might appear to require mountains of money and resources. This could be a problem for indie game developers with limited budgets. Expensive PR agencies might have once been the only option, but today's internet-based marketing channels are free for the asking. The networks and people who can provide the exposure you need often have as much to gain from your success as you do—it's your content that keeps them in business. More than they create, influencers endorse and

attract. They need a constant flow of new and visionary material to keep viewers interested. Indie game developers can feed that appetite for content as well as any major game studio, but how do you make that connection?

Getting the word out today means more than sprinkling seeds to the four winds of the web and nurturing the ones that take root. Today's influencers—the streamers, YouTubers and bloggers—can multiply your exposure many times over, and it's important to identify and target the ones that play your type of game. You also can gain exposure from your indie peers, traditional media outlets, gaming conferences, and from the consumers themselves.

The trick to approaching these disparate groups is in knowing how to identify the influencers of highest value to you, designing a plan of attack for each, and implementing and tracking the results of that plan.

This article covers strategies for approaching:

- Social network communities
- Streamers on Twitch\*, YouTube\*, and others
- Game retailers
- Gaming event attendees

It leans heavily on the know-how of Patrick DeFreitas and Dan Fineberg, marketing experts at Intel, who share time-tested techniques for publicizing and distributing titles on a budget that indies can afford.

## **Social Networks: Start with What You Know**

Social media channels play heavily into an overall brand-building strategy. Identify the social networks you're already familiar with, and start promoting your game there.

During the early stages of development, indies can already identify the aspects of their game that make it unique and fun. Before a game is even playable, screenshots or renderings of game scenery can be used to promote the game on sites such as Facebook, where it's easy for others to help spread the word, generate interest, and perhaps even spawn a community. "Even if you don't have anything to show but a single screenshot, if you have a good story, and something to share with the gaming community that they feel would be a value to their own work, then that's another way of bringing visibility to your game in the very, very early stages," says Patrick DeFreitas, Intel marketing manager for software, user experience, and media.

What is different about your game—its narrative, characters, or flow? Identify the characteristics of your game that will capture people's interest and post about them on social sites. One post could cover how the game riffs on a popular storyline, another its original setting, and the next how it augments reality in a way that's never been done before. It could be anything, but it should be something that's yours and

yours alone. DeFreitas says that outreach should begin at an early stage. Dan Fineberg—a software marketing and planning consultant at Intel—points out that new social channels, such as Medium\*, are being launched frequently and are getting a lot of attention. “It’s a relatively new medium when you think about it. There’s a lot of change, and you just have to stay abreast of it.”

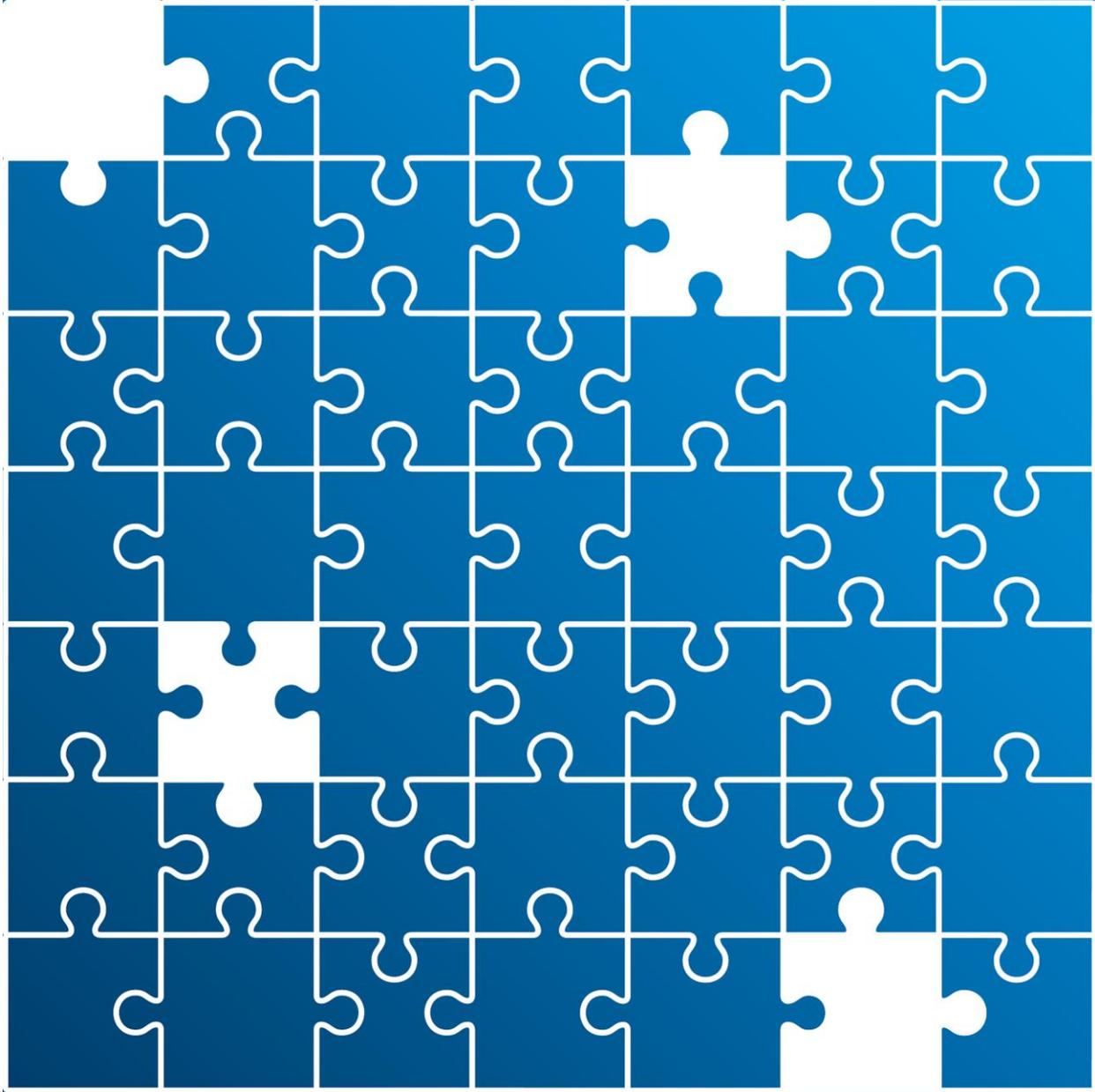
Dan also said that for generalized social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter\*, Instagram\*, and YouTube, your strategy must be carefully tailored. “There is a lot of nuance in terms of what each platform is best at doing.” Different social media channels have differing value to gamers and the game developer. “Not just in gaming, but in general software-related areas, you might find that you can get a lot more engagement on one medium such as Facebook, but that for creating more awareness of your game another channel such as Instagram or Twitter might be better—but your results are unique to you.”

The social aspect for some specialized sites might be relatively small, but having a presence can pay off later. “Places like [Green Man Gaming](#) and others like it have obvious relevance,” says Fineberg. They are good places to get early visibility and make inroads to the opportunities the sites offer to increase the distribution of your title. He added that Twitch also has become a powerful social platform, and can lead to engagements with influencers and others that might be interested in promoting your title.



**Figure 1:** *Identify and spread the word about the unique aspects of your process and game.*

“You’ve also got Reddit\*,” notes DeFreitas. “There are so many different groups within those channels that really cater to developers and individual developer programs, and I think they’ll continue to use those social channels.” The trick is to balance your game development time with the time you spend on social networks. DeFreitas added: “You only have so much time in the day to dedicate to exchanging content and information with your digital community online, versus focusing on creating your game.” He advises that selecting communities and channels that yield the best return-per-engagement might involve some trial and error. Make sure you’re providing value and tapping into a channel that sees what you’re doing is innovative, progressive or unique, and parallel to what that channel or community is all about. The community itself will let you know, either by silence or by storm.



**Figure 2:** *As the pieces of your game come together, put them in the public eye to generate interest and build a community.*

## **An Agenda for Events**

A great place to make direct contact with influencers, industry figures, and game enthusiasts is at developer events, such as the [Intel® Buzz Workshop](#) series, where the focus isn't necessarily on showing people a game that's ready for market. "You could be talking about your development techniques, the challenges, and things that you've overcome," says DeFreitas. Also, on the agenda could be some of the different solutions you've implemented that other developers may find interesting or valuable.

The most important element of the indie's marketing campaign is to approach influencers who can spread the word about your game, and get people interested in buying and playing it. Schedule appointments ahead of time, and take advantage of events that draw together personalities that you otherwise would have to spend a vast amount of time and money tracking down individually. Think ahead and plan your campaign.

Once your game has reached playability, offering a closed beta is a great way to give gamers a sneak preview. DeFreitas described how Polish game developers Destructive Creations are using this strategy for the upcoming release of [Ancestors Legacy](#)\*. "They created [videos on YouTube](#). They created a product page on Steam and, to get the word out for the game, they created all of this content—and obviously the game's not even ready for market."



**Figure 3:** To create buzz, Destructive Creations created prerelease content for Ancestors Legacy\*.

"The closed beta means getting people to hammer on the game itself, and you're still capturing all the feedback," says DeFreitas. "That feedback won't necessarily affect your ratings on Steam, because everyone understands that this is a closed environment." Testers are made to feel like insiders, which likely means they'll talk about the game more, and it gives them a stake in your game's success—and a say in what goes into it. "It's a clever way of doing that, when you think about it. Besides them playing your game and giving feedback, if they love it they'll get a free copy, or a couple of copies to give to friends and family when everything is ready." You offer something interesting, exclusive, and unique to your audience, as well as a reward for participating.

## Strategies for Streamers

Is your game a first-person shooter, side-scroller, or immersive adventure? Does it take place in space or a fantasy land? One-on-one or online multiplayer? Identify streamers who play your type of game. Be brave, aim high, and list them all, regardless of their status. “Don’t be afraid to start with the mid-tier or upper-tier influencers and see if they’ll be willing to stream,” says DeFreitas. After all, streamers need content to fill their pipelines, gain new viewers, and increase their influence. Their inclination will be to listen, but your time with them will be limited. So, develop and practice your pitch—you might only get one shot.

“If you can engage with people like that, and implement some of their ideas in your game, they will likely feel really positive toward what you’re doing and help promote it,” Fineberg added. This can be a critical strategy in any market—luminaries and influencers get on your side to champion your cause because you’ve realized their vision. “That’s important, because they’re opinion leaders, and they have ideas that lots of people care about. You can help them build equity in their value to their audience, and they’ll be inclined to help you, in return.”

Of course, there could be roadblocks. “Once you start reaching the celebrity influencers and streamers that are out there, often they’re committed to a specific title or genre, or under commitments made to a sponsor,” says DeFreitas. This makes it a greater challenge to pull someone in to stream your game, especially if it doesn’t have the level of success of other games they’re currently streaming. There may be, however, opportunities to partner with the sponsors themselves. “Channel folks can help,” Fineberg says, “because as you develop relationships in distribution, that can become an entrée into their joint go-to-market activities, including engaging with influencers.”

DeFreitas agrees. He says that developers should also look to the hardware companies producing the kit used by gamers. “Some of the independent software vendor developers we’re working with today wouldn’t have reached out to some of the streamers that we work with, if we didn’t insert ourselves as part of the equation.”

## Tap Existing Contacts

Identify the sponsors of the streamers you plan to approach and exploit any existing relationship or connection you might have with them. “Those influencers are already getting paid through sponsorship, so if they have a channel and they need to fill that channel with content they may be open to opportunities to insert your game into that channel, which is already being paid for and covered by the bigger partner or brand sponsoring it,” says DeFreitas.

Intel, your game engine maker, and others, also might maintain influencer networks as part of their developer programs. Some might even have their own streaming channels. “It takes considerable energy, time, and resources to keep one of those up and running and filled with content,” says DeFreitas. “So, they are probably always looking for opportunities to pull in new content, especially if it’s a title that’s related to their technology.”

## Talk to Game Retailers

“Companies like Green Man Gaming and Humble Bundle want to increase their revenues, so they engage the developers of games they distribute in go-to-market promotional activities to build interest and demand for the titles,” says Fineberg. Retailers have affiliates, influencer channels, and networks, too, and all are aimed at generating revenue. Green Man Gaming maintains a network of about 3,000 influencers, explains DeFreitas, but access doesn’t come for free. Retailers usually expect you to contribute time, effort, and possibly money, to the go-to-market program.

Some of that time should include putting together an *influencer kit* that describes the game in positive terms. Include artwork and other relevant game assets in your kit. And make it easy for retailers and influencers to understand, help promote, and sell your product. After signing a retail contract, you’ll be working with either an account manager or with a marketing team. According to DeFreitas, your proposal might be to set aside 50 influencers and give each of them three keys to give out to their audience. “You’re most likely going to get some visibility on their channels.”

Repeat this process for other distribution channels. “Now you’re taking their networks, and leveraging their audiences on your behalf, without really doing a lot of work,” says DeFreitas. “Essentially, you’re giving them the keys, you’re giving them the artwork, you’re giving them some interesting facts about the game itself, you’re packaging it up, and you’re pushing it out. Ultimately what they are trying to do is bring visibility to your game, drive audiences back to their respective retail channels, and convert those sales.”



**Figure 4:** A successful publicity strategy will include many interrelated components, working together.

### **Take a Holistic Approach**

As an independent game developer your business strategy needs to begin early in your design process, evolve as the game does, and continue through release and distribution. You must find the right balance between coding and marketing, learn from mistakes, focus on the strategies that succeed, identify the most efficient influencers, and prioritize your contact and engagement with them.



**Figure 5:** *Be brave. No matter how big the influencer, it's a mutually beneficial partnership.*

(Image Source: Image:

[http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_ANR73\\_NGTfU/S7y4CAcq2EI/AAAAAAAAAEE/OIMSbQJhybM/w1200-h630-p-k-no-nu/bravery.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_ANR73_NGTfU/S7y4CAcq2EI/AAAAAAAAAEE/OIMSbQJhybM/w1200-h630-p-k-no-nu/bravery.jpg))

Awareness marketing has historically been thought of as separate from lead generation. “That’s all changed. Social media really combines both awareness and lead generation in one fell swoop,” says DeFreitas. The reason for this is simply due to the sheer mass of sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. “When viral content exists on one, or there’s a controversy or what have you, it creates a ripple effect throughout the entire mass communication media spectrum,” he explained.

Influencers need you as much as you need them. So, remember to be brave, and try to avoid being eaten.

## Resources

Green Man Gaming: <https://www.greenmangaming.com/>

Humble Bundle: <https://www.humblebundle.com/>

Taboola: <https://www.taboola.com/>

Intel® Developer Zone: <https://software.intel.com/en-us>

Intel® Buzz Workshop Series: <https://software.intel.com/en-us/event/buzzworkshop>

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