

ADSENSE MILLIONAIRES

An Analysis Of The Biggest
Viral Websites In The World

By Chris Lee

Imagine logging into your AdSense account and seeing over 5 figures earned for the day. That's pretty unbelievable considering you would need an unbelievable amount of traffic to get anywhere close to those kinds of numbers.

I've read stories about sites like ViralNova in the past, but I've never seen it with my own eyes until a few weeks ago.

Last week, I mentioned that I had the [chance to briefly work](#) with one of the biggest viral websites on the internet. I was able to get an inside look at how a giant successful viral media company operates.

The best part is that I was able to get access to exactly what metrics they look at to make stories go viral. It opened up my eyes completely to a different way of running Facebook ads and creating content for these types of sites.

I recently did a lot of research into the whole viral business model just out of my own curiosity, and I still can't get over how much traffic these sites get. And the amount of money they make is absurd.

Also, they run AdSense as their main source of revenue so that's inline with what I do on a daily basis (although they do run other ad networks as well).

So I decided to do an analysis of some big viral websites and calculate how much they're making.

The websites:

1. [BuzzFeed](#)
2. [Diply](#)
3. [Distractify](#)
4. [ViralNova](#)
5. [Little Things](#)

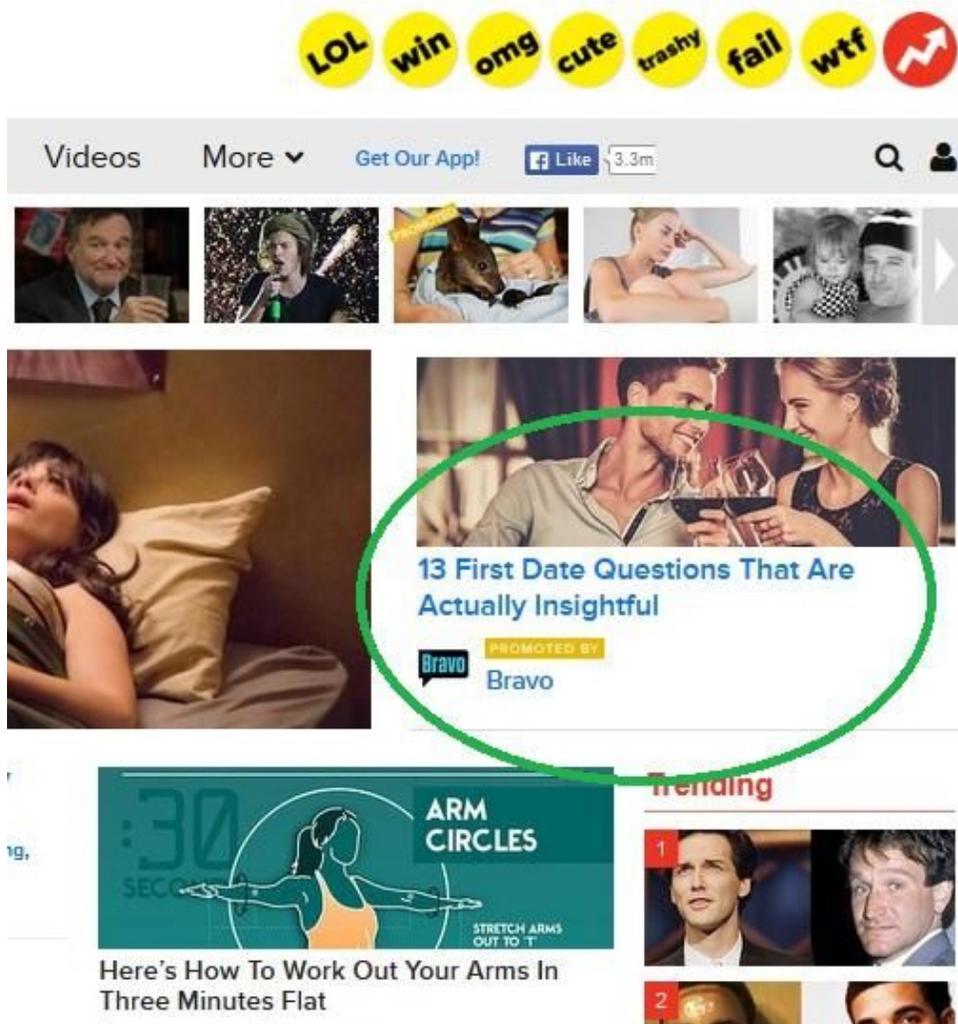
How do these sites make money

All of these sites make money from cost-per-click advertising (AdSense) except for BuzzFeed. They seem to have their [own monetization strategy](#) where they will work with big brands to produce in-content advertising.

BuzzFeed's Sponsored Content

Basically, they'll create a post that looks just like their own, relevant to the brand's industry, and then promote the company through a byline and link at the end of the post.

They do state that the post is advertorial.



From what I've heard, they charge \$100,000/month for brands to advertise on their site.

That's pretty amazing, and is only achievable for BuzzFeed because their one of the biggest brands in the world themselves.

Everyone Else's Advertising Model

Almost every other viral website makes money through 3rd party ad networks like AdSense.

I see most of them running AdSense except a few of them.

They also run ads through networks like [Taboola](#) and [OutBrain](#) along with AdSense. You have probably seen these types of ads before. At the end of the post, there is a list of other posts, usually title "From The Web" and works on a CPC model like AdSense.

Cost per click is a lot lower for these networks but click-through-rate is great. And you might imagine why when the ads are filled with posts like this:

You May Like

Sponsored Links by Taboola

| | | |
|--|--|---|
|  <p>Learn How NYC's Largest Fruit And Vegetable Distributor Navigates T...</p> <p>Teletrac</p> |  <p>They How Old?! 6 Celebs Who Don't Look Their Age</p> <p>Wow!Can'tBelieveIt.com</p> |  <p>This Man Found Out He Was Royalty. You'll Never Guess How!</p> <p>MyHeritage</p> |
|  <p>10 of the Largest and Creepiest Animals Know to Man</p> <p>Calliser</p> |  <p>23 Shocking Must-See Photos From the Past!</p> <p>RIPBird</p> |  <p>The Most Distinguished Walmart Shoppers</p> <p>Hypster Guru</p> |

It also blends in on each site to match their design. It really looks like it's just a list of related posts on the site and doesn't look like an ad at all. That makes for a lot of clicking after people scroll down to the bottom of the post.

Still, as I'll explain later when we look at monthly revenues, it doesn't come anywhere close to what they make with AdSense.

How much traffic are these sites getting?

BuzzFeed.com

Buzzfeed is definitely on a level of their own when it comes to viral content. Besides getting over 176 million visitors last month, they also are one of the only sites producing their own content.

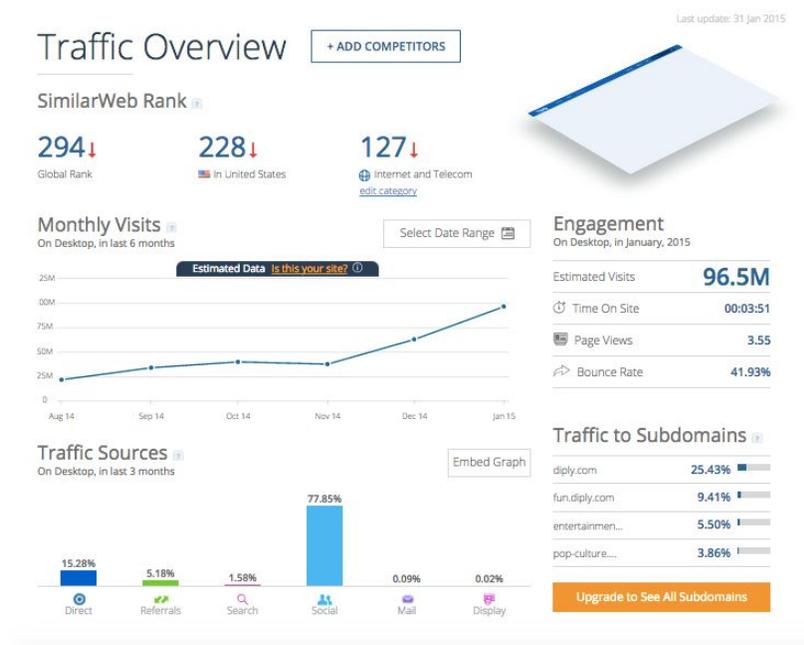
Of course, a lot of what they use for their stories are taken from other websites like Reddit, but they are the only ones actively curating list posts, creating their own quizzes, creating videos on YouTube, and now they're even covering news stories.



What's interesting to note is that only 50% of their total traffic comes from social. A lot of these other sites get as much as 90% of their traffic through social.

Diply.com

Diply's traffic was much higher than I thought it would be. With 96 million visitors last month, they're certainly one of the biggest players in the viral traffic game.



They're getting 77% of their traffic through social.

Distractify.com

Distractify only received 19 million visitors last month. It's really weird to have to say "only" when they're getting multi millions of visitors every month.



They're getting 63% of their visitors from social, which is pretty impressive for them to get so many direct visitors.

ViralNova

The infamous ViralNova. They received a lot of press the last 2 years for generating an insane amount of traffic with only a one-person team.

They're one of the biggest reasons that these viral sites started to pop up everywhere after people saw the potential income they could generate in a fast amount of time.

Most of them quickly realized it wasn't so easy and blew a LOT of money on Facebook ads.



At 11 million, it's a LOT lower than last year when they were reporting over 200 million.

They're getting 61% of their visitors through social now.

I also saw ads for their site on Taboola ads on other viral sites, so I guess they're trying to branch out into different advertising channels than just Facebook.

Little Things

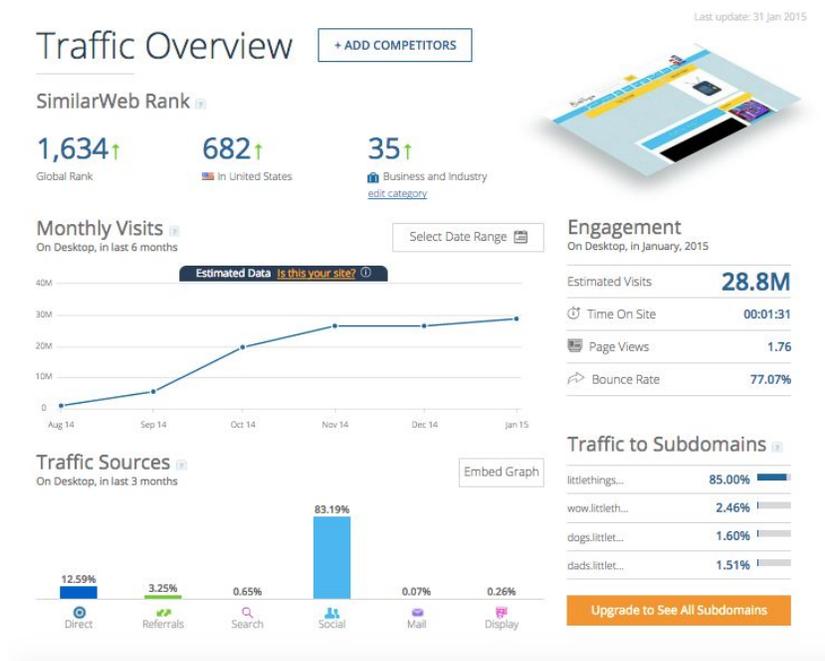
Little Things is a pretty new player, but they're doing a lot of things right. At 28 million visitors last month, they're getting more traffic than these giants ViralNova and Distractify.

I've heard of ViralNova, Distractify, and Dibly before, and saw them in my Facebook news feed, but never have I heard of Little Things.

The only way I found them was through their ad on BuzzFeed.

I'm not sure if they paid the \$100,000/month to be featured on BuzzFeed's site, BuzzFeed gave them a smaller fee / smaller exposure deal, or if it's a sister site of BuzzFeed.

Maybe someone who knows can clear this up because I think it's an absurd amount of money to spend towards advertising on BuzzFeed, even if it's the perfect advertising for them.



They're getting 83% of their visitors through social, which makes more sense for a newer site.

Facebook is everything

A lot of these sites surprised me that they weren't getting a larger percentage of their traffic through social.

However, I guess Dibly, Distractify, and the older more established sites are able to get more direct traffic as they get more exposure to millions of visitors.

At the beginning stages, 90%+ of total traffic from social makes more sense.

99% Facebook

Of the social traffic, 99% is Facebook. It's not just a figure of speech. It's actually **99%**.

This is consistent for all websites in the viral game. Facebook is king and a lot of the newer sites don't even pay attention to the other social networks because they don't come anywhere close to what Facebook can drive.

How much do these sites make?

So finally, let's take a look at how much these sites are making. They don't reveal their numbers publicly except for BuzzFeed. So, for the other sites, we'll do some calculations based on traffic numbers and an average RPM (revenue per 1000 visitors) calculated with industry averages and AdSense averages.

Buzzfeed

BuzzFeed is the only site to have a publicly announced valuation. In August of last year (2014), they raised another \$50M in funding that brought their valuation at **\$850 million**.

Thats.... insane.....

They're almost a billion dollar company, and at its simplest description, they just produce viral content.

How much do they make per month?

BuzzFeed crossed \$100 million in revenue for 2014. I couldn't find the exact number, but earlier in August, they stated they [expected to make \\$120 million by the end of the year](#) so it should be pretty close to that.

At \$120 million for the year, that's \$10 million per month.

Remember, though, that they use a different monetization strategy than the other viral sites out there. They leverage their brand power and work with brands directly for fees upwards of \$100,000/month.

That puts BuzzFeed on an income level of its own. No site can get to that level with the same level of traffic as them.

Their biggest viral competitors don't even come close to \$1 million / month, just to give you an idea of how far ahead they are.

How much do the rest of them make with advertising then?

None of the other sites publicly reveal their earnings. A lot of the site owners are just a few people who started out just testing out the model and now are crushing it.

The closest published revenue figure we have is from ViralNova. Last year, they were contemplating selling their site, so some of the figures were estimated by top analysts from sites like [Business Insider](#), [Bloomberg](#), [The Wire](#), and [Inc](#).

The figures calculated for ViralNova were 200 million page views in December for an estimated AdSense revenue of \$400,000.

That works out to be a \$2 RPM (revenue per 1000 impressions).

Since the rest of the sites are pretty much consistent with one other in terms of traffic numbers, traffic source, type of content, and layout of their site, we can accurately assume that their CTR and CPC is similar and there are no big differences between them.

So using a \$2 RPM for AdSense, we can calculate the following revenues per month and year.

1. Dibly – \$192,000/month = \$2,304,000/year
2. Distractify – \$38,000/month – \$456,000/year
3. ViralNova – \$22,000/month – \$264,000/year
4. Little Things – \$57,600/month – \$691,200/year

That's just based off of January 2014's traffic so their yearly income is likely to be really different. Traffic to these sites shift in the millions every month, based on how well their stories do.

For instance, a story could easily blow up and triple last month's traffic and income. Or it might be a slow and stale period and traffic could cut in half. It's just the way the game works.

But with the information given, that's a pretty close estimation of what they're making **per month** with those traffic numbers.

Taboola, Outbrain, Etc.

It's important to note that all of these sites use at least one other ad network such as Taboola or Outbrain to increase their revenues.

I didn't include them into the calculations because:

They don't pay nearly as much as AdSense. Although official average RPM numbers aren't available for these networks, PlayBuzz, another viral website specializing in quizzes, reported that it's about 1/10th of what AdSense brings in. It still makes a dent when you're getting millions of visitors, but not nearly as much as AdSense.

It's not all profit, obviously

Of course these numbers are not all profit. A ton of money is spent on Facebook ads to drive this traffic.

I learned that it doesn't really matter if you have 2 million fans on your Facebook page. You still have to run ads the same way a new page would have to **if** you want to give it a push at going viral.

Having a lot of fans helps reach fans for free and allows you to test run your posts. That way, you can decide which posts to push with ads if they're getting a high engagement rate.

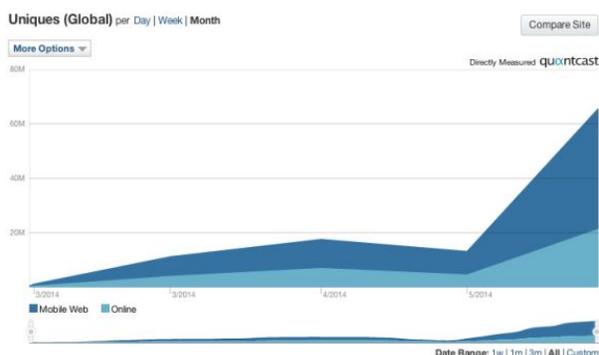
Not everything goes viral, and it can cost a LOT of money to push a bunch of different stories everyday.

Also, each of these sites have a large team (outsourced or in-house) workers finding and posting their content for them so that's another chunk of cash going towards their salaries.

Is this method still profitable?

Yes, it clearly is for these big sites. However, maybe not as much as it used to be for newer sites. It's still possible for new sites to pop up and get millions of visitors. It just won't be as cheap and easy as it was in the past.

It's still the easiest and fastest way for regular people to get traffic stats like this:



From nothing to millions in a matter of months.

I see a lot of brand new sites in my Facebook feed these days from people trying out the model. In a matter of months, they're gone.

They just can't spend any more money pushing posts and trying to make them go viral because it's costing more than it's bringing in.

That's just the nature of this game. Go viral or go home.

Will I start my own viral website?

Right now, the decision's leaning towards no.

In the past, I never really attempted making one because it seemed the fad was over. By the time I read about these sites making millions in just a matter of months, I began seeing new sites pop up in my Facebook feed almost daily. On top of that, Facebook [announced an algorithm change](#) and I read about big sites who [plunged in traffic](#) because of it.

Also, the whole clickbait approach pushing meaningless content at people didn't really interest me enough to want to pursue it.

Today, I know a lot more about the model, but it's just so much work, and there are so many moving parts. I would have to put everything else to the side for awhile and go full throttle with it.

I don't think a passive approach to this is viable as there are just too many things you need to do in order to maintain your page's engagement rate.

Another approach

What I would rather do is mix viral traffic with SEO traffic.

These viral sites get almost **no** search traffic because none of their content is unique, and the things they write about don't get many searches, if any.

But I might consider building a new website around a topic that's highly sharable and highly searchable, too. That way, I don't have to rely on a single traffic source, but rather use social only to grow overall long-term traffic to it.

A site that's doing well with this strategy is lifehack.org.

Just look at their traffic stats.



16 million! And if you visit their site, you'll see it's a LOT different than the viral sites mentioned earlier.

They focus on getting a LOT of traffic through search by writing long, high quality articles around highly searched topics. At the same time, the stuff they write is highly share-able.

They're obviously taking advantage of their high brand power and authority in the search engines and are pumping out articles. They look almost like a content farm. But it's clearly working so good for them.

A more sustainable business model

Creating a viral site seems more like a short-term model. Who knows how long these sites will be able to thrive off of traffic from Facebook? Facebook makes one change, and they could be out of business in a matter of days.

But if you take a similar approach to a site with high quality (evergreen) content, then it's a different story. Instead of solely relying on social for all your traffic, you're supplementally using it to grow it instead with search engine traffic as your main strategy.

In the long run, search traffic will continuously rise, you'll have tons of followers, and you'll have the perfect traffic stats like Life Hack has. A great combination of traffic sources: direct, social, and search engine traffic.

Sounds much better to me.