

Google+ Hangouts™ for Business

How to use Google+ Hangouts to Improve Brand Impact, Build Business, and Communicate in Real-Time

David Amerland

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Google+ Hangouts™ for Business

How to Use Google+ Hangouts to Improve
Brand Impact, Build Business, and
Communicate in Real Time

DAVID AMERLAND

que®

800 East 96th Street,
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Google+ Hangouts™ for Business: How to Use Google+ Hangouts to Improve Brand Impact, Build Business, and Communicate in Real Time
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About the Author

David Amerland's involvement with the Web goes back to the days when the number of websites in existence could fit in a printed 80-page directory and SEO consisted of keyword stuffing and pixel-wide hidden text.

Since those less enlightened days, he has worked with blue-chip multinationals and individual entrepreneurs helping them craft SEO and social media marketing strategies that work with their internal cultures and deliver value to their target audience.

He writes for Forbes, HP UK, and Social Media Today and blogs on his own website, DavidAmerland.com. When he is not writing or surfing the Web, he spends time giving lectures on how social media is changing everything.

Dedication

This one, like all the others, is for N. Every step of every day is a new beginning.

Acknowledgments

It is difficult to separate a book from its journey. Each idea has many midwives before it comes to light. This one is no exception. Katherine Bull, Acquisitions Editor extraordinaire, takes center stage here. As a writer I have worked with many editors. It takes a lot to stand out in this job and she certainly makes it look effortless. For the transition of this book from a bunch of words and images into a document that actually has value for the reader, I have to thank my friends and contacts at Google+. You guys, and you all know who you are, have changed my world and approach to writing. For your ideas, suggestions, and support—thank you is never enough. I feel compelled to mention by name a few whose contribution helped me immensely. Martin Shervington and Lee Smallwood, you guys are turning out to be a fixture in my online life. Keith McMean, for “getting” the element of personalization out of a conversation or two. Yifat Cohen, for breaking me gently into the world of Hangouts on Air, many moons ago. A very special thanks for their comments and permission to quote them goes to Scott Scowcroft, a man whose insights on HOA production values have pushed the envelope, and Marianne Howell Wright, whose brilliance in using YouTube and video in an authentic way is very much part of the way things are evolving towards authenticity and personalization on the web. Last in all this but never least has to be Ronnie Bincer, whose overall guidance on Google+ has helped many of us appear way more professional hosting a Hangout on Air than our own knowledge and expertise would have allowed.

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As the reader of this book, *you* are our most important critic and commentator. We value your opinion and want to know what we're doing right, what we could do better, what areas you'd like to see us publish in, and any other words of wisdom you're willing to pass our way.

As an associate publisher for Que Publishing, I welcome your comments. You can email or write me directly to let me know what you did or didn't like about this book—as well as what we can do to make our books better.

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Foreword

Over the past few years, social media has enabled people to reach out to old friends and build new communities, but there has been something missing. Unless people are able to “see” the face behind the tweet, comment, or post, we are limited in how much we can connect.

Through Hangouts we can not only connect in private groups, but also choose to broadcast content to the world through our own, free YouTube channels. As such, we can now turn a social presence into something that enables us to build trust, authority, and reputation through simply being ourselves.

Many moons ago, I had the good fortune to write a section of Professor Robert Winston’s book on communication called simply, *Human*. With a focus on “non-verbal” communication, I considered facial expression and signs, some that transcended cultures and others whose meanings were more local. As the world moves online, there is a need for people to connect in new ways, and that is exactly reflective of my experience of Google Hangouts. The technology allows for a full immersion experience where the technology “just gets out the way,” allowing us to focus on what matters: relationships. The visual and auditory feedback allows you to deepen these relationships with every event in which you participate, with people from all over the world or just from your building, creating virtual teams and moving seamlessly from social experience in words alone to one that embraces more of the senses, allowing the relational dance to form and develop. It really is quite something.

I would recommend you find out for yourself, and know that this is just the beginning of the whole world coming together in a new way.

—*Martin Shervington*

Plus Your Business Community Manager and Owner

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Introduction

Back in the 1980s, when mail-order businesses were taking off, a sheepskin merchant based in Australia lamented the cost involved in printing and shipping heavy, expensively produced product catalogs to his global customers. His argument was that since he was shipping from a warehouse and his products were top-notch, he would much rather invest the cost of his catalog in lower prices and even better quality than in fancy marketing aids.

He was completely missing the point. The cost he was lamenting was actually the minimum investment required by his potential customers before they could trust him enough to do business with him without ever having met him. The trust equation that was in operation back then required a certain expense in order to create the perception of solidity in a business, which would then translate into trust and lead to purchase transactions.

The world does not work that way anymore. The entry barrier to instant, visual, global communication has dropped to the price of a laptop and an Internet connection. Smartphones, tablets, and hotspots are turning the globe into a wired, connected community where the chatter never stops. The connectivity and real-time video contact that are now possible have transformed the identity-forming, trust-shaping game into something else—something new, more complicated, and, at the same time, more real and authentic.

Dealing with all this alone is a challenge that requires a different way of behaving online and a new way of marketing. But there is more. The connectivity, the “chatter,” has its own impetus and acts as its own catalyst. And from it, fresh value is now being unlocked, new ideas are arising, and new business opportunities are being born, as well as challenges the likes of which we have not seen before.

Foresight is the United Kingdom government wing that is charged with carrying out surveys that help to determine future government policies. In its latest commissioned survey of digital identity, webcams were described this way: “The latest version of increasingly ubiquitous online activity, this is a form of hyper realist identity with unprecedentedly intense face-to-face communication potentially changing our offline identity through increasing self-consciousness.”

Admittedly, self-consciousness is something that none of us envisaged as a problem on the Web. It has always been the place where we felt most at home, precisely because we could not be seen. We could play online games dressed in our underwear, do our banking wearing our pj’s, and never worry about being groomed, speaking clearly, or being able to articulate our thoughts on the go.

Nevertheless, here we are. The ability to visually connect with another person or group of people, any time, any place, from potentially anywhere, is radically changing the face of the Web. In the process it is also changing the ease with which we connect across the world, and inevitably it impacts upon the way we do business.

How?

In the days before the Internet, if you worked for a company, the place to hang out was the office water cooler. That’s where you met new people, caught up on the gossip, and exchanged all those bits of information that enabled you to do your job properly.

In the digital age of the connected economy, the office water cooler has gone. Workers are on the move; companies are frequently spread across countries, continents, and time zones. The commute to work has changed from time spent in the car or public transportation in order to put in a nine-to-five, into the time it takes to get from the bedroom to the home office and log on to the Web. The eight-hour day has shifted, fragmented, and, inevitably, expanded.

What has remained the same, however, is the need for the water cooler. The place to hang out, the capacity to catch up on gossip, shoot the breeze, find out something interesting and meet new people. Whether real or virtual the “water cooler” is a requirement for human contact in an environment that allows trust to form. Outside the office businesses used exhibitions, events, and public presentations as touchpoints with their audience. Those were the moments where one could talk to people and get a sense of the character of a business.

In the digital age that role has been taken over by the Hangout. The speed, stability, and ever-evolving functionality of the Google+ Hangout feature has, quietly, become the “increasingly ubiquitous online activity...with unprecedentedly intense face to face communication potential” that the U.K. government report mentioned.

As we are pushing deeper into the second decade of the twenty-first century and the real-time Web becomes the place where we go to chill as well as do business, the need for visual communication changes from a luxury that’s nice to have to a necessity we cannot do without. With it, we also change the way we communicate and the issues we communicate about. Hangouts and Hangouts on Air, on the commercial side of things, represent a totally new way of creating brand awareness, brand equity, and the all-important brand loyalty without which no business can survive.

In preparing this book I looked at the Hangout functionality in depth, examined the dynamics that govern it, and went through its technicalities. The result is this book. I hope that it’s useful and informative. Above all, I hope that it becomes the springboard you need to take your business to the next level and become part of the wave that will usher in fresh change in how business is done.

David Amerland

London

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The Hangout Revolution

Hangouts are the unexpected breakthrough technology of the online world. Implemented as just one of several features offered by the Google+ social network, they've proved to be capable of changing the way online marketing and interactivity happen.

In this chapter we will take a look at what Hangouts actually are, why they are such a big thing, what drives them, and what you need to get started.

A Paradigm Shift in Action

As you are reading this, a paradigm shift is taking place. People who could never travel see places they could never go to. Complex questions regarding technical issues that require documentation and many emails to resolve are sorted out in minutes. Teachers teach students remotely at next to no cost. Music artists find a global audience before they even have a label. Businesses find customers and establish trust without spending a dime on advertising.

What is happening is that the promise of remote, face-to-face communication, which has been the Holy Grail of businesses for over half a century, is now here. The paradox is that its arrival snuck up on us unexpectedly, riding on the back of a new social network that appeared when there was little apparent need for it, and it was presented as one of the many free features offered, rather than the main one.

Google+ came on the scene at a time when Facebook was the world's dominant social network. What's more, in typical Google fashion, it came out in Beta, presenting itself without a manual and with ever-changing functionality and features that were left for its users to discover and put to use.

One of these features was the capability to videoconference with a group of people. Google called it a "Hangout," and it was designed to be as impromptu and spontaneous as a chat in the street when you run across someone you know. It sounds innocuous, yet Hangouts would turn out to be the "Killer App" of 2011, changing, by degrees, the nature of online communications and, in the process, challenging the marketing setup of every traditional institution and organization on the Web.

The official terminology states that "Hangout" is the name given to the peer-to-peer videoconferencing capability provided within the Google+ environment. To understand the importance of this to the individual online marketer and business entity, it is necessary to establish a distinction: Videoconferencing is distinct from video chat in an important way. Whereas video chat is aimed at transmitting audio and video between individuals, videoconferencing is designed to transmit audio and video between multiple locations.

The distinction is important because costly as it might have been to have a video chat between two people, in the past it was still feasible. But a videoconference was something reserved for James Bond films. The prohibitive barriers that stopped it from happening were determined not only by the cost, which was pretty hefty, but also by the technological difficulties involved, which were considerable. Multiple locations, multiple tiers of equipment, and individuals of varying degrees of videoconferencing expertise magnified the problems rather than the opportunities. So, usually, it was easier not to bother.

As a matter of fact, the level of difficulty experienced was such that until Google came along with its deep pockets, custom-made server base, and stable bandwidth,

the only use for videoconferencing was consigned to the occasional gimmicky effect of the odd, high-level board meeting and when there was a real emergency that justified the cost involved in setting up the required network connections.

Fast-forward into the present and what is happening is that ordinary people, celebrities, online businesses, and brands are busy connecting with their audience and the world at large through videoconferencing on a whim. From scheduled slots and regular shows to impromptu meetings—and even the odd occasion of entirely opportunistic connections where someone turns on their webcam just to see who they will be able to connect with—the built-in videoconferencing capability that is offered by Google+ is opening up all sorts of connective possibilities.

Hangouts have been the Google+ “secret weapon,” offering a compelling reason not just for more online marketing and greater connectivity through the Web, but for a different type of online marketing and a different type of connectivity.

The usual response to this is divided equally into “yeas” and “nays”: those who intuitively grasp the concept and get involved become hooked soon enough, and those who are so steeped in traditional marketing methods that they cannot see the possibilities and develop an almost pathological aversion to it that in itself becomes a stumbling block.

Hangouts are a disruptive technology. As such, they offer what every good disruptive technology offers:

- Lower implementation costs (in this case, to connect using video feeds)
- Enhanced capabilities (for communication and marketing)
- Easy integration (for Hangouts, across many different web properties)

It’s worthwhile, for a moment, to look at these three things in a little more detail.

Lower implementation costs: It doesn’t matter how good a new technology may be. If it is expensive to implement, it remains an oddity to be tried only when it is necessary to make a statement about status. Hangouts are a low-cost solution because you can get away with zero investment in the tech required (though I would strongly advise in investing in some tech). Google does the heavy lifting with its servers and massive capability in distributed computing. Because its servers also do a lot of other things, such as support Google search and YouTube, the cost of supporting Hangouts is relatively small for the company. Similarly, as end users, we use our laptops to perform many other tasks. We do not buy them specifically for Hangouts. The built-in mic and webcam typically come standard, so the set-up cost for a Hangout can be very little indeed. This low-entry cost threshold is one of the signs of a disruptive technology. It makes what was previously expensive to set up seem almost incidental.

Enhanced Capabilities: The perfect means of communication is face-to-face interaction. Not only does it allow us to communicate at several levels at once (verbal, tonal, physical), but it also permits us to ask questions and get more clarification of anything we have not quite understood. On the web we have never had this option before, and marketing has always relied on a simple repeated signal precisely because there had to be a little room left for misunderstandings. But that is not how video contact works. A Hangout allows you to see a person's face, hear their voice, watch their body language, and ask clarification for anything you have not understood. All in real time.

Easy integration: In the past anything that had to do with remote video interaction required a trained team of technicians and expert know-how to pull off. Hangouts on G+ can be used as a stand-alone impromptu app, they can be used as public broadcasts of specific events, embedded on website pages with just a few lines of code, or shown on YouTube. The versatility offered by Hangouts increases their value as communication and marketing tools.

The Mechanics of Personal Connections

Real-time connections, videoconferencing, and the Google Hangouts explosion can be understood and used properly only if we can break down and analyze the forces that traditionally drive uptake of videoconferencing as a valid means of communication. As so often happens with new technologies, practical benefits become a habit only after the underlying need that drives them is better identified.

Fortunately, in a 2011 study, Damien Perritaz, Christophe Salzmann, and Denis Gillet, researchers at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), one of two Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology, identified the motivation driving the uptake of real-time videoconferencing into three distinct vector forces:

- User Perception
- Video Adaptation
- Network Adaptation

If you're a marketer wondering, for instance, why your clients are so reluctant to adopt Hangout technology, which you know is robust, the chances are that the reason for their reluctance lies in a combination of these three vectors. This makes them important to understand.

User Perception measures user satisfaction through Quality of Perception (QoP). Simply put, if the expected experience is not good enough, there is little desire for uptake. No one wants to struggle with a poor frame rate, grainy pictures, and sound that comes and goes when discussing business or trying to figure out, on a first meeting, whether to trust someone through visual and audio clues.

Video Adaptation has always been a hurdle. In the past it required some considerable technical expertise and an expensive connection to ensure that the sampling rate of the video was good enough for the purpose. Its quality often became one of the perceptual hurdles that users had to overcome before they decided to use it. When you constantly had to fiddle with the equipment to make it work, it became difficult to focus on the virtual meeting itself.

Network Adaptation has been historically iffy. Platform stability, dropped connections, sound and audio that fade in and out due to bandwidth fluctuations, and the odd freezing of screens are just some of the recurring issues that accompany the litany of reasons that spell out “unreliability.”

Understandably, when end users had to struggle with each of these three obstacles, any of which could become so difficult to resolve as to be a deal-breaker in its own right, videoconferencing was one of those luxuries that you considered only after every other option had been exhausted.

The stroke of genius behind Hangouts is that within the Google+ environment, Google did away with all three considerations by applying the digital equivalent of “Plug and Play” to the videoconferencing option. Powered by Google’s servers and with compression algorithms ensuring the quality and stability of the service, anyone with an Internet connection, a laptop, and a webcam could suddenly talk, face-to-face, to anyone else in the world, in a group setting.

It is easy here to descend to hyperboles comparing Google+ Hangouts to sliced bread. The Hangout revolution was never featured or promoted as such. Instead, in the typical way Google does services these days, it was presented as a feature of the Google+ platform and left to see how it would be used by those who accessed the network.

The results exceeded expectations and changed communication across the Web for the better.

Formally Defining a Disruptive Technology

Web technologies are mostly driven by a single principle: disruption. It’s not enough to take an existing concept and digitize it in a way that creates efficiencies of scale and cost savings. Such an approach has a very short product cycle that rarely justifies the research and development costs involved.

To succeed in the digital realm, technology has to provide a strong disruptive element right from the start. If things cannot be done *differently*, a transition to digital is not going to be compelling enough for a wide enough adoption to create sustainability.

Clayton M. Christensen, author of the popular book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, stated in a paper published in the *Journal of Product Innovation Management* that disruption is a process rather than an event. He cited three types of situations where innovation leads to disruption:

“(1) Innovations that are financially unattractive to the leading incumbents. These essentially comprise the low-end and new-market disruptions.

“(2) Innovations that are financially attractive to the leading incumbents. These comprise the innovations that are categorized as sustaining.

“(3) Innovations that are unattainable to the incumbent leaders, because the technology or capital requirements are simply beyond the reach of the incumbent leaders.”

Christensen's definitions of situations with disruptive potential place the Google+ Hangout feature in a starring position on the Web. Ever since the first website went up, web technologies have been driven by a push toward greater interactivity and real-time or near-real-time connection. The primary force driving this lies in the peculiarity of the digital medium.

The online world is a distributed, noncentralized model that lacks central authorities, physical addresses, and policing units. As a result, trust, a quality that in the offline world is generated through personal contact, visual clues, and a tangible presence, in the digital world relies on content and contextual clues gleaned from interaction.

We are hard-wired to engage with those we trust, and this hard-wiring has led to a constant push for greater interaction and connection on the Web. Both interaction and our desire for connectivity stem from the fact that we need to fill the vacuum left by a lack of visual clues and physical presence with something that will perform the job they did. On the Web these tasks are performed by the way we interact, the content we share and, now, the visual connections we make through Google+ Hangouts.

Rather than seeing the Hangout as the final step in the technological evolution of the Web, we need to understand that it is one more step that has been put in place to help accumulate the clues we need in order to make a judgment of where we should place our trust.

How to Get Started

Hangout technology within Google+ is constantly evolving. To make sure you have the most up-to-date information, I have included resource pages links throughout

this book and in the section at the back. Deciding to participate in a Hangout is always a nerve-wracking experience. Whether we like it or not, it is a very public stage, and we're in full view of the web. This thought alone has the tendency to bring out our inner critics in full force.

There are a couple things I can share here that will help. First, things go “tragically” wrong in Hangouts only if you try to be something you are not. An over-polished, perfect image and rigidly controlled promotional overtones (the things we always hated about TV) are likely to cause a reflexive negative response in your viewers. Embrace the possibility that things will go wrong regardless of how much you plan. Your audience will only care if what you have to say is of value.

This is a very human response. We live in a world where creating content is cheap, which makes attention expensive. No matter how good or bad your Hangout was, it will be of no use to you if you do not get seen. If your audience does not engage. If it does not have an impact in *their* world.

So focus on the content. Be as real as you can be. I was going to say be relaxed, but that is never quite possible, particularly if you're hosting a Hangout and you have to do everything yourself. However, try and have as much fun as you can. At the end of the day you're using a screen to talk to people who may not even be in the same time zone as yourself. That is pretty futuristic if you think about it.

Knowing some of the basics also helps of course.

You could use a Hangout without having a Google+ account just through your Gmail. This is called “Hangout Lite,” and it is a feature available to Gmail users who want to have a video call with someone they're exchanging emails with. It is also available for Apple devices users, so it is not limited to a PC or Android environment. For more information on both these options, you should go to this link: <http://goo.gl/xbknT> and scroll down to about the middle of the page.

I would advise, however, creating a Google+ account in order to use Hangouts. Beyond the fact that this makes the connection a lot more robust, there are additional benefits in the way the connection being made can be enhanced.

Strictly speaking, there are three types of Hangouts available to you:

1. A Hangout that does not automatically include video to start. Instead, it loads a chat box in the G+ environment as shown in Figure 1.1. The best way to think about this option is as a chat room of old with some very modern capabilities. You can create as many of these as you want, either one-to-one or with a group, and archive them for reference.

The Hangout chat window that opens up within Google+ allows you to carry out and archive a chat conversation with another person. You could even add several other people to that chat and share pictures and

links as necessary. You can also choose to go to video by clicking on the video icon. This will make a video call available to everyone who is on that Hangout chat.

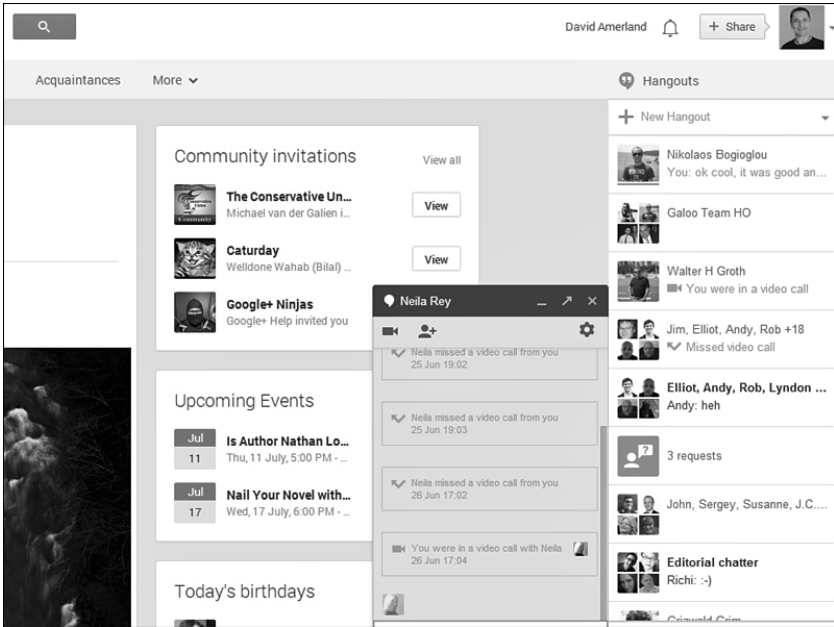


Figure 1.1 A Hangout chat box in the Google+ environment. You can choose to make a video chat by clicking the video icon.

2. A plain-vanilla Hangout (usually abbreviated to HO or HVC for Hangout Video Call) that allows you to videoconference with any number of participants between 1 and 10. The type of connection should be familiar to anyone who has used Skype on a one-to-one basis before, or has done any kind of videoconferencing in the past. Some suggestions on how to best prepare for this are given by Google: <http://goo.gl/jadB2d>.
3. The more familiar and versatile Hangout-On-Air (frequently abbreviated as HOA). The difference between this and the HVC is that it allows you to automatically record the Hangout and broadcast it. There are pros and cons to using each, and, as you probably have guessed already, each type has its own set of rules and requires its own technical setup.

Hangouts are used widely enough, at the moment, for us to be able to look at their uses in a broader spectrum. This serves both as a basis for suggested areas where they could be applied and as a springboard for further innovation.

Hangouts are frequently used in the following areas:

- Customer Management
- Company Sales
- Staff Training

Each of these sections has its own subset of applications that depend on the exact nature of your business, the internal setup of your company, and your current requirements. Broadly speaking, however, this is where Hangouts can really prove useful:

In Customer Management

- Develop better customer relations by providing the opportunity of a real-time connection to answer complicated questions in a more personable way than an email. This is particularly useful when potential customers require reassurance in remote-buying situations or when large-ticket items are involved and the questions bring answers that themselves might raise more questions.
- Improve customer service. Customers with concerns are always ready to imagine the worst and frequently overreact. The ability to selectively take customers into a Hangout and provide a face-to-face experience can be key in diffusing situations before they deteriorate to the point beyond recovery.
- Humanize your business. There is a lot of talk in marketing circles about putting a “human” face to your business. Behind the logo and behind the brand pull, customers want to know that there are real people who really care. The ability to occasionally pull customers into a face-to-face meeting can create a real sense of caring. The buzz that comes from being able to talk to someone about a problem and get a solution can go a long way toward the creation of the much-needed evangelism without which no modern business can long survive.

In Company Sales

- Pilot products and services. Hangouts enable you to pilot projects and get direct feedback. At the very least, they become a great way to gather intelligence on customer requirements regarding products and services.
- Announce new products and services. Sales relies on buzz and buzz requires interaction. Hangouts provide a low-cost, deep-reach means

of actually engaging with customers and potential customers, convincingly showcasing new products and services.

- Offer after-sales services or consultations. Depending on the product or service you are promoting, you might want to add the “cherry” of a personalized approach to those who might need a little hand-holding after making a purchase. A plain vanilla Hangout is completely confidential: no recording takes place and you need to be invited in order to join it. This makes it a great way to provide a sense of exclusivity to customers and clients who trust you with their business, particularly with high-end purchases or complex services.

In Staff Training

- Hold webinars. Bringing staff up-to-date is always difficult. Space, time, and even location requirements make it hard to organize any kind of training or coordination with your staff. Hangouts offer the opportunity to coordinate in real time without needing to get to a specific location or even be in the same building.
- Conduct team meetings. With teams being spread thin these days, or even working from home, having a team meeting that only needs an agreement on time is a great boon to any business manager or owner.
- Collaborate on projects. Hangouts offer the ability to collaborate on projects without having to have every member of a team in the same location. This can become even more useful when it is used in combination with other Google properties like Google Docs (GDocs), for instance. The ability to remotely connect staff this way unleashes the knowledge capital that frequently lies dormant in a business and increases participation and engagement in your business.

Hangouts on Air (HOA) also have a host of uses:

- Hold a Press Conference. The obvious use of a HOA for marketing purposes is to use its public broadcast nature to spread news about your products or services that will be viewed by many more than just the participants of the Hangout on Air. This will bring your YouTube channel into play and leverage the traffic that YouTube, the web’s second most popular search engine, receives to further increase the visibility of what you’re promoting.
- Announce events. A HOA is a great way to announce a product or service by holding an event. The welcome addition of recording it for a YouTube channel amplifies the impact and increases the audience reach. In addition, YouTube provides an embed URL for embedding videos in other websites and blogs, which further amplifies the

potential for reach and increases the possibility of a product or service announcement going viral after the HOA is over. Additionally the embed code provided can be used while the HOA is live. This can help integrate a corporate or even a brand website that is relatively static into the marketing campaign, bringing loyal customers to the site in order for them to see a live-streamed event.

- Create an online presentation that combines video, slideshare, online apps like Google Docs, and chat. Orchestrated correctly, all this helps increase the impact of the online contact, creating a multidimensional effect that wows audiences and wins their loyalty.

With all this functionality and potential at our fingertips, the question that usually gets asked first is, does it require any special equipment?

Well, at its most basic level a Hangout needs nothing more than an Internet connection, a laptop, and a webcam. You can have Hangouts using your cellphone or mobile device (Tablet computer or iPad).

Google recommends downloading the latest version of their free Talk Plugin: <http://www.google.com/talk/>.

These are the supported operating systems:

- Mac OS X 10.5+
- Windows 7
- Windows Vista with SP1 or later
- Windows XP
- Chrome
- Ubuntu and other Debian-based Linux distributions

As Hangout requirements change in the future, you can find updates here: <https://support.google.com/plus/answer/1216376?hl=en>.

And the supported browsers necessary for a better experience are as shown here:

- Google Chrome 10+
- Microsoft Internet Explorer (IE) 8+
- Mozilla Firefox 3+
- Safari 4+

The list may seem technical but the chances are that you already have a combination of one of these operating systems and browsers and use it often, so there should be nothing to worry about here.

If you're serious about using Hangouts for business and better communication, however, you need to think about investing in some equipment. Why? Because the medium should not be the message. By that, I mean that you should not let a Hangout experience that's poor in technical quality affect the way your content is received. Yes, in today's hyper-connected, social media savvy world, we make judgments based on the quality of the content rather than the packaging, but in the first instance, before any other contact is made, you should not be putting up any additional perception barriers between you and your audience. A Hangout that is not technically as good as possible, unfortunately, can do just that at a time when you're trying to achieve the exact opposite.

The Basic Setup

Connecting with someone through video across the Web, when done right, can be as nuanced, productive, and effective as a face-to-face meeting. It saves time, prevents misunderstandings, gets things done fast, and, when used as part of your marketing and branding efforts, can amplify both the reach of your marketing and the equity of your brand.

To work best, however, a Hangout does have four basic requirements:

- **Connection speed.** Ideally, you need this to be as fast and stable as possible. I have been on Hangouts where participants have dialed in from the beach using a mobile phone and a basic Wi-Fi connection but the results are not ideal. Google has taken into account connection speeds and will always prioritize sound when the connection drops. This will work in a pinch and is fine when you are trying something innovative, but it is not what you want if you are trying to win the first-impressions battle. If possible, use a wired Ethernet connection to the web as opposed to Wi-Fi for Hangouts. Wired connections are more stable, produce a more consistent signal, and provide greater overall quality.
- **Sound.** Although a videoconference is an audiovisual experience, the most important element is sound. Your audience will forgive a picture that is not as good as it can be, but if they cannot hear what you say, the best HD broadcast in the world will not save you. You will need to invest in a good-quality headset. If image is important and you think that a headset is a little too geeky, then make sure that you have a professional-quality microphone connected to the laptop or the computer. If you are using a microphone, it is also important to use ear buds connected to the audio jack of your laptop. This eliminates the problem of sound played by the speakers being picked up by the microphone and producing an annoying echo in the Hangout.

- **Video.** Most laptops' built-in video cameras produce an adequate picture, but you are always better off investing in a good-quality webcam. Laptop cameras usually have a poor frame capture rate that creates distortion every time there is movement. Again, when the battle of impressions is being fought, everything that contributes to seamless communication works in your favor. If you're using a desktop computer, you will need to add a webcam. There are very few desktop models that come with a built-in one (usually found on the monitor), and they're never that great in resolution.
- **Light.** By now it might be beginning to sound like you need to have your own studio set up, and in truth that would not hurt. Many online marketers and brands do have a specially set-up area that is lit properly, is free of distractions, and helps them project a professional image in Hangouts. Light is important because webcams are not that good at capturing image in low light. Their focus has to work harder to maintain the clarity of the image, and even tiny movements can cause camera blur. A good source of natural light or a good lighting setup alleviates this problem. The latter we will cover in detail a little later, so for now it's best to try to have as much natural light as possible. One point I will bring up here is to make sure that light is directed at your face as much as possible. If you are backlit (with the window behind you, for example) the webcam settings will adjust for the intensity of the light behind you and you will find that you come across as a darkened outline, which totally defeats the purpose. If it's daytime and you have a window to work with, try and position yourself so that it is either directly in front of you or to the side of you.

What Do You Do Next?

Assuming you have your laptop (or desktop), webcam, and microphone headset and can just about sort out the lighting, the next logical question has to be, what do you do next? Before you even consider leaping into a Hangout of any sort, you need to work out the answer to the following three questions:

- Why?
- When?
- How?

To make your Hangouts succeed, you need to decide first why you need them, when you are going to hold them, and how you are going to gauge their effectiveness. Failure to satisfactorily answer any of these questions is the clearest indication that your business is not yet ready for a Hangout, and unless you get your

marketing strategy to the point where it can successfully integrate a Hangout, you will only end up wasting valuable energy and time.

So first decide how you will be using Hangouts. You might want to go for both types, HO (the plain vanilla flavor) and HOA, but one or the other is going to be your initial focus. Beyond the explicit desire to adopt the technology, there has to be a real reason for using it. For example, will you be training your staff? Reaching out to customers? Creating training videos?

The answer to these questions will also show you what you need to have in place and how to best organize it. Hangouts, for instance, cannot be recorded without the use of third party tools, so if recording a video and having it made available later is important, you will need to use Hangouts on Air for that.

Businesses, generally, need both Hangouts and Hangouts on Air, but the percentage of use of each will vary with the demands made on the business. This is why you need to be able to work out beforehand why you need Hangouts.

The timing of when you have them is also a crucial part of the equation. If you are using Hangouts on Air, for instance, you will need to have them on at a specific time; otherwise, your potential audience will run into time zone issues. Hangouts used as a direct customer contact, or a perk with specific purchases, are a lot more fluid and unscheduled, and you will need to have special plans in place to deal with them. Again, these are considerations that will be different for each brand and business and will depend on available manpower, expertise, and inclination.

The final question you have to answer could also easily be changed from “How?” to “Who?” and it will have the same effect. Hangouts of any variety can be spontaneous, and even when planned, they feel very intimate in the immediacy of their connection and are still governed to some degree by the dynamics of the broadcast medium.

Beyond the technology involved in setting them up, there is a real need for familiarity with the medium itself plus an awareness of how you look and sound on camera. In an offline situation, we hardly think about these things because we take them for granted. We usually know how we look and we have some idea of how we sound when we speak. Online in a Hangout, however, these are things that need to be worked out all over again.

All of this takes practice and experience, and setting some ground rules regarding time and use at the beginning helps to create boundaries and a comfort zone for those who will be taking part. Like everything else we do to communicate, Hangouts have their own “language,” and becoming familiar with it and comfortable in its use is a critical aspect of using them successfully. Your audience in a Hangout is a lot closer to you than it is during a traditional TV broadcast or a radio show.

Depending on the format of your Hangout, you may have part of the audience right there with you. If not, a lot of them will be, at any rate, active on the Events page, asking questions, adding comments, and even bringing in extra links and information.

This level of interaction takes the one-way street model of the traditional broadcast and marries it to the power of social media to create a totally transparent, interactive and engaging environment where things happen in real time, but which also has an asynchronous, later-viewing model built in. Many Hangouts are rediscovered through YouTube, shared, and discussed weeks and even months after the date they went live.

This is what makes Hangouts such a disruptive marketing tool. In a single app (because really, that's all Hangouts are) we have the ability to

- Broadcast to a large audience in real time
- Interact with a large audience in real time (on the Events page)
- Mix real-time and asynchronous communication in one vehicle
- Discover a fresh audience at a later date (as the video is rediscovered through search on YouTube)
- Leverage Google search (Hangouts in Google+ are indexed by Google)
- Create a resource page on Google+ through the Events page that can surface in Google search and find a fresh audience within Google+

All of these bring us naturally to the obvious next step: YouTube. In order to best leverage the power of a Hangout, you need to have a YouTube channel set up.

When it comes to setting up your YouTube Channel, the steps are fairly straightforward:

To set up your YouTube Channel, you have to have a Google account to begin with. Be aware that after you've set up your channel using a particular Google account, you can't then transfer it to another Google account and you cannot reuse a YouTube name, so think carefully about what you will call it.

To create a YouTube channel, sign up for a YouTube account first at <http://www.youtube.com/signup>. Use your Google account email address (that's your Gmail) and login.

At the end of the account setup, you'll be presented with a screen with a link to create a custom URL for your Channel (i.e., one that reflects your name, company name, or brand name); follow this link. Alternatively, if you miss it or want to add a channel to an existing YouTube account, then no problem—just look at the upper-right corner of the screen to find your username. Next to your username is a pull-down arrow; click on this and select Customize Channel from the menu.

Now you can see your channel but you will need to customize it a little to make it better work for your branding.

At the top of the channel, on the right-hand side beside the thumbnail picture of yourself, there is an arrow. Clicking it opens an entirely new menu that allows you to run your YouTube Channel as a powerful branding and marketing aid. YouTube gets more than four billion visits a day and it is the Web's second-largest search engine after Google. It is frequently overlooked as a viable source of promotion because its environment is not easily understood. The public perception of its content is usually shaped by massive viral video hits like Korean superstar Psy's "Gangnam Style" video. Yet, handled properly, it can become a core means of reaching a wider audience, increasing brand awareness, and shaping and maintaining the image of your business.

Figure 1.2 shows you a Channel Setup Checklist you should follow to create a top YouTube Channel experience.

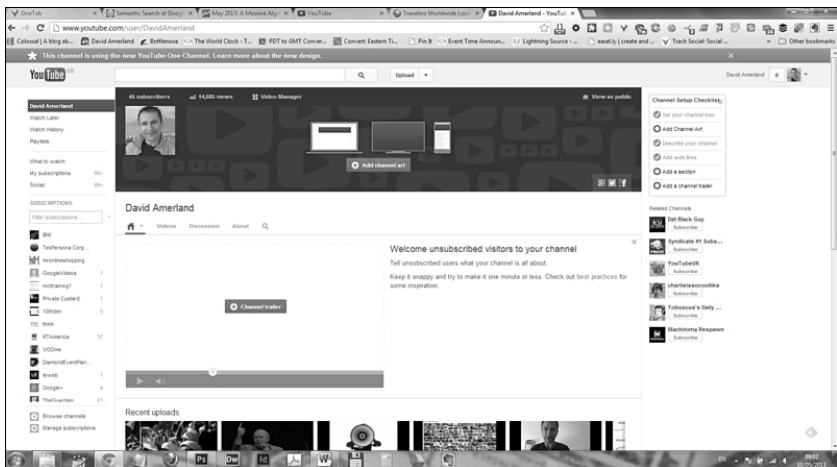


Figure 1.2 After creating your YouTube Channel, follow the Channel Setup Checklist (shown in the right column) to customize and enhance it.

The instructions change a little each time the functionality and layout of YouTube changes. Google has a resource page that is frequently updated and which can be found here: <http://goo.gl/rvtpB6>.

The "channel art" you are being requested to load here is the image you will use to brand your channel (remember that it creates an impression and helps promote the values of your company or business). The exact dimensions are 2560 pixels

wide by 1440 pixels tall. You are also given the opportunity to create a short video trailer introducing your YouTube Channel to viewers who come across it and have not yet subscribed. The number of people who subscribe to you on YouTube represents a sizable chunk of your Channel's immediate reach, so being able to tell them what it's about is a powerful marketing aid. For help with the Channel Art, Google has another resource page that's worth checking out: <http://goo.gl/Bkiu7P>.

After you have your channel's art uploaded, you can start to upload videos. YouTube allows you to set up a channel and also share videos you find through it. You have to be a little picky here. In the new Web, sharing is part of your identity and directly impacts your brand image and reputation. Anything you find that might be of purely entertainment value has to be looked at critically in terms of your business aims before it's loaded to or associated with your YouTube Channel.

Recapping on the Basics

Hangouts are a powerful tool. To be used properly you need to have the following:

- A Google Account
- A Google+ Profile
- A Google+ Page (for your business)
- A website (for your business)
- A YouTube Account (for your business)

If you have a Google+ Page as well as a Google+ Profile, you can now create a YouTube Channel just for your Google+ Page. You may want to create a new YouTube channel that will be used separately from your other YouTube channel. This kind of separation allows you to create video content that addresses a particular type of audience or a particular kind of audience need. As the content builds up so will the value of your channel, so there is a valid reason for separating video content this way. YouTube Channels that are linked to a Google+ Page do have some limitations, detailed here: <http://goo.gl/v4k6Qr>.

You can find a Google resource page explaining how to create a new channel here: <http://goo.gl/bELyV4>.

There are a few more things to keep in mind. Make sure that you do the clever search engine optimization trick, and name your YouTube account after your business, rather than choosing any old kind of name. Make sure that your Google Profile is properly filled out and that you have Gmail addresses with your individual names on them, rather than weird acronyms or nicknames.

Google+ Hangout Preparation List

Like any other business practice, Hangouts need some preparation and a little practice to get right. As with mock customer service calls, you could practice having Hangouts among your staff (or you and a friend if you are a small team) taking turns to be different roles and scripting the boundaries of each role for a more realistic effect. So, for instance, if one of you is a customer, you know that there are some boundaries you cannot go beyond, such as using inappropriate language or being overly familiar to the point that it causes offense. These points might seem obvious, but Hangouts have the tendency to create a sense of intimacy and familiarity in the contact that is great when you're hanging out with friends but which can easily wrong-foot a brand.

Practice helps instill a code of conduct and create a sense of confidence in how one should act. This comes across in the HOA interaction and adds to the positive impact of the experience. It also helps the HOA host to focus on communicating his message better.

The 10 points that follow are designed to be your preflight checklist. Answering them will help you prepare best for Hangouts and create the right kind of confidence in the technology for you and your team:

- List all the reasons why you need to hold Hangouts.
- Detail all the technical setup for the Hangouts, including who will be responsible for reviewing performance and training.
- Explain how Hangouts will fit in with your overall company structure and marketing plans.
- Detail how you will familiarize yourself and your staff with Hangouts.
- Make a list of the Hangout types you will have and how you will decide which type you should have and when.
- Decide how you will gauge the effectiveness of each type of Hangout.
- Detail how you will assess whether a Hangout has met the specific needs of your business.
- Detail how you are going to use the data you get from Hangouts and integrate it into your marketing.
- Explain your choice of subjects for Hangouts on Air.
- Detail how Hangouts can be used in the launch of products or services.

What You Learned in This Chapter

Here's what I hope you have taken away from this chapter and now have in your mind:

- Hangouts are a disruptive technology that can afford a real competitive advantage to those who take the trouble to integrate them fully into their marketing efforts.
- There is an instinctive reaction to using Hangouts that is prejudiced by past experience with similar videoconferencing technologies.
- Hangouts are technically easy to implement.
- The personal connection that is possible through a Hangout presents many possibilities for creating better branding opportunities and fostering real trust with an audience.
- Hangouts On Air (HOAs) can be used asynchronously in a brand's marketing, leveraging YouTube views long after the HOA is over.

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