CTRL+CLICK CAST #10 Balancing Conversions with User Experience

[Music]

Lea Alcantara: You are listening to CTRL+CLICK CAST. We inspect the web for you! Today we're discussing ad-driven sites where conversions are sometimes a larger priority than user experience. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

Emily Lewis: Emily Lewis.

Lea Alcantara: This episode is sponsored by CodePen. CodePen is a code editor in the browser. Write HTML, CSS and JavaScript and see the results update as you type. Your profile on CodePen is like a portfolio for your front-end skills. With CodePen Pro, you can upload assets, collaborate in real time with other people, teach a class and more. Check it out at codepen.io.

Emily Lewis: CTRL+CLICK would also like to thank Pixel & Tonic for being our major sponsor of the year. [Music ends] Hi Lea, happy new year!

Lea Alcantara: Happy new year to you, too!

Emily Lewis: How was your trip up to Canada for the holidays?

Lea Alcantara: It was really good. A little long though. I would have to say, I got bored near the end. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: I mean, I was excited to see all my friends and family and things like that, but I think there's just so much you could just do sitting around, I guess.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: But that's also a good thing because I've felt ready to go back and get to work.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] That's good. That's almost better than when you come home from vacation and you like need two or three days just before you can get back to your real life to recover from your vacation. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I know for sure. How about you?

Emily Lewis: I mostly worked. I did take Christmas off and a little bit of time on new year's off, but it's been surprisingly this time of year has been busy which is unusual from the past years around in December, but I guess that's how things went this year.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I know. I think it's always like a rush in December and then sometimes when priorities get rearranged, then it's like, "Well, okay, since we couldn't get it done in December, let's get it done in January."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So…

Emily Lewis: Yeah. But, yeah, it was nice and quiet. Nice weather. It's cold, but we always have sun which makes me happy. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Well, I'm glad that we're not in the middle of that winter storm.

Emily Lewis: Polar vortex.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: Isn't that what they're calling it on TV?

Lea Alcantara: It's crazy.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: It's so crazy. Yeah, I know I'm glad I'm in mild Seattle where it's overcast but relatively nice.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, well, that's good. Well, I'm glad you had a nice break and we're reenergized for work.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I'm excited really for this year's podcast audience and podcast guests.

Emily Lewis: Oh yeah, we've got a great lineup.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I'm just…

Emily Lewis: And only just for the first couple of months.

Lea Alcantara: I know. I know. Well, we already have guests until April

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Can you believe that?

Emily Lewis: I'm so glad we planned ahead, otherwise, we'd be worried about it now.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I know totally, totally. I think that's basically all of December planning for 2014.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees] All right, well, then let's get to it, and let's start with some news in the world of content management systems. During December, Craft released a new update for their contact form plugin and it now features the honeypot captcha.

Lea Alcantara: Very cool. So the folks over at Perch are working on Version 2.4 and they're looking for feedback, so they "fix all the things."

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: If you have any improvements you'd like to see in the next version of Perch, you should let them know. Link to details are in our show notes.

Emily Lewis: And you actually caught this little tidbit over the holidays.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: I missed it, so maybe our listeners missed it, but EllisLab has officially updated their remove index.php documentation to address duplicate content concerns which basically was the original way they were supporting to remove index.php. It would remove it from your URLs, but would still allow Google or even site visitors to access an old link with index.php still in it.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And so the new documentation now has extra lines to address this to avoid that duplicate content.

Lea Alcantara: It's very interesting because Kevin Thompson actually addressed this issue way back in 2011, March of 2011.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And he wrote an entire blog post about it, but this is news because this is the first time this solution has been integrated into the official documentation, so what that actually really means is it's not just written down, that's not the big deal. What's important is now that EllisLab is officially supporting this solution so that means if you use this solution to create an EE site to remove index.php, then the team should be able to help troubleshoot.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, that's nice.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, and this isn't much about news, but something I saw interesting on Twitter.

Ryan Masuga asked on Twitter for recommendations on a minimal blogging platform.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And then he found that the question was actually way more complicated than it seemed. So some replies included Ghost for WordPress, Wardrobe CMS, Octopress, and of course, Statamic and Craft, which is really both a mix of recommendations regarding database and file-driven CMSs. What I'm interested in, what CTRL+CLICK is interested in is knowing what you as our listener thinks a simple, no frills blogging platform actually is. What does that even mean?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Like how barebones are we going? And if so, what platform do you think best addresses that problem? Contact us at www.ctrlclickcast.com/contact, we're interested in what you have to say.

Emily Lewis: What do you actually think about that, Lea? Because the point reminds me of a Q&A I did for Web Standards Sherpa last year where I talked about a tendency for clients to let technology lead their decisions rather than their actual requirements, leading the decision about the technology.

Lea Alcantara: Sure, yeah.

Emily Lewis: And so I guess my initial thought was minimal blogging platform, I was like, "Oh, Statamic." And then I thought about them like, "Yeah, well, I'm using Statamic right now, and it doesn't have everything I might want." You know?

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: So it's really about I think the features and priority is first and then you have to find the technology from that.

Lea Alcantara: Well, yeah, I definitely agree about that. I think the difficulty in terms of thinking about a minimal blogging platform, or what does minimal mean?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And at the same time you kind of have to be like astrologer/fortune teller.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Because you are having to anticipate what you want to do with your data in the future and what you think would be best what platform that data could be stored in, and sometimes there might be more confidence in storing them in a database because people are used to being able to use a SQL thingy. They just pull whatever they want and then insert it wherever they want in the future, but if all you want to do is update your day and nothing else and you just want a way to publish that, then why would you need like an extra database for that?

Emily Lewis: Well, and maybe why would you even need a CMS that you have to install and maintain, there's Tumblr.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly.

Emily Lewis: There are so many options, it totally depends. I can see that that's such a more complicated issue than it sounds.

Lea Alcantara: Yes, absolutely, so I'm really, really interested in hearing what our listeners think it actually even means.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And what solution they think would fit that.

Emily Lewis: If we overlook news about a CMS that you favor or interested in, let us know and we'll

make sure to get it on our radar for future episodes. So let's get to today's episode, and we're going to be talking about the design and development considerations needed for sites that rely heavily, if not entirely, on ads for revenue. This topic came up, you and I talked about it because we're working on a project that this is actually relevant.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, and it's interesting because it's a poetry site.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Whenever I talk about this type of project with anyone who's asking what we're working on right now, they\re always like, "Oh, really, a poetry site." They collect and share user-submitted poems, and well, it sounds very user and community focused. The site really isn't strong in those areas as it could be, but where the site is strong is impressions and ad revenue.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So the client came to us for rebranding and responsive web design, but his priority from Day 1 was figuring out how to leverage his Google ad placement and conversions while keeping his brand a priority, and, on top of that list to add more complication, responsibly working.

Emily Lewis: Well, even adding more complication to that, he wanted more community focus.

Lea Alcantara: Yes, exactly.

Emily Lewis: But it wasn't a top priority.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: But it was a priority. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: Many priorities, all are first priorities. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] So why don't we just discuss exactly what does a conversion actually mean.

Emily Lewis: From my perspective, well, I guess the high level thought of a conversion is any action you want someone to take on your site and then taking that action. I guess when it comes to ads, it would be clicking through on those ads.

Lea Alcantara: Yes, and also just in the impression of those ads, like how many times someone is able to visit a particular one and stat position of that ad like is it getting the impressions or clicks and things like that. Right now we're prioritizing a discussion about ads, but conversion marketing could also mean okay, they clicked the contact button, that could be a conversion, or they clicked Facebook Like…

Emily Lewis: Or donate or any of the main calls to action on a website.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly, so when we're talking about conversions, even though this episode is prioritizing ads, it really is about focusing on what kind of action a visitor to that site is going to do and what your client wants them to do.

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Emily Lewis: Yeah, and I think when it comes down to it, it's really a discussion about managing those client priorities of higher conversions, good ad placement along with the audience and visitor priorities.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And then our opinions, like you and me.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, our professional opinions.

Emily Lewis: Right, I mean, just initially when this project came to us, I had some hesitancy because it looks like one of the project in its state at that time, his original site, it looked like one of those sites that I don't spend time on.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: There were a lot of ads, a lot of stuff is crammed in, all the font sizes are really small, and I didn't feel it was a positive experience. But he has statistics that prove that he has people visiting the site. That interface, it's working for some people on some level, whether it's a content or the community or whatever, but I had my own judgments before I even had a kickoff and talk to him about the details.

Lea Alcantara: Yes, and whenever you are met with sites like that, our first impression, especially with ads and things like that, it's not positive because you feel like that's the priority.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Ads are a reality, but you know as a visitor and also as a professional, that isn't necessarily our priority. We want to have like the best tech running the site or best code or best looking site and things like that, and sometimes ads deter from that but that's the reality.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, and I think they deter from it from our perspective as the designers and developers. If visitors are actually on the site and even clicking through on the ads, they're not interrupting their experience as much as we may assume they are.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly, and in a way it really is our job to make sure all those needs are met, managing the client priorities so they continue to make the revenue and even increase their revenue, audience and visitor priorities so they're not turned off and they have a good user experience, and

then our own professional opinions in that, all of that is balanced, and when people visit the site, they think it's beautiful as well as technologically advanced, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees] I remember during our kickoff with this client, at one point I just said, "Well, what is your priority?" The ads were his priority, and it was at that point I shifted my mindset from what it had been.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Being like, "Okay, if this is his priority, that needs to become my priority and I have to find a way to get past my misperceptions or whatever you want to call them about heavy ad sites, and find a way to make a solution that's going to meet that priority of his, but also make me feel like I'm delivering something good for the user of the site."

Lea Alcantara: Yes, absolutely, and this, it's easy to talk about, but it's so hard to actually execute because this is such a divisive issue.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Like if you would just start discussing this with somebody else in the industry or other clients or other people in the web like marketers, web marketers, social media people, et cetera, they've got a lot of conflicting opinions.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And I think one of the most famous one is this website. It's a Tumblr site actually called Tab Closed Didn't Read.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Which is actually a hilarious site and its screenshots of websites that have those

modal dialogs that automatically pop up when you visit it so the background of the site is like it turns into like a 50% black and the pop up is at a 100%, so it forces you to either log into the site or sign up with your email before you can actually do anything with the site. So the person who created the site thinks that's dumb and is a poor user experience so he started this Tumblr to kind of show that this is really not a good idea in his opinion.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: However, a lot of people strongly disagree with that, and that's mostly due to the fact that if you look at the statistics, they convert.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Those popups, as annoying as it is, as professionals because visually we think it's intrusive, and as visitors, because it's personally intrusive, the statistics show that people will put their email address there.

Emily Lewis: It reminds me of something you said. It was either on our last episode or the one before that about the assumptions we make in our little echo chamber industry, and it's not about us. If we aren't the audience, it isn't about what we think. It's finding out who that audience is. I think you were talking about getting to know people outside of your industry to find out what their experiences are.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly, because their behaviors are different because they've got different assumptions coming to the site and different comfort levels with their information.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: For example, somebody who is very used to online shopping is probably really used to like having these popups to sign up for the newsletter so you can get deals like Sephora does this,

right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So you can get like discounts on their makeup or any clothing site, et cetera. It's just very natural so if you're just a regular layman who just visits a website and then you see this popup, to some people, giving out their email is not a big deal, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: They don't think it through as much, and if they want to get the content, they'll give you that email.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: And actually, the person who created Tab Closed Didn't Read wrote an article on Medium about the value of content arguing that the statistics while they show something interesting in converting, sometimes statistics don't actually reflect qualitative data.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, great. Somebody gave you their email, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're going to convert into a customer.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: They gave you their email, but maybe they're going to unsubscribe right after they gave you their email because they're savvy enough to do so, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And then he's arguing that you've done that and you've ruined their perception of

your brand already, and is that a risk you want to take, right?

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: So it's definitely very complicated, so I think as professionals and even to inform our clients, we have to discuss how much does quantitative metrics inform decision making.

Emily Lewis: Right. Well, especially if the metrics in place are simple in a sense that maybe they've just dropped Google Analytics on the site and they look at some reports.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Or they've looked at the automatic reports that you get, but they've done nothing to actually track campaigns or specific to areas being clicked.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And making assumptions based on that. I mean, that actually is not a good idea, especially if you haven't taken the time to really narrowly focus your metrics.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, and I mean, one example where it could be deceptive, and I think we actually spoke about this in a different episode or one of our guests mentioned it and I think it might have been Dana DiTomaso with SEO episode that we had.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So you could have a statistic saying that visitors bounced really quickly on your site, so they were only there for like under 60 seconds.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And generally speaking, if you're thinking about the overall general view is that you

want people to be on your site as long as possible, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: But if you think about the context of perhaps that site or that particular piece of information, perhaps the bounce rate being quick is actually a good thing because what that meant is they got what they wanted.

Emily Lewis: Right away.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly. They didn't need to spend ten minutes on the site navigating some quandary simply because the user experience was so good that they were able to get it, right?

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: So that's like an example of where you can't just take number's face value, right?

Emily Lewis: You have to go further. If you're going to rely on metrics, you have to go further with them than just like the defaults.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, and I mean, I think that's our job, as professionals, to convey that to the client because we need to communicate better. Our intuitive professional knowledge is actually based on our experience and that our qualitative experience also has value.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Another thing we need to think about regarding metrics is that when people are looking at statistics, you're looking at current statistics, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So do you always want to base your decisions based on what's currently happening

versus what might happen because you're making certain changes, and remember that current metrics are based on the current state that it's in. So if you make a change, that's why there's AB testing with like minor changes, right?

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: If you make a change, then the metric will change because it's based on that change now. Sometimes the metrics that you have aren't necessarily always going to inform what's going to happen in the future.

Emily Lewis: It reminds me of this, so when we were tackling this site, there was one area of the site. The workflow that he wanted the user to go through to review a poem, so that users submit poems and then other users review them and write them.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And what he had was when the user try selected Review, a popup showed up.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And it had a heavy text with instructions.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And essentially, the instructions were you have to click a category. You have to select a category first before we can give you a poem to review.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: And the categories were listed in this popup, and he thought that the popup would force them to pick this category first to follow this workflow he needed, except you could close the popup.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

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Emily Lewis: So you could close the popup and totally bypass the instructions in selecting a category and all this other stuff, but he was kind of wedded to the popup.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And honestly, my first impression is I think he thinks popups are cool, you know?

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Because when we asked him, I said, "Well, do you have statistics to back that up?" And he was like, "No, I'm tracking that." And so we ended up coming up with a solution that address that workflow that users need to follow to review a poem and got rid of the popup, but it brings some point, like he likes the popup. It's just like we have our assumptions, the client has his own assumptions.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Oh, it's a popup, it's more interactive. It seems more technologically advanced.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Recently, Adrian Roselli wrote an article for Web Standards Sherpa.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And the article is on tracking printed pages, but what it's really about is validating assumptions.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: Some people would say to him, because he's a big proponent of print CSS and providing print versions of websites, he feels that that's just another level of responsive design, which I tend to agree with him.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But people would say, "Oh, no one print sites, no one print sites. Why are you wasting…"

Lea Alcantara: Oh, that's such a lie. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: "Why are wasting time on that?" And meanwhile, he's talking to someone and they've spent hours upon hours building some advanced jQuery carousel because it's more interactive, and what he's arguing is that if you're going to do anything on a site, let's say it's the carousel, put some click metrics on it, some click tracking to find out, "Are people actually clicking through on your carousel that you just spent 20 hours on."

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: And then put some metrics or put some click tracking on the option to print.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: And he advices how you can do this using Google Analytics campaigns. What he found out for some of his own projects is that, yes, there's a lot of people printing the pages, and far fewer choosing to experience the carousel, and then in comparison, designing the print CSS was a couple hours of work but delivered tremendous value for his users.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: We have all these assumptions, but you have to have the information to back them up,

I mean, if you're going to argue the assumption, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Lewis: So I think that was one of the those situations where he had really pushed on that popup, our client wanting to keep it, but I think we would have advised that we put some click tracking on it, so at least we could help guide his decision in the future.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Because if everyone was closing it because X was right there and prominent, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And weren't clicking through the Select the Category first, then it negated his idea that it was cool.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly, and I mean, when you're explaining that story, again, I think a lot of our assumptions, because we're in a bit of an echo chamber within our own tech industry, we assume because we don't print as much. Like perhaps you're running a paperless office and you're doing all these kind of things and you don't even use a real pen anymore, everything is on your iPad, that doesn't necessarily mean that's what "regular" visitor to that website is going to be doing, and I know me personally I do a lot of things paperless, but even for just work, if I need to really focus on something, I need to print it out.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Because I want to make notes on paper physically because it helps me focus and think better than just moving a mouse around on a screen, and then also I'm notorious, even though I

should probably digitize more of this, if I want to cook something, I tend to print out the recipe.

Emily Lewis: Oh, you print out the recipe.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Well, why? It's because your hands get dirty and you don't want to be swiping on your iPad or whatever.

Lea Alcantara: Totally, exactly, and these are quantitative date of reality, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And for example, it might be environmentally friendly, but I won't cry if I get a splash of sauce on a piece of paper.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: But I'm probably going to get upset if that happened on my iPad, right?

Emily Lewis: Right. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: So I still do occasionally print out recipes, so that's an example of where there is a real need to think about how people are actually really using your site and then having metrics to back that up.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: But then it is a balance with both quantitative of actually seeing numbers and then qualitative where you're making intuitive decisions or using emotions to back things up. For example, I found out somewhere or read somewhere that there are all these social media icons, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And sometimes, me visually as a designer, I find too many of those boxes, icons, et cetera, visually offensive, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Like I just think it looks messy, but there's actually data to back up the fact that when people, in certain sites when you visit that page and there are all those social media icons, it adds some emotional authority. So there might not actually be click through data to those social media icons.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: But there might be a different conversion happening like pressing by simply because those social media icons were there to add authority to the site as in there are actually people in a company behind this site, this page, et cetera.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: And so as a designer, it's my job to make those social media icons work in a nice manner because they need to be there.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Even if I think it's too much, you have to think about your client's goals and your visitor's goals, and sometimes there may not be click through data to the social media links themselves, but there might be a higher converting…

Emily Lewis: Somewhere else.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly.

Emily Lewis: That was influenced by it.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly.

Emily Lewis: Well, it's like that, what is it, the Facebook Like that shows the number of likes.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: You may not actually click that button, but if you see a whole bunch of people who liked it, you might be more compelled to read or to donate or to do whatever the call to action is.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly.

Emily Lewis: Peer pressure is powerful.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah. I think the term is like social engineering. I think that's the actual official term, social engineering, that's what it means.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And another thing we need to think about when we're thinking about metrics too is whether these metrics inform short term as well as long term goals.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: How long is this design going to stay up? Are you going to have a team that will be constantly changing, tweaking things, testing things. Like for example, Obama's site during election time, they're constantly changing how forms looked and how pages looked and whether something had an image or didn't have an image and stuff because there were certain short term goals that needed to be done, like we needed to get like a donation campaign, and then okay, then if that was

great for that campaign, perhaps long term though, like if it's just going to stick around there and no one is going to be interacting, would you prioritize how visual prioritization turns up, like branding and how it looks over conversions, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Because sometimes certain things work better due to conversions, but if it's just going to be there for branding purposes which could have qualitative data and emotional residence long term, you might have a different layout.

Emily Lewis: It's stuff like this that makes me realize how absolutely complex it is to do what we do for a living. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: If you want to deliver a really high quality project, it has so many moving parts, and so much education involved in terms of you learning what the client's goals are and you educating the client about what they could do and what different choices may impact the site now and in the future.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, and I think with all those things in mind like you're always trying to communicate, well, how much can or should you change with those goals in mind?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And what is the priority first, like are we going to be hitting the short term goal first as in like trying to get campaign donations. Are we doing like a long term goal where we're trying to do a branding campaign so that there's a perception of your product or service or whatever that sticks around, and that really changes how the site looks and feels. I think really the most complicated part of this is how to communicate that to the client, the positives and negatives of certain solutions.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, I agree, and it can be a difficult process because people don't like change sometimes, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: And it's just like we don't.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I have my own issues, like when I said, I saw the site and I was like, "Oh my God, look at all those ads." But that's kind of our job.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And it's really a process. I think I particularly find that with this client is that we have to just talk with him more.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: Because the more questions we ask him, the more things come up that clarify what his goals are and what his priorities are, like he may think it's one thing, but as he explains and discusses then, oh, all of a sudden, community is a very big priority and that's really important, and so that we need to let him know that we hear that and play it back to him so he can confirm it and then it starts clicking in his head that, "Oh, I'm not just serving ads here. I do want the community aspect here and that means that I do have to make some compromises in terms of what I think my goals were when I started this versus what we're going to execute.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, and when you're balancing branding concerns too, every time you do ask a question in regards to what he wants on the site, he always answer a question back, "Is that going to move your brand further? Is that a reflection of your brand?"

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And with this particular client, I thought it was interesting that he had started responding to certain questions with mentioning the brand goals and saying like, "Well, I personally like this, but that might be in conflict with our goal to this."

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Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: And that showed that he was getting it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: That he was getting that there are decisions that you have to make that you might make assumptions for that you have to maybe pull back on or aggressively go after simply because it's good for your brand, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And another thing we need to think about when you're discussing this with clients really is there's a lot of room for compromise. There's never a need for just an either/or situation like do you necessarily need ten ads or something, or do you need them positioned that way or even with the notorious popup, especially because as I mentioned earlier, there are proven metrics that show that they convert, but how do you incorporate something like that without pissing off your visitor? Right?

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: So for example, a compromise that I do know is that you could have a long delay before the popup shows up.

Emily Lewis: Oh right.

Lea Alcantara: Versus the immediate paywall type when you go to a site. So for example, one of our clients, FamZoo, on their blog, if you're reading their blog, you'll get a tiny modal dialog eventually asking, "Well, do you want to see more of this, go ahead and put in your email if you feel like it." But that doesn't happen until you've been physically on their site for a while.,

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And I think that's smart because that means if you've been on their site for a while enough that when the timer runs out for that popup to show up, that means you might be interested in more because you're still on the site reading, and then you could, as a programmer, make sure that there's a cookie so you know that if that visitor has already signed up or their IP shows up or whatever, that you don't ever show that popup ever again, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So it's never a situation where it's like, "Oh, it's a 100% evil." Or it's going to be so obtrusive, is it really going to be obtrusive to me if I'm visiting a website like let's say I'm doing some online shopping, and I've been staring at these shoes or whatever…[Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: For a long time to the point…

Emily Lewis: And you don't have issues. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Exactly, and then whatever timer or fancy things that's going on in the background, it shows that I've been staring at it for five minutes, like if there's a tiny little slide up that says like, "Well, do you need some customer service help? Is that why you haven't pressed by after ten

minutes? Or do you need an incentive, a.k.a., wow, did you know that there's a 10% off today."

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: That kind of thing, and is that a bad experience for me as a consumer? Not at all, like I mean, if I am visiting that site with the purpose to purchase and there was a popup or a slide down or something that show that, "By the way, did you know there's 25% off coupon," I want that coupon. Right?

Emily Lewis: Right. It might be to compel them to take action at that point.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly, and that's not to me as a visitor something bad. It's really about giving the users what they want in the end without bludgeoning them over the head with it.

Emily Lewis: Right. So let's talk a little bit about ads. We mentioned the popup changes that we made for this project, but I think the ads were our particular biggest challenge in terms of balancing that priority with what we needed to do to prioritize community and his brand.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: So I remember specifically during our kickoff because we were going through what ads he needed to show up, where he got the best conversion in terms of where they were placed on his current redesigned site, and I was thinking, "Oh my gosh, how are we going to make this look good?"

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And then when we started the IA process, I was like, "Huh, this isn't so bad." You almost have to see this stuff.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: You almost have to get your hands in it first before you say how many ads are too

many ads, or how many ads disrupt the content or the experience.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Because I really thought what he was describing to us in terms of what works for him now and what he wanted us to incorporate seemed to me to be too much.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But then we did some basic sketches and those sketches, I was like, "Huh, that's not so bad." But then even better, when I got into the responsive Live Wires, I saw so many new opportunities for how to deal with the ads because of the responsive interface.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Because I had, I know there's technically no breakpoints, but we have six breakpoints. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: And I saw different things I could do in those different breakpoints that I wouldn't have ever been able to do had I've been dealing with the fixed-width desktop only design.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: We would have had to go with the skyscraper ad, it only shows up when it's a three-column layout, and this ad shows up here at the top and here at the bottom and then this one falls across, it's called the leaderboard and it goes across the top, and it sounds like so much. But if you have different viewports that you are able to design, those ads can fall into different places and still be effective. It was really surprising to me.

Lea Alcantara: Well, and also when you were talking about how at first we thought, "Oh my God, we

have to incorporate so many ads." Then when we got to the IA and the sketching and the Live Wires, we actually found, "Wow, there's room for more ads."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: We actually found in certain pages, we're like, "Well, you could put another ad here and it would not disrupt the experience." It would not look overwhelming. It might actually like just be a 100% fine and it can have more impressions or more ads without any issue at all. What I do find interesting though when we're talking about responsive design plus ads and positioning and how that affected where you decided to position, how did you find working with that? Would you say only specifically you have to immediately in the IA design a layout that you know where the ads could flow naturally to the next column or something.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, I'll be honest. I mean, we started with the sketches that you worked out.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And then I took those to make them responsive, and I don't know if this is the right workflow, but it's the one I chose and this is the first time I had to sort of apply this because this is the first time I've done a really heavy ad site.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I chose to design the layouts based on the ads first. I took the sketch. I saw what we needed to do in terms of what contents are generally needed to be on different pages, but then I was thinking, as I was designing, I was like, "Oh, when I shrink it down here, where could this ad go?" If you recall, he said that skyscraper ad, which is like the tall, narrow one.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: He's like, "That only shows up on three-column layouts." And he is using fixed width ads.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: So it's a responsive site with fixed width ads.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Which means they literally are breakpoints. He's got a leaderboard ad that's 728 pixels wide and so I need to make sure that that width stays consistent in that area, otherwise, you'd get weird white space when it gets beyond that.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Like larger viewports.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And so I just started messing around with these things to be like, "Well, I don't want to be forced to do a three-column layout, but I do want this skyscraper ad to have different options." And so focusing on the layout, I put placeholder images in place and I was just resizing and seeing what made sense, and then once I sort of figured out what made sense for those ads to, one, hit all the ads he said he wanted included on the site.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But also identifying it doesn't have to go in the third column when we shrink down, that third column can drop below the second column and there's plenty of white space there.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: And that's probably something he hadn't considered, and frankly, it was something I hadn't considered until I started resizing my browser to see how things are resized.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, exactly. Now, I will say that it was frustrating on some level to have to do a responsive design with fixed width elements.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Because I did, I had to come up with a solution to maintain a certain amount of proportion to that 728 x 90 leaderboard ad.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And that skyscraper ad, it's like 160 or…

Lea Alcantara: By 600?

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: It's something like that.

Emily Lewis: Something like that. It's narrow.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: It's narrow enough that it doesn't look good. A column of content that narrow doesn't quite look right.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And so that was frustrating because all the other images on the site can be responsive and resized down nicely.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But the thing is, is that for him, there aren't currently any options that he's ready to go forward with, with responsive ads.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: He uses Google ads and they do offer what they call responsive ad units.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And what it does is I guess you pick your ad and it gives you different options for sizing and then based on the natural resizing of the device viewport or the browser viewport, it will call the different ad size. It doesn't actually shrink the ad because that would distort especially like texts getting too small or something like that, but it's in beta and he's like, "I'm not sure I want to make that commitment yet until this is fully tested and vetted." He relies on these ads for his revenue.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Lewis: It would have been great if these had been responsive ads, my job would have been…

Lea Alcantara: Easier. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Hours and hours easier. But it wasn't, but at the same time, having some fixed width points, I was like, "Well, this is a breakpoint. Solution done, like I have a breakpoint."

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I have no choice, that 728 has to be one of my breakpoints. It was interesting, but it certainly introduced a challenge when you have the whole site resizing and flowing nicely and then you get this image that doesn't.

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Lea Alcantara: So what do you think about hiding ads in smaller viewports, because I know that that's definitely one of the things that is controversial right now because if people are going to a site and then they're purchasing sponsorship spots or ad spots or whatever, but then they find out that if someone looks at it in an iPad, their ad no longer exist. What did you think about that when you were developing our site?

Emily Lewis: To be honest, I think that that point is probably more relevant for like our own podcast site where we are actually selling advertising and we've made a commitment to that placement.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: If we took our podcast site responsive, which I'm sure we'll do at some point, we're going to have to come up with a way with those ads staying in place, but with Google ads, he gets paid based on what is clicked on, I believe, is the mode.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: So I don't think it's the same. I don't think he owes anybody anything.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: What I do know is that Google has rules about their ads in AdWords where you can't mess with the markup. They give you the markup, you put it in there and if you mess with it, you are violating their terms of service. Now, they don't say you can't hide things with CSS, but I don't like the idea of hiding content with CSS. It sort of rubs me the wrong way.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But that's kind of a remnant I think of concerns about accessibility, and I'm not sure

ads necessarily hit that particular point.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: But when it came down to it, that's his site and that's how he wants to handle it, hiding and showing based on what the viewport is, like he has specific ads that will show up on iPhones.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Specific ads that will show up on desktop, and that's his plan, and so I put aside my own personal opinions about it and I did the showing and hiding based on media queries.

Lea Alcantara: That make sense.

Emily Lewis: Frankly, it's simple. I mean, I understand why people choose to do it versus going for like a mobile site.

Lea Alcantara: Mobile only like mobile-specific site.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, yeah. I mean, you define where you want the ad to hide or show up and it's pretty straightforward, and of course, there are options beyond display none.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: There are options to hide it visually, but make it available to screen readers and search engines, and they're not complicated. They're just a simple CSS.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But yeah, it wasn't a big concern of mine because it was his priority, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: It kind of became me taking out my ego and my opinions about him being like I'm

going to give him what he's asking for.

Lea Alcantara: So in regards to that, that makes me think, we've been talking a lot about design in the front end and just client stuff, but now we're finally serving these ads and you can use Google ads to do that, but sometimes you might involve a CMS to manage these ads as well. Do you think there are any particular content management system considerations when you're dealing with any type of ad placement?

Emily Lewis: Do you mean like in terms of where it falls on the page?

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: I don't really know, and that's an interesting question. It would be nice. I mean, this is like thinking way outside of what I've actually touched with my own hands, but let's take AdMan, for example.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: Which is the EE add-on made by Hippo, Carl Crawley. We use it to manage our own ads on our site.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Now, if we take it responsive and we want to have greater flexibility than just saying, "Well, we sold this ad space. We have to give them this ad space in all viewports." Well, what if we sell the ad space, but we ask for several different sizes of ads for different viewports and then AdMan could then serve those conditionally.

Lea Alcantara: Yes, that would be awesome.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, but I don't' think that exist though. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I know, not yet, but I believe for the programmers who are listening in….

Emily Lewis: Oh, they could do it, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: They're probably like, "Oh yeah, we could inject that using blah, blah, blah." So you smarty pants, I'm sure, are able to do that.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: But yeah, I definitely think that if you are taking on a project with several different ads that needs to have responsive design incorporated with these ads, choosing a CMS is really important, or figuring out how that current CMS, whatever your client is using, how does that affect how these ads are served. With our particular client, he's a programmer so he's going to do the CMS stuff himself.

Emily Lewis: Yes, it's a hand rolled thing.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly. So let's say he didn't like the display none thing or whatever, then he should be able to figure out or conditionally inject some sort of image based on what device you're using, et cetera, but we've given him the tools to know where to place them.

Emily Lewis: Right. It's been a very interesting project in a really good way. I don't mean it's been like, "Oh, it's been interesting." It's been one of those things where I feel like I learned a lot about something I really didn't realize I needed to learn about.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And it was really funny when I figured it out, and I guess it was like a week and a half ago when I finally got all the breakpoints defined in the layout. I was like patting myself in the back.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: I was like, "Oh, you came up with the best solution for the ad, that's so creative. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: I was just like really proud of myself because it was something where I normally, I guess maybe in the past, wouldn't have tried so hard to reach that goal.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I would have said, "Oh, he says the skyscraper shows up on three columns, it shows up on three columns and leave it at that."

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But I didn't want that add to disappear when we were going down in smaller viewports.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: Because it doesn't have to.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: It didn't have to.

Lea Alcantara: Exactly. So you know what, I think to me, the biggest takeaways from thinking about ads, thinking about conversions, thinking about clients and on professional opinions, planning is very integral to any sort of success [laughs] for a project like this, and a lot of communicating with the client over their expectations of how things are going to be laid out and what these testings are and also especially communicating that what these changes are going to do may and will affect your statistics and metrics and we hope and, based on our professional opinion, believe that these changes will make a positive change to your statistics. Even if it's already good, you might want to

take it from good to great. Planning it out on IA phase is so, so, so, so, so, so important.

Emily Lewis: Oh yeah. I'd say this IA phase is probably one of the longest ones that I've had in recent projects.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: It's going to make the front end totally worth it because more than half of the work were already be done since we're doing all of our wireframing in the browser. But not just the planning for the layout and the code and how it's going to translate, but getting all those details from the client like we almost had to extract them, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Well, what specific ads do you need? Where are they performing best? What are the sizes? Why aren't you using responsive? Like you really have to. You can't just or you shouldn't just go on those, "Oh, I have four ads on the page." And you're like, "All right."

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: It's just not that simple.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, exactly, exactly. With that in mind, how important do you think designing with coding in mind or coding while designing is to a project like this? Like how important is it?

Emily Lewis: Well, I think it's important anytime you're dealing with responsive design. It's less about the ad than the fact that your content shifts.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And so if your design isn't flexible for that, then the front end, whether it's wireframes, web-based wireframes or the actual front-end templates, it's going to be painful, and so the design

while you're coding is really nice because you can see how things fall. You can say, "Oh." Like I made a lot of assumptions about where I thought I would move from one column to two columns, like at what breakpoint I would do that.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I thought it would be a lot sooner, but once I started seeing some stuff, I was like, "No, I really think it's better with everything in one column right now." You know?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And that was a design decision ultimately.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: In our sketches, we hadn't gotten to that point, that it was being done in the browser.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: And I think that's just now our workflow. We spend a little time on some sketches, but then the actual layouts and positioning of content is really designed in the browser in our Live Wires these days. I don't know how we could do it otherwise without wasting hours upon hours upon hours.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I was just thinking about old school workflow. I just can't imagine creating that many static views.

Emily Lewis: And there would be no way, I mean, there would be a way, but I'd be unhappy as a front-end developer, having 50 comps that I have to reference.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: It's kind of back and forth and going to each, it would drive me freaking nuts.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And so being able to take just one concept where we ultimately think we want content to fall. I mean, primarily the sketches tell us this is the content that's got to go on the page.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: And then from that, we make design decisions. Some decisions are made like what goes into masthead and where we think the main content should be versus the supplementary content, but I don't want to go back to the old way of doing a comp for everything you could see because it's almost impossible for me to deliver on that because you might come up with something really awesome and I'm like, "Oh my God, that's going to take me forever to actually do."

Lea Alcantara: And here's the other thing about that too is that what we're trying with this particular client, and actually, no, we didn't even do it with this another client in 2013, we didn't show them any of the static sketches of our IA. The first wireframe view, the first thing that they ever saw in terms of the structure of their site is in the browser.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: It's basically they saw the actual Live Wires in the browser so they can actually make better decisions and feedback.

Emily Lewis: That was Ben Callahan's suggestion I think. I mean, I've been reading about it, but it was kind of like I think after we had Ben on the show, we needed to do it.

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Lea Alcantara: Yeah, let's just do it.

Emily Lewis: We just need to do it.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I know, exactly, and I think it's just when they actually see it, first of all, the client is thrilled because even if it's just black and white and boxes and stuff like that, it feels real now to them, right?

Emily Lewis: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's a more tangible deliverable.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, as opposed to if you could just send them a bunch of JPEGs of boxes or PDFs and things like that. I think it's definitely necessary internally, but I don't think the client needs to see that yet because there could be confused discussions that can be had because it's a static medium.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: And the final deliverable is not at all.

Emily Lewis: Exactly, and I find that we actually did do this process with our law firm client.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: We didn't give them any static wireframes.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: We gave them the web-based wireframes, and so I was able to get feedback on things like dropdowns and click areas, target areas and things that you can't get when you hand them a static JPEG.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, absolutely, like whether they would actually want to have a show/hide thing versus like a tab versus just everything all on that page.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Because then they could physically see things scrolling and then they just make

better decisions and feedback because they're now seeing it in the context it's going to be finally in.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, and I also find that having that feedback and that clarification in the plain black and white simple wireframes gets my HTML that much closer to production-ready HTML. It gets my CSS that much closer, like it's not prettified, but it's got the foundations already there.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And so by the time I hand over the really pretty templates, all of those things have already been worked out, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, for sure.

Emily Lewis: It's been a really fun project. Totally different.

Lea Alcantara: So we learned a lot.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And hopefully, our listeners have a learned a lot too. If you guys have any feedback about this particular topic because I'm so curious over how people have handled balancing design and commerce and client feedback, et cetera, like how did you sell a solution.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Or our client is really insistent that there needs to be this many ads or whatever, what kind of statistics, programs or metrics are you following? I'd be really curious to know, and really, on that note, that's all the time we have for today. Welcome 2014..

Emily Lewis: I know really. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] [Music starts] All right, so we'd now like to thank our sponsors for this

podcast, CodePen and Pixel & Tonic.

Emily Lewis: We also want to thank our partners, Arcustech, Devot:ee and EE Insider.

Lea Alcantara: And thanks to our listeners for tuning in! If you want to know more about CTRL+CLICK, make sure you follow us on Twitter @ctrlclickcast or visit our website, ctrlclickcast.com.

Emily Lewis: Don't forget to tune in to our next episode when Happy Cog's Allison Wagner is joining us to discuss templating and markup for content management systems. Be sure to check out our schedule on our site, ctrlclickcast.com/schedule for more upcoming topics.

Lea Alcantara: This is Lea Alcantara …

Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis.

Lea Alcantara: Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

Emily Lewis: Cheers!

[Music stops]

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