THE THOUGHTFUL HUSTLE

The Insider

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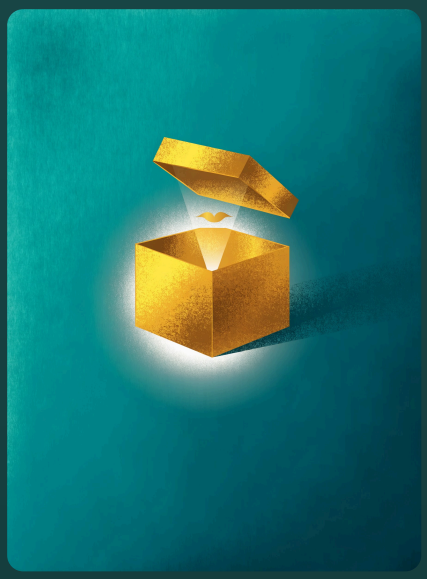

Everyone's Selling the Same Thing

When ten people recommend the identical product, why would anyone buy through you? The quiet, honest answer, and how to make the small extra that wins. Plus the prize in the box that built a brand for a hundred years.

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A note from Colin

Welcome back. Here's something you've probably noticed this year. Everyone is recommending the same handful of tools. Open your inbox and three different people are pushing the identical thing, often with the identical words.

Which raises a fair question a few of you have asked: if ten people point at the same product, why buy through me? The answer is the least pushy thing in marketing. You give them a bit more, something useful they only get through you. A bonus. Let's get into it.

COVER FEATURE · MONEY-MAKING & TRENDS

Everyone's Selling the Same Thing. Here's How You Win.

The honest edge that makes someone buy through you

When you recommend a product and earn a little if someone buys through your link, you're almost never the only one. The makers line up dozens of us to recommend the same thing at the same time. So why you?

For years the loud answer was: shout louder. Bigger promises, fake countdowns. I've always hated that, and so would you. There's a quieter answer that works better, and it has real research behind it. You give the person a genuinely useful extra. A bonus. And it works not through trickery, but through one of the most human things there is.

Back in 1971, a researcher named Dennis Regan ran a now-famous study. During a break, a helper sometimes brought a participant a free bottle of Coca-Cola, a small unasked-for kindness, and sometimes brought nothing. Later, the helper asked everyone to buy raffle tickets. The people he'd bought a drink for bought about twice as many. A ten-cent gift, freely given, roughly doubled what they spent with him. And it didn't even depend on whether they liked him.

A second study I love even more, from 2002, tested it in a real restaurant (Strohmetz and colleagues). A waiter gave diners a sweet with the bill: tips rose a little. Then the waiter gave one sweet, started to leave, turned back and said, in effect, "here, one more just for you." Same sweets. Tips jumped by around 14%. It wasn't the sugar. It was being seen.

When everyone's selling the same thing, the extra you add is the only thing that's truly yours.

That's the honest edge. You don't beat the other nine by being louder or cheaper. You beat them by adding real help, and making it feel like it came from a person. A good bonus isn't a bribe. A bribe says "buy this even though it's wrong for you." A good bonus says "get it from me and I'll make sure it works for you." One is a trick. The other is just being useful.

Sources: Regan, D. T. (1971), "Effects of a favor and liking on compliance," Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 7, 627–639. Strohmetz, Rind, Fisher & Lynn (2002), "Sweetening the Till," Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 32(2), 300–309.

REAL-LIFE STORY · TRENDS & NEWS

The Prize in the Box

How one small extra carried a brand for a hundred years



ILLUSTRATION · THE LITTLE EXTRA BECAME THE WHOLE APPEAL

If you want proof that a small extra can matter more than the main thing itself, you don't need a marketing textbook. You need a box of caramel popcorn.

Caramel-coated popcorn and peanuts, first made in the late 1800s by a German immigrant to Chicago called Frederick Rueckheim. It sold well enough. It was tasty and cheap, and plenty of people liked it. But it was, when you got down to it, just nice popcorn. And nice popcorn has competition.

Then, in 1912, the company did something that changed everything. They put a small prize in every single box. A tiny toy, a little trinket, tucked in at the bottom. And they said so, right on the packet: a prize in every box.

The snack didn't change one bit. But the little extra turned a nice snack into something people couldn't resist, especially children, who'd eat their way to the bottom just to see what they'd got. The prize became the point. That one idea carried the brand for over a century, and by some counts the company has given away something like 17 billion little prizes.

Your bonus is your prize in the box. It doesn't have to be big. It has to be yours.

Rueckheim sold the same sort of thing a dozen others sold. He won, and kept winning, not by making the popcorn louder or cheaper, but by adding one small, delightful extra that was genuinely his. The thing people remembered wasn't the main product. It was the bit he threw in.

Sources: Fox News and CBS News, "On this day in history, Feb. 19, 1912, Cracker Jack's 'prize in every box' debuts"; company history on the 1912 introduction and slogan; widely reported estimate of roughly 17 billion prizes distributed.

HOW-TO · MONEY-MAKING IDEAS

How to Make One Bonus That Actually Helps

Small and genuinely useful beats big and vague, every time



ILLUSTRATION · ONE SMALL, USEFUL EXTRA

The good news first: a bonus doesn't have to be fancy or technical. The best ones are small and solve a real, specific problem. Here's how to make one, even if this still feels like a stretch.

1. Find the gap the product leaves. Once someone buys the thing, what's the very next thing they'll get stuck on? That's your bonus. Not a second product. The missing step.

2. Make the smallest thing that fixes it. A one-page checklist. A short "five mistakes I made so you don't have to." A simple template. A ten-minute video of you walking through the tricky bit on your own screen.

3. Put yourself in it. This is the part the big names can't copy. "Here's what confused me." "Here's the setting I always forget." Your honest voice is the bonus. That personal touch does more work than the thing itself.

4. Deliver it simply. Put it on a simple page or send it as a PDF, handed over right after they buy. A free Systeme.io page, or even a tidy document, does the job. No shop or clever software needed.

5. Say what it is, plainly. "Buy through my link and I'll also send you [your bonus], which helps you with [the exact stuck bit]." No mystery, no hype. Just a clear "here's the extra you get from me."

One good bonus, made once, can sit there helping people for a long time. You're not building an empire. You're adding one thoughtful extra. That's enough.

FEATURE · AUDIENCE EMPATHY

Your Best Bonus Isn't a Product. It's You.

The one thing a faceless funnel can never offer



ILLUSTRATION · A REAL PERSON AT THE OTHER END

I want to take the pressure off. "A bonus? I can barely work the thing I'm recommending, let alone build something to give away alongside it." So let me tell you the most reassuring thing I know about all this. Your best bonus is almost never a thing. It's you.

The big operators recommending the same products have one glaring weakness: there's no actual person behind the link. You buy, you get an automated email, and if you get stuck, good luck. You are the opposite of that, and it's worth more than you think.

"Buy through my link and you can reply to me if you get stuck, and I'll help." That's a real bonus. It costs you nothing but a bit of time, and it's the single thing those faceless funnels can never offer. For our readers especially, people who've been burned before and value a real human over a flashy video, a patient person at the other end is often the deciding thing.

The thing that makes you a good recommender is the same thing that makes you a good neighbour.

Your experience is a bonus too. You don't have to be an expert. You just have to be a step or two ahead, honest about what you found. That's genuinely valuable to someone one step behind you, and it's completely yours. You've spent a lifetime being the person who helps and tells the truth about what's hard. Online, where almost nobody bothers, that's the rarest and most valuable bonus there is. And you already have it.

MOTIVATION & MINDSET

Being Generous and Being Smart Are the Same Thing Here

For once, you don't have to choose between doing well and doing right



ILLUSTRATION · GENEROSITY THAT RETURNS IN KIND

There's a worry I want to name gently, because I've felt it. When you first hear "add a bonus to get more people to buy," a part of you flinches. It can sound like a manipulation, like you're giving a little gift only to get something back.

Here's where I've landed. It would be manipulation if the thing you were selling was no good and the bonus was there to paper over the cracks. That's real, it happens, and we both despise it. But that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about recommending something you genuinely think is worth it, to a person you genuinely want to help, and adding something that makes it work better for them. There's nothing dishonest in that. It's generosity that happens to also be good sense.

The warm thing to do and the smart thing to do are, here, the same thing.

In a lot of the online money world, you're asked to choose between doing well and doing right. Here, in this small honest corner of it, you're not. Be genuinely helpful, add real value, tell the truth about what's hard, and you'll also, as it happens, do better than the person shouting louder.

For many of you, the reason you started this at all was to feel useful again. To contribute. Well, this is it. A good bonus is you being useful, on purpose, to a real person. That you also earn a little from it isn't the catch. It's just the thanks.

COLIN'S PICKS

Worth Your Time This Month

All tied to adding your own honest extra. Where a link is affiliate, I say so plainly

AFFILIATE · A BIT TECHNICAL, READ THE CAVEAT

1. ResultsAiX Bonus Builder

The most on-topic pick I've ever put in these pages, so I'll be careful. It's software (a WordPress plugin) from Kevin Fahey that does exactly what this issue is about: it takes a product's sales page, suggests bonus ideas, and helps you build the bonus page, the write-up and the delivery, far faster than by hand. For someone who recommends products regularly, that's a genuine time-saver.

The honest caveats, because this one has real ones. It needs its own WordPress website to run, so if you haven't got one, this isn't your starting point. It uses AI to write, so you must read and edit everything before you put your name on it. It's a launch right now, around $27 as a one-off (it creeps up a penny per sale, then settles to a yearly price), with a 14-day money-back guarantee. If you've a WordPress site and recommend often, it could save you real hours. If not, skip it with my blessing and use the How-To instead. → **onlineskillsacademy.com/bonus (my affiliate link)**

FREE · NOT AFFILIATE

2. The AI Library: free, and mine

My growing, free library of small, beginner-friendly AI tools and Custom GPTs. Want to make a simple bonus (a checklist, a short guide) but don't know where to start? Some of these help you draft it in minutes. No cost, no catch. → **onlineskillsacademy.com/ai-library/**

AFFILIATE

3. Systeme.io: the free place to put your bonus

Follows straight on from the How-To. When you've made a bonus, it has to live somewhere a person can get it. Systeme gives you a genuinely free way to put up a simple page and hand it over, no card needed to start. It's where I host my own bits and pieces.

MY OWN · LOW-COST

4. The Honest Affiliate

If this issue has you thinking "maybe I could do this recommending thing, but only if it's honest," this is for you. A set of short, plain-English reports on exactly that: recommending products without turning into one of the hypey people we both avoid. Deliberately cheap, £9 for the lot. → **learn.thethoughtfulhustle.com/sp4**

NEWS & TRENDS

What's Moving

- **A free gift roughly doubled what people spent.** In a classic 1971 study, people given a small unasked-for drink later bought about twice as much from the person who gave it (Dennis Regan). The lesson isn't to bribe anyone. It's that genuine, no-strings helpfulness is quietly the most persuasive thing there is.
- **It's the personal touch, not the gift, that lands.** In a real restaurant study, a second sweet handed over personally ("this one's for you") raised tips far more than the sweets alone (Strohmetz and colleagues, 2002). We can't outspend the big names, but we can out-human them.
- **Making a bonus just got a lot easier.** The tools to make one have quietly become beginner-friendly. A one-page guide or short checklist that used to need a designer now takes a free AI tool and twenty minutes. The barrier that made "add a bonus" advice useless for ordinary people has mostly fallen away.



That's Issue 7. When everyone's selling the same thing, you don't win by being louder. You win by being the one who adds something genuinely useful, and who feels like a real person while doing it. Rueckheim just put a little prize in the box. A hundred years later, that's still the lesson. See you next month.

Colin

Quick Reference

- The idea in one line: **when everyone sells the same thing, your honest bonus is the only thing that's truly yours**
- Make one small bonus that fixes the exact bit people get stuck on **after** they buy
- Your best bonus is often you: **"reply to me and I'll help"** is something no faceless funnel can offer
- Free tools to draft a simple bonus: **onlineskillsacademy.com/ai-library/**
- The free place to host and deliver it: **systeme.io**
- The on-topic tool (needs a WordPress site; read the caveats): **onlineskillsacademy.com/bonus**
- My own honest-affiliate reports (£9): **learn.thethoughtfulhustle.com/sp4**
- The weekly newsletter (free): **onlineskillsacademy.com/hustle**

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