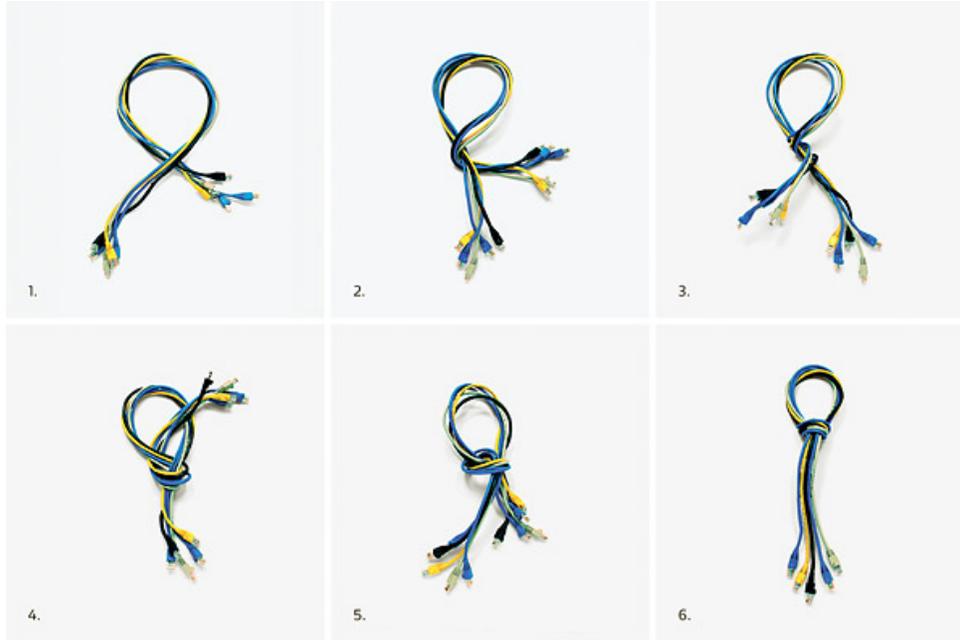


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THE MEDIUM

Tiny Talents



By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

On the Web's amazing how-to sites, I am studying bar tricks. I should be learning, once and for all, how to do CPR, but all I really want to know is how to mix a Singapore Sling, palm a card and tongue-knot the stem of a maraschino cherry.

The best thing about how-to sites like Howcast, eHow, WonderHowTo, Instructables, SuTree, VideoJug and ExpertVillage — huge collections of videos that offer instruction in Chinese dining etiquette and surviving zombie attacks, plating fettuccine Alfredo and linking spins in freestyle kayaking — is that they revive a lost era of two-bit skills, when Cross pens whirled around thumbs, Zippo's burst in and out of flames and someone was forever trying to show you how.

My favorite online card-trick virtuosos, especially, recall a certain kind of 20th-century drifter who gave impromptu courses in prestidigitation on trains and park benches. His many inside pockets were stuffed with the holy relics of the pre-Google life: a money clip, a pocket comb, a deck of Bicycle cards and all that smokers' jazz. "Prestidigitation"? Come on! Even the word is a nostalgia trip and a way today to wrest "digit" away from "digital."

Anyway, how-to sites are trippy. Those sorcerers of small things ("pickpockets," you say? con artists?) have their own video shows — and even reputable demonstrations contain a hint of

mischievous. On one site, an actress named Roxanne Beckford, who once played nonpregnant characters while pregnant, hosts a video called “Hiding Pregnancy With Clothes.” She tries to say it’s not for teenagers who haven’t told their parents, but who knows who will benefit? These sorts of videos provide hacks and shortcuts for everyone and collectively make life look easy.

As the Web’s underpaid teaching corps, how-to instructors are far from being the old television pedants, the omnipresent psychologists of the 1990s who resolved daytime-TV showdowns by having people face the jokers who wronged them. Instead, they tactfully don’t ask why you want to learn something — why declare bankruptcy? why conceal an office affair? — and skip straight to how. Free, usually. Thus, an army of hustlers has become professorial. In dusky colors and tattoos (or, alternately, pink shirts and overlong ties; most are men), they maintain a level gaze and project utter self-assurance. “When you think about it,” says a woman’s voice on the British site VideoJug, “putting your lips onto another person’s lips and moving them about is an odd thing to do.” No matter. Here’s how.

As is currently common practice in the world of online video, producers of how-tos typically make or collect a set of videos and mount them on a specialized site. The demos I like these days originate at Kapoof and Easy Bar Tricks. These sites present a limited number of videos for which producers have paid almost nothing (to actors, shooters, editors and graphics people). Often — as appears to be the case with Simon Crack at Free Magic Tricks 4 U — the entrepreneur who had the idea for the site turns out to be the boss, talent and sole employee. This makes sense: it’s hard to get your friends to kick in labor for an online-video project. There’s still no promise of revenue, and no one yet knows what will be a hit on the Web. (“This site really is a labor of love,” writes Crack on his.)

You’d think the shoestring budget would mean bad videos, but usually the reverse is true: host sites that are overseen directly by people with pet subjects and personal styles offer video that far outshines the average scrappy upload to YouTube. A recent video on Easy Bar Tricks, for example, shows nothing but a pair of hands, a coin and a bill. With understated amusement, the narrator — who owns the hands, presumably — talks the viewer through a bet he can’t lose: he, unlike those he might hustle, can balance a coin on the edge of a bill folded the long way. As the narrator shows first how hard this is to do, and then how easy (if you know the trick and “the laws of physics”), the hands in the frame are both expressive and supersteady. The physical world seems very manageable, especially if you know where its jokes hide. The trick demo becomes a little William Carlos Williams vignette. In fact, the very best way to see virtually any video is almost always on its home site. Producers play video to best advantage there, situate it amid other material of interest and often attract informative and focused discussion sections.

But these home sites — with interchangeable names like Magic Tricks, The Magic Teacher and Cyber Magic Tricks — are not always easy to find. Producers don't exactly rack up hits as they wait for people to stumble on goofy Web addresses that have no priority on Google. And would-be patrons of small sites don't know what they're looking for when browsing the Web for something to do. That's why the big video sites (YouTube, above all) function best when they increase a user's chances of glimpsing new stuff. You think you're looking for aerial shots of Ireland on YouTube, but the site has other ideas: how about Michael Londra singing "Danny Boy," Roy Zimmerman doing the Beatles as Irishmen, Kathy Ireland posing for Sports Illustrated in 1992?

For the person in the mood to learn, the big how-to clearinghouse sites borrow tactics from YouTube and keep users zinging around through various disciplines. The good news is that there are so many how-to videos that the concept is capacious. Visit eHow, and you're awakened to how much you have to learn. It's exciting. Want to relieve a foot cramp, become pregnant, charm someone? Don't get bogged down in worries. Just watch the videos.

The major demo sites also try to give credit to production teams — or I should say that production teams try to ensure that they get credit, since their deals with these big sites are typically modest. (About the best they can hope for from the clearinghouses is exposure for their videos and maybe a thousand dollars in royalties if something really takes off.) As a result, producers try to work their names into the video frame by any means possible — using overlay ads, ads affixed to the end of the video or T-shirts on the talent that make the Web addresses clear to viewers.

Last month, a hacker-friendly venture-capital firm called Y Combinator published a list of "Startup Ideas We'd Like to Fund." No. 13 was "online learning," which — the firm proposed — could build on popular online test-prep courses. If entrepreneurs are looking for faculty, they might also consult the how-to sites, where magicians might be retrained for science demos and actresses could drill students in memorizable poetry.

The guides and gurus look as if they were born to this kind of short film. But the tricksters are the best. They can't have enjoyed especially steady or high-paying employment in the years before Web video got off the ground. So they're ready for their close-ups. And centuries' worth of tricks involving coins and corks finally have a modern showcase. I'll absolutely be spending the rest of Web summer school with Wayne Phelps, Malik Haddadi and Brandon Nowasky, a motley crew of magic men prone to epigrams like "This card trick's called Pinky Does It because . . . the pinky does it." Come September, prepare to be amazed.

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Points of Entry

THIS WEEK'S RECOMMENDATIONS

DEMO DERBY: Currently, the clearest use for original online video is demonstration. Better even than advertising. Much better than entertainment. To admire the range of undertakings on which people will claim expertise — oh, and to learn something — see the big demo sites first, which include Expert Village, Instructables, SuTree, eHow, WonderHowTo and Howcast. Their holdings are growing every day. You might even upload your own video.

DECLUTTERING: Slightly more specific how-to sites, devoted to how to, say, get rid of things (from I.B.S. to ghosts), can be useful, and often have a more coherent tone than the wacky single-subject sites, as well as a considered advertising layout that doesn't drive you bananas, as the ones studded with sponsored links tend to. Get Rid of Things — “a people's guide to better living” — is well worth a look, as are the sister sites How to Clean Things and How to Write Good.

THE NITTY-GRITTY: Web sites like law.justanswer.com (for legal advice) and Black Hair Planet leave nothing to chance. You know you want to know about makeup and hair — and virtually nothing else? DailyMakeover.com is your site. Breaking and entering? Free-lock-picking-guide.com. How to subdue your enemies? GracieAcademy.com — for the basics of Ultimate Fighting “ground and pound” tricks. Yikes.