



Secret agent evangelist

Written in 2002.

Tucked away in an office in Sebastopol, Calif., Simone Paddock patrols the Internet's underground, lurking in the shadows. Well-cloaked so as to keep her identity a secret, she is out to discover what people are saying about her employer, **O'Reilly & Associates**, the technology publishing company.



Simone Paddock

Paddock is not exactly the stereotypical spy. Soft-spoken, prone to laughter, with a generous smile and a mirthful toy collection surrounding her computer, Paddock's role is to quietly create a community of evangelists for O'Reilly by rewarding the voices in the wild who have professed their love and devotion to O'Reilly's products. Once discovered, Paddock sheds her cloak and like the Bob Barker of evangelism, she rewards these strangers with free copies of books from O'Reilly's extensive collection of technology titles.

Welcome to the world of secret agent evangelism marketing.

Simone Paddock is O'Reilly & Associates' first staff evangelist. After stints in several public relations jobs with the company, she was tasked in September 2000 to develop a program based on her title.

"I started out from zero," she says. "Nothing before me, and no expectations. I could basically go wild with it."

Mandate in hand, she created a program that seeks to convert the company's already satisfied customers - the often uber-critical programmer corps - into evangelists. She does this by rewarding them with something that most programmers love more than anything else: free stuff.

Books. T-shirts. Trinkets. Then there are the discounts on O'Reilly conferences and tutorials. All of it is high-value currency in the programming world. An O'Reilly evangelist is thus ordained because he stood up in an online discussion list, or a chat room, or in an Amazon book review and said he loves O'Reilly's stuff, and

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because Simone Paddock witnessed it.

"The evangelism program is by invitation only or from references," Paddock says. "We want to get to know these people and have personal contact with them. It's intentional to keep program as small as it has been. I'm selective in who I'm going to take into the program."

Well-versed in the mechanics of buzz and word-of-mouth referrals, Paddock is apparently helping the company grow sales. Last year, privately held O'Reilly & Associates' revenue grew 30 percent, to \$65 million, according to Hoovers.com. Since September of 1999, traffic to the company's website has doubled, to 1.1 million visitors per month. In the past year, O'Reilly websites have been featured more than 70 times on Slashdot.org (a technology news site). Twenty of those notices are a direct result of either Paddock's submissions or by one of her 65 ordained evangelists. Considering that a single story on slashdot.org can drive between 10,000 and 20,000 unique visitors to oreilly.com, Paddock is marshalling results for growing the community around her company's destination site.

"We saw that there was a possibility of seizing part of the marketing power in the community; we needed someone to create the community around O'Reilly," Paddock says. It was a natural complement to the work of the company's namesake, Tim O'Reilly, who is very visible in the technology community, especially for his promotion of OpenSource initiatives.

"At O'Reilly, we think that one of the things that makes us stand out from our competitors is that we're better at listening to (and talking with) our customers," O'Reilly says. "We know that the people who read our books and web sites and attend our conferences are also the people who are pushing the envelope of the technology itself. They are the ones who lead, shape and contribute to technical communities. Our mission is to pour fuel on the fire they're building."

Following that principle, of talking with customers, is how Paddock developed her evangelism program: She asked an early group of customer evangelists to help her develop an evangelism program that would appeal to other customers like them. By involving them early on, the group bought in to the concept and felt a level of ownership for its success.

Rallying people to various causes surrounding technology has been a tenet of O'Reilly's success since its founding in 1978. Founder Tim O'Reilly has tackled a number of technology issues, including recently challenging Amazon.com's "One-Click" shopping patent. After gathering 10,000 electronic signatures in two days from the technology community protesting Amazon's enforcement of the patent, O'Reilly helped convince the big online retailer to work with Congress in reforming patent law.

"I find people all the time who have really passionate voices online and are out there evangelizing for their own causes or technologies," Paddock says. "That's someone who we really want to have in the program: Someone who is passionate, somebody who really cares about the technologies that we cover."

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Simone Paddock is now a photographer and writer living in Central Oregon. She has spent the last 8 years in pursuit of capturing all those things that make life worthwhile: soaring architecture, neat objects, sumptuous food, and interesting stories. You can check out her work at her [website](#).