

MOVE OVER MERRIAM-WEBSTER

Alum Aaron Peckham's Urban Dictionary Redefines Language

By JoAnn Lloyd



Teachers use it. Parents use it. It has even been referenced by courts and used by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office to "determine the legitimacy of a trademark application." It's the vastly popular Urban Dictionary, created by Aaron Peckham (B.S., M.S., Computer Science, 2005).

The website, Peckham said, is both educational and entertaining. "It is written by the people who use the language," he said. "It's rebellious, uncensored, independent and smart." And although about 30 million people view the site every month, "it doesn't take itself very seriously." Here Peckham sheds some light on his creation and its function.

Peckham: I started Urban Dictionary in my first quarter at Cal Poly in 1999, when I was living in Stenner Glen. For a while, the web server was under my bed! I put up Urban Dictionary posters around campus to spread the word, and my friends wrote a lot of really funny definitions. The site spread by word of mouth; I haven't done any serious advertising for it.

Q: When we wrote about you several years back, the article stated Urban Dictionary had 333,000 words and 600,000 definitions. What are the current statistics?

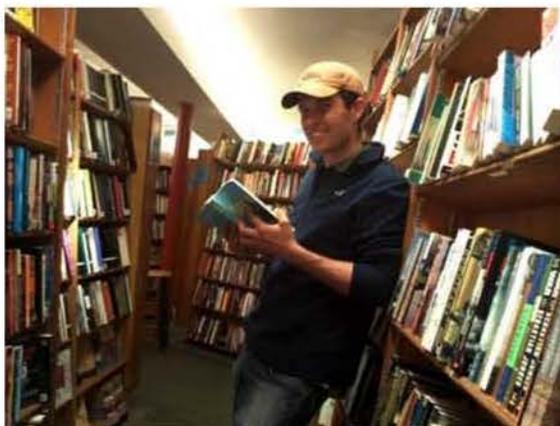
Peckham: In August, the site received its six millionth definition. About half the submitted definitions have been published on the site; the rest were rejected by Urban Dictionary's volunteer editors. About 1.3 million unique words are defined. According to Quantcast, a company that ranks websites, Urban Dictionary is the 89th most-visited site in the U.S. About 30 million people visit every month. People submit about 2,000 new definitions to Urban Dictionary every day. That's about 1.3 new definitions per minute!

Q: We've heard Urban Dictionary described as the ultimate pop lexicon website, among other things. How do you describe it?

Peckham: Urban Dictionary is written by the people who use the language — random people on the Internet. Real speakers are the authority on what words mean and when to use them. Reading their opinionated, witty definitions with hilarious examples and creative spelling is the best way to see what a word really means.

Q: How has the site changed since its inception?

Peckham: My interpretation of what it is has changed. It started as a slang dictionary, but the line between slang and not slang is different for every speaker. And some words are defined on the site that no one would say are slang, like "America" and "California."



Urban Dictionary founder and Cal Poly alum Aaron Peckham.
Photo courtesy Aaron Peckham

The site started as a parody of the "real" dictionary, because real dictionaries can be stuffy and take themselves too seriously. Real dictionaries (and Wikipedia) strive for a neutral point of view, but sometimes there is no objectivity for a particular subject. Urban Dictionary's distinguishing feature is that all the definitions are written by normal Internet users. Every definition is written by one person, and editors aren't allowed to change spelling, word choice or punctuation.

Also, when the site started I thought I had some control over it. I thought I could tell people to stop making up crazy sex acts or crazy drug slang and stick to funny definitions of slang words. But the line between slang and regular language, and the line between funny and not funny, is different for everyone. I was outnumbered, and realized I'm not as in control of this thing as I thought. It's like a living organism, powered by hundreds of thousands of interests and senses of humor, and it can't

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really be controlled. I think that's illustrative of a lesson I learned in my time at Cal Poly: the importance of getting a product into the hands of real people quickly and seeing whether they like it. I try to remember to not develop in isolation and to test assumptions with real customers.

Q: What role does Urban Dictionary play in our society?

Peckham: Teachers use it to understand their students. Parents use it to understand their kids. Kids use it to figure out what "sex" means. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office has used it to determine the legitimacy of a trademark application. It's been referenced in court, and the Department of Motor Vehicles in several states use it to figure out if people are cussing on their personalized license plate applications. Ad agencies should probably use Urban Dictionary more often; I've seen some hilarious mistakes where agencies accidentally make a sexual reference when using a slang word.

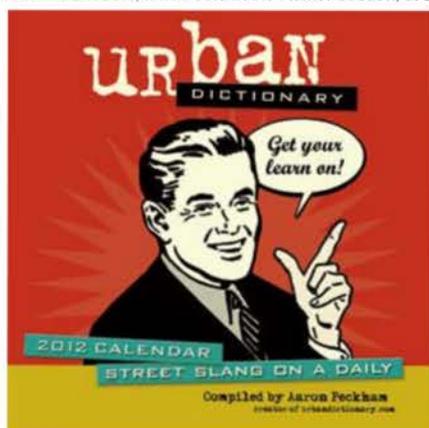
Q: Why do you think it has become so popular?

Peckham: Language is witty, expressive and funny, and everyone who talks has an interest in it. Language changes fast, especially because we're all on the Internet now. Urban Dictionary helps people who aren't hip, to get hip. I'm not sure if there was one particular event that caused it to become popular. Since it started, there have been two periods of big growth, but other than that it's grown slowly. One of those periods was in February 2010. A trend started on Facebook where people were looking up the definition of their first name, then pasting the definition into their status. Tons of people did it – and 10 million people visited the site in about 24 hours!

Q: Do you consider it educational?

Peckham: Definitely. It teaches you what things really mean, according to a lot of people. Readers can vote "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" on every definition, and multiple definitions for one word are sorted by popularity. For example, the word "emo," which applies to punk music and teen angst, has been defined more than 1,000 times. The definition with the most "thumbs up" is the one that shows up first. Even if people don't agree on what a word means, Urban Dictionary can teach you what they all think.

It's a cool blend of entertainment and education. As an example, we've published some of Urban Dictionary's content in a book. At Borders, it was sold in the Humor section; at Barnes & Noble it was next to the dictionaries in the Reference section.



Q: How many editors do you have?

Peckham: About 20,000 editors a month read all the new definitions and decide whether they should appear on Urban Dictionary. On average, each editor reviews 20 definitions.

They're self-selected volunteers, like with Wikipedia. It doesn't take anything to become an editor – just go to the site, click the "Edit" link, and you'll be presented with the most recently submitted definition. You can decide right there if the definition should be published. If a few other editors agree, it will appear on the site the following day.

Q: Is there anything you won't publish?

Peckham: Editors are asked to reject definitions containing the full names of non-celebrities, inside jokes aimed at a small audience, and racist and sexist definitions. The guidelines note that just because a word is offensive, that doesn't mean its definition should be rejected. Offensive words exist in the language and should be in Urban Dictionary. When someone hears a racial slur on the street, they should be able to look it up in and find out what it means. It's a

tough call to decide if something should be published, but the editors work hard and do a good job.

Q: Do you see the site changing or evolving in the coming years?

Peckham: I'd love for Urban Dictionary to maintain its unique voice. It's rebellious, uncensored, independent and smart. It doesn't take itself very seriously, and no subject is off limits. Many definitions are witty and hilarious, and although they're not things you would read in a real dictionary, they're helpful in understanding culture and language.

Peckham's Picks

Here are some of Urban Dictionary creator Aaron Peckham's favorite "family friendly" definitions from the site. Visit www.urbandictionary.com to find yours. (Be forewarned: The site can be addictive, and some of its content is decidedly not G-rated.)

Bad Economy – An all-purpose excuse people use during a recession to justify doing things that are below their usual standard.

Cash Pedal – The accelerator pedal in your car during times of high gasoline prices.

Joke Insurance – When two mates have a mutual understanding to laugh at each other's jokes, no matter how lame or awkward said joke is, therefore lessening the social failure of the bad joke.

Life Password – The password you use for every web site.

LOL Theory – The theory that the internet phrase "lol," meaning "laugh out loud," can be placed at any part in any sentence and make said sentence lose all credibility and seriousness.

Niteflix – Dreams so complex in plot and rich in production value that they seem like feature length films.

No Offense – A phrase used to make insults seem socially acceptable.

Productive Procrastination – Doing stuff to keep busy while avoiding what really needs doing. When all is said and done, your room is clean, your laundry is folded – but you haven't started your English paper.

Rescue Chip – The chip you use to fish out the bits of the first one that broke apart in the dip.

Soap Grafting – The act of attaching an almost completely used piece of soap to a new, unused piece because it is now too small to be conveniently used but you also don't want to waste it.

Spot Tease – A parking spot that appears to be open but is actually taken by a small car or motorcycle. Also can refer to a car that takes up to 90 percent of its own spot and 10 percent of the one next to it, leaving no room for another car to park.

That's Crazy - The perfect response when you haven't been listening at all. It works whether the other person has been saying something funny, or sad, or infuriating, or boring.

This Guy Knows What I'm Talking About – An expression used to diffuse responsibility for an unpopular statement made in a public setting. Typically used to imply complicity or collusion on the part of an unwilling stranger.

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