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How APIs.io Hit the Front Page of Hacker News

How we got there & then what happened… Part 1

Last Thursday we announced that APIs.io – the first open source search engine for APIs, which we've worked on with API Evangelist – had indexed more than 800 APIs. This was a major milestone. Along with our usual promotion, we had wanted to take this opportunity to reach out to some developers on Hacker News. Of course, everyone's ultimate goal is that their post blows up on Hacker News. We of course would love it if APIs.io would be the first place they would look to find accurate information about APIs. And before we knew it, we got picked up and reached the front page of Hacker News! After a couple minutes, we were already in the top 10. Soon after we reached #1, but that was only the beginning.

APIs.io reaches 800 APIs

Back to the announcement. It took a huge amount of momentum for APIs.io to achieve this milestone only months after the initial launch at Gluecon. We'd received support from companies like Spotify and PayPal who had listed official APIs.json description files to describe their APIs. We saw support from the whole API community — it was really encouraging.

We were covered by API.report and The New Stack. Usually we post on reddit and Hacker News too, with elaborate plans to get on the front page. This time I just posted the link to APIs.io with the title "800+ APIs search engine" and told my team about it on Slack. Only two or three co-workers up-voted it, yet suddenly we were climbing front page of Hacker News, right to the top!



That was the beginning of our 24 hour journey.

With #1 on Hacker News comes great responsibility

As you may have heard before in similar stories of Hacker News success, our site went down pretty quickly. At one point, we had more than 600 users on the site at the same time.

To develop APIs.io, I'd decided to use my new favorite framework: Meteor. It comes with everything built-in. I was particularly interested to use it for it's DDP aspect. DDP stands for Distributed Data Protocol, it's basically a way to keep the connection between client and server, and notify the client when something changes on the database. It's awesome to build reactive apps.

But in this version of APIs.io, to give a better search experience to users, we were loading all the data in the cache when users were hitting the root domain. What worked well with 200 APIs in database and few users on the site did not scale with thousands of requests. People were stuck with a forever "loading…" screen. I spawned new dynos but it didn't help much.

On my local machine, I had a beta version to optimize the loading time. It will only load the data you requested. I was working on it for the last couple of days and was planning to deploy it soon… But now I didn't have a choice… I had to trust my code and deploy it to production to keep the site alive and give a good experience to users.

I saw myself jumping of a cliff… "to infinity and beyond" as they say… I watched the progress bar from the deployment tool was very stressful. But it worked!

Takeaways

Having something interesting that is barely available created a great deal of demand. Though obviously not ideal and a little frustration for the users, people will comment and complain, but that gives you the opportunity to answer and solve the problems, taking care to hear and respond to what people are saying. You *feel* the community, that's for sure!

At the same time that I was busy scaling our the site, Steve and Kin were answering people on the HN thread with comments and suggestions they had about APIs.io. This kept the conversation alive and for sure gave us some karma points to stay on top.

This launch worked better for us this time than in the past and there are a few reasons why. We linked to the actual content, not to an announcement, taking people right to the product. Plus, it's something this audience sees value in. We knew that, but to see it was a sight to behold.

Lessons Learned

- Post to your content, not to an announcement
- Play by the rules
- Monitor live to scale
- Answer questions on the thread as they come in if you can

Stay tuned for Part 2 of the story. We're analyzing the search data from that day on HN and will continue to for the next couple of weeks. Interesting stuff people searched for on APIs.io for coming soon. You'll be surprised ;)