

DEATH OF LITTLE-THINGS SHOWS HOW FACEBOOK, AMAZON AND GOOGLE ARE MURDERING AMERICAN BUSINESS AND OPPORTUNITY



PUBLISHING ON FACEBOOK

Live by the algorithm, die by the algorithm: How LittleThings went from social publishing darling to shutting down

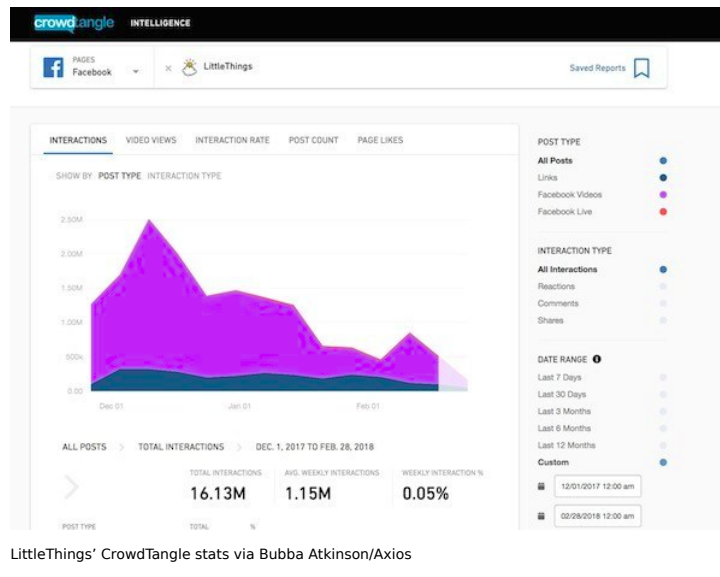
MARCH 1, 2018 by [Lucia Moses](#)

It was two years ago at the Cannes advertising spectacular, a week of peacocking, drinking and schmoozing on the French Riviera. And on a corner of the Daily Mail yacht, there was LittleThings, hosting a late-afternoon pick-me-up with hand massages and nail touch-ups, and, of course, rosé. It was a modest affair by Cannes standards, but it showed the aspirations of the then 2-year-old media company.

LittleThings, which started as a pet supplies e-commerce site, became a poster child for astonishing audience growth, topping 50 million uniques in three years by sharing inspirational stories on Facebook about people and animals doing heroic things, among other inspirational content aimed squarely at Facebook's sweet spot: middle-aged women. The formula thrived for a while as long as Facebook rewarded it and other clicky content sites with referral traffic. Facebook even touted the company in its case studies.

CEO and founder Joe Speiser brushed aside comparisons to fast-growth Facebook publishers like Upworthy and ViralNova. This time it was different, since LittleThings was an original content publisher — and Facebook needed publishers like LittleThings that drove engagement on the platform. As Facebook changed — emphasizing video, in particular — so too would LittleThings. “As long as you constantly pivot within the Facebook ecosystem, you’ll be fine,” Speiser said on the Digiday Podcast in May 2016.

That turned out not to be the case for LittleThings. When Facebook decided earlier this year it wanted less publisher content in the news feed, LittleThings’ traffic and engagement plunged. Speiser and Gretchen Tibbits, the company’s president and COO, announced Feb. 27 to their 100 employees that after attempts to sell fell through, the company would close.



The publisher is now a cautionary case study in relying too much on a giant distribution partner whose priorities might not line up with yours. Speiser and Tibbits have fans, both within LittleThings and in the broader industry. They were known as levelheaded media operators who focused on the details of the business and gave the internet a counterpoint to the often negative news of the day. Yet it was not enough.