

Strategic Web Site Planning

WebProNews - April 24th, 2001 - The Internet has finally evolved as an essential marketing tool. The latest figures estimate that 50% of American households have a computer. Most businesses use the Internet for some business related function. B2B marketing (business to business), CRM (customer relation management) and SCM (supply chain management) are the key areas of business related growth on the Internet.

Integrate E-Marketing into Your Overall Marketing Strategy

Not an easy job. Everyone has a different idea of how this works. First it is critical to understand the difference between Internet Marketing and conventional marketing.

A printed brochure can easily be targeted to a specific audience. Many companies have several brochures, either for different products, different product lines, or the same products for different audiences. You can tailor an ad for the audience of a specific publication. If an ad is not well designed, people will still see it as they flip through the magazine.

You rarely send out any printed material to someone you have never spoken with. No matter what the brochure or product sheet looks like, people will keep them if they are interested in what you have to sell.

All this changes on the Internet.

Newspapers are designed to be read. They sure are not pretty to look at. The narrow columns allow you to scan, rather than actually read. At the newsstand papers sell based on the feature headline.

Magazines are produced to sell advertising. No one reads magazines. People skim through them and look at the photos and the ads. Some magazines run their articles on page after page after page just to force you to look at all the ads. On the newsstand magazines sell based on the photograph on the cover.

A Website, on the other hand, needs to appeal to a vast majority of people. If you are in the B2B space you need to be concerned as to what type of image your site projects to your potential customer base. The site must be a reflection of your company, not a "home grown" site or a "designer special". The Website is your image 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Even the technical people who use the Internet to do "market research" do not like to spend time on a site that is not well designed, or has too much text, or is difficult to navigate. The site should be comfortably designed. That is, graphically pleasing to look at and technically current.

The Website needs to go beyond anything you can present on paper. Your Website can easily provide animation and user interaction, two powerful marketing tools not available in print. A product demo can be simulated. Navigation tools are becoming much more

graphically sophisticated and user friendly. CRM, order entry and order checking can all be done online. This eliminates personal interaction, can ease the burden on your own customer service people, and makes the process an entertaining experience for the end user - your customer. If the total Website experience is not entertaining it only take one mouse click to lose your visitor.

How to Plan Your Site

As much as you may want to provide copious amounts of information, people do not want to read it. When you need to provide text, be kind and limit the width of the text. No one wants to simulate watching a tennis match on a Website. There must be a good mix of text and graphics with limited page scrolling. Studies have shown people would rather click to a new page than scroll more than two screens.

Think through what you want the Website to accomplish.

Ask yourself these questions:

1. What do I expect from this Website?

We all want our Websites to produce income by either selling products or developing leads to sell services. The reality is that with all the thousands of new sites coming on the Internet each week yours will get lost in a myriad web, so to speak. It is critical to address important issues relative to your business, specifically directed to your target client or customer.

2. What do I want my clients or customers to derive from the site?

Your site should be informative and helpful. Accurately define your services or products and document how they will help your potential clients and customers solve their problems or make their life more pleasant. Use examples and testimonials. Posting articles and white papers helps visitors understand what it is you are trying to accomplish. Just expounding on the "features and benefits" of your own products or services is like preaching to the choir. Perhaps the best lesson we have learned over the past few years is that we no longer need a wonderful solution to a problem that does not exist.

3. What is the purpose of the Website?

If your purpose is to sell product (not a retail e-commerce site) then you need to directly address the customer you are trying to reach. If your product is technical, but the decision maker is in management, you need to direct your Website to both entities or you will not make the sale. You must address the needs of management (the pain) and how you can solve their problems; and still have your site talk to the technical aspects of how your product or service will integrate into the customer's corporate structure.

4. How can I be informative to visitors, but important to my own customers?

You must be aware that any information you post is in the public domain, so be careful what you may or may not want people to look at. If someone merely "stumbles" onto your site there should be enough general information to quickly portray your company, your services, your products, and your corporate philosophy. You never know when this may lead to a referral. If you need to present in-depth information you can create a password protected section that allows you to capture the identity of the visitor.

5. How can I keep people on the site and keep them coming back?

Change the content. If you constantly add new content there is a reason for visitors to return. New articles, new products, a "What's New" section, a calendar of events, a list of things to come. These should always be planned in the design stage before the site development process starts.

6. How can I sell on the Internet?

Marketing 101 dictates that if you never ask for the order you will never get it. On a Website you have many more opportunities to do this than you ever had in print. You can use e-mail links, fill-in forms, a contact page, an FAQ page, "click here" links, even your own bulletin board or discussion page. If your company produces a newsletter or white papers, use a subscription form. Be creative, capture the identity you need for your own marketing purposes and ask for the order! Always sell!

7. When do I stop?

Never. Any good Web site is always "Under Construction." As you build the site, for navigation purposes you may want to include links to pages that you have not yet developed. Instead of using "Under Construction" put some text on an incomplete page that will tantalize people to check back.

Be kind and friendly to your Website visitors and your Website will repay the kindness.