How to create and promote a Web site that works

This article was written for Bytestart by Nigel T Packer of Business for Business

A search is carried out on Google - the most used search engine currently on the internet - every 0.003 of a second, searching over 8 billion Web pages. If your Web site does not match the searchers' enquiries your chances of trading successfully and your business 'making it' on the internet are low.

The World Wide Web is like one huge shopping centre, every Web site offering products and services; some 'shops' are well lit and easy to access, however, the majority have the lights turned off, their shutters down and the 'closed' sign on the door.

Making your company Web site attractive and popular is more than just putting a picture of the product or a description of the service onto a Web page and publishing it on the Web.

There are a host of issues that need to be addressed to ensure success, but before a Web developer is even contracted, the bigger picture of strategic marketing needs to be addressed. It is important to understand that marketing is not sales, strategic marketing provides the structure to help us collate information and through it understand our customers. This is information that we need in order to sell successfully.

Applying this to a company Web site, before any development work is carried out on the Web site we have to be clear on who the customer is and why they are likely to buy. In describing the target customer, such factors as gender, age and socio-economic group are essentials while further information such as technical capability and language level can also be useful.

Primary market research
By carrying out primary market research – and this means not just reading reports or looking at statistics, actually get up from your desk and go and ask your customers - we will be able to develop a better understanding of the customer. Including this information in your design brief puts the Web developer in a much better position to produce a site that the end user will feel affiliated to and comfortable with.

What is the objective of the site? Is it to provide information, to produce direct sales, or just a brochure-ware site showing the company and its capabilities? Is it intended to generate enquiries from new customers or to keep existing customers informed?

Objectives will include the detailed information on any existing brand identity and the image the company wants to portray to the world at large. Remember your

Web site is now the first port of call for a potential customer. Recent research has shown that viewers will make a decision on the suitability of a company in 20 milliseconds based purely on the image they are seeing on their computer screen. What is your Web site saying about your company? Make sure your Web developer is fully informed.

The importance of gender

It is also important to identify the gender of your client base. This has been much ignored to date, possibly to the detriment of many businesses. Much research and writing exists on how communication differs between genders; since a Web site is by its nature a communication, it should make sense to have a Web site targeted at female buyers designed and developed by a female designer or team.

The same obviously applies to a male audience, if this is your target then contract a male designer to build your site. Recent research at the University of Glamorgan supports this; it has shown that gender makes a big difference in the perceptions of the viewer. According to their research over 77% of Web sites showed a predominantly male design, reflecting the higher proportion of male designers in the marketplace. An interesting statistic when according to Judy Hoyt Pettigrew (author of Women Mean Business: The Secret to Selling to Women), as much has 80% of purchases are made by women.

Geography and Culture

Another consideration is geography and culture. Is the Web site going to be used to target a particular community or sector? Make sure that this is your focus and provide information that is of value to your viewers. Data that helps the decision making process can be the difference between a sale and no sale.

Once we have a Web site that represents the business effectively in terms of image, content and functionality, what else needs to be addressed?

Promoting the site

Major considerations in the promotion of the site through search engine listings (not paid or sponsored) are the keywords and key-phrases. Over the past eight years it has baffled me that so many sites are missing this meta-data and have no appropriate page titles.

These are essential if potential customers are to find your Web site and offerings. Although it is not obvious to the viewer, the purpose of this information is to provide the search engine with the data they need to place the site in the correct category in the database, which in turn helps the search engine respond to search terms entered by users.

To achieve successful ranking in search engines the title and meta-data must reflect the content of the page it belongs to. Keywords and phrases need to be

researched thoroughly, what exactly are your customers likely to enter as search terms into search engines.

When writing the content of the page remember that whilst conveying information about the products and services you should include your keywords and phrases - those terms which you have identified are used by your potential customer. It is possible to repeat the keywords and phrases a few times but not too often as the search engines treat this as spam!

Use useful and appropriate page titles - the common use of generic page titles such as “home page” and “contact us” is a waste of keyword opportunity. No-one types “contact us” into a search engine, why would they? Carry out a Web search on these two phrases and see how many there are out there (at the time of writing this was 3.1 billion & 6.2 billion respectively).

Once completed, the search engine submission process can start. Whilst time consuming, review the search engine you have selected and ask if it is relevant to your industry or whether it is likely to be relevant to your target market.

Start with your own country search engines and submit to them – ensuring you are following their terms and conditions. Use of free submission services online is not recommended, consider how they make their money! Local regional and national directories should also be used. Many are free for basic listings but there is often a charge for enhanced listing.

In summary the biggest part of the Web site is in the preparation. If you carry out your research into your customers and understand them then you can build a Web site which they will find useful and will purchase from. Remember who the Web site is for - your customers!

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