



Web Sites That Work

By Suzanne McGann

Web sites have become a primary tool for business efficiency, revenue growth, marketplace visibility, and reputation. Web sites have become more cost effective. New technologies are allowing businesses to upgrade their existing systems to improve operations, streamline customer communications and spur profitability. Business owners are finding more often that a Web site's overall value and return makes it a priority over developing an advertising campaign or communications strategy.

So, where do you begin in developing a Web site and analyzing its bottom line value? Here are some tips on determining a business strategy, a reasonable budget and expected returns on your investment.

Assuming that the site is first and foremost a marketing brochure-ware tool, you can expect it will provide informative content to your customer base and gain credibility for your business. Beyond that it should fill two operational needs: Decrease an operation that is repeatedly performed by internal staff, such as giving directions to the office; and meet client needs when a client-request trend has been noticed. Beyond that, Web content that

adds value to your key accounts will solidify business relationships and revenue.

Determining a Web site business strategy—

- Review your overall business plan and marketing goals for the next few years. Determine how a Web site can fulfill strategies and serve those goals. Questions to consider include: What are key themes? What is your business voice?
- Review your sales, marketing, and operational objectives to determine internal and external Web strategies.
- Analyze the audience you are trying to reach and consider how you can provide value to those people through online information and tools. It is also a good idea to analyze your competition's approach.
- Consider ongoing strategies and maintenance. The greatest strength of a Web site is its real-time ability to evolve and change with the business. You will want to keep the site exciting and fresh, reflective of changes in your business and industry. Many companies want the Web developer to handle maintenance because of time constraints. But the developer can also build the site so that it can be managed in-house.

Throughout this process, your Web developer can present various technologies and ideas to help you fulfill your goals.

Determining a Budget—

While it's easy to pull together a "store front" with text, photos and contact information, a Web site reflects your company image and is often a customer's first impression of you. A design that fits your company brand is as important as the content you deliver. The complexity of your site will ultimately determine your budget. Things like navigational structure, flash motion, sound, video clips, rotating .gif images, language translations, password-protected areas, and e-commerce capabilities may or may not be needed, but should be considered when you are working out a budget. A good range to budget for is \$5,000 to \$40,000.

Determining Return on Investment—

Based on initial goals, a Web site should do increase business revenue because of improved visibility and image, and greater market reach (often attracting national and international markets).

- Increase sales opportunities because of value-added services that may include e-commerce, online newsletters or e-mail announcements to your core customers.
- Lower overhead because of streamlined operations that provide cost-savings throughout the company.

Analyzing Results

Most hosting companies offer some back-end data on your Web users and trends that emerge. Use the data to analyze your Web statistics and determine ongoing strategies.

- What page seems most interesting to your users?

- Is the online activity matching your initial goals, as they relate to overall business strategies?
- How many people are coming through your contact tools to specific e-mail accounts?
- Are all of those people being treated with quick/effective customer service?
- Are these people your target audience?
- Are key prospects/accounts referencing your Web site? Are they impressed by something that it offers?

Finally, the best Web site is not going to bring results if it can't be found. Expect a Web developer to present all

the options for search optimization services, some of which are free and others are paid. As a partner in this voyage, a good Web developer will bring ideas throughout the entire process, from planning to development and implementation, and help your business grow. ■

—Suzanne McGann is Owner and President of the award-winning *Voyageur I.T.*, 413 Wacouta Street, Suite 250, St. Paul, MN 55101. She can be reached at 651.292.8838 or 651.276.0008, Suzanne@voyageurit.net. Visit *Voyageur I.T.* at www.voyageurit.net. ■

"Business owners are finding more often that a Web site's overall value and return makes it a priority over developing an advertising campaign or communications strategy."

—Suzanne McGann

www.xcelenergy.com ©2004 Xcel Energy Inc.



"THINK OF US AS 1-800-ONE-PLACE-FOR-ALL-YOUR-BUSINESS-ENERGY QUESTIONS. WE JUST COULDN'T FIND A NUMBER THAT LONG."

"Any question. Any concern. And lots of information that can help your business and lower your costs. We're the Business Solutions Center. Our team can get to the bottom of just about any subject from energy efficiency, to financing, billing and payment options, and even money-saving load management programs. Think of 1-800-481-4700 as your hotline for all your business needs."

Brenda, Senior Customer Advocate



Every time you flip a switch or turn a dial, you tap into the energy of over 12,000 people working to make your life better. Xcel Energy. You get all of our energy.