

These smart Web strategies can boost business

LIKE THE BUSINESS CARD

or brochure of the past, Web sites can offer credibility and viability to a business. In fact, a 21st-century business can hardly be considered proficient without one.

But just having a Web site is quite different from having one that markets well, increases sales or improves operations. There are a number of Web marketing strategies that, in many ways, have surpassed traditional marketing and communications strategies. They're also easy to implement, very affordable and can give businesses a boost.

It's common for business owners to be overwhelmed about where to allocate money. The first step is to review what your Web site is trying to achieve. Is it a prestige piece (which I call brochure-ware)? Is it about relationship-building or e-commerce? Is your business mostly referral-based or do you need to be found easily within search engines like Google?

A Web site should serve your overall business strategy and be designed to communicate effectively. Even at the first level, basic brochure-ware, it should convey the essence of your company so well that people get it immediately. And, it should solicit some type of action, even if just a "Wow! This business is for real."

The second level, relationship-building, takes your business a step further and can actively increase revenue. It involves creating some extra



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selling products. It can mean having people pay for your services online, or register for events online.

- 2 | Any business can benefit from a simple e-mail marketing campaign.
- 3 | For \$1,000 or less, you can launch a targeted e-mail program extracted from your own database, that at the very least provides some backend data to help define your customer base and what they respond to.

items that users will respond to, and help you develop and build core relationships with them. These items may be a quiz, survey, resource information (that your user finds invaluable) or a data-rich extranet.

How it's done

SoleTrex.com is a prime example of a relationship-building site that is generating new revenue. Owner Jeff Carver developed soletrex.com to sell

his backpacking how-to DVD kit and post information about his seminars. But the site has evolved into a meeting point for a large community of backpackers and hikers.

Carver has added new features to serve that community, including links and ads from outdoor gear manufacturers, product discounts, advice from experts, and a high traffic area where users can post trip photos and exchange information.

"The hiking community is tough to read — some are recreational, others are aggressive and into mountaineering, so it's hard to get your arms around this group," says Carver.

"When Voyageur and I first sat down, we agreed that community was going to be the most important part of the site. Last month I had 500 new visitors to the site. I get e-mails from people five miles from my house and as far away as Canada, looking for information on where to hike. As I grow the site, it will become more community-oriented to serve that need."

The third-level site involves e-commerce and other marketing strategies that define your core customer, from those who are aware of your business to those who are loyal, repeat customers. It's important to note that e-commerce isn't just about selling products. E-commerce can mean having people pay for your services online, or register for events online. Strategies such as e-mail marketing

campaigns and search positioning campaigns can be useful at all levels—from setting up a professional Web presence, to developing customer relationships or driving sales to your e-commerce component.

Any business can benefit from a simple e-mail marketing campaign. It falls under what I call the “Silly Not to Try It” category. For \$1,000 or less, you can launch a targeted e-mail program extracted from your own database, that at the very least provides some back-end data to help define your customer base and what they respond to.

Cheerful Givers is a non-profit group that provides children's birthday gift bags to shelters and food shelves in Minnesota. It has been trying to raise awareness through its Web site since 2001. Last November, Cheerful Givers launched a simple e-mail campaign, which generated a 30 percent response rate from donors and volunteers on the first try. The group also started an e-newsletter that Web visitors can sign up for, which is now distributed to 600 people.

“The nice thing about the e-newsletter is that it's national. So even though the bags are distributed in Minnesota, we've been able to get donations from national sources. The newsletter is less than six months and it's been very successful,” says Karen Kitchel, the organization's president. “We've also been directing people to the Web site via stickers, which we distribute at a number of events. The site is our main marketing and visibility vehicle and it has really worked. We've drawn more donations and volunteers each month through the site, which we update each month in order to give people a reason to come back.”

Get searching

Search positioning is another strategy that can boost brand awareness, but it becomes more important when a Web site constitutes revenue generation. In that case, I always recommend a budget of at least \$6,000 for an effective search positioning program.

Search positioning can be used successfully in different ways as needed

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— Suzanne McGann, Voyageur I.T.

for the business cycle. Evergreen Industries in Inver Grove Heights is the No. 1 producer of holiday wreaths and garlands for fundraising purposes. Because its sales cycle is seasonal, it launched an aggressive search positioning campaign including Web site ads and links last fall through December. The ad campaign was pulled back in January and will start up slowly again after June. It helps the company market effectively online, within a budget it can handle.

Helicopterbuyer.com owner Mark Clancy has a very specific need: to move inventory fast because he's selling million-dollar helicopters. Rather than putting money into regular search positioning that tells the world he sells helicopters, we helped him develop a Google ad campaign that is used whenever he has a specific helicopter to sell. Not only are the helicopters selling faster, within two weeks compared to a couple of months, the overall selling process has become a lot less expensive. In Clancy's case, that translates into maximum return on investment and business success.

Every business needs to have a Web

site, and Web sites are dynamic. Because of this, it is easy to develop a brochure-ware site that morphs into a fully functional relationship site or e-commerce site.

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