

# Vision helps to rein in online marketing: Form a strategic plan

**Editor's note:** To inquire about submitting a Strategies column, contact Senior Editor Steve LeBeau at (612) 288-2108 or slebeau@bizjournals.com

There's no escaping the Web and its intricate connection to how we do business today.

So how do you rein it all in and make the Web work hard for you?

**1. Mission control.** Creating and maintaining a powerful Web presence starts with forming a strategic plan based on the mission and vision of your company. Your Web site needs to serve the overall business strategy and reflect the spirit of the organization. First, review what your Web site needs to achieve. A prestige site, aka brochureware, is far different from a more function-oriented site that builds relationships and revenue via blogs, customer surveys, valuable resource information or a data-rich extranet.

For a general roadmap to your online strategy, consider your type of organization:

Marketing-based firms need to be highly cognizant of branding but often have lean sales staffs, so they might need more online advertising and consistency in branding. These firms can leverage podcasts, videos and other rich content while doing aggressive search-engine optimization (SEO) to ensure they get noticed on the Web.

On the other hand, sales-based organiza-

tions with deep sales capability can often get by with a weaker Web presence. These firms can stand to leverage e-mail communications, including opt-in newsletters, to reach prospects and customers. They also can tap into extranets and other online tools to develop stronger client relationships.

Imagine the possibilities with variations on these themes. For instance, a private, extranet area can review all-important sales literature while streamlining the sales chain from first phone call, detailed follow-up email, more phone calls and meetings on through "the close." Every site is unique because every business is unique. That said, sites generally are brochureware sites, resource sites (listing good stuff to learn from), and/or transactional sites (this includes extranets and e-commerce sites).

**2. Budget casting.** The marketing bromide of the more you spend, the more you get back is particularly true on the Web but only if you start with a good plan with the end game in mind.

A few years ago, many small and mid-size companies were spending one-half or less of their marketing budgets online. More recently, these firms typically spend about 80 percent of their total marketing budgets online. Retailers and service-based organizations might consider spending 50 to 80 percent of their total marketing budget on Web initiatives, including 20 to 40 percent on SEO and 5 to 10 percent on e-mail marketing.

Small companies with fewer than 40 employees tend to funnel marketing spending all from a single budget allocation. Larger firms

may pull online spending from sales, marketing, operational or other budgets, but efforts should be integrated and coordinated under a unified strategy and guidelines. Larger firms find success in forming a Web committee that meets with key Web site and technology people at the project start, mid-point and occasional check-ins, guided by a designated decision-maker for the Web site from the company side such as a marketing director.

**3. Is it you?** Be consistent. In support of the above point about a unified effort, remember, branding is king. Offline and online, be consistent with messaging, logos, tag lines, etc. to communicate your brand as the essence of your organization. When branding permeates your company, it forms a potent bond with customers because it creates a consistent, positive experience. Revenue and particularly higher-yielding revenue flow from this harmony.

While you might spend more in the upfront creation of good design and branding, the investment in focusing your online strategies also strengthens the way you communicate your business each day in selling and delivering service to prospects and clients.

**4. Hired guns.** To avoid poor design and content, outsource to a professional Web design and development team. Marketing professionals and graphic designers design the best Web sites, not jack-of-all-trade entrepreneurs and stressed-out staffers. Bring your ideas and concepts but leave the final design work to the development team. A good developer or team won't be an order taker but will enhance your

own creative concepts and know how to leverage today's technologies to execute these ideas. They'll also make the site efficient for updates and search positioning strategies.

**5. Keeping it fresh.** Treat online efforts as a fluid vehicle for helping your business. Accordingly, well-planned site architecture is essential to success. Professional Web site developers greatly help in physically building in flexibility to your site. Think through realistic maintenance expectations during site development and determine how to work with a content editor or Web team to meet your needs.

Some Web sites are strategically created to be professional sites that don't require editing. They simply need replacing every few years. Other sites, whether in HTML or Flash format, require frequent updating and benefit by the use of newer technologies such as content management systems and cascading style sheets. Web developers are increasingly using these and other tools that place design around content, which allows for easy image updating without rebuilding all site content.

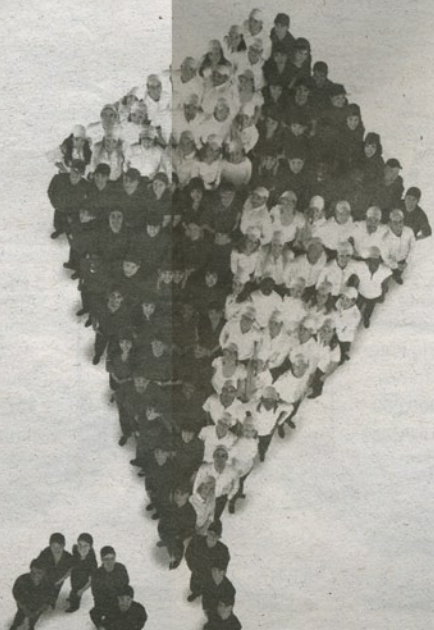
Online strategies aren't much different than business strategies: clear messaging and a presentation that says "expertise." When done right, Web sites and online marketing have the potential to transform your business to tremendous proportions.

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