

Managing, measuring online strategy for the growing business

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Podcasts, videos, RSS feeds and other content-rich applications in today's Web 2.0 world bring tantalizing opportunities to drive revenue. Savvy search engine marketing also is required so customers can find you on the Web. The good and bad news is experts in marketing, sales and IT functions as well as vendors like Web developers, marketing firms, advertising agencies and other specialists often contribute to the online marketing pot. Finger-pointing and ball-dropping ensues. Sight of the big picture is lost.

So how does the growing enterprise set up to manage online strategy?

1. Orchestrated, top-down strategy. Realigning the organization often is a critical first step to effectively plan and execute online strategy. The marketing planning process requires consistency enterprise-wide with activities coordinated across lines of business and channels.

Leadership of online strategy needs to be top-down. For instance, firms with less than \$40 million in revenues or fewer than 100 employees often do best when online marketing activities are directed from an owner or CEO. Larger

enterprises that lead online strategy from a chief marketing officer or a centralized marketing function tend to execute far better than segmented organizations and with less cost.

After forming your online strategy, break down the specific online activities and outline clear lines of responsibility for each. The basics of an online marketing strategy include Web design, Web development, search and e-mail marketing. Assign roles of responsibility for regular updates (Who updates the site?) and analytics (Who reviews and is kept accountable for the site's success?). In-house marketing staff, for example, can make Web edits via a content management tool.

Depending on core competencies, firms often opt to outsource basics like strategy development or more advanced Web tasks related to design or programming. Firms of all sizes are outsourcing search marketing to Google-certified vendors to raise their search visibility, a move that often brings substantial return on investment.

2. Marketing directs. The marketing department does best by taking ownership of directives that drive brand messaging and online sales processes via Web initiatives. Marketing should pull the I.T. department into Web projects and meetings only when needed as it relates to I.T. resources. I.T. needs to understand that marketing has legitimate requests that often touch upon technology, such as hosting, analytics or interoperability issues so marketing can move forward easily with their tasks. Marketers also can work toward developing strong processes and ongoing communication with I.T.

3. I.T.'s role. While I.T.'s role in Web design and content is diminished, I.T. needs to take an active role in technical issues. When planning projects, Web vendors require occasional access to I.T. to confirm that internal systems are set up for project success. For example, companies can now set filters for various browsers, software and Web sites. So before starting a project, Web developers and I.T. staff are smart to ask about these compliance issues. Technical areas where I.T. is integral to Web projects include managing domain registrations and hosting, consultant roles or as database developer for functions that move from the company Web site and back again (think dealer locators, member information or e-commerce transactions).

4. Measure results. "Proof" is emphasized in all areas of business today. Even employees are held accountable to performance metrics. So in marketing, savvy marketers appreciate that their Web site, search-engine marketing and e-mail marketing all can be tracked within to-the-minute data regarding activity. Many analytic packages are available. Combining these automated reports with sales/operational reports gives companies clear learning around the success (or lack thereof) within campaigns. By quickly analyzing trends, companies can swiftly elevate their marketing success. More importantly, companies can review all marketing dollars and set budgets that bring high ROI.

Analytics can be leveraged to tightly integrate with marketing. In every Web site, we can see what days and times of the week are most active for the client. Monday at 10 a.m.

is a very active "browsing" time. So firms can choose any of the following actions: run search campaign words during selected times or days, have salespeople make more calls during those times, or place radio ads during the drive-times that surround the peak "shopping times."

Analytics also are used to rationalize marketing campaigns. One strong case in point is search-engine marketing that includes but isn't limited to search-engine optimization and pay-per-click advertising strategies. Metrics shed light on the ever-changing sands of popular key words you could be using to gain better natural search placement or support pay-per-click. Whether examining Web, e-mail or search-engine statistics, the review will help any firm see where their money is working and where it isn't. Search-engine marketing needs to be managed weekly with monthly reviews of statistics.

Remember, Web strategy doesn't happen without regard to the rest of the business. Strategy sessions with key members of the business should be held throughout the year to review key findings and to meld the initiatives that bring together efforts in marketing, sales, operations and information technology.

Take your online strategy to the next level by aligning the enterprise and coordinating with outside vendors to better manage online strategy. Integrated activities, efficient execution with an eye on processes and the ability to measure results all support online strategy.

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