

How To Attract Business Via a Website

BY PETER ECONOMY

WHAT IF YOU gave a party and nobody came? Unfortunately, that's the fate for many sites on the World Wide Web. With an estimated 20,000 Websites coming online every month, it's not hard for your business message to get lost in cyberspace.

Despite the challenges, having a Website is still a hot business strategy. Building and maintaining one should be an essential part of your marketing plan—just as important as printing brochures, placing ads in targeted publications, and networking with potential clients.

Dennis Ragan, online-interactive marketing consultant for Development Dimensions International, Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, puts it this way: "Maintaining a Website is critical. We feel that it's one additional medium for communicating with our clients, so it plays a very important role in our plans. Not only that, but we've heard from our clients that it's important to them."

Given the importance of being on the Web, how can you best use a Website to attract new clients and keep the ones you already have? Here are five essential strategies.

Strategy 1: Be easy to find. Don't make it difficult for your clients to find you. Your domain name (www.yourname.com) should be intuitive. For example, suppose that your company's name is XYZ Training. Then, your domain name or URL should be www.xyztraining.com. That way clients (and potential clients) who don't know your Web address will be able to guess it easily.

Frank Russell, president of Geo-Learning, Des Moines, Iowa, says, "You can promote your site by linking creatively to other sites. For example, we belong to the Training Media Association. When you go to its Website, there's a direct link from it to ours so visitors can also find us. It's interconnectivity that makes you known."

Russell also advises registering

your Website with the major Internet search engines and directories to move your site to the top of the search lists. You want to be listed on the first page of search results that pops up on people's computer screens, not the last. Referrals from major search

can't. If you decide to hire a firm to do that, be sure to find out exactly what it plans to do to reach the people most likely to buy your products and services, and what guarantee it offers.

Strategy 3: Give your visitors a reason to visit—and return often. If your site is boring, people will click out of it just as quickly as they clicked in. Take a look at your competitors' sites to get an idea of what works and what doesn't. Use graphics,

photographs, and attractive backgrounds to make your site more appealing, but be careful that those byte-intensive files don't dramatically slow down your page-loading speed. Above all, provide lots of fresh, value-added content—such as training news, workplace articles, HRD surveys, tips, industry trends, and networking forums—that will keep people coming back for more.

Of course, it's one thing to attract visitors to your site, and it's another to keep them there. The folks at Incentive Automation have found that the secret to getting potential clients to hang around is to give them plenty to look at on the site. Says Smithson, "One thing we've learned is that people crave detail. We originally had a broad description of our products on our Website, but now we're switching over to provide more details, more pictures, and more in-depth information—even more than in our marketing literature. People seem to appreciate that."

Generally, the best way to get prospective clients to spend time at your site—and to come back again and again—is to provide content that's interesting, fresh, and interactive. For example, DDI puts new surveys on its Website every two to four weeks and provides previous survey results. If your site hasn't changed for a while—with new content, new features, and new ways of interacting—many people won't bother coming back.

Strategy 4: Capture contact information. When people visit your site, they're usually there by choice—

HOW TO BE IN THE LIMELIGHT

Grab some limelight. Here's where to find online help—freebies, software demos, newsletters, tips, links, and tools—on how to attract people to your Website.

- ▶ deadlock Design, www.deadlock.com/promote
- ▶ NetPromote, www.netpromote.com
- ▶ Gator's Byte, www.gatorsbyte.com
- ▶ INP Internet Marketing, inp.harbinger.net/support/public/sitemarket.htm
- ▶ Homepage Now, www.homepage.now.com/promote.html
- ▶ WebPromote, www.webpromote.com/wpmonthly
- ▶ VirtualPROMOTE, www.virtualpromote.com

engines—including Yahoo!, Excite, AltaVista, and others—are critical for helping people find you.

Strategy 2: Advertise your address like crazy. Four words: *Everywhere, all the time*. Kimberly Smithson, vice president of sales and marketing for Incentive Automation, Batavia, Illinois, says that the simple ways of promoting a Website are often the most effective. One of the best ways to get the word out about your Website is to include the address (the URL) on your business cards, letterhead stationery, invoices, marketing brochures, and anyplace else you can fit all those letters and dots. Smithson says, "We've gotten a lot of Web visits from international clients. Because of the time differential overseas, a lot of people will go straight to the Website to look at our products and services instead of making a phone call."

A note of caution: You may be approached by companies that promise to increase your Website traffic. Maybe they can, and maybe they

they're interested in what you offer. Take advantage of the opportunity by encouraging them to give you contact information that you can use in your business's marketing and promotions. For example, set up a guest book where Web visitors can leave their comments, name and title, mail and email addresses, and phone numbers. Or offer to mail a free newsletter to people who provide their contact information. Contests, special offers, and surveys are all great ways to encourage people to give you information.

Many organizations have discovered that company Websites are a boon for providing value-added services that can attract new clients and help keep them once they're signed.

Says Ragan, "We're establishing a client-protected area that only our clients can access with a password. Once they get into the area, they'll be able to view a special DDI client newsletter available only to them. We'll have a discussion group set up there so they can network with other

clients and ask us questions about our programs, materials, and expertise. We're also going to be building into that an information retrieval system that's currently on the DDI intranet. Clients will be able to do a topic search to see articles, presentations, and other information relating to that topic."

Strategy 5: Check your Web statistics, and visit your site regularly.

A good Website hosting service can provide a way to access vital statistics about your Website—for example, the number of daily visitors, where they're from, how long they stayed, what pages they viewed, and which search engine (if any) referred them to your site. By analyzing those statistics, you'll learn what parts of your site attract the most (and the least) visitors, and you'll be able to test their responses to site changes in real time.

If you host your own Website, use a good statistics software program to monitor traffic. Whether you run a site on your own server or hire a serv-

er, you want to make sure that the site is *on* more than it's *off*. And be sure to visit your site regularly to make sure that it's working correctly.

From a gaggle of personal Webpages built by third-graders in Poughkeepsie to the multilayered Websites of such corporate giants as Microsoft, AT&T, and General Motors, there's stiff competition on the Web for people's attention. But you can hook them by using a few Website-marketing skills.

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