

The Benefits of the Internet

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This is the second of a series of articles dealing with the practical applications of the Internet in business. Last month we provided an overview of the Internet and attempted to unravel some of the jargon. This month's article aims to highlight the benefits of the Internet and consider whether a web site is a worthwhile business investment.

Cost-Effectiveness

Perhaps the best place to start is how much it all costs - a subject close to every businessman's heart! The Internet is gradually becoming the most cost-effective communications medium when compared to traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television.

The main reason a web site is comparatively cost-effective is it is not depleted by use. For example, if 20,000 customers visit your web site 100,000 times to view, print and download the information they require about your company, the web site remains unaffected. In essence, the customer pays to communicate with you and print a copy of your brochure! Compare this to the cost of printing and sending a full colour brochure to 20,000 customers and you can see the huge cost advantage. Also, standard desktop software such as Microsoft Word is becoming increasingly able to output web pages which reduces the considerable costs and time associated with preparing a brochure for print.

In addition, having a web site means your target audience immediately expands to cover Internet users world-wide whether these users are potential new customers or business partners/resellers. This is a massive benefit for no extra cost.

Time Advantage

Information on a web site is in digital format which means this information can be altered or updated in a matter of minutes. This provides massive benefits when compared to the amount of time (plus the costs) associated with having information such as price sheets amended, typeset and printed in the traditional manner. In addition, information can be published at any time and mistakes can be corrected with immediate effect.

Accessibility

Perhaps the most important benefit of a web site is the accessibility it provides to your customers. A web site is available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year and in addition, there

are no concerns about time zones. This means customers can access up-to-date information about your business whenever they want and it eliminates the common delays and complications associated with a potential customer telephoning for a brochure and waiting for it to arrive (or not waiting as the case may be - a competitor may have got to them by then!). This kind of accessibility of information is critical to a business and is impossible with any other form of communication regardless of the cost.

Interactive & Dynamic

One of the most powerful features of a web site is its dynamic nature. The Internet essentially transforms the user from a passive viewer into an active participant where they can interact with a web page. The advantages this provides your business are enormous. For example, access can be provided to a database of your product information allowing you to sell your products electronically over the Internet. A customer will be able to securely place orders and receive up-to-date information related to the products they are interested in. In addition, you can have direct contact with customers via email or response pages on your web site. One of the biggest advantages of the interactive nature is to have instant feedback from customers. In effect, you don't send out an order from, you simply receive an order!

Intuitive & Targeted

Another advantage of a web site is the manner in which a huge amount information can be presented without overloading the user. The interactive, intuitive and hierarchical nature of a web site means a user can target the information they require. The home page of a business-oriented web site usually consists of a series of main headings for a variety of topics such as company history, financial data, contact details, latest news, and product information. From these headings, the user can establish a hierarchy of inquiry for whatever information they require which intuitively flows from the general to specific.

This is a unique feature of a web site as no other marketing media can present such a variety of data in an easily understood and logical manner which allows the user to browse, pick and choose exactly what they want to learn more about in relation to your business.

Research

The web is an invaluable resource for information and can be of huge benefit to all kinds of businesses and their various departments such as marketing, IT and sales. Not only will you be able to research suppliers and competitors but you will also have access to information about potential new customers. In essence, this benefit of the Internet is self-fulfilling since by having your own web site, your business immediately becomes accessible to other businesses and customers for the same research purposes.

Email

Most businesses now accept email is an essential part of everyday business. Email is invaluable for communicating with colleagues and clients alike, especially when the person concerned is extremely busy and very hard to get on the phone. Email also has the advantage of being instantly sent and received by an individual.

To summarise, the Internet is becoming a vital part of everyday business, providing endless potential which can be of benefit to your business in a variety of ways as outlined above. If you do not currently have a web site or email, you are missing out on the increased communications on offer.

The next articles in this series will consider some issues related to making a web site work for your business. Developing a site and putting it on line is by no means enough to ensure success. It is essential to market your site in the right manner and ensure it has a professional look and feel and is easy to use. In addition, there are security issues which must be addressed to protect your business' web data. We will also be examining the specific benefits associated with locating e-commerce business offshore in the Isle of Man.

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