

Making your web site a success - Part 1

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This is the third of a series of articles dealing with the practical applications of the Internet in business. Last month we discussed the benefits of the Internet. This month's article aims to give practical advice on how to make your web site a success and highlights some essential marketing techniques.

So why do you need to market your web site? The hard fact is that it doesn't matter how good your web site is, if people don't know about it then it won't be a success and it will receive few visitors. The web makes it easy for your customers or potential customers to find you only if they're already looking for you or know where to find you. It is a mistake to think having a web site automatically increases your potential market. In fact, the market is the same as it was before you had a web presence, the only difference now is customers can reach you through the web.

There are several different marketing techniques which can be used to promote your web site and increase web traffic, i.e., the number of visitors to your site. These techniques involve both traditional and on-line marketing.

Traditional Marketing

Although it is important to use on-line marketing techniques to promote your web site, it is just as important to use traditional marketing techniques. As a first step, always list your web site address (URL) and email on your company letterheads, business cards and compliment slips. In addition, make sure your web site address appears prominently in any brochures or adverts. This is perhaps one of the best ways to promote your web site to existing and potential customers as a web address is usually easier to remember than a phone number.

Another traditional marketing tool which can be used effectively is press releases. If you have a business which is often in the press then it is a good idea to produce a press release about your web site and target those publications which you most frequently receive coverage from. Make sure you include details about your site's best features and why it might be of interest. Better still combine the launch of the site with a new service or product, or create an offer available only on the site. Even a small press release with the web address at the end can often increase the number of visits to your site.

A good example of traditional marketing working successfully for a web site is the BBC's approach. They use television advertising to promote their web site and also include a web address at the end of relevant programmes, e.g., www.bbc.co.uk/watchdog. It is reported the

extensive promotion by the BBC has had a significant effect on the demand for PCs in the run-up to Christmas.

On-line Marketing

One of the first ways to use on-line marketing is to ensure your web address is included in your business email signature files, i.e., the text file added to the end of all email messages you send. Not only does this act to promote your web site but it also increases the chance of your site being seen by people with Internet access and an existing interest in your company.

Search engines are where most users start when looking for information and it is important your web site is registered on as many as possible. Users enter some keywords relevant to the information they require and are presented with a list of web sites specific to those keywords. However, it is not enough to simply register a web site on a search engine. It is well known that those sites listed first will get the most hits therefore it is important to increase your site's chance of being amongst the first listed. To achieve this you must include META tags; these are keywords which sit transparently on your pages and are used by most search engines to index and classify your pages, determining where they will be listed in the results of a search. Different search engines use different methods when it comes to the META tags so it is important the web designer responsible for your site knows how to maximise the efficiency of these tags and get your pages as high up the list of search results as possible.

Web directories are also important in promoting your web site. These differ from search engines in that submitted sites are reviewed by real people to provide quality control. They also often provide an independent review of the site which can be beneficial if your site is good. It is important to identify directories which suit your business rather than just submitting your site to any directory; a good way of doing this is by looking at which directories your competitors are listed in.

Strategic link development is a critical factor in ensuring the long-term success of your web site. Any site on the web can contain links to any other site regardless of who owns it. Consequently the number of potential routes to your site is truly mind boggling. Links can be particularly effective if they carry some kind of endorsement which gives your site credibility. Most web sites also include a list of recommended links. There is also partnership linking where more prominent links are placed on your site and a relevant partner's site; this often involves strategic cross-promotions and content-sharing deals. A good place to start link development is by looking at a competitor's site and seeing who they maintain links to. This may also indicate potential link partners.

Banner advertising is another method of on-line marketing which is particularly effective in marketing a brand. Banners are seen on search engines, directories and some web sites and provide a short-term link to your web site. Costs tend to be determined by the number of banner views shown and how targeted the market is. Banner links differ to normal linking as they can provide accurate demographic targeting so you can target the on-line audience you want. Companies often use banners for product launches; recent examples include Sky Digital and BMW's 3 Series.

Summary

To summarise, it is important to realise simply putting up a well-designed web site is not enough if people don't know about it. You must advertise your web site where your customers congregate in both the real and virtual world; this means making sure your site is indexed effectively on search engines and directories whilst not neglecting the more traditional marketing methods.

A Final Word

A word of warning which also introduces the next article in this series: if your site is of poor quality then even the best marketing may not persuade visitors to come back again or even get past the first page. It is imperative your site is ready for business before it is promoted and is both fast to download and easy and intuitive to use. Good web site design will be discussed in part 2 of 'Making your web site a success'. Future articles in this series include Intranets & Extranets and electronic commerce.

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