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How does a web site fit in with your other marketing?

By Carolyn West Price

Okay, we've ridden the big wave of www.this and dot.com that. And, while many dot.coms have come and gone, the web site seems to have worked its way into mainstream marketing and is here to stay.

But, as you well know, not all web sites are created equally. They are not a replacement for traditional marketing materials, just as they should not be simply a rehash of your printed brochure. What they are is simply a complementary tool in the scheme of marketing communications.



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It's a tool that has advantages like no other marketing material—it can be constantly updated for free if you do it yourself or with minimal cost. It crosses geographic boundaries, giving worldwide access to an organization. And, it allows a firm to overcome the "size" perception issue, since a well-done web site (just as with printed marketing materials) will not give the viewer a clue if you're a one-person shop or a publicly traded conglomerate.

With that said, here's where we can discuss some fundamentals. Consistency of image needs to remain a rule of good marketing. Your web site should truly reflect the same image your other marketing materials reflect—and vice versa. Additionally, you should "test drive" your own web site periodically, not just during the initial development phase. By test-driving your own site and others that are trying to

achieve the same goal (whether it's e-commerce or simply informational), you can pick up potential problems before they go "live" and then undetected. According to Dynamic Graphics Magazine, there are several products to do load testing. They say, "Adobe GoLive, for instance, lets you test how long pages take to download." They recommend searching the web for "web site testing, HTML validator, site security or load testing, depending upon your needs." Additionally, many web-design software programs include this feature.

Your surfing and self-testing will also allow you to discover elements you like about others' sites and convey them to your designer or webmaster for subsequent enhancements. For instance, maybe the 10 seconds it takes for your opening splash could be time better spent in the downloading of your catalog so the visitor is not frustrated by the time it takes to view your merchandise on top of your opening glitz.

This process brings up another point: what is the goal of your site? Do you just want to have one because you think you should? Are you trying to measure visitors' viewing habits and resulting actions? If you expect to promote your site extensively and anticipate a high volume of visits in a concentrated period of time, check with your ISP to be sure the server can handle such an influx.

Here are some other questions to consider as you "audit" your site:

- Is it easy for the user to get back home?
- Are the pages different enough so the viewer knows he or she has moved to another page without studying the content?

- Does your site appear differently on Mac versus PC?
- Do you really want to require a surfer to have bells and whistles, such as flash or shock wave plug-ins, for instance, to utilize your site?
- Is it easy to contact you via traditional methods? I can't tell you how many sites I've discovered with no phone number or even a city. (This is particularly difficult when you're trying to conduct an e-commerce transaction and it goes awry.)
- What can keep it fresh without costing a lot in maintenance and time?
- And, if you're putting a huge catalog on your site, how can you make it functional and direct the viewer to specific pages. Perhaps a directory with a photo of a product and description for each section, so the viewer knows pages 1-15 are widgets and pages 16-30 are gadgets.
- Use "thumbnail" images with the option of clicking the picture for a larger view, since thumbnails load much faster.
- The rule of thumb for the screen size is to limit your page content to 600 pixels in width so that all browsers and various-sized monitors center the pages. The amount of information you can expect a user to see in one screen is usually 400 pixels long. (This translates to the information on a printed page.)

Again, incorporating your web site and upgrades of it in your ongoing marketing efforts is no different than promoting your phone number; just put it on everything you distribute. And, don't forget to ask for outside critiques. So often, the cliché of "can't see the forest for the trees" is way too true for all of us.

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