To Master Web Marketing Start with Credible Information and Stay Focused

by Evan Schuman

The very nature of the Web makes Web marketing radically different than earlier forms of marketing. The Web was designed to put the site visitor in charge.

That means that marketers must get site visitors to want to see Web marketing. In TV and radio, this is often accomplished through entertainment. In the Web world, though, the only truly effective means of attracting and holding prospects is by offering good quality information. In this sense, the Web is less like radio and TV and more like the telephone Yellow Pages and an encyclopedia. People turn to the Web to learn things and as long as you are offering something related, compelling, and credible, you have a shot.

But, many marketers ask, how do I move from offering general information about a related topic to pitching my particular product or service? The answer: Context.

Let's say you're a lawyer specializing in divorce. Who are you trying to reach? People who are considering filing for divorce. What would be valuable information for those people? Advice columns for saving a troubled marriage perhaps or discussion forums with other couples having similar concerns. As an attorney,

you start posting comments or stories as advice for surviving a divorce. That content will be of strong interest to your prospects and will gently introduce you as an expert who can help.

A funeral parlor might write about preparing for the inevitable and provide medical information on terminal diseases.

> *"Communicating on the web is easy – IF— you stay focused on what your customer's care about and you use content that does its job well."*
>
> **– Evan Schuman**

Grocery stores could post tons of cooking tips, suggestions, and offer a baking hotline. The strongest Web marketing advice out there today is the one that almost everyone agrees with, and is also the one most forgotten during the implementation phase: Focus on the prospect.

Sounds obvious, no? But I have seen far too many Websites lose their focus as

content moves through the approval process. The advice starts to melt away and blatant ad copy takes over. The sad fact is that more widgets will be sold if you stop pushing them and start being helpful.

Another common problem with Web marketing efforts is in the area of design. Prospects tend to make almost immediate decisions about a company based on the look-and-feel of their site. Is this a healthy and large company or somebody working in a garage? I can't stress enough that a professional design is essential. Skimp on that and hardly anything else matters. Having said that, overdoing a design is equally bad. Animation, music, integrated video are just a few of the examples of design options that make sites less appealing to prospects, slower, and much more expensive. Why is it so popular then? First, designers make more money on the flashy stuff and it's more fun to do. When designer's start getting paid based solely on the money their clients make from their sites, you're going to see Flash go away in a flash. Until then, though, it's up to the site's owners to stop the nonsense.

The second reason is that marketers tend to enjoy the impressive demos and not think about how their prospects will

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likely see them. That fun-filled demo that you enjoyed so much in your conference – running off the designer's CD – will be much less enjoyable when a prospect is being forced to download it from a hotel's switchboard. One makes enemies that way.

One of the most attractive attributes of Web marketing is the ability to use multimedia. But like many other expensive and bandwidth-hogging capabilities, the most essential rule is to have a specific answer as to why you are doing it.

That answer had better be based on what your prospects want, not what a graphic design team tells you your customer's want. Graphic designers and Web designers know graphics and the Web, but nobody knows your customers and prospects as well as you do. If you remember nothing else, remember that. In every Web meeting, be the person that asks, "So tell me again why we think that jewelry-buyers (or car buyers or funeral home customers) would need and even want this?" You won't be popular, but you'll be right.

Earlier in this article, we looked at how Web designers will push animation and other Web decorations. The same rules apply to multimedia. Whether it's eye-candy or a useful piece of information depends on your audience and the specific graphic.

Take application software vendors, for example. They always want to use screen captures. Is that useful or not? That graphic must answer the question, "What information am I conveying in an efficient manner? How am I advancing the story? What's the point of this image?" In some cases, the point is that the design has been radically revamped so that it's easier to use. Does the screen capture show that? Can the reader see that at a glance? Sometimes they want to show how easy it is to save in different formats. OK. Does the image clearly show that? If yes, it's valuable. If no, it's not. Does it communicate that in a way that is superior to what could be done with text? If yes, it's valuable.

What about stock art? The same rule applies. Is the image intended to say that this is a product for doctors? If so, if the image shows doctors in a medical setting, it could be helpful. But many sites use generic images of attractive models that

have nothing whatsoever to do with the product or service being discussed. That's textbook eye-candy and it's evil.

What about multimedia? The rule here needs to be tweaked. The most efficient way to communicate anything is with plain ASCII text, just as you are reading now. One step up is to use a photo or a chart. You need to have a reason to take that step. Two steps up are simple audio and a small illustrative animation. Is it worth the step?

Done well, audio can communicate a lot more than the written word. Think about an E-mail exchange you have had recently where you couldn't communicate a point. Did you then pick up the phone and call that person? If so, did communication happen, even if you just repeated what you had said in the E-mail? The difference was your use of inflection, meaningful pauses, and emotion. Does the audio you are considering use those attributes to communicate? Or is just someone reading in an emotionless way? Good audio is worth it.

Three steps up would be simple

video and perhaps synched up audio and slides. You are giving up a lot here. This is demanding an awful lot of bandwidth and cost. The vast majority of video on the Web does not communicate any better than audio or even pictures. Is the video of some executive delivering a speech at a podium? What does that tell the reader that text and a picture and some audio wouldn't? There are occasions where a video clip is the most effective means of explaining something, perhaps in a medical situation where a surgical technique is being demonstrated. But those instances are remarkably rare.

If you stay focused on what your customers care about and use content that does its job well – and holds up to your most aggressive questioning – you'll find that communicating on the Web is indeed as easy as a mouse click. ■

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