

Why Web Sites Fail: Part II Marketing

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This case study is the second in a three part series examining the reasons why web initiatives frequently do not meet their intended goals. While there are as many reasons for failure as there are different kinds of web sites, this series is based on experiences I have had over the past 5 years as a web site builder and refers to web sites that are used for client acquisition, customer relationship management and e-commerce. This second part addresses the underlying foundation of web site communications – marketing.

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OVERVIEW Since web site content is embedded in software on a network, understanding how to effectively utilize web sites as a marketing communications medium requires knowledge of Internet technology as well as traditional marketing practices. Without this technical understanding, web site managers can hinder a web site's potential. Here are a few basic Internet marketing principles.

PUSH + PULL Web sites are based on people seeking information and 'pulling' it to them, while traditional media such as television and newspapers are based on distributing and broadcasting content, 'pushing' it on viewers. Since there are approximately 2.5 billion pages on the web as of January 2003, with an estimated 7.5 million pages being launched every day [as reported by Cyveillance [www.cyveillance.com/resources/library.asp], there is a great need for 'pushing' people to web sites. Web site managers are faced with the challenge of developing the right method for driving traffic to their site. Here is a brief description of different ways to accomplish this.

- ▶ E-mail: Newsletters, press releases, product announcements etc. are ubiquitous, often overdone, but still potentially very effective. Given the right content with a compelling call to action, e-mail can generate significant traffic.
- ▶ Search Engine Optimization and Marketing [SEO, SEM]: SEO has long been a complex process that now has been simplified with the increasingly common practice of paid listings. Barring paid listings, receiving a top 10 ranking can sometimes be achieved with the aid of a consultant and/or a software application such as Web Position [http://www.web-positiongold.com].

- ▶ *Linking Strategies:* There are several ways to link one site to another, here are three examples. 1) Affiliate marketing, where a referrer site is paid for linking a user that results in a sale. 2) Link partnerships, which can be as simple as listing the site in portals and directories that specialize in the appropriate industry. And 3) content leasing, where content [i.e. articles, case studies etc.] is placed on a site or newsletter that includes a link to another site.
- ▶ *Integrated Marketing:* This is a complex and evolving topic, but in summary, synergies between online and traditional marketing programs are often overlooked, diminishing the overall effectiveness of a company's marketing efforts.
- ▶ *Viral Marketing:* This is a general term that applies to most Internet marketing. In its simplest form an 'e-mail this page' link is inserted in a newsletter or web page with the hopes that viewers will spread the content and traffic will be generated. Typically an offer is needed [e.g. 'free case study'] to prime the pump, otherwise most users will disregard the link.
- ▶ *Online Advertising:* This includes banner ads [traditionally priced CPM – cost per thousands], SEM [search engine placements priced on 'pay per click'] and affiliate marketing [priced on 'pay per action'].

MINE THE METRICS

One of the advantages of web marketing is the ability to data-mine viewer activity. Metrics can be used to understand how well the site is performing and what areas need to be addressed such as marketing and usability. Here is a list of issues that are important to keep in mind.

- ▶ *Software:* Web site server logs contain enormous amounts of information, increasing the importance of an effective software application that allows users to view select information pertaining to the site's business goals. While most ISPs include free web site statistics software with a hosting account, these applications do a poor job of managing the information. If metrics are important, it is well worth the cost to invest in a software application such as SiteCatalyst by Omniture or WebTrends by Net IQ.
- ▶ *Page Activity:* By understanding which pages are most viewed and which aren't, site managers can understand the value of each page.

- ▶ *Search Engine Keywords:* By looking at what keywords are being used to find a site, managers can understand how to increase the ranking of the site in the search engines.
- ▶ *Unique Visitors:* Understanding how many unique visitors are viewing a site as well as seeing how often these same viewers visit and what they do, can also be of great value.
- ▶ *Click-stream Analysis:* if you are selling products or just interested in having users sign registration forms, it's helpful to see the pathways that users follow within a site and at what point they leave.
- ▶ *Usability:* Site metrics can provide invaluable information critical to understanding how well a site is performing. There are numerous metrics, such as click-stream analysis and conversion rates that are helpful in determining if there are usability issues that need to be addressed.

BRANDING DISCONNECT

Many first generation web sites, still up and running today, were designed by web developers, often at the expense of the brand. Here are a few areas that can increase the value of the branding of a site.

- ▶ *Design:* Since many web sites were designed by people with little or no marketing communications skills, the value of the corporate brand was often diminished. Make sure the 'look and feel' as well as the performance of the site enhances the brand, incorporating attributes and values consistent with offline marketing programs. When the site is up for a re-design, hire a professional web designer who understands how to extend a brand online.
- ▶ *Multi-Media:* Utilize the audio-visual nature of the web. Repurpose video clips such as annual meetings, product demonstrations and trade show presentations that utilize the web's storytelling ability.
- ▶ *One to One Marketing:* The web is great at tailoring information to individual requests. Offer interactive features that bring your customers closer to your brand and give them the control that they want.

SUMMARY While understanding technology issues that underlie web site marketing can help increase value, it's important to always remember what the specific business goals are. Since there are numerous ways to implement marketing programs, each at an additional cost, keeping focus on the bottom line is key to successfully creating and managing a web presence.

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