

Marketing Minute ~

Your Website, the First Point of New Customer Contact

In today's marketplace, a business' website is often the first point of contact for new customers. While poor design invariably drives prospects away, a professionally designed and managed site communicates that your company is well run and successful, giving new customers the confidence to do business with you. Your website is a key component of your overall marketing mix, it must advance your business strategy and branding.

Your company website must effectively communicate through words and images your vision, purpose, products, and services. It must make it easy for customers to get the information they need and buy the products they want. It must provide actionable performance measures. Your website has to work for your customers and for you. To create an effective high-performance site, follow these top ten practices:

- 1) **Choose a domain name.** This will be a unique internet address for your website. Try to choose an easy-to-pronounce, easy-to-spell name that reflects your unique business. Obviously, if your company is already established, you will want to register that name. Also, you can choose a domain name that contains key words that will appear on your site. This will help potential customers find your site when they search on those words in search engines such as Google.com. To find out if a domain name is currently registered, go to <http://www.internic.net/whois.html>. If the name you want is taken, be creative rather than literal. Try free association of concepts. Bounce your ideas off an associate. Keep trying until you have a name that is effective and available.
- 2) **Plan your site.** What is the purpose of your website? What do you want to achieve with your site? Establish your goals and priorities. Do you want to share information about your company, products and services? Influence and motivate potential customers to visit your location or call your phone number? Brand your company and refine its image? Sell online? Provide customer service? Or some combination of the above? How you answer these questions will guide the design and development of your site.
- 3) **Create a budget.** The cost of creating a website depends in large part on the purpose of the site. The other key factors are high quality and high performance. There is no point spending any amount of money on a website that presents an amateurish image and does not function properly. Although a general rule may be the larger your investment, the greater your return, there is no need to be a spendthrift. Creating a website can be less expensive if you do it yourself, but only if you have the time, inclination and tools to do a good job. Otherwise, obtain bids from highly recommended designers and developers. Clearly define your goals, style, and expectations for these experienced professionals. After you have an acceptable bid, add in promotion and advertising expenses. As your company grows, you can expand your site, spreading your investment over time.
- 4) **Gather information.** Take a look at some of your competitors' websites. What information do you find most useful or compelling? Which design styles do you prefer? Which writing styles appeal to you? Make sure your site contains plenty of useful information — not just advertising. Give prospects and returning customers the information they need to decide to visit your business or purchase your products and services. Most common pages found on a website could be: About Us, Products & Services, Order Form, Contact or Feedback, FAQs, News and Events.
- 5) **Design your site.** You've heard the saying, "one picture is worth a thousand words," but have you really thought about it? In fact, graphic design can communicate just as much, if not more, as the words on your website regarding your business. Your homepage has to capture the attention of visitors, drawing them into your site. The page design and navigation have to be clear and direct to keep them there.
 - **Get attention!**
Use your home page like a piece of direct mail. Quickly grab visitors' attention. Tell them who you are and what they will find on your site.
 - **Make it easy to find information.**
Site navigation plays a big role in determining the 'stickiness' of your site (how long visitors stay and explore). Typically, the first thing visitors do on any page is read the content and then look around for other pages that might interest them. Put the substance of your site at the highest navigation levels; don't make potential customers drill down through multiple layers of links.
 - **Keep it clean.**
A clean layout that uses a lot of white space improves legibility and encourages visitors to read the content on your website. Keep the number of fonts, font styles and colors to a minimum. Use animation sparingly. The focus should be on the content, not on the whiz-bang technology. An abundance of fonts, styles, colors and animation will only project an amateurish image. Your business as well as your website will be judged initially on its appearance.

- 6) **Optimize load time.** Customers today are in a hurry. They want information fast and won't wait more than ten seconds for a webpage to download. Optimize your website for any web browser by designing each page to be under 40k in size. Use graphics, Flash animations, and scripts only as needed because they increase file size. Design pages for easy viewing on a typical 15-inch computer monitor.
- 7) **Use GRABBER Copy.** Use this formula:
 - Identify the problem, agitate the problem.
 - Provide an example.
 - Show how you can help.
 - Use testimonials.
 - Continue to build value throughout the copy.
 - Make a statement as to WHY you are doing business.
 - Give them something for free or bonuses.
 - Follow up within 24 hours when contacted.
 - Tell a story.
 - Be specific.
 - Answer objections before they surface.
 - Peek their curiosity.
- 8) **Interact with your customers.** The big idea behind most websites is to build ongoing relationships with customers to assure repeat business. To that end, list your phone number or email address on every page of your website so customers can contact you with questions and comments. You also may want to create a registration page that gives prospects and customers the option of receiving news and special offers from your company. Finally, it is imperative that you explain your privacy policy on your website.
- 9) **Maintain your site.** Your website requires ongoing maintenance to perform optimally and profitably. Update content and improve functionality by incorporating visitors' feedback. Keep them coming back for more with fresh information and new features. On a regular basis, perform these maintenance tasks:
 - Check the links on your site to make sure they are working.
 - Respond to and act on visitors' feedback.
 - Update your site frequently (almost daily) if you put a 'last updated' date on your web pages. An 'update' date displayed at the bottom of each page assures your visitors that they are getting the very latest information.
 - Monitor time-sensitive information. Do not leave event information on your site after the event date.
 - Periodically add new information. Many sites accomplish this by publishing a monthly newsletter or daily or weekly tips.
- 10) **Promote your site.** The best website in the world does no good if no one knows about it. Effectively marketing your site is just as important as professionally designing your site when it comes to success. Here are a few basic ideas for marketing your site:
 - Include your website address on all of your marketing materials. Even put your web address on a company vehicle with a bumper sticker or customer paint job.
 - Advertise your site. Update your entries in directories and on search engines. Take advantage of opportunities to cross-link with other sites. If appropriate, participate in relevant newsgroups and forums — not blatantly advertising or promoting, but responding to postings — with your site address in your signature file.

These ideas are only a few that can help you get a professional website up and running. Not all of these ideas may apply to your or your business, but keep in mind to be informative, create interest and peak curiosity about who you are and what you do. Then, give them a reason to contact you. Pretty simple, but effective.

