

Your Business and the Web

A brief guide to Internet strategy for business large & small

| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| In terms of the Internet, where are you now? Where do you want to be?..... | 2 |
| What are the goals of your website? | 2 |
| Who is the target audience? | 2 |
| What is happening in the marketplace?..... | 3 |
| What is the content and how should it be organised? | 3 |
| How are you going to maintain human relationships?..... | 3 |
| What do you want your site to look like?..... | 3 |
| How will the site be updated? | 3 |
| How will you drive traffic to your site? | 4 |
| What are your success criteria?..... | 4 |
| Will marketing strategies or business processes need to be modified to fit in with your Internet strategy? | 4 |
| In Conclusion..... | 4 |

Introduction

Too many companies have put up a website without a clear Internet strategy. Maybe it was created in response to a competitor's website, or management believed that "these days" you must have a website. It's not surprising then that many companies are disappointed with the results.

To maximise your Internet success, you need to develop a clear Internet strategy (ideally as an integral part of your overall business plan) before you spend any more money on your website. Your Internet strategy may be as simple as one paragraph explaining what your website aims to achieve for your business, or it may evolve into a 50 page policy document – but whether your business is a large corporate or a one-man-show, this concise guide will help you create that strategy by getting you to answer some simple questions.

In terms of the Internet, where are you now? Where do you want to be?

Before rushing off to a web developer and creating a pretty website, think about answering these questions. And don't be frightened to ask for some independent advice – marketing strategy advice for your business market, that is, which is not necessarily the purview of web developers.

A planned, phased approach allows you to identify where you want to go and to develop milestones to assess your progress along the way. Also remember that your ideal website may not be necessary, appropriate or affordable immediately. But plan what you want to do, when you should go live with each new version of your site, and decide how you are going to monitor progress.

Example: You may aim to have 50% of sales via your website by 2004. You may want to offer a completely integrated experience, from online information, customer service, product ordering and delivery to inventory management or service availability. However, you may not want to offer all this functionality at once, but as finances allow or as customer demand grows.

If you're unsure about what can actually be achieved using the web, or are unsure how the functionality that is available might relate to your business, contact us and we will be able to run through the possibilities. This can be done via telephone, at our office or at your premises.

What are the goals of your website?

First determine what you want your website to do.

Do you want it to inform, educate, entertain or sell? Is it supposed to enhance brand equity, lower costs or improve customer intimacy? What transactions are appropriate or necessary? When should e-commerce be incorporated into your website? How important is it to provide a personalised experience?

Example: A travel agent might want to improve service by providing more complete holiday information than offered by brochure, or by having a site search engine. The agent may also want to lower costs by reducing the number of brochures printed and offering online bookings and payment.

Who is the target audience?

Determining who will use your site often goes hand-in-hand with identifying its goals. There can be more than one target audience and your business' customers might not *all* be a target audience for your website.

Categorise your target audiences, identify their needs, and have your website developed to meet their needs.

Example: The travel agent might segment the market into business travellers and recreational travellers. Information on the website would be presented differently to the different travellers.

What is happening in the marketplace?

Don't create your Internet strategy in a vacuum. What are your competitors doing? What are the relevant industry and technology trends? Can you identify best practice sites within your industry, for benchmarking?

Suggestion: Be disciplined and spend an uninterrupted hour on the web doing some research – browse as if you are trying to purchase your own products or services – you may be surprised at what you find.

What is the content and how should it be organized?

Your answers to the preceding questions will help you determine your site's content and what level of detail to present. What functionality should your site offer users? How should the information be structured and what global and local navigation aids are you going to have?

As web developers we can help you with structure and navigation, but we need to use your knowledge of your customers to design the paths through your website. We will then ensure that your customers have control of their movement within your site by having clear and simple navigation that caters to both novices and experienced users.

How are you going to maintain human relationships?

This is a critical element in the one on one communication channel that is the Internet. There are many facets to customer relationship management on the web, but there's one point definitely worth reiterating: formulate an email response policy to ensure appropriate and timely responses to customer e-mail. After all your hard work the last thing you want is to ignore your customers enquiries.

What do you want your site to look like?

With the preceding questions answered, contemplate what your site should look like. Users should know where they are on the site, where they have been, and how to get to where they want to be. If your website is an integrated part of your overall marketing plan, then your online logo, colours and brand should be consistent with your existing offline brand (or any update of your offline branding if appropriate).

We can then take your ideas and apply our expert knowledge to achieve the best results. To communicate this information, we use colour, branding, navigation design and links.

Suggestion: Formulate a policy on the appropriateness of links and designate someone to monitor them. If you are a smaller business and perhaps don't have a dedicated person or team to manage the site, we can do this for you.

How will the site be updated?

Site maintenance can sometimes account for 30% to 40% of your total website costs. How often should content be changed? Who will make and approve the changes? How are content, software and hardware going to be upgraded if you manage the site inhouse?

As a guide, for web sites that only require occasional updating (once every 4 to 6 weeks) outsourcing the updating to us tends to be the most economic. For sites that require updating more frequently we can provide easy to use content management tools to give you complete and immediate control in house.

How will you drive traffic to your site?

It's no good having the best site in the world if no one knows about it. Some sites spend 20% or more of their web budgets on promotion.

Options include permission email, banner ads, keyword ads, public relations, links, offline promotion, search engine registration, articles in e-zines, and event or content sponsorship. Many companies get external expert advice on website promotion.

We provide submission to the search engines free of charge with any development project; for banner advertising or traditional press advertising we work with our partners who provide specialist media buying services.

What are your success criteria?

Your success criteria should be quantifiable reflections of your goals, and they should be set in advance. Your success criteria should be measurable business yardsticks that are critical to your business objectives. These may include number of new customers, improved customer retention, quicker new product development, better co-ordination between business partners and enhanced customer intimacy.

Hits alone do not usually adequately quantify success. Instead, your success criteria might also include some of the following: page views, unique users, time spent on the site, return visits, revenue and reduced costs.

Will marketing strategies or business processes need to be modified to fit in with your internet strategy?

Some business will need to transform their organisations to really thrive on the Internet. For others it may be a more gradual process.

Do you need to consider the impact on your organisational structure or functions, your distribution channels, or your product range? Are there any backend databases or information that should be shared with suppliers or customers?

In many companies these changes may not be immediately appropriate, but if you don't keep up with the rapidly evolving business environment wrought by the Internet, then you are at real risk of being outwitted by a new or existing competitor, or missing out on new opportunities.

In Conclusion

To maximise your Internet success, develop a clear Internet strategy, if possible as an integral part of your overall business plan, before you spend any money - or more money - on your website. It does not have to be a painful process and it is a process that we can help with.

For many smaller companies it is an investment of an hour or two in discussing your aspirations and your business. Larger companies may face a more involved process, but either way time and money spent on developing your strategy now will be well rewarded in the future.

Contact us for a free no-obligation discussion and let us help your business work the web successfully.