



Series: The Small Business Challenge – Deriving Real Benefits from the Web

Paper One: Designing to Increase Traffic and Basic Marketing Techniques

Introduction

Now that the Internet is firmly entrenched in our lives, more and more small and medium sized businesses are asking themselves how they can leverage web technology to grow their businesses. Many have taken a cursory stab at marketing themselves on-line, but driving traffic to a site, differentiating it from other sites, keeping it up-to-date and finding new ways to derive cost savings and increased sales are some of challenges that they face. Answers to these challenges exist, and many are simple and cost-effective to implement. In this first paper in the series we will examine various approaches to web-site design and marketing aimed at solving the most basic problem of driving traffic to a site.

Designing to Increase Traffic

At the most basic level, driving people to your website is about designing your pages properly. Proper design allows search engines to index your site effectively, which in turn improves the odds that your site will come up in a search. Many search engines don't index everything, and often times features that have been added to a site can prevent web-crawlers, the tools search engines use to index the web, from accessing and indexing it. If your site isn't indexed, it will NEVER appear in a search results list.

Some Design Rules of Thumb:

- 1) In addition to using <meta> tags to list keywords relevant to your site, it is also crucial to make sure you have effectively titled each page and that your page text is direct, using common phrases to describe the contents of your site. In addition to indexing the <meta> keywords, many engines also index titles and text found at the top of a given page.
- 2) Avoid requiring registration or password on home pages. Site indexers will not be able to access protected content.
- 3) Though it's good to present visitors with dynamic content, dynamically created pages as well as Active Server Pages cannot be indexed. A solid base of static HTML pages will increase the odds that your site will make it into the index.

- 4) Using frames can confuse web crawlers, and though text contained in frames may be indexed, frames are treated as individual pages, rather than as a coherent whole. If using frames is a must, creating a non-frames version of your site is a good idea, if only to increase the likelihood that your site will be found in a search.
- 5) Text that appears in images cannot be indexed, so while it's nice to have buttons describe the contents of your site, adding textual reference to your contents is a good idea.
- 6) The way you organize your information may impact the likelihood that it appears in a search. For sites with many levels of details it is imperative that the most important information remains high in the directory structure. Many search engines will not index pages which are more than three levels down in the hierarchy.
- 7) Because web-crawlers use internal links to index a site, it is important to have at least one central page with clear navigation to all other important pages.

The list above should be taken as a list of recommendations. Very few sites will conform to all of these guidelines, but your site should be evaluated on each criterion and design decisions should be made with the full knowledge of their impact on your site's ability to be indexed.

Search Engine Registration

The first step after site design and development is registering your site with some search engines. By registering, you are only making those engines aware that your site exists, and that it is available for indexing. When registering, it is important to choose the right engines, as there are literally hundreds of options but only a few effective choices. The chart below will give you some idea of the most commonly used search engines and their relative traffic.

Searches Per Day

Service	Searches	As Of/Notes
AltaVista	55 million	5/00 (as reported to me by AltaVista, for its site and queries through partners)
Inktomi	47 million	4/00 (still reflects queries from Yahoo, which will be handled by Google from July 2000).
Google	30 million 12 million/	7/00 (as reported to me by Google. 10 million are via Google.com and the rest from partners such as Yahoo and Netscape. I would estimate Yahoo's share to be around 15 million, based on number of Google searches per day pre-Yahoo)
Ask Jeeves	4 million	3/00

Voila	1.5 million	1/00 (as reported to me by Voila, for its entire network of sites)
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Chart from <http://www.searchenginewatch.com>

There are a large number of services willing to register your site with hundreds of search engines for a fee. Keep in mind that registering with the top six engines will cover the vast majority of Internet searches run. When contracting for registration services be sure to ask exactly what engines are included in the service, making certain that the big names are on the list.

Key Word Buys

In addition to indexing the web, most search engines also offer the option of buying specific key words and phrases, which ensures that your site gets preferential placement when users search on those words. You can spend virtually limitless amounts of money on key words, and there are a number of key word related services available. Suffice it to say there is an option for every budget.

On the high end, it is possible to have key-words produce not only a top result in a search list, but also display a banner advertisement at the top of the page. You may also secure key-word exclusivity alone, which guarantees you the top search result. Other engines will sell key-words for advertising only, which means that when a user searches on your word, the engine will just display your banner at the top of the results page. No additional preference is given with regards to your placement in the results list.

For a bit less money you can be one of many shareholders of a certain key word. In this scenario, the search engine will display the shareholders in order of money spent, such that those who pay more appear higher in a list. Still more economical is a system whereby you pay only for those users who click through from the results list to your website.

There are a lot of options with key-word buys, and a few components to every deal that you need to be aware of, such as whether or not you have exclusive rights on the words you have purchased. Another thing to think about is whether you are paying for showing up in lists or for users actually clicking through to your site. Finally, you should be clear about what your commitment is, especially in a situation where your key words might generate more traffic than you imagined. You need to be able to drop key words if they become too expensive to maintain, potentially exceeding your budget.

Integrated Marketing

Beyond following good design practices, there are many other ways to draw visitors to your site. You should think of your site as only one of the pieces of your total marketing package. Including the address of your website on brochures, catalogues and other forms of marketing communications will raise your potential customers' awareness of your website. You should think of your site address the same way you think about

your physical address, including it on letterhead, business cards and all other forms of communication.

Because capturing valuable customer information is so easy through on-line forms, you should consider diverting traditional promotions to your website. For example, many businesses run giveaway type promotions in which customers sign-up for a chance to win a prize. Running the sign-up through a web-based form allows you to capture data without the added administration of entering information from paper sign-ups. Radio and television ads that direct customers to your website to view weekly specials or one-time offers, save money on print advertising. Posting ads on your site gives you more control over their look than you would get by advertising in a newspaper or magazine, and encourages follow on interest in other areas of your website.

Summary

Many small and medium-sized businesses don't understand how to leverage the Internet to build sales and brand recognition. By executing on the basics outlined in this paper some modicum of success is guaranteed. Too often the web is viewed as the domain of big businesses and big budgets. In truth, sound design, registration and simple, integrated marketing are the foundation of real success on the Internet.

Once this foundation is laid, you can focus your energies on increasing repeat visits to your site, finding on-line business partners and searching for the efficiencies and cost-savings available through prudent use of new technologies. Above all else, it is important that you look upon the Internet as a valuable business tool to be integrated into your total business strategy. Treating the web as a side business or one-off project won't garner the long-term success that small and mid-sized businesses depend on to survive in our fast growing economy.