



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

Paper Two: Repeat Visits – Customization, Personalization and Building On-line Communities

Introduction

In the first paper in this series, *Designing to Increase Traffic and Basic Marketing Techniques*, we examined ways to design and market your website to maximize first time visitor traffic. After driving people to your site initially though, securing follow-up visits can be very challenging. Every successful site finds a way to answer this challenge through a combination of dynamic content, useful functionality and user specific customization. In this paper we will look at ways to keep content fresh, provide features that users will depend on and tailoring your site to repeat user's needs. Specifically we will focus on on-line community building and the different functionalities of customization and personalization.

Creating On-line Community

We've all heard the mantra, "content is king," which means that valuable, ever-changing content is the single most attractive feature of any website. For many businesses, though, generating that content and keeping it fresh can be very costly. Building an on-line community where customers can interact with each other may be a solution to this problem.

If you are not in the content creation business directly as a provider of news and commentary, generating valuable and compelling content can be a big distraction from your core business tasks. By providing your customers with a forum for exchanging ideas, writing product reviews and swapping new information about your products and services, content is generated for you and community is established amongst contributing visitors. People who share common interests and goals with your on-line community will be drawn to your site, bolstering your user traffic and enriching the content.

There are a number of easy to implement features that serve as community building tools, such as message boards, product and service review forums and live chat areas. Message boards, in particular, often foster the kind of shared purpose among users that leads to sustained interest in a specific on-line space. As an example, there is "The Well" (<http://www.thewell.com>) which is essentially one, enormous message board consisting of a myriad of topics or, in Well parlance, "conferences." The conferences are

actually never-ending discussions of everything from parenting to literature. Individual business sites can facilitate the same kind of community by limiting their forums to topics related to their specific industry. For example, a new car dealer might host message boards related to car enthusiasts, electric cars, the hottest new sports cars, etc. Interested web-surfers will turn this kind of site into a daily destination, forming relationships with others who share their interest and chiming in on the topics of the day.

Message boards can take some time to plan and set up, but once they are up and running should be wholly self-sustaining. Topic areas, the overarching categories of discussion, must be established, and user moderators must be identified. User moderators are power users who are willing to mediate the discussions in their topic area, keeping things civil when conversations grow heated and starting new topics to stimulate interaction when things get bogged down. Moderators are empowered to remove troublesome members of the community and to end discussion threads that get out of hand.

Live chat is another interactive feature that's easy to add to any site. Live chat differs from message boards in that users participate in conversations in real-time. Further, no record of the conversation is archived on the site. While users utilize the website as a meeting place to begin a conversation on a given topic, users who visit later have no opportunity to add their views to the discussion. Live chat is an excellent feature for a site that doesn't want to be concerned with maintaining a large discussions database that may require considerable storage space.

Even giving your visitors a place on your website to post opinions about your products and/or services can serve to build some loose communal feeling. Amazon.com, for example, gives users the ability to write reviews of books for other shoppers to read. Though users that participate in this kind of site interactivity are less likely to return to your site than users who have formed interpersonal relationships in a typical message board scenario, giving them the ability to express their views on your site is a good way to generate content that might attract other users, and often times seeing their own words on-line will endear them to your site as they form some sense of ownership for your site's content.

Personalization

For some sites that serve as aggregators of disparate content, portals like Yahoo! for example, normal community building features are less effective. Sites like this turn to personalization as a way of connecting users to their on-line destination. Personalization is a way of making the user feel that the site is tailored specially to their needs, delivering only the content that that specific user wants, or providing them with free site-branded functionality such as e-mail or a home-page. Personalized features become possible when sites capture information about their visitors and save it for use later.

One simple thing that many successful websites do is greet return visitors. "Welcome back to Sample Site, Joe Schmoe!" Greeting the user back to the site gives the impression that the site remembers them, that they belong there. Other ways to tie users to a site are to provide them with the aforementioned site-branded functionality like e-mail (e.g. joeschmoe@website.com) or even free business cards with site logo printed on the back.

With information captured from previous visits, sites can pre-fill shipping or billing forms. By tracking visitors' preferences sites are able to make targeted recommendations for future purchases. If a site can strike the right balance between providing the user with helpful, individualized features and appearing like an on-line stalker with far more personalized information than seems appropriate, the user will make the site part of his or her daily on-line routine. This kind of relationship represents the ultimate in Internet customer loyalty.

Customization

Delivering truly customized, dynamic content is the biggest step a site can take to tailor itself to a visitor's needs. A site like Yahoo!, for example, gives users the ability to create a personal, site template which will ensure that they are delivered a home page which contains only that content the user has stipulated in their template. This level of customization fundamentally alters the look and content of the site, but may provide a key to visitor retention, as the user knows exactly which information that will be available at the site at any given time. For those users who are accustomed to searching across multiple pages for the information they need on a daily basis, a customized content aggregator can save them time and energy.

Summary

Once you've driven some initial traffic to your website, earning repeat visits becomes the next challenge. Every successful site finds a way to answer this challenge through a combination of dynamic content, useful functionality and user specific customization. There are a vast array of features that are easy to implement which bolster repeat site visits by creating community, content and habit-forming utility. Giving visitors an opportunity to contribute to the valuable content you are offering on-line and a means to interact with other site users are both compelling ways to encourage repeat visits and by extension customer loyalty. As a small business it is absolutely imperative that you leverage some of these affordable technologies to grow your web business as an integrated part of your total business strategy.