

How to bet your business on the Internet, and win

AT THIS STAGE of the cyberspace business, you might be wondering if it's worth betting your company on the Internet. Consider this: Over 150 million Americans have access to the Web, and in some industries — such as travel and car sales — over 70 percent of all transactions are influenced by the Web.

As with most business opportunities, if you don't move on it, someone else will. Be the first one on the Internet with your unique product, message and service territory, and it's pretty tough for someone else to come along and knock you off.

Not that it can't be done, but the original owner of an Internet presence claims search-engine territory that requires an enormous amount of money to take over. If you don't take it, then someone else — a competitor, a current employee, someone you know and who knows you — will place that bet.

Primo real estate

Once you decide to claim that primo Internet real estate, what are some reasonable expectations? For one, a Web site should provide your customers with your full brand promise. Make it quick and easy for customers to find anything and everything they want to know about your products and services, along with how to order those products.

With a Web presence, you should expect at least 10 percent of your busi-

ness and 30 percent of all inquiries to come directly from the Internet. That's a reasonable expectation, although it's possible to achieve even more. In addition, remember that your unique brand and original ideas are what draw prospects to your Web site and then keep them coming back. There should always be at least one brilliant idea on your Web site that outflanks, outsells and surpasses anything your competi-

[tips]

- 1 | If you have a wide variety of products, each with a lot of details, your Web site is a great place for display.
- 2 | Optimum search engine placement is key; make that a priority when planning your Web presence.
- 3 | The original owner of an Internet presence claims search-engine territory that requires an enormous amount of money to take over. If you don't move, someone else will.
- 4 | With a Web presence, you should expect at least 10 percent of your business and 30 percent of all inquiries to come directly from the Internet.
- 5 | You may be able to bring ongoing Web development in-house once the foundation is there, to save costs.

tors are doing to reach your marketplace.

Once you decide to place the bet, you face a critical decision. The partner you choose could be the very factor that puts a ceiling on your success. With over 100 million Web sites out there, all the best search engines index fewer than 10 million sites. Choose the wrong partner, don't build or promote your Web site the best way, and your site is among the 90 million not indexed. Deciding on a partner is where your bet succeeds or fails.

Choices, choices

You can generally choose from five kinds of partners, each with pluses and minuses. Art studios, also known as branding consultancies, are known for their specialty of creating stunning first impressions. Be sure they also have the necessary technical and marketing know-how or you'll be left with simply a beautiful site. Strategists, your second option, tend to function on the opposite end: tactics and methods for reaching your audience, yet no other deliverables. You're still left with the challenge of finding the right company to develop and execute your Internet presence, unless they have connections to do that for you.

The IT shop or tech house is another option, but again a comprehensive marketing focus is not the standard deliverable. Be sure that you have marketing expertise on staff or with a partner if it's not available via the tech house.

And the fourth option, a Web design firm, may emphasize graphic impact over other areas. Again, check out the full range of services offered.

The fifth option, an advertising agency, is likely to base recommendations on an overall marketing strategy. Make sure their technical capability is up to the challenge as well.

Whichever partner you choose, be sure to visit the sites and see for yourself how they deliver. Is the site attractive? Can you find what you're looking for easily? Is it easy to order right off the site? Does it have that big idea to keep you coming back?

Three Web tactics

Each customer is different, so the Web presence should be as well. Three examples from our customers show successful tactics to consider.

- Magnum Research of Minneapolis manufactures and imports high-quality firearms. Their Web site provides information about the firm's products and includes an online catalog of accessories, such as holsters and clothing. The detailed information available to consumers via the Web site complements the information available through dealers.

In addition, the site reminds consumers to visit their dealers, while providing Magnum with an effective tool for direct sales of accessories, which most dealers do not carry. Magnum went online in 1994; today more than \$1 million in annual sales comes direct-

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were able to bring the development expertise in-house to do ongoing tasks.

- Hubler Family Business Consultants of Minneapolis specializes in consulting for family-owned businesses. In 2000, they wanted to develop a Web presence and incorporate ongoing search optimization, with the goal of getting one to two leads per year from the Web site.

Optimum search engine placement put the Hubler Web site front and center when Today Show producers went to the Internet to find a company to feature on the program. As a result, the show appearance along with monthly search optimization updates continue to reward Hubler with at least a dozen leads every year, well over their initial goal.

Zero to 90

When choosing a partner for the task of betting your company on the Internet, remember this: Those who don't do it right in the first place have a 10 percent chance of success. Those who do it right the first time raise their chances to 90 percent. And for those who do nothing at all, the chances are an irrefutable 0 percent.

Consider your choices wisely, remembering that your Web site is but one element of your entire marketing presence.

"There should always be at least one brilliant idea on your Web site that outflanks, outsells and surpasses anything your competitors are doing to reach your marketplace."

— John Risdall, Risdall Advertising

Measurable results

Talk to the customer to find out how long it took to get the Web site going and how responsive the vendor is to changes (and what they'll cost you). Your goal is to build a Web presence based on sound marketing planning, and designed to deliver measurable sales results.

While the trends and passions of the Internet seem to redefine themselves constantly, the principles of making a sale remain the same. Make sure the partner you choose can drive the sale for your company, since that is the fundamental point.

ly from the Internet.

- AGS Publishing in Shoreview is a publisher of assessments, textbooks and instructional materials for students with a wide range of special needs. Since 1996, this company has completed various Web development projects, including four major site redesigns and 10 separate Web sites. Web site traffic grew from 17,000 user sessions in 1997 to more than 700,000 in 2002, year to date, with sales going up accordingly.

The company used a cost-effective strategy for Web development, initially using an outside vendor to lay a foundation, launch test sites and develop new versions of sites. Afterward they