

## **Developing A Successful Web Site**

### A White Paper on Truly Useful Web Sites

There has been an explosion in the number of Web sites to be found on the World Wide Web (for this paper, the terms 'World Wide Web' and 'Internet' will be used interchangeably). But how many of these pages are truly successful? Some Web sites must be giving their visitors what they are looking for because, according to statistics released this past January, on-line retail sales for 2003 exceeded \$100 Billion\*! But with search engines typically returning thousands of pages per search term, how do you stand out? How do you make your site successful?

Let's start by looking at some common goals for Web sites. When most business owners think of a successful site, they think of:

- ◆ Large numbers of 'hits' to the site (hits refers to the number of visitors to the site).
- ◆ An increase in sales.
- ◆ An increase in customers to the physical location of the business.
- ◆ An increase in requests for information.

These are all valid measures of a successful Web site. But, Web sites are not miracle workers. A Web site will do little to nothing for you if it is not well planned out, designed, developed and implemented. A Web site by itself will seldom really be considered successful. That's worth saying again – a Web site by itself will seldom really be successful!

What are other common 'myths' about having a Web site? The most common myth would have to be: "Having my site listed high on search engines will bring success." Reality – It doesn't matter if your site is always listed first. If the site is not attractive, easy to navigate, informative and useful, the visitors to the site will not use the site. Your site will be a failure.

Another common myth: "My business is a service business. Service businesses don't do well on the Web." In reality service businesses are perfect for the Web. These are the kinds of businesses that have not taken the full advantage of what the Web has to offer.

### **Things to Help the Site**

Let's take just a minute to look at other things that can help make our Web site successful. If possible Web sites should be used in conjunction with other advertising. If you routinely run newspaper ads, include the Web address. But also, include information about what the visitor can find and do on the site. Next, include your Web address on all business cards, business stationary, envelopes, brochures, etc. And don't forget Word of Mouth! The best advertisement for your business is also the best advertisement for your Web site. With a well-designed, enjoyable site your visitors will become the best advertising tool you can have for a Web page.

### **So, lets get to it! What makes up a successful Web site?**

A successful Web site should be:

- ✓ Visually pleasing.
- ✓ Easy to navigate.
- ✓ Truly informative.
- ✓ Truly useful.
- ✓ Enjoyable to re-visit.

Lets take a look at each of these points individually.

### *Visually Pleasing*

There have been many studies on just what makes a site visually pleasing. And the most common aspects of a visually pleasing site are:

- Page length should be small. Visitors typically do not like to scroll much. They want as much information visible at one time as possible. It is often better to use multiple pages to display your information.
- Words should be kept to a minimum. Visitors don't want to read a lot. Studies have show that when information is presented in short sentences with bullet points, users are more likely to read through it.
- Plenty of 'white space.' Crowding images, text, animations, etc. together can make things hard to read and hard to find. Users will quickly get tired of searching and more on to another site.
- Background and text colors should work together. Many sites want to attract attention and so use bright colors for backgrounds and text. But, this can be hard to see or hard on the eyes. It is better to choose soft shades that make the text easy to see/read.
- Clear images and flowing text. Images/photos that are too small only frustrate visitors. If the image is 'busy' it is best to use a large version of the image, or not to use it at all. Text should flow. Some fonts (square fonts) are harder to read and should be avoided. Rounded text encourages the eyes to flow. Studies have shown that rounded, flowing text is not only easier to read but also can increase reading speed.

### *Easy to Navigate*

No matter how pleasing the site may be or how informative the site may be; if visitors cannot find the information they are looking for, it does no good to have it there. Well laid out menu systems that are easy to use, with descriptive menu items are essential. With today's technology, Web page menus can be just as dynamic as menus used in any program. Drop down menus, pop-up menus, roll-over menus and more can be used alone or in combination to enhance the site and make it easy for users to find the information they are looking for. Site maps and search capabilities are also nice additions to larger sites.

### *Truly Informative*

Using words to describe your business is great. But often times visitors to Web sites are looking for more than this. Typical Web sites might include direction to your location, price lists and contact information. But, give your visitor more. Adding any of the following helps give visitors REAL information:

- FAQ Sections (Frequently Asked Questions).
- Tips or Tips & Tricks Sections.
- Calculators or wizards that give information about prices, rates, premiums or any other quantitative information.

- If your business sells products that have manuals, get started guides, etc.; you may want to offer these for download from your Web site.
- If your business benefits from visual information, use videos and/or panoramic images. (For example, real estate sites, hotel/timeshare sites, day care centers and more).

### *Truly Useful*

Truly useful is similar to truly informative, except that now you are giving visitors a way to interact with your business. Often times this is referred to as 'adding functionality to the site.' You might give visitors a way to:

- Check order status.
- Access account information.
- Make on-line payments to invoices, dues, etc.
- Make reservations /schedule appointments.
- Ask questions on-line with forums.
- Ask questions live with Instant Messenger features.
- Download forms they may need to do business with you.

### *Enjoyable to Re-Visit*

By creating a site that includes all of the above, you are taking a giant leap toward giving your visitor an enjoyable site. But, is there reason for your visitors to return to your site? A few things you can do to keep visitors returning:

- Keep information up to date.
- Offer on-line discounts that change periodically.
- Consider adding automatically rotating images or photos. Each time the user visits your Web site a different image or photo is displayed.
- Add a 'News' section to your site that keeps visitors informed about what's going on in your business – keep it updated.
- When visitors make on-line requests/inquiries respond quickly. If you give them a return message that says you will respond in 24 business hours, make sure you do!

And Finally...

When choosing a company to design, develop and build your site. It is important that you choose someone who is knowledgeable about search engine placement. Although being listed high is not a guarantee of success, it is well known that most people do not go past the first few pages returned by search engines.

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2003 eCommerce: The Year In Review

by Carrie A. Johnson et. al.

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US online retail sales soared past \$100 billion in 2003, up 38% over last year. How did retailers do it? They responded to changing consumer demand and behaviors with advanced site features, optimized marketing, and easy-to-use multichannel tools.