

Making Your Web Site a Valuable Marketing Tool

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The days of having a web site up "just to have a web site up" are long gone. More and more companies are recognizing and utilizing their web sites as valuable marketing tools. In order for a web site to be effective in marketing your organization, it needs to address these five elements:

1) A web site, at its most basic level, has to be fully operable. Some examples of a site being considered inoperable include: broken links (links that do not go to the directed target), the site cannot be seen (or does not appear the same) on all browsers (all versions of Internet Explorer and Netscape). Other examples include photos not coming up, animations that do not work, and the site cannot be seen equally well on laptops as desktops. Of course, the site has to come up quickly.

2) The site has to be findable.

"The single most important thing for business web sites to achieve today is search engine visibility. If your web site doesn't show up on the first page of the search results, it's as though you don't exist."

Jakob Nielsen in "B to B Interactive Marketing Guide"

According to most search engines, there are several criteria that every web site has to abide by to be even considered "submissable." These range from being "spiderable" (ability to go from one page to another) to having absolutely no indication of spamming. Some search engines do not consider any individual web page worthy of being submitted unless it has at least 200 words of text.

After that, every search engine has its own particular criteria. Yahoo, for example, puts great emphasis on having key words (words descriptive of the site's services) repeated at least four times per page, and have those key words in the title, description, and keyword meta-tags of the site. According to Yahoo, you have to "prove" in your copy what your site is all about and then put these keywords into the "tags" of the web site code. Most search engines put importance on related out-going links and how "useful" your site is. Google puts great importance on in-coming links (links from other sites to your site). Every page of a web site should feature at least one related out-going link (to an association, organization, partner, etc.). The returns are even greater if those you link to link back to you.

It is important to note that some web sites feature dynamic graphics that flash across the screen, but these graphics are not findable by search engines. Thus any marketing keywords featured in these graphics would not be "readable" by these search engines, providing very poor search results.

3. The third aspect is "value to the visitor." What does a visitor gain when he/she visits your site? The more information ("valuable content") you can provide, the more likely a search engine will rate your site high. Examples of valuable content include how-to articles, resources, references, product reviews, case studies, tools, tips and so on. Remember, the more time a person stays on your site, the more likely he/she will buy your product or use your service.
4. A web site has to have the right "personality" as well as visual appeal. Personalities of a web site can range from professional, institutional, "outdoorsy," and feminine to fun, "moving," soft and "down-to-business." A perfect web site has to portray the right image for that company or organization. Web sites cannot be evaluated on their visual appeal alone, but how it markets your organization. However, a web site should always be visually appealing without grainy photos or graphics.
5. Most web sites need to have a "call for an action." Whether it be "buy our product," "become a member," "invest in our company," "request a quote," "donate to our cause" or "hire us as a consultant," there has to be a "call for an action." And all of the elements have to be in place for the "action" to take place, such as secure shopping carts and working e-mail forms.