



Online Marketing

How To Take Your Message Beyond Your Website

By Don Sadler

Ten years ago a discussion of online marketing probably started with “So, do you have a website?”

Today, having a website is a given even for the smallest micro-businesses and solo entrepreneurs. But having a website is just the start.

Progressive small-business owners and entrepreneurs are incorporating a number of different Web 2.0 elements into their websites, including search engine optimization (or SEO), pay-per-click (or PPC) advertising, social media, blogs and e-newsletters.

By adding such techniques to their online marketing arsenal, owners enhance their online presence and make their websites true marketing tools.

You can do the same for your micro-business by following these guidelines.

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Develop A Strategy

One of the keys to online marketing success is creating a cohesive strategy. But, how do you decide which elements to focus on first?

"Taking things one step at a time is the best way to prioritize tasks and not get overwhelmed," says Stacy Williams, president and founder of Prominent Placement, a search engine marketing company in Atlanta, Ga.

She identifies three distinct steps in an integrated online marketing strategy.

1. The first step is to make sure your target customers are aware that they have a problem to be solved, and that your category of products or services can solve it.

"Online display advertising on sites that the target audience is visiting is great for this kind of general branding and awareness," says Williams.

2. The second step is to make sure your website can be found easily when prospects go to a search engine to look for service providers in your category. This is where SEO and PPC advertising come into play.

"They help ensure that your site is highly visible so prospects can start considering your brand," Williams explains.

SEO involves determining which keywords your prospects are likely to type into a search engine when looking for businesses like yours, and then working those words into the copy on your website pages, as well as your site's title tags and description tags. When done properly, SEO will help get your website listed high in the main section of a search engine's results page.

PPC advertising is a little different.

Here, you also try to determine which keywords your prospects will use. Then you bid with the search engines to essentially buy these keywords, so that links to your website will come up in the paid section of the results page (either on the right-hand side or at the top of the page). You pay the search engine each time someone clicks on your link.

Jason Morrison, vice president of sales and marketing for Capitol Media Solutions, a media strategy, buying and sales agency headquartered in Washington, D.C., says there are two main PPC advertising providers: Google AdWords, which has about 70 percent of the PPC market, and Microsoft adCenter, which is newer and has the remaining 30 percent.

Google AdWords was the original, Morrison notes, "and it's very user-friendly. I usually recommend it to businesses that are just starting out with PPC advertising."

To get started, simply visit [Google AdWords](#) or [Microsoft adCenter](#).

3. The final step in Williams' three-step integrated marketing strategy is to engage prospects on your website by offering some sort of valuable content.

"You want to either entice them to make a purchase or to give you their contact information so you can follow up," she explains. "This is where a lead-nurturing campaign, perhaps via email marketing, can be valuable."

The consumer's searching and buying process is not always this linear, of course.

Adds Williams: "The bottom line is that businesses should try to be visible online everywhere their target audience is, throughout the entire buying cycle, and have a cohesive campaign offering a consistent message."



E-Newsletter Success Tips

Here are three top e-newsletter success tips from Michael Katz, founder of Blue Penguin Development, a consulting firm that specializes in the development of e-newsletters.

1. Publish regularly

"The biggest reason e-newsletters fail is that companies stop publishing them after just a few issues," says Katz.

2. Share a point of view

"If you want to stand out, you need to say something noteworthy," Katz adds. He urges clients to avoid the temptation to stay in the middle of the road.

3. Write in a natural voice

Email and now social media have made casual, first-person writing the voice of business, Katz points out. "Write in a way that reflects your authentic voice."

“E-newsletters are a great way to stay in front of your customers.”



E-Newsletters, Blogs And Social Media

E-newsletters are an increasingly popular tool used by businesses of all shapes and sizes to enhance their online presence. E-newsletters are especially useful for nurturing and staying in touch with prospects and leads.

“When done properly, e-newsletters accomplish three critical things all at once,” says Michael Katz, founder of Blue Penguin Development, a consulting firm in Hopkinton, Mass., that specializes in the development of e-newsletters. “They position you as an expert. They leverage your existing relationships. And they provide a means for revealing the true voice of your company.”

Media strategist Morrison concurs: “E-newsletters are a great way to stay in front of your customers and prospects week after week, month after month, when you might otherwise fall off their radar.”

Katz stresses that e-newsletters must be more than simply poorly disguised sales pitches.

“You need to provide value if you want people to give you permission to keep coming back to their inbox,” says Katz.

Blogging and being active on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are other ways many businesses are beefing up their online presence. Blogs, Facebook fan pages, Twitter feeds and LinkedIn profiles should all be integrated together and easily accessible from your website’s home page.

Do It Yourself—Or Hire A Pro?

While all of these techniques may sound relatively simple, success hinges on expertise, consistency and execution.

“There are a lot of nuances to SEO and PPC advertising that do-it-yourselfers should be aware of if they want to get the best results,” says Williams.

She says whether to hire a pro or do it yourself depends primarily on the competitiveness of your market.

“If you’re selling books online and want to compete with Amazon and Barnes & Noble, then plan to set aside a big budget and hire an expert. But if you’re selling blue widgets in Montana, you can probably read some basic information online and optimize your site and set up PPC yourself.”

Similarly, social media efforts and blogging are only as good as the time and effort you put into them, Morrison adds.

“They’re very labor intensive, and you really have to stay on top of things. Most of the businesses that do social media and blogging well have staff members who are devoted to keeping them going.”

If you don’t have the time or inclination to do all of this yourself, but don’t have a big budget either, Morrison suggests hiring an intern to help out.

“Many colleges and universities are now offering courses in all of this. An intern cannot only help you implement these strategies very cost-effectively, but can also teach you the techniques so you’re better able to do it yourself in the future.”

Whatever you decide to do, don’t do it halfway.

“If you can’t put 100-percent effort into an initiative, then hold off until you can,” advises Morrison. “The biggest mistake I see is business owners getting three or four of these platforms going but not concentrating on doing any of them well. Focus on perfecting one platform at a time.” ■

Don Sadler is a freelance writer who specializes in topics that are relevant to small-business owners. He’s currently working on enhancing his website, donsadlerwriter.com, with some Web 2.0 elements.

Two Ways The NASE Can Help

1. Business 101 Experts

Get the one-on-one help you need to develop an online marketing strategy. The NASE’s micro-business specialists offer personalized, confidential answers to all of your questions. Plus unlimited access to the business experts is included in the cost of your NASE Membership.

2. Business Law Experts

Be sure your online marketing tools adhere to laws regarding copyrights, trademarks and other legal issues. The NASE business law specialists can help with straightforward answers to your questions—at no additional cost to you.