WEB MARKETING – THE BASICS

The Internet represents both a formidable research tool and a powerful marketing medium. Chris Pearse shows us how to exploit the Internet without burning either your fingers, or your pocket.

Integrate the Web as part of a coherent marketing strategy, for research, as a marketing tool, or both. A Web presence is expected of many companies today, but it’s not a panacea for marketing difficulties. A badly executed site can create more problems than it solves. But even without your own site, Internet access will give you email, and admission to a vast information resource for next to nothing. So research the Internet using the techniques outlined below before deciding how your presence will benefit your business.

GETTING WIRED

As a business, plump for one of the many unmetered packages available for £16 per month or less. Lo-call (0845) numbers will get you watching the clock and off-peak deals don’t guarantee off-peak traffic levels. Even better, opt for an ADSL (broadband) connection which will give you lightning-fast access (ten times faster than dial-up) for as little as £20 per month plus installation charge – you’ll be able to talk on the line at the same time and connection will be instantaneous. A single broadband connection can supply a small network. Proximity to your local exchange is a factor, and a line test can determine if you are close enough.

SEARCH AND RESEARCH

Before contemplating your own website, have a good look at how your markets exploit the Internet. Use a general-purpose search engine – Google and Yahoo are popular choices and use industry-specific words to look at competitor and supplier activity. For a wider trawl of the Web, use a search utility to ask the 15 or so top engines simultaneously, collate the results and present them in order of ranking. Copernic provides a powerful utility, free of charge, which can be downloaded and used with ease. Meta-searching uses the same principle but through an online interface, try Vivisimo or the provocatively named Dogpile.
MARKETING WITHOUT A SITE
More and more exposure on the Internet is being achieved through third party sites—so why create your own site if you don’t need to? The Internet is a content-hungry environment and getting articles published can be easier than through the printed media. Large, high profile sites (like the IEE’s) will also get your content noticed by the search engines far quicker than a new site with little or no profile.

Use the numerous business directories available like Applegate.com or Kellysearch.co.uk—your sector may well have its own specific online directories. Some charge an annual fee, some are free, but beware that some directories will only list in return for a link from your site.

WEB DESIGN – TOP TIPS
Once you’ve decided to post your own site on the Internet, a few simple rules will keep you out of trouble:

Get a professional to create the site with an arm’s length relationship. Too many companies try to do it on the cheap and use in-house ‘expertise’, friends, clients and suppliers. The result is that it takes forever because it always assumes a lower priority than the core activity. Even dedicated in-house IT departments have difficulties in this respect.

Make sure the professional Web designer is a graphic artist first and foremost. Graphic designers can assimilate Web skills far more easily than a technologist can learn graphic design. Better still, use a multi-disciplinary team.

Employ the basic principles of project management—write a specification and get it agreed, at a price, before any work is commenced. Costs will vary from a few hundred pounds upwards.

Keep it simple—most sites do not benefit from animations. Beware the ‘skip intro’ button on your home page, signalling your designer’s urge to demonstrate his or her flair and creativity to the full. In an engineering context, site visitors will want information and want it quickly.

Discuss search engine submission and Web stats with your designer—if its central to your strategy, make sure these are built into the project. Submission may require payment and Web stats should take the form of periodic reports—a visitor counter is not only useless, it can be very misleading.

CHOOSING HOSTS AND ISPS
The host is the organisation that holds your website on its server and connects it to the Internet. The ISP (Internet service provider) is the organisation that connects your company’s network to the Internet. Many Internet companies offer both services in one package—cheaper deals are available separately, but watch out for premium rate help lines. The Internet press list the numerous offerings in this field as they change monthly. Do opt for the more expensive business deals, the small extra premium often ensures much better service when its needed and better connection performance.

MARKETING YOUR SITE
Once it’s up and running, the site has to be marketed rather like a product or service. Define your audience to determine whether the site needs submitting to the engines and directories. The site may only apply to existing contacts, in which case you can forget submission and concentrate on telling your contacts about it. Make sure every piece of company literature promotes the site name.

When your target audience includes the market at large, submission plays an important role. With so many sites competing for the top spot, a high ranking is becoming more difficult to achieve. Keywords (meta-tags) are becoming less important as engines become more sophisticated in the way they rank, concentrating on content and relevance. Paying for a listing will ensure a faster and higher ranking and is a necessity for some sites—the number of options is large so take advice and work to a budget.

MEASURING THE RESULTS
If you can’t measure the results of an initiative, it may not be worth doing. Firstly, train your staff to ask each new caller how they got your contact details. Log the details and analyse monthly.

If your website is aimed at the market at large, choose from the plethora of services and products available for generating statistics, or take advice from your Web designer. Ensure that you get a regular report which can sift out visits from search engine crawlers and your own staff. If you have a variety of products featured online, you will also want to know which attracted most traffic.

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