

Marketing Strategy and Tactics: Leveraging your Web Site as a Marketing Weapon

Abstract:

Often a company's Web site is the first point of contact with prospects, press, influencers and analysts. Each type of visitor is seeking different information and has a varying threshold at which he or she will make a crucial decision: to leave the site having failed to find useful data or to stay and perhaps provide detailed information about themselves that you can use to improve your marketing efforts. Without a coherent strategy to address the needs of these constituents and to capture essential visitor data, your site will fail to meet baseline marketing objectives. You will lose competitive ground. This KCG Perspective will analyze the problem of bloated, ineffective sites and provide several key strategies for turning your Web site into a marketing hub – a strategic weapon for filling your sales pipeline with qualified leads and building mindshare and buzz.

Situation:

In software marketing, Web sites are most often still considered ancillary to existing marketing materials, such as brochures, sales presentations, demos and whitepapers. In some cases, the site is literally an afterthought, a marketing channel that is grudgingly created and a chore to maintain. The content for a company's site is culled from verbiage already present in a company's brochures and data sheets, making it redundant. Even more surprising, many of these companies are in the Internet software market, or sell Web-based solutions, and will be judged by the effectiveness of their sites.

The current trend is toward a "more-is-more" approach, in which a company feels that every piece of information that exists about them should be crammed onto their site, causing a structural and navigational nightmare. Adding to the problem is a class of Web content that can only be called information meringue – vapid animated Flash files, video welcomes by the CEO, scrolling industry news and other bandwidth-intensive fluff. This all adds up to bloated brochureware and a site that does not consider the needs of its visitors.

Analysis:

The common problems in Web site implementation stem from one thing: the failure of marketing departments to think of their company's site as the hub around which their other, more traditional marketing efforts revolve. This failure is understandable. The Web has only been a viable marketing channel for 5 years, and most marketing executives learned their craft before the rise of the Internet. Most have accepted the Internet as a critical medium, but still think of it as a spoke in the marketing wheel. It needs to be the hub.

The reasons that the Web is more than simply another marketing channel stem from the three I's – it is interactive, instantaneous and inexpensive. The Web is second only to the telephone in terms of interactivity, and is much more cost-effective. A well-designed site guides visitors to the information that is most relevant to them and creates a "dialog" of request and delivery between the visitor

and the company. Site users receive the information instantly and at their convenience, and Web sites are available 24/7 at a cost that is nearly insignificant compared to traditional media. Turning your corporate Web site into a marketing hub requires a paradigm shift in how you think about marketing. You need to assume that the first point of contact with your company will be the Web. Positioning and marketing strategy can be built for the Web first and then adapted and expanded for other collateral. Brochures can become more specific and focused; in fact, some companies have forgone the use of a “corporate brochure” altogether. This is a little drastic (high-level buyers still like the feel of something tangible in their hands), but on a limited budget, it makes sense to spend money on a well-designed Web site rather than the high printing and mailing costs associated with physical collateral.

The shift to Web-centricity has to be decisive and company-wide. It should become part of your company culture, especially in sales departments. Inside sales personnel and SEs need to think Web-first and direct prospects to the proper places on the company’s site that serve to qualify as well as inform the visitors. Your URL should become part of your logo and be prominent on all company communications, both internal and external. We are not suggesting that companies abandon traditional marketing in favor of the Internet, rather that they use their Web presence as the focal point of their marketing efforts and expand from there.

Once the marketing department has embraced Web-centric marketing, and the rest of the company is on board, careful thought must go into the design and structure of the corporate site. Web-centricity is a double-edged sword: just as a well-designed site at the center of your marketing universe can feed your sales pipeline and generate incredible buzz, a poor, ineffective site can derail your entire marketing plan.

The strongest influence on site design is audience. Who will be coming to your site and why? Which visitors are most important to you and how can you gather information about them? If you can rank the audiences that your site will serve in order of importance, you will be a long way toward a powerful marketing weapon. Try to think in terms of what information your visitors want, not what information you want them to have. On the best sites, each page is directed toward a specific type of visitor – prospect, press, client, analyst – and the navigation serves to direct the visitors toward the pages that will meet their needs.

Consistency is also important. If you have a strong positioning statement and company story, it will inform all areas of the Web site. Your positioning should be consistently represented throughout the site and across all marketing materials, from presentations to whitepapers. One of the greatest threats to mindshare for a company is inconsistent or conflicting messages, yet this is also one of the most common attributes of corporate Web sites. The best way to avoid this is to build your positioning with the Web in mind, and then extend it to other collateral.

The final important element to a Web-centric marketing effort is the ability of your site to gather information about visitors that is crucial to your marketing and sales tactics. Visitors to your site are usually looking for a specific bit of information about your company or products. If that

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information is attractive enough to them, they may be willing to provide contact information to get it. There are many ways to achieve this:

- Visitors who want to try out a demo of your product will usually fill out basic contact information (Name, e-mail address and phone number) for the privilege.
- Those who want access to a detailed ROI worksheet might be willing to fill out a short survey about their company and software needs.
- Offering a recurring e-mail newsletter is a good way to gather a database of e-mail addresses.

One caveat about data gathering: be sure to post a clear, visible privacy policy stating what information your site gathers, precisely what it will be used for and whether it will be shared with third-parties for any reason.

Best Practice:

If you accept the proposition that all inquiries about your company will route through your Web site first, you must be sure that your site is built to handle it. It must be designed from a visitor's perspective, with a clear navigational structure that guides visitors to information that is relevant to them. It must be internally consistent as well as in tune with all of your other marketing materials, and it must be able to persuade visitors to give up information about themselves in exchange for useful data about your company or products.

One way to achieve this is by having your employees surf your site, pretending to be a specific type of visitor, trying to find a specific piece of information. Record how long and how many clicks it takes them to find it. For example, a user could act as an analyst, trying to find out three things – the names of your major products, how long your company has been in business and if your company has been covered in any top-tier business publications. Another employee could pose as a prospect who wants to demo your product, read any technical whitepapers you have published and have a sales person call him directly.

Choose the scenarios that reflect the most likely visitors to your site and refine your site to streamline those interactions. Constantly revise your site to better serve your audiences and keep your site fresh by adding relevant news and changing the site as marketing and sales strategies evolve. By choosing a Web-centric view of your marketing universe, you will create a cost-effective and highly useful method of reaching those constituents who mean the most to your company.

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