

Virtually Speaking

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Ten years ago the World Wide Web was cautiously poking its head into the world of consumer communications and we warily watched its evolution, gauging when the right time would be to "launch" into the fray with our company or client's web sites. Some communications professionals entered more quickly than others with varied success and many failures.

In the new millennium there are three kinds of communicators:

1. Those who don't have a web presence... yet.
2. Those who are on the web but haven't truly capitalized on it, and...
3. Those who have harnessed the power of the web to reach their target audiences.

How do you become a number three? Just follow any tried and true communications formula... like RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) and go from there. If it sounds simple, it is. But like anything else, it's time consuming and requires knowledge of the technology and the process.

First, determine whom your target audience is and if they're on the Internet. Then define how your product or service should be positioned and finally, what part of the communications plan/marketing mix your Internet elements fit. A web site is a logical assumption of what electronic tool you can use, however, do consider other types of virtual communications vehicles as well: e-mail lists, reciprocal links or banner advertising.

Once your communications plan is complete, each component will have a different implementation plan. Like most projects (a newsletter, brochure, presentation, video, etc.) your electronic communications will need a team of people with different skills... or maybe you're the chosen one who is multi-talented. When designing a web site, the communicator's talent is in developing the message and how to present it to the target audience for the desired results. Web design has become a specialty all its own and as many of us know, the best writers are not always the best designers. Remember: simple is always best. Load time is critical. Web surfers are typically looking for instant gratification – instantly. If your site takes more than a few seconds to load (usually because of too many graphics), you'll lose your audience. Ease of navigation and access to information is also vital. Most people have a specific mission when surfing and the easier you make it for them to succeed the more likely they are to buy.

The biggest challenge comes after the writing and design of the web site. Maintaining a web site to its greatest potential is a full-time job. If you don't have the budget to hire an in-house webmaster, or you don't have the time or the inclination to maintain it yourself, another option is to hire a freelance graphic artist who specializes in web site design – AND maintenance.

Of course, having a web presence is useless if people don't visit. Drawing the right people to your site takes more than just registering your web site with the top search engines (like Yahoo, Alta Vista, WebCrawler, Lycos, Netscape, Dog Pile, Excite, and InfoSeek). This has become a science in itself and you need to have someone who understands the intricacies of search engine/directory registration. When done properly, web sites have been known to be the greatest source of sales leads, far outnumbering traditional marketing and communications efforts. Web leads are also one of the best "qualified" leads you'll find. Once potential customers arrive at your web site, they've already decided what they want. They're just checking to see if you have it. So maintaining visibility on the web is well worth the work and expense.

Here are some helpful hints to improve your search engine ranking (for example, having your Ford dealership appear on the top of the list when someone types "1999 Mustang" in a search engine):

1. In the programming code of your site make sure you choose the right keyword combinations for Title and Meta Tags—this is the hidden code that search engines start with when looking for sites for your potential customers.
2. Include your city/state/country location in your key words.
3. Each page of your web site should have unique Meta Tags describing what that particular page pertains to.
4. Put key words in the heading line; search engines often give more weight to this.
5. Avoid frames on your web site. Search engines don't like them and neither do most web users.

Revisit your listings frequently. Just because you appeared at the top of the list one week doesn't mean you'll stay there. Also, when registering with search engines, follow their directions very carefully. Once this is all in place, ongoing evaluation is critical. It takes significant time and resources to establish and maintain a web site but you can reap the rewards. Meaningful statistics are important when measuring the effectiveness of your web site. It doesn't matter if you know that 5,000 people a day visit your web site. What's really important is how many of those 5,000 purchase your product or your services. A mechanism to capture this data should be incorporated into your web site. It can be a simple research tool such as a short questionnaire programmed into your site. At this stage, as with any communications plan, even a "virtual" one, the loop simply begins again: Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation.

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