

# WC JOURNAL

## Web Site Strategy – Part 1

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In this third issue of the WC Journal we will begin to look at Web site strategy. I believe that this is the most ignored aspect of Web site planning and development.

Also, I received some feedback on the last issue, which I have included at the end of the article.

Weidman Consulting has also launched its Search Engine Optimization (SEO) service. There is more info about this at the end of the article as well.



Web Strategy can mean a lot of different things to different people. I find myself guilty of explaining it in different ways depending on where the conversation takes place and who the audience is. But I have been converging on a new talk track about what I think Web Strategy involves that has become more consistent and clear.

If you distill the goals of any commercial Web site down to the most basic ones, the result is the identification of two fundamental challenges: **attract visitors**, and **convert them**. In my mind, the basis for every Web strategy needs to be about addressing those two goals. I acknowledge that this concept is not groundbreaking, but it is clear by examining the Web sites that I come across in my daily surfing (which I estimate to include well over a dozen new sites per day) that no matter how obvious these concepts might be, they are largely ignored.

The process of attracting visitors to a site is essentially the marketing of the site. That process can take place online as well as offline (traditional advertising). For now, we will focus on online marketing – Internet Marketing – and confine its scope to be *the process of attracting Web site visitors*. The topic of Internet marketing could extend into branding as well, but that's outside the scope of this article.

Once you have developed an Internet marketing plan to get the right kinds of visitors to your site, you're faced with the second challenge of conversion. Conversion can refer to a major event such as selling your product, obtaining a donation for your organization, or

obtaining a subscription to your publication. But it can also refer to the smaller conversions along the way (like receiving an e-mail address) that accumulate in the trust-building process so important to making the “big sale.”

By starting my Web strategy discussions examining these two challenges I have found that people “get it” pretty quickly. So let’s look at Internet marketing and conversions in more detail.

### **Internet Marketing**

There are lots of ways to attract visitors to your site. There are even “101 Ways...” books on the topic. Remember that the challenge is not just driving traffic to your site; you also want the traffic to be as targeted as possible to your products or services. So a good Web strategy must address the issue of how to attract qualified visitors to your site.

Depending on the specifics of your site, search engines may be the place to start your traffic-building plan. Search engines offer a significant advantage over interruption-based marketing techniques because the searcher is seeking your product or service rather than being interrupted by a popup or banner. The down side to search engines is that getting listed and obtaining a prominent position in the results pages for your desired search terms is not a trivial task. Some Web site owners actively work on improving their ranking by studying the current literature on the subject and experimenting. Others employ professional search engine optimization (SEO) firms to achieve meaningful results. Most site owners simply fail to design and manage their sites with search engine traffic in mind.

To address the tricky nature of achieving top rankings, many major search engines also feature “sponsored” listings, which are no more than targeted ads. Advertisers choose the key words and phrases that they want to advertise for and how much they’re willing to pay for the top positions in the listings. In this model, advertisers pay each time their ad in the search results page is clicked on. A company called Overture is the major player in this arena, and their pay-per-click (PPC) results are used by Yahoo!, MSN, and others. Google has their own AdWords Select™ program. Each PPC supplier has a different model for how much advertisers pay for clicks.

A second important Internet marketing technique uses the placement of links to your site on other Web sites (inbound links) to drive traffic. Inbound links can be obtained for free or paid for. You can seek links on your own at news sites, industry-related sites, etc. Don’t forget local business directory sites and the like. Although they may not drive significant traffic, you don’t want to miss any opportunities for boosting the number of inbound links you have because the number and quality of links to your site are also important in determining your search engine rankings. Google, for instance, considers a link to your site as a “vote” for it, making it more relevant than a similar site with no links to it.

There are also banner/link exchange programs out there, some which only require you to cooperatively display banners on your site in exchange for having your banner displayed

on other sites. This approach may or may not be appropriate for you depending on your business. In most cases, you are allowed control over what types of banners appear on your site, and also the types of sites your banner is displayed on.

Paid link strategies are essentially advertisements. In addition to the search engine PPC ads described above, many sites offer traditional fee-based banner advertisements. News sites, shopping sites, industry sites, etc. are all potential candidates for placing your banner ads. Because it can be a significant task to find and manage the relationships for placing your banner ads, affiliate programs have become prominent. Affiliate programs are commission-based marketing programs. The affiliate network provider is a broker for your ad, and commissions are paid to the broker and the affiliate who displays your ad based on a certain action – a “click” or a “purchase,” for example.

Targeted e-Mail marketing is another method of promoting your site, using either in-house or rented lists. The proliferation of spam (unsolicited and frequently irrelevant e-mail) has reduced the effectiveness of such campaigns as it has become harder and harder to write a compelling subject line that entices the recipient to open the note rather than trash it. For this reason, opt-in lists have become the only real effective way to run an e-mail campaign. In this scenario, the recipient has subscribed to a list, and is therefore expecting to receive newsletters or advertisements. These e-mail messages have a much higher probability of being opened. Consider, too, that critical to the success of any e-mail plan is the ability to accurately track the results, and there are service providers out there who can facilitate the design, distribution, and tracking of your entire campaign.

So a good Web strategy must examine these and all options for driving traffic to your site. A cost analysis of each approach along with an estimate of the number of conversions (our next topic) will help you determine the best mix for your company.

### **Conversion**

Assuming that you have effectively solved the problem of getting qualified traffic to your site, it will all be for naught if you don't convert a reasonable percentage of the visitors once they get there. Conversion is not necessarily an immediate outcome in most cases, but in some it may be. A lot depends on how long the buyer is “in the market” for what your site offers. When I am looking for ink cartridges for my printer, I may check a few places online, price compare against my local office supply store, and decide within minutes if I will make the purchase online or run out to the store. In contrast, I may spend weeks searching for my next car, incorporating a lot of online research into the process.

For longer sales cycles, the best way to analyze the conversion needs of your site is to break down the process into smaller conversions. The process includes a gradual building of trust between your company and the prospect - increasing their knowledge of your product or service. For some percentage of those prospects, you finally convince them to make a “buy” decision. The smaller conversions along the way might include a newsletter signup, site registration in exchange for a discount, or the downloading of a case study or white paper. No matter what these smaller conversions are, the emphasis is

on progressively gaining more information about your prospect, which will in turn enable you to target your message more specifically to them. As they give you more and more permission to interact with them, you grow in your ability to drive them to a “buy” decision.

If you are selling in a commodity market - like the ink jet cartridges example - the conversion process is more focused and immediate. In this arena, brand image, Web site usability, and customer service become more critical factors in the conversion process. Here, an analysis of how users interact with your Web site and how they find the information that they need may well dictate what percentage of prospects you convert. After the first sale, though, the longer-term permission and trust aspects of conversion come into play. By using the smaller conversion steps as described above, you increase the probability that these customers will become *return* customers.

There's a lot more to say about the conversion process, but for now it is most important to understand that any Web strategy must include an analysis of how the site will facilitate the process, either in quick steps (the commodity market) or with incremental conversions that occur over a longer time period.

I honestly believe that if most Web site projects started out by considering these two key challenges, there would be a much larger population of successful sites out there. Not that the analysis of either problem is easy, but even some basic steps and planning can go a long way towards improving your site.



### **Feedback**

I received some feedback on the last WC Journal article (“Why Do Only 27% of Small Business Owners Report an Operating Profit From Their Web Site?”) regarding my comments on the use of Macromedia Flash on Web sites. The comment came from a colleague with extensive experience in branding and graphic design. She responded to this statement in the article, “In almost all cases, a 10-second animated intro (most of which are difficult to skip) is not appropriate. Developers love these things because they showcase their design talent.”

She commented that, “Honestly, I don't think the issue has as much to do with ego as it does innovation. Innovation can be a messy business when it's performed in front of the public eye. I think you're seeing the effects of designers trying to educate themselves and keep up with technology that is changing faster than it ever has in our history.”

Point well taken – equating Flash and ego so strongly was inappropriate. It is also worth noting that there are wonderful applications for Flash (showing an animation of how to replace the ink jet cartridge I've just purchased, for example) that are completely appropriate for Web sites.

Thanks for the feedback – keep it coming.



Weidman Consulting has just launched our search engine optimization (SEO) service to help our clients drive more targeted and profitable traffic to their sites. I believe that a good search engine strategy is *the first place* to look for traffic-generating solutions for most companies. Read more about the service at <http://www.weidmanconsulting.com/seo>.



We hope that you will continue to find insight and value in the WC Journal, and we welcome your comments, which can be addressed to Will Weidman at [will@weidmanconsulting.com](mailto:will@weidmanconsulting.com).

You can subscribe to the WC Journal at <http://www.weidmanconsulting.com/subscribe.html>.