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Putting Your Name Up in Cyber-Lights

Basic pointers on making your Web presence felt.

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Ten or 15 years ago, the single most important sales tool for a job shop was some sort of capabilities literature—a brochure, a binder or folder with inserts highlighting equipment and expertise, even a video showing a shop in action. Today, while the need to demonstrate capability hasn't changed, the tool to do it with is now a Web site. That doesn't mean the other tools are no longer important, but a Web site is critical.

Last month Todd Grimm looked at some of the ways you can build traffic for your Web site and make it work as a marketing vehicle. This month we'll take a look at the site itself and offer some nuts and bolts advice on putting one together.

Content, Design and Code
A Web site is like a stool with three legs. The first of these is all the information you want to put up there—this is the content. Second is the design or visual presentation and format of that information. And third is all the plumbing that goes in behind the scenes to make it all work. This is the HTML code, or "Hyper-Text Markup Language," you've heard about.

Code Advice
Let's start with this third leg, as it's the easiest to dispose of. The recommendation is—don't do it. There are a number of programs out there that promise you can develop a professional-looking Web site all by yourself in as little as 15 minutes without writing a single line of code, but unless you have someone on staff who is already familiar with these programs or you have a great deal of free time and enjoy the challenge of near vertical learning curves, you should seek professional help.

In selecting a designer, you obviously need one who is Web-savvy, but Alan Greco of Alan Greco Design also recommends seeking one who understands business-to-business communication, the more technical the better. It's not necessary that the designer understand moldmaking, per se, but a good grounding in how industrial products are sold will shorten your path to cyberspace and improve your reception there. A designer who is familiar with your business also may be able to provide invaluable assistance in marketing your site, through links on other specialty sites, listings in appropriate directories, etc.

The same can be said—but for different reasons—of the design component of your site. While the code is complicated, the visual impression your site makes will literally be the first impression many prospects will get of your company. Whatever else you do with your site, you want it to look professional. A good designer cannot only help you do that, he or she also can help you through the development process and steer you around common pitfalls.

But, a designer is not going to do all the work for you. Web sites are custom products and much of the development work—and certainly all key decisions—will remain in your court. The designer will likely do his or her best, but you will remain the customer—and you know what they say about customers. So you need to understand how to direct this person, what to provide and what not to insist on.

Rules of Good Design
Noted designer Alan Greco of Alan Greco Design shares the four things he likes clients to understand before starting their projects:

1. "Follow accepted standards."

These are not standards as the ISO would define them, but they are expectations and patterns of usage Web-goers are comfortable with and have come to expect. Some of these are simple things like putting navigation buttons across the top or down the left column, or both. Mouse-overs are fine, as are drop-down menus to a certain extent, but any scheme that radically departs from this fundamental navigation platform will probably deter usage.

2. "Nothing should slow you down."

Speed and facility of navigation come even before aesthetics in site design. Internet users are impatient; they want to find what they are looking for quickly, and if they don't, they bail. The site also can be pretty, but it must be quick.

3. "Put content over corporate."

With the possible exception of some mega-brands, users are not coming to your site to see you. They want to see what you offer, and if you (or your logo) get in the way, you may lose them. On the other hand, too little identity can cost you visitors as well. Make sure all your pages are clearly identified (and identifiable), and that users always know where they are, and how to get back.

4. "Put as much critical information as far up front as you can."

> Follow the standard rules of good design, keep it clean and simple, and cut to the chase in terms of content. Avoid bells and whistles for their own sake, but stay open to creativity that can really enhance your presentation and improve the communication of your message. If you have something in your process that really requires flash or video to convey, go for it, but make sure the user always has an option.

At the same time, try to make your homepage fit the screen. This means be clear and concise and choose a design that facilitates understanding. Studies have shown that the average person reads 25 percent slower online, so avoid things that slow comprehension, like small type (12 point minimum), centered text or headlines, colored type, and of course, reverse type (i.e., white or some other color on a darker background). Most users—especially business users—have high-speed connections, so there are no longer as many prohibitions against using lots of photos and other downloadable files like MPGs, AVI, Media Player or QuickTime files. On the other hand, there is a definite trend away from gratuitous imaging in favor of informational efficiency.

Content Tips
On the Web, content is king. It's what users look for, what search engines try to find and what you should focus on in developing your own site. All those rules that apply to conventional business and promotional writing also apply to the Web, such as the following:

1. Write for the audience, not only in terms of their interests, but also in terms they understand. Listen to your customers and prospects, and, note their questions and concerns, what technical terms they use, what of your own terminology you always have to explain.
2. Write clearly and quickly, as in "readably." Let's examine the notion of a "hype continuum" to describe various writing styles. At the left end of this spectrum is academic copy, at the far right is "carnival copy," which you hear a lot of in used car and furniture ads. You want to be somewhere just right of center, with shortish, pithy sentences, lots of substance and just a dash of spin.
3. Break your content up into digestible bites and place links to as many of these on your homepage as you can reasonably fit. A model increasingly used these days is news sites such as CNN where the bulk of homepage content consists of abbreviated headlines. These are easy to update and not only give users a feel of currency in the site, but also let them focus in on the information they want much more readily.
4. Keep your site fresh. The trick is to plan an updatable element in the site from the start, and more importantly, make that element something that is done for the business as a whole, not just something Web-specific. Some ideas include a News section; an online newsletter that you can announce to subscribers via e-mail; an ongoing column of technical Q&A; a product of the month feature; and, a customer application section that can be regularly updated.

Summary
Don't think of your Web site as some static, single-purpose object like the sign on your building. Rather, think of your site as a communications hub—as central to your business as your telephone system and both the genesis and repository for marketing communications. That way, not only will your site continue to appeal to those content-hungry search engine spiders, but it also will become a dynamic engine to promote your business.