



The Business of the Internet

Your competitors are only a click away.

White Paper

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Abstract

The Internet is a rapidly changing environment, interactive and dynamic; consequently a successful website needs to be organised, timely, responsive and attractive. The key to success for most companies is to gain the maximum business value for minimal cost. This white paper looks at how the Internet can be utilised to ensure a measurable return on investment and a high impact on the business.

Trends and Growth

An increase in the number of households with broadband internet connections has helped to boost the usage of the internet and with almost two thirds of all adults now regularly logging on to the web, it seems that the internet is and will remain a key marketplace. This virtual arena has countless possibilities; nearly a fifth of people carry out their banking online and two thirds of single people are looking for love using internet dating services.

In a survey of top UK companies, managing the online customer experience was seen as important by 71% of respondents. Although only 25% of respondents think managing the online experience is very important today, 58% believe it will become very important in the future.

Online trading has been showing significant year on year growth and in the UK consumers spent in excess of £8.2bn online in 2005. Growth is set to continue in 2006 and a survey has said shoppers will transfer £18.5bn of spending to internet retailers by 2010.

Creating an Online Presence

"We have to have a website because everyone else has one."

The problem with this view is that an online presence needs goals to succeed. You have to put some consideration not only into the reasons why you need a website, but also the type of website that would work best for your business.

If you already have a website and you aren't getting the results you expected, you may need to take a step back. Consider whether you had goals for the site and whether these goals are now a reality. The internet is

dynamic and websites need to evolve rapidly with the introduction of new technologies, so it may be that the goalposts have been shifted since the website was launched.

A website can be used to accommodate many business requirements and operations. In identifying the goal, whether it is reaching more customers, entering new markets or simply supplying information, the chances of a successful project are increased.

There are three important questions you need to ask yourself:

- What is the purpose of your website?
- What is your target audience?
- What do you want to achieve from the website?

Deciding your target audience and the type of website you need is largely dependant on your business sector and the service you offer. eCommerce, for example, might not be suitable for companies whose services do not easily transfer to the virtual arena, or whose target audience would prefer a more tangible exchange.

As is always the case, company expenditure needs to be justified. The level of entry into the marketplace has to be determined by the return on investment. Building a website is not just a single phase venture. It should be expected that any projected outlay must incorporate ongoing resource time. Time needs to be taken, not only in the initial development of the site, but also in the ongoing maintenance of the site. In many studies, timely, accurate information from a website and its operators has been identified as the most important element of the user experience. All of this must be taken into consideration before you make your investment decision.

Do you want a simple website to promote who you are

and what you do? Or, do you think it would be useful to have a catalogue and the ability to sell your products or services online? Whichever route you take it is imperative that the site is kept up to date. If you think it is likely that the website content will change frequently, it may be that you employ a third party to carry out these changes. However, you might want to take control of the website and have it developed in a way which would allow you to update content via an administration interface. This might be slightly more expensive to develop in the short term, but should save money in the medium term.

Success from Credibility and Design

There are a number of factors which can contribute to the success or failure of your website. Clearly, ensuring that people can find your website is the most important concern and this will be discussed later.

Overall, a credible website will acquire vast benefits for your business. Credibility can be gained through design, content and most importantly, evidence of physical existence.

The principles of a well designed website are that it:

- fulfils all agreed functionality and content requirements;
- complies with the required identity and branding guidelines, including colour schemes, logo, image usage, fonts and layout;
- has the appropriate look and feel to ensure ease of use through clear and consistent layout and navigation.

Usability

In order for a website to be useful and effective, visitors should be able to reach their intended goal with ease and simplicity. This encourages repeat visits and helps

provide a satisfying visitor experience. This usability is promoted by ensuring that:

- “alt” tags are used for all graphics, especially navigation graphics;
- navigation is consistent and simple, making use of minimal clicks where possible;
- page layout is uncluttered, clear and easy to follow;
- all content is contained within the display screen area;
- font sizes are easy to read at default browser setting, and
- images don't take too long to load.

Accessibility

The Disability Discrimination Act makes it unlawful for a service producer to discriminate against a disabled person by refusing to provide any service which it provides to members of the public. This applies to websites as well as other services your organisation may provide.

There are many sources of information and guidelines covering web content accessibility that can help you ensure that your website is compliant with this Act. One of the best can be found on the World Wide Web Consortium's website at www.w3.org which provides a comprehensive set of guidelines and a checklist which can be used to measure compliance.

When designing your site it is important to remember that users may be operating in contexts very different from your own, for example;

- They may not be able to see, hear, move, or may not be able to process some types of information easily or at all.
- They may have difficulty reading or comprehending text.

- They may not have, or be able to use, a keyboard or mouse.
- They may have a text-only screen, a small screen or a slow internet connection.
- They may not speak or understand fluently the language in which the document is written.
- They may be in a situation where their eyes, ears or hands are busy or interfered with, e.g. working in a loud environment.
- They may have an early version of a browser, a different browser entirely, a voice browser or a different operating system.

These factors might affect those users with a disability but equally might affect able bodied users, e.g. screen size, environmental noise, language differences. By ensuring that your website complies with the Disability Discrimination Act you actually make the site more usable for all.

In general a number of guidelines may be suggested to assist in compliance:

- Provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.
- Don't rely on colour alone.
- Use mark-up and style sheets properly.
- Clarify natural language usage.
- Create tables that transform gracefully.
- Ensure that pages featuring new technologies transform gracefully.
- Ensure user control of time-sensitive content changes.
- Ensure direct accessibility of embedded user interfaces.
- Design for device independence.
- Use interim accessibility solutions so that assistive technologies and older browsers will

operate correctly.

- Provide context and orientation information.
- Provide clear navigation mechanisms.
- Ensure that documents are clear and simple.

Optimisation

Simply having your site online is not enough – you must undertake extra marketing activities to ensure that visitors know about your site and how to get there. One method is to include your URL (the website address) on other forms of marketing that you undertake, e.g. adverts, company brochures, letterheads etc. This will tell your regular contacts about your site. However, there will be people out there with whom you do not have regular contact and who might be searching the Internet for exactly the service you provide. Aside from entering your company into online directories you can optimise your site so that it appears higher in the search engine rankings in response to key word searches.

Search engines scan sites for key words and phrases therefore using these in the content of your site can dramatically improve its performance in search engine results. However, this will only be successful if you use the words and phrases that your potential customers will search for, something that may require careful research and consideration. All of the major crawler-based engines (e.g. Google, Yahoo, MSN) measure popularity to determine relevance.

The most effective method of online marketing is through Pay per Click. Most search engines sell the first few search results on a cost per click basis. Pay per Click works because it puts you in front of people looking for your products or services. The main limitation to this is cost, as with most forms of advertising.

Finally, remember it can take up to three months for your site to be registered with the major search engines (due to the large number of submissions they receive) so do not expect instant results.

The Value of the Platform

There are numerous software packages available on the market, which allow you to build eCommerce and content managed websites. As you may expect there is a wide variety of prices and functionality and as always it is usually important to research carefully the products available to ensure you receive the best one for your requirements and budget.

When choosing a platform, there are a number of factors that may be taken into consideration. Firstly, is it easy to update? As your content changes over time it is usually important that you can easily update, add and remove products without having to have any programming capabilities.

You may want to consider an eCommerce platform that enables you to perform 'cross-selling', i.e. identifying customers who may be interested in other products based on their existing purchases and offering these to them. Some platforms also enable you to offer tailored discounts and special offers for individual customers.

Some platforms contain other features such as online and email marketing functionality, links to auction sites such as eBay and payment gateways.

Whichever platform you choose one of the most critical things to consider is the longevity of the product. By this we mean the ability of the platform to grow and develop with your organisation and to adapt to your changing needs.

Integration

One aim of any IT implementation should be to improve the overall efficiency of your business and to assist in cutting costs where possible. Many platforms are able to integrate with existing business applications such as financial systems, sales and marketing systems and stock control. This can provide enormous benefits, not only by reducing the amount of time and effort spent collating and re-entering information but by reducing the level of data entry errors.

Payment

One concern commonly expressed by eCommerce customers is the level of security surrounding online payments. Many people are cautious of sending their credit card details via electronic communications for fear that the information will be intercepted and then used for illicit purposes. In reality online payments are just as secure as other methods. People are willing enough to give their details over the phone or via the post, both of which carry at least as much risk as electronic payments.

There is nothing more important than providing assurance to your potential customers that your site is secure. Many users consider the gold padlock at the base of the browser as the trademark of secure online transactions. Research into this has shown that there is a definite increase in orders when it is displayed. The simplest and most cost-effective way to offer customers that security is by purchasing an SSL Certificate. An SSL certificate is installed on a secure server. It is used to encrypt the credit card details, and other sensitive data. Generally, the certificate is made visible as a padlock icon in the bottom right hand side of the browser, and gives a website the ability to communicate securely with its customers.

There are, of course, methods of collecting payment for online purchases other than transmitting credit card details over the Internet. Customers can place their orders and leave contact details by which a representative of the organisation can call them and take payment details via the telephone. Alternatively customers may set up an account and be billed on a regular or ad-hoc basis, whichever is most appropriate. For smaller organisations payment can even be taken on delivery but once the value or volume of sales starts to become significant this method can become impractical.

Whichever method is chosen it is important to remember not to take payment until the purchased items have been dispatched. Details of posting and packaging, as well as any other charges or handling fees, should be made very clear on the site.

Success Stories

British Airways PLC - www.ba.com/giftshop



British Airways Plc (BA) wanted a site that would enable their passengers to view items that could be purchased 'in-flight' prior to departure. Whilst they would be unable to purchase their duty-free items online, BA wanted to give users the functionality to be able to create a 'shopping list' of the items required, which they could print out and take on-board. With the decommissioning of the Concorde aircraft from the fleet, BA also wanted to sell Concorde memorabilia online. Items ranged from prints of the aircraft to the seats used on the planes themselves. The BA branded site is an extension to their 'High Life!' shop and allows for full payment online.

This site has proven to be one of BA's most successful ventures and gained significant press coverage due to the high level of sales it has achieved.

Resort Excursions – www.resortexcursions.com



Resort Excursions is a travel company who provide their customers with the opportunity to buy their holiday excursions online before they travel. Bookings are made by selecting the destination and resort from those that are available and specifying the dates of travel and the number of people. Available excursions are then displayed and customers can book the ones they want. Booking information is automatically emailed to the excursion operator and a confirmation email is sent to the customer. Payments are made online via a payment gateway. The company has full control over the back office system, allowing them to update the excursions and add new content. Building upon the success of the site the company decided to launch a sister site that allows users to pre-book independent airport transfers. Taxi Transfers is a website dedicated to providing holidaymakers with transfers in all holiday resorts across the world, at discounted rates, with a fully bookable on-line product, the quickest and simplest booking facility available.

Resortexcursions.com picked up Best UK specialist travel website 2006 at the tenth anniversary Agency Achievement Awards held at the Royal Lancaster Hotel, London 22 March 2006. The awards recognise and reward excellence, in the travel field. They also have been awarded with the 'Best Website' in the Travel Trade Gazette North 2006 Agent Awards.

Summary

Most businesses still do not fully appreciate the importance of designing a user friendly and accessible site that is still attractive. Furthermore, many companies fail with their attempts to create an online presence due to a lack of supporting marketing for the site. Without this marketing potential customers are unaware of the services on offer or even of the existence of the site and therefore will not visit it. In conclusion, a website should be treated in the same way as setting up any business operation, with the same attention paid to business plans and research as well as the development and maintenance of profitable customer relationships.

About Perfect Image

Perfect Image is a Newcastle upon Tyne based IT Solutions company. Established in 1991 we have extensive experience in adapting leading technologies to meet the unique needs of individual businesses. We are a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner and a Microsoft Small Business Specialist and we pride ourselves on continuing to operate at the leading edge of new technology and developments. At Perfect Image our strength lies in our commitment to understanding the needs of your business. Every organisation is unique and we believe that an IT solution can only be successful if it is tailored to meet those individual needs. For this reason, before a single line of code is written, we will aim to fully understand your business, your current situation and your future goals. Only then can we advise on the best solution for you. If no appropriate third-party application can be found then we can customise an existing solution or develop a completely new one from scratch. The key to our success is making the technology work for you. We have carried out projects for organisations such as:

Bellway Homes

British Airways

Resort Excursions

ONE North East

Northern Film & Media

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