

# TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

November 2007

## How to make a winning Web site



In my recent column on public speaking, I wrote on the importance of making a good first impression. Just as a presentation

audience will judge you in the first two or three seconds, Web site users are equally as merciless in determining whether or not you are worth their time. While a physical audience isn't likely to just get up and leave if they're not impressed, your online audience can quickly jump ship. What does this mean for business? Creating a strong Web site that successfully communicates the value of your business is one of your organization's most important assets.

The internet in particular is an increasingly vital medium for businesses. A 2007 study of online user behavior shows people spend most of their time online finding and reading information—not emailing, not shopping, but researching. But if users don't like what they see in those first few seconds, they move on to more navigable waters to find the information they're looking for. According to Jakob Nielsen, author and researcher on Web site usability, users spend about 30 seconds on the homepage and less than two minutes on an entire site before they go to a different site.

Nearly everyone agrees Web sites are essential for just about every type of business, but if you're not doing things right you can actually damage your company's image. In a society that increasingly depends on accessing information online before making decisions, businesses can't afford to have a Web site that doesn't meet their consumers' needs.

Here are a few important principles to help your business make sure it is maximizing its online presence:

**Web sites are a long-term commitment.** It's easy to get excited about putting a new site together, but once they are up and running, professional Web sites are too often neglected. Keeping your site's content regularly updated—by posting company updates and news releases, offering consumers helpful industry tips and information, or incorporating elements such as a blog or RSS feed—will not only ensure your audience has the most accurate and up-to-date information; it will also improve your search rankings.

Your Web site is also a means for direct communication, so your contact information must be current and clearly displayed on every page. Provide an email address that someone in your office will check and respond to every day in order to take advantage of every opportunity to engage with potential consumers.

**Content, content, and more content.** So you're ready to make sure your Web site is properly tended to—but what actually goes on it? In the frenzy to stay ahead of the curve, businesses often panic about online “tricks” like embedding metatags in the hope they will keep their site on the top of search lists. The secret is, there is no trick. When it comes to what information needs to be on your site, the answer is simple: Include content that is relevant and genuinely informative to your industry and audience. If you're doing this, there shouldn't be a need to run around in circles trying to top yourself. You're already on target.

**Stay on top of search.** First and foremost, don't forget the obvious: Submit your url and site map to Google and the other major search engines (Yahoo! and MSN round out the top three) to ensure you get on their radar.

Place regular updates on your home page, and make sure your home page content is geared more toward public relations and information accessibility than advertising. The home page is a starting point where potential consumers will begin the process of informing themselves about your product or service. Users and search engines will recognize your site as current and relevant.

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**Skip the beauty contest.** Relevant content is also more important than visuals. While we all want our sites to be visually impressive, it's important to find balance. Search engines like Google have few ways to rate pictures or tell potential users how cool your flash intro is, so don't overdo the graphics.

This doesn't mean you can't incorporate great graphic design into your site; having an elegant visual theme can be what distinguishes your site from the rest. Still, if the content isn't there, visuals aren't going to help. Make sure you avoid flash intro pages or too many graphics (especially on the home page). Users will only give you a few seconds before they decide whether to stay on your page, and it is easier for them to just move on if they have to cut through clutter.

Web site graphic design can help make your site more appealing, and is at its best when it reinforces your company's brand and allows users to easily locate the information on your site. Use a simple color scheme and incorporate consistent design elements on every page so users experience the same look and feel throughout the entire site. If you are interested in incorporating a strong graphic element into your site, invest in a high-end graphic designer who can do it right. If your graphics look sloppy or overwhelming, users may assume your company is unprofessional and won't think twice about clicking the back button.

**Make navigation simple.** Businesses have a thousand priorities and messages they want to convey, but with just seconds to convince a user

to stay on your site, only one question matters: Do you have the information I need? Almost as important as having relevant, up-to-date content is making sure people can easily find it.

Design your Web site with your consumer in mind, and make the information they are most likely to look for the most easily accessible. Structure the navigation so users don't have to dig too deep to find anything; and provide a search tool that will allow them to type in keywords in case they don't want to waste time clicking through page after page if they aren't sure where to go. Word your menus clearly without being cute or clever; users don't have time to solve riddles. If you have a larger Web site and the menus and search tool aren't enough, consider including a site index that lists every subject and page by title in alphabetical order.

**Integrate!** Of course, online communications don't exist in isolation; it's important to make sure your messaging in other mediums, such as your collateral and advertising, compliment each other. From the visual branding to the actual messages you use to convey the services and value your business has to offer, be consistent across platforms.

Keep in mind that, more and more, Web sites are the first stop to learn about a business. Make sure your web address is incorporated into every form of communication your business offers, from e-mail signatures to brochures, business cards and billboards. Everything points back to your Web site (another reason it's crucial the site itself is polished and professional).

**Continue to evolve.** Your site is up and running. You have a Web site management system in place to update content and respond to consumers. You've made your information as easy to locate and understand as possible. How do you know if it's working?

Monitor user behavior and track your goals by setting up an analytics tool for your site (Google offers one for free called Google Analytics). This will allow you to track things like where your traffic is coming from, how long they stay on your site, and what they do while they're there. It also lets you set and monitor conversion goals (number of online sales or downloads, for example). If these numbers aren't where you want them to be, ask yourself if your expectations are realistic and if there is anything you can enhance in your site that will allow it to better serve your customers.

John Perry Barlow, founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, once described the internet as a place with "more opportunities than there will ever be entrepreneurs enough to exploit." Today's businesses are struggling to learn how to engage consumers in this expanding technological environment. With more than 108 million Web sites just a click away, the competition for attention is greater than ever. Being able to offer users exactly what they're looking for will continue to be the measure of success. 



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