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Exploring the Art of Web Marketing by Molly Butz

If your company doesn't have a web site, this article will clue you in on why you should consider it a valuable—and relatively inexpensive—marketing tool.

The World Wide Web is no big secret. You can hardly pass a billboard or flip past a TV commercial without being inundated by www-dot-something-dot-com or logon to such-in-such for more information. But what may come as a surprise for many, is how useful the web can be as a low-cost marketing tool. Yes, low-cost. Bob Ward, General Manager at Southern Components, Inc. in Shreveport, LA, agrees. "The nice thing about our web site is that it can be updated periodically and inexpensively. Once you spend a lot of money on printed literature you're pretty much stuck with it, which is especially unfortunate if the information changes," Ward said.

Certainly you could spend tens of thousands of dollars hiring the latest "who's who in web programming developing the latest B-to-B interactive site," or spend hours pouring over textbooks and literature trying to "teach yourself dazzling web design in 21 days (or less)." But the realities that surround using the web as a marketing tool might startle you:

1. Simpler is smarter.
2. It costs less to get up and running than you may think.

REALITY #1

There are plenty of elaborate web sites to visit on the World Wide Web, each one driven by differing needs and objectives ranging from simple pictures on a page to complex database driven sites that make the entire business function as efficiently and effectively as possible. A review will show that there are also plenty of easy-to-access, easy-to-navigate, basic web sites that offer just the type of information that you, as a component manufacturer, can benefit from by offering to your current and potential customers. Really, it's simple if you think about web marketing in the same way you think about "traditional" marketing, such as TV, radio, print and even trade shows. You'll spend a small percentage of the cost of all of the other methods and reach the same number of potential customers.

"The ability to update or change information in 'real-time' makes the use of a web site for marketing purposes a huge asset for our company," said Mike Noonan, Vice President of Marketing at Cascade Mfg Co in Cascade, IA.

So, what would any good marketing campaign entail? A basic summary of your product or a special offer is a good place to start, followed by your contact information, so the interested

party can get in touch. These same concepts transfer to a simple web page as well, and they are a great way to get your feet wet.

The key to building your new simple and smart web site is to begin by asking questions. What is the point of the site? The answer will help you begin to focus your purpose, whether it's showing your audience the variety of trusses you can make, or reminding them about your outstanding customer service.

"I look at our web site as an informational place. Having a web site shows people that we are an established company. It seems to give us credibility and it's an easy way to illustrate what our company is all about," Ward added.

Which brings us to our next questions: Who is your audience and, more importantly, how will they view your web site? Each web page needs to load before it appears on the screen. Not everyone will be accessing your pages on a computer with a cable modem or digital subscriber line (DSL) (i.e., "a really fast Internet connection").

Once you've answered some of the basic "content" questions, you can begin the design of your web site. Here are five easy ways to get the most out of the design of your company's new web site.

1. Make sure the most important information is located at the top of the screen. We've all been to web sites that seem to scroll for an eternity. In this day and age of sound bites and drive-by advertising, you have a limited amount of time to catch your viewer's attention. Again, this applies to the World Wide Web as well. For example, if the goal of your web site is to get people to call you and place an order, then be sure your phone number is near the top and prominently displayed.

2. People will view your web site much as they would anything written, which means they will look to the upper left-hand corner of the page. Work toward ensuring your pages flow smoothly from left to right as well as from top to bottom.

3. Color is a powerful tool used in marketing. It applies to web sites the same way it applies to printed materials. Too many colors can be distracting, but rest assured, a few solid, well-chosen colors will go a long way. Caution: You've probably heard this before, but humans subconsciously attach meanings and feelings to colors. Here's a quick refresher so you know what your web site is really saying:

- Red = danger, energy, war
- Pink = femininity
- Orange = enthusiasm, happiness, creativity
- Yellow = joy, intellect, cheerfulness
- Gold = wealth, wisdom
- Green = nature, fertility, harmony
- Light Blue = softness, weakness
- Blue = confidence, trust, stability

- Purple = royalty, luxury, ambition White = purity, goodness
- Black = power, elegance, death

4. Readability. This may seem obvious, but you'll be surprised how differently text and graphics on paper look versus viewing them on a computer monitor. While monitors are getting flatter, bigger and include more high-tech features for less high-tech prices, you can almost guarantee that at least one of your customers is sitting in front of a monitor that was built in the Stone Ages. Feel free to experiment with color and size, but rest assured you can really never go wrong with black type on a white background.

5. Keep it simple. All of your ideas should strive to keep your web site as clean, crisp and easy to navigate. Otherwise, people won't stay and browse.

REALITY # 2

Come on, this stuff is fun! Really it is. It's going to help you promote and grow your business, and it can be a relatively inexpensive endeavor. However, if you're into component design, not web design, your best bet is to find someone else to do it for you.

- If a total lack of budget is the only thing standing in the way of your company having a web site, you could start by asking your employees if they have a son or daughter who has an interest in web site programming and might consider a little "pro-bono" web work to hone their skills. You could offer to pay a little something, or even reward their time with gift certificates. Helping you gives them an instant line on their résumé and a concrete example of their work. Another option is to work with your local high school, community college or technical school, providing them with real life experience through an internship.
- If neither of these options meet your timing, quality or peace-of-mind needs, then your best investment is to hire a professional. Generally this will cost a bit more, but the experience you are buying should be worth the investment. Professional organizations have gone through all of the pitfalls of web site development and can create a site that meets your needs for simplicity, usability and style. What's more, they can help you plan for the future and create a site that will easily grow with your company over the long term.

DIY DOT COM

If finding someone else to do this project doesn't appeal to you, or for some reason you just have a hankerin' to roll your sleeves up and dive in, by all means, do it! Cascade's web site has been online for seven years, Noonan told SBC staff.

"Our web site is maintained internally. Software that's available makes this a relatively easy process," said Noonan.

Web sites, web pages and web designing sounds complex from the outside, but a little knowledge can get you a long way. Here are some suggestions for the closet Do-It-Yourselfer:

- **Online Tutorials:** There is a wealth of information available to you on the World Wide Web; it

comes as no surprise that included in the millions of web sites are some great web pages devoted to—you guessed it—creating web pages. Your best bet is to logon to a search engine such as www.google.com, and type keywords into the search field, for instance: tutorial, easy, basic, web page, web site and html. It's likely you'll find something in the first page of results that can help, but don't worry, there are just shy of 500,000 other page hits if you don't.

- **Web Design Software:** As you can surely guess, plenty of people have produced software that can be used to design web pages. They range in difficulty from easy to I-don't-even-know-where-to-start, but it's reasonable to think that you can find something that fits in to your level of knowledge. WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) programs are probably the simplest option for beginners. You don't actually always get what you see, but generally it's close, which makes drag-and-drop web design a snap.
- **Books:** To some, the idea of a spine-clad, paper-dependent document may seem archaic, especially when you're talking about the Internet, but there are some great books available that make web design a bit easier to understand. The list below is brief, and should not be mistaken as the "Canon of Web Design Documentation," but for a beginner they'll lend a gentle hand:
 - Easy Web Page Creation, by Mary Millhollon
 - Creating Your First Web Page (Cliffs Notes), by Alan Simpson
 - Creating Web Pages for Dummies, Sixth Edition, by Tim Worsley
 - Create Your First Web Page in a Weekend (Includes CD), by Steve Callihan
- **Consultants:** If you have someone on your staff who is interested in maintaining a web site, but doesn't have the time to read a bunch of books and sift through the plethora of tools and materials available, your most efficient option may be to hire a professional to get you started. A web site consultant can analyze your company's needs, suggest the best tools and software for the job, develop the structure of the site and provide training for your staff so that updates and maintenance can be handled internally. It makes a lot of sense to have an employee handle the day-to-day changes after a web site consultant has helped you design a professional site that meets your company's objectives.

LET THE GAMES BEGIN!

So, imagine for a moment that you've already conquered all of the above and your web site is up and running. (Nice home page, snazzy.) Tell the world! Include your web address on your stationery, business cards and just about any other literature you can think of. Make coasters, can cozies and imprint your new web site on ink pens. It's easy to have someone in-house draw up a press release and send it to your local media contacts, and even easier to add a "signature" with your new web address to your outgoing emails.

In a few short steps you'll have more web traffic than you know what to do with...enjoy it! Then all that remains is keeping your web site current. "The key to having a successful web site is to update it and keep it fresh—especially the Home Page," Noonan added. "Your site can have all kinds of features, depending on how sophisticated you want to get. The main point is this: have a presence on the web as it (the Internet) is a growing way of accessing information," concluded Noonan.

You can use your web site for a variety of information, from a weekly, monthly or quarterly

newsletter, to your latest special or upcoming booth at a home show. Even small updates on semi-regular intervals will keep people coming back to see what's new. And let's face the facts, the web is the first place that everyone goes, right? OK, so maybe not everyone, but more and more, the World Wide Web is a one-stop marketplace for just about anything.

"A lot of people use the web, we even had a company out of New York contact us for information because of a particular product that we manufacture," Ward told SBC staff. "They'd gotten the initial information from our web site. It just goes to show you that people who never would have known about us could get in contact with us because of our web site." Just remember: Keep it simple and the web is your oyster.

[SBC HOME PAGE](#)

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