

On line web site marketing - By David Tebbs MA CEng FBCS FRSA MIEE

It is interesting, as a non-executive director on the board of TMT (Technology Media and Telecommunications) companies, to occasionally ask questions on what is being done to market the company's web site. Clearly there are TMT businesses that are highly web based but this paper is more addressed towards a company's use of its web site as part of its overall promotion. When I ask board colleagues "what is done to maximise the number of relevant people who will visit the web site?", answers are often related to the elegance of the site design and content and to the publication of the web address in printed materials such as letter heads, brochures and advertising.

While each of these topics are important in exploiting a successful web site there are many other techniques concerned with promotion in the web and too often they have had a low priority. Even in medium and small companies these issues have no visibility at board or head of sales and marketing level. This paper focuses on the use of web-based promotion of professional company web sites and will cover both retail and focused B2B businesses.

While not a common board topic it is worth checking that this is a field well addressed by your company. This paper aims to help senior executives and directors (exec and non-exec) better appreciate the topic and help them in their questioning on such company activity.

Objectives

The objective of the promotion is to increase awareness of the company in:

- Buyers
- Potential buyers
- Decision makers
- Decision influencers

AND

- Whether these individuals are visible to the company's sales and marketing team or not.

The aim is that decision makers and direct influencers should be positively aware of the company and never have a friend, colleague or business acquaintance saying

"who? – never heard of them"

While this paper is written in terms of communicating with prospects and customers the same thinking can be applied to other stakeholders and shareholders. The objectives are:

- to make it easy for them to find the company's web site
- whether they know of its existence and need help finding the site
- are using search engines/ directories
- using topic directories

OR

- visiting the site of an associate with an interest potentially served by the company.

On-Line Marketing the Web Site

The broad content and elegance of the web site is important, but that is well recognised and not covered in this paper. Equally the company can promote its web site through leveraging other communications (e.g. making sure the address (URL [Universal Resource Locator], for example, <http://www.company.com>) is well publicised and included in all relevant documents, emails, advertisements and publications). While important that promotion is not online and not the topic of this paper.

On line web promotion can include both pro-active approaches - such as banner ads on other sites and proactive emailing - and more passive processes involved in gaining access from others researching a relevant topic. This paper is mainly about the latter and focuses on the valuable techniques than can be economically applied by most businesses rather than on high spend solutions. While senior managers and directors may not be expected to be familiar with all the web jargon, some is used below to help you in raising and testing awareness in those who should know.

If we are to attract relevant potential viewers when they are on the web we need to address the process at two levels.

First; at a business level

This is mainly about understanding ones target audience and how they may be searching (explicitly or implicitly) when we seek to have them steered to our site. Who are the targets in the range of decision makers, recommenders and influencers? What are the topics, keywords and key phrases that a searcher may use that is relevant to lead to the company. Are these key words and phrases too general (e.g. “software”) leading to wasted hits and poor (competitive search engine rankings) or too focused (e.g. “London foreign equity investment IT consultancy”) and unlikely to catch attention? Where is the balance?

Are there key words/phrases that might help those who remember a related fact but forget the company name, e.g. a location, a product set.

How do each of these key words/phrases best relate to the web site or part there of? For example, searching for “City Shirts” it is better to be directed to say Harrods’ Shirts page than to Harrods’ company home page.

What are the company’s priorities for these key word/phrases? Budget levels? and objectives?

Secondly; at a technical level.

This broadly falls into techniques and actions to gain a high search engine rating in most relevant search engines and registration in relevant trade and topic directories. (The latter is often supportive of search engine rating and thus has a use even if no prospect accesses the site that way)

Techniques

The content of the site is important for both the target audience and for search engine rating. Setting the best approach for search engines is somewhat search engine related. However important common areas are:

Data visible to most viewers: Use of key words and phrases in the text relevant to the search targets for that page, use of alt key wording (words that appear when the cursor is moved over a picture) to enhance the above, use of extra text – usually not viewed as scrolled well down to support the above.

Partially hidden data - Meta tags: (Meta tags are headers in the underlying HTML for web pages. They can be seen by viewers using the browser's View tab.) Set up meta title, descriptions and keywords with search engines in mind. There are many accessible guides on good practice on how to populate these partially hidden tags

Hidden data by use of doorway pages to enhance search engine appeal. This is more advanced and means most users cannot see what you are doing. For example top-pile.com provide a service focussed on selected keywords held in a doorway page that enhances search engine appeal through heavy cross referencing in the doorways across its client base. This can be particularly helpful where the viewer centric approach of the web site design creates a fine site but one that is not search engine friendly.

Leverage on Associates, subsidiaries, sister and parent companies

Encourage all relevant sites to cross reference to your site. This increases ratings in many engines. The doorway above works on this principal. This can be reinforced across multi sites that the company might own. Proactively register with all geography and relevant topic directories.

Search engine registration

Register the site and selected pages (as alternative entry points) with as many search engines as possible. Increasingly engines charge but wide cover can still be achieved for a modest sum. Even with small sites this is best done through an automated service, perhaps enhanced manually. Recommended frequency seems to vary from weeks to bi monthly. There are many offering this service and those seen (but not all tested) include:

<http://www.ineedhits.com/>

<http://www.top-pile.com/> who promote www.itnea.net

<http://www.parkerdart.net/features.htm>

<http://www.netsubmissions.co.uk>

<http://ranker.proboost.com/?e=100> analysis tools

<http://www.bcentral.com/products/si/pricing.asp>

Achieving Results

Any on line web marketing programme is measured in two - three parts:

Have we progressed in relevant search engine and directory registration?

Are the site hit rates progressing?

Are relevant site hit rate progressing?

The first two are straightforward to answer but the third needs addressing with time.

I have seen substantial measurable improvements in the first two and extrapolated improvements in the third following the application of active on line marketing of a site alongside its printed promotion.

Asking the Questions

For the senior manager or director director, the first step is to identify who in the board or marketing area takes a real responsibility for this field of promotion. Beyond that depends on the organisation. Next it is important to determine whether these forms of promotion are being used and whether there is anyone within the company with relevant responsibility with a good understanding of the options and their use in the business. If third parties are used to access their particular skills or tools is there someone internally who understands the topic sufficiently to manage them? What is their potential in the business?

I raise these questions because the answer is often not as positive as one would like.

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