

Planning a Strategic Web Site

Over the past two years we have experienced a major shift in the business community's attitude towards the Internet and web sites. Two years ago most businesses asked, "What is the Internet and how could it possibly impact my business or industry?" Today the query is predominately, "When can you develop us a web site and how quickly will it benefit my business or industry?" With the media promoting Internet startup sites such as Yahoo, e-Bay and Amazon.com with their enormous market caps and sky rocketing stock prices, and the record breaking pace of online transactions each Christmas season, this shift in attitudes is understandable. CEO's seek to bottle an Internet presence that will help them capture market share and dominate their industry. Some of these captains of industry will spend a fortune on buying favorable search engine placement on an overcrowded ship with a cast of millions. The returns on such investments often do not pan out. Many businesses will look at competitive sites for ideas. Often these sites are non-performing themselves or are positioned to meet unique business objectives related to that specific company. There must be a clearer method of unleashing a web site that performs well and gets noticed.

How does a business succeed with an Internet initiative? There is no guarantee of success. However, there is a higher probability of success if the web site is developed from a strategic planning point of view. Is it possible that the success stories are a result of a good plan and the nature of the Internet magnifies the results?

Looking at the following strategic planning processes:

- a) SWOT analysis;
- b) review of existing and potential customers and their unique needs;
- c) identification of corporate programs (goods and services) and organizational functions; and
- d) goal and objective setting,

We can demonstrate that strategic planning is the key to online business success rather than believing the Internet is a mysterious deliverer of corporate wealth.

Reviewing a company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT Analysis) is a great starting point for developing a corporate web site. Your business' strengths should be prominently promoted on the web site. The site can be used to overcome competitive weaknesses, such as limited resources to establish a twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week customer service centre. The web site also serves as a reliable center point for taking advantage of opportunities. It can be used for test marketing a new product or it can act as a data capture point for surveying the market acceptance of an existing product in a new geographical territory. As for threats, a web site with a Listserve (database of existing and potential customers) can quickly notify its customer base of its superior attributes and fend off the threatening launch of a competitor's well-publicized product. Thus an in-depth review of your business' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is an important first step to developing a productive web site.

Recognizing who your customers are and understanding their varying needs is a key process of strategic planning. Who are your large, medium and small volume customers? Which customers are the most profitable to your business? What are the needs of each segment of your customer base? Once these questions are determined one can formulate a comprehensive service plan that integrates the web site with your staff. In most instances, a web site that services an existing client base will draw more qualified leads by word of mouth than any search engine. Customer service features on a web site is one of the most overlooked applications, despite the fact that they encourage repeat visits to the site and therefore create what is known in the industry as "stickiness", which is critical success factor of highly rated web sites.

Listing your programs (goods and services) and your various organization's functions (marketing, sales, customer service, administration, operations, human resources, etc.) helps you look beyond building a web site that only reflects the marketing side of your business and ensures you have considered all your products and services. Successful sites tend to provide more value to the visitor than presenting what one can view in a product or service brochure, avoiding the "brochureware" label. There are opportunities to develop applications that cross the various functional sections of your organization and include different product and service offerings. For example, a web based customer service application that provides a status on shipped orders can also promote and market the product launch of a new product line to existing customers.

Establishing corporate goals and objectives are a hallmark of enterprises that run at peak performance. You effectively use the energy of your troops if they know where they are going, how far they are to go, and how long it takes them to get there. In other words, setting corporate objectives that are measurable and time bound (e.g. \$1,000,000 in sales by the end of the fourth quarter of this fiscal year). It is critical that applications for the web site contribute directly or indirectly towards a corporate objective. If one identifies an application or web site section that is not in alignment with any corporate objective, then it does not belong on the web site.

We can now answer the questions "When can you develop us a web site and how quickly will it benefit my business or industry?" A web site is mapped out and developed after a careful review of a completed comprehensive strategic plan. The more solid the strategic plan and the more one considers the web site as a resource within the strategic plan, the higher the probability of successful launch of the site as an effective part of the business. There may be exceptions to the rule of a solid plan, but these exceptions enjoy the luck of timing in the short term and will most likely not be around for the long term. Unleashing a successful presence on the Internet is based on sound business principles that have historically leaned toward strategic planning and hard work, and less on luck.