



Expert Advice On Your Online Marketing Effort

OPEN's VP of Marketing for Online Acquisitions, Jason Ewell, explains how to keep your sights on what matters for your online-marketing effort.

The world of online marketing doesn't stand still, and small businesses – given their flexibility and ingenuity – are ideal web constituents. However, the web and the opportunities to leverage it for your business are constantly evolving. Jason Ewell finds that with a little knowledge about on-line marketing and everyday business sense, you can make the web work for you. Here, he tackles some of the most common questions.

Is There a Golden Rule for Online Marketing?

From a marketing perspective, cost efficiency and scale are two of the Web's greatest advantages. But there is no hard and fast rule that will guarantee results. The key to any online-marketing strategy is, naturally, your web site. Your site is up 24/7 and it represents you to your customers and prospects when it is convenient for them – when they look up your company the week after a trade show, find your business card in their wallet or hear about you through a referral. Therefore, your site should be a simple, high-quality manifestation of your company, always working on your behalf, providing clients with information and, ideally, making sales.

Your web site conveys the essence of your company. For instance, if you have a product-based business selling merchandise online, your site is every bit as important as your physical store, and requires the same level of care and attention. If you have a service company, then your site becomes an extension of your sales force, and should communicate the same standards of excellence that you'd deliver in person. Ultimately, an effective web site improves returns on all other marketing activities and should be well integrated with these efforts.

Do I Need to Invest In Stand-Out Web Design?

A unique and innovative web design can create a buzz, but that shouldn't necessarily be the goal. If you have access to the design talent, you might want to try creating a strong visual impact, but not at the expense of getting the basics right.

A good checklist is:

- Is the site simple to understand and easy to navigate?
- Does it load quickly?
- Is it relevant and focused on customer information?

- Does it provide customers with an easy way to contact you?

It's important to be practical about your site's layout so that it attracts and retains your customers' attention, whether it's about product display or the delivery of your sales pitch. In either case, your web site should be customer-centric, staying focused on helping your visitors with their decision-making process.

When My Site's in Shape, How Do I Attract Visitors?

Your online marketing is a natural extension of what you do offline. Many customers become aware of your site through your current marketing activities, so give your web address (or "URL") a prominent position on all of your business cards, mailings and advertisements. Moreover, if you have a network of like-minded businesses partners who routinely provide referrals, it could be a good idea to link to each other's web sites. Creating an "email-a-friend" link from the product information pages of your site also encourages visitors to pass on your information and drives more traffic to your homepage.

Another way to get people to notice your website is through affiliate marketing, in which links to your site appear on sites that cover subjects related to your business. As your affiliates promote your site, you pay them an agreed-upon sum for each sale they generate. It's possible to arrange affiliate relationships directly via your network of customers or vendors, but if your goal is scale, there are many firms from which to choose. Sites such as Linkshare (www.linkshare.com) and Commission Junction (www.commissionjunction.com) can oversee the process – from identifying suitable affiliates to keeping track of the billing.

How Can Marketing on Search Engines Help Build My Online Presence?

Search engines are the primary way people find information online, so it's important to have a strategy that combines both natural and paid search to help your web site be more prominent via this channel. Natural search results are those which the system returns automatically based on how popular sites are, while paid search generally refers to the ads that appear adjacent to the natural results.

Since complex algorithms are used by search engines to generate natural-search results, great technical expertise is required in this arena. One approach to begin with is to identify and ask the owners of related web sites to link to yours, as the more sites that link to you, the higher you site will be ranked by search engines.

Data from the research firm Eyetools indicates that 70 percent of clicks occur on natural-search placements; this avenue can be a good option for many businesses as results are seen more quickly and require less expertise to execute.

How Can I Measure Success in Online Marketing?

In order to quantify the effectiveness of your web effort, you should determine what a particular action is worth to you – what is the value of an email address vs. a phone number vs. an appointment vs. a sale? Knowing this will help you determine the return on your investment for any, or all, of the strategies mentioned above.

The web's greatest marketing advantage is its ability to test different methods quickly and cheaply. You can set up different landing pages on your web site that will greet visitors from multiple sources, so you can measure which communications are more successful and traffic-generating. Each page serves as a "front door" to your site, so the information presented needs to be relevant to the ad or site from which the user is coming.

Ultimately, much of the expertise you use to run your business can be applied online. With a basic understanding of how the web operates and how customers use the web, you can make the Internet a powerful marketing tool for your business.