

DIGITAL MARKETING: WEBSITES

Building and maintaining a B2B website which really adds value to your brand need not be difficult, says Alex Blyth

MAKING THE WORLD WIDE WEB WORK



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BEN JEFFERY
Director, Bluelinimedia

B2B websites have improved greatly from their early incarnations which were often little more than on-screen brochures, full of tedious animation, turgid copy, and broken links. Moving on from this type of site, and getting B2B website design right, is not easy, but those who do it well testify that the improved results make it worthwhile.

Richard Bush, MD of agency Base One, comments, "In the B2B industry, the website is now the most critical part

of the sales and marketing mix. The website is the place where dialogue begins; where enquiries are qualified, and where prospects are nurtured before they are passed on to the sales department."

Obey these seven rules and you will be well on the way to reaping those results yourself.

1. The customer is always right

The number one rule is to remember to design the website

for the people who will visit it, rather than for yourself. Think about who will visit your site and what they will want to do there. Getting into this mindset will help when you come to make decisions about content, structure and visual effects.

Ben Jeffery, director at Bluelinmedia, a website design company, says: "Present your company and services according to your visitor's perspective, not yours. Do not make the mistake on your homepage of forcing them to sit through a thirty-second animation about your company. If they want to see that, they'll look for it. Also, rather than boring them with detailed descriptions of your technical processes, explain how much money you can make them."

Melanie Smith, marketing manager at B2B data solutions provider Market Location, adds this advice: "A fatal error in website design is not providing a phone number, and instead presenting visitors with a very long form to fill in. This irritates customers just when they are at a buying stage, and also makes your company look untrustworthy and unprofessional. If people are going to buy from you, they want to know they can contact you."

2. Make it easy to navigate

We have all been frustrated by websites that are difficult to navigate. Make sure that yours is not one of them. Phil Harvey, chairman of marketing agency JPMH, says: "Many sites seem to have three or even four primary navigation elements. Reed Elsevier's site is a good example of how not to do it. As a user, you don't know where to go; you don't know which button to click. There are so many options that you're spoilt for choice and so the journey through the site becomes difficult. The rule here is to keep it simple. Do your homework before you start. Understand who will be coming to the site and what they want, and then construct the site accordingly."

Wesley Kitt, country manager at web development agency NQContent, adds, "One of the most fatal errors is taking visitors down dead-ends. So many people write separate content for each page of their site without considering how the user will move from one page to the next. A website should be like a book that the customer can start reading at any page and continue back and forth without unnecessary confusion. You need to hold the user's hand and taken him or her through the site, from one page, to the next."

3. Get IT and marketing working together

In the early days of website design, marketing departments tended to own the site and would request technical support from their colleagues in IT. Often this led to delays, websites being down, and orders getting lost. In many cases after a couple of years of this happening IT departments were given control over websites.

However, as Rachel Hawkes, account director at Elemental Communications, puts it, "Not letting the

marketing department have any type of ownership over the company website and having it solely under the control of IT is like baking a cake and putting the flour in as an afterthought. It just doesn't work."

She continues: "Marketing and IT need to work together to drive flexible, scaleable and successful website



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Marketing manager, Intercea

strategy and implementation. IT departments are more marketing-savvy than ever, and it's a sorely exaggerated myth that they don't get it. The problem as always is communication. The best way to maintain relations is clear planning and regular face-to-face meetings. Organisations need to co-plan what happens with the website."

4. Integrate your site

"Online is just another part of the marketing mix and should therefore follow brand guidelines, the same as any other medium," says Maria McCann, marketing manager at ebusiness solutions provider Intercea. "You should make sure your designers incorporate your brand guidelines and company personality into the design of your site. Web is often the first point of contact for a prospective customer so you want to make the right impression."

You should be wary of trying to translate your offline brand directly onto your website. What works in a brochure will not necessarily work on a screen. Instead of aiming for a perfect replica, simply ensure that the website has the same look and feel as your offline materials, and that it fits in with your broader marketing work. For instance, if you are running a direct mail

campaign, use some of the images and messages from the mailer on your website.

5. Keep it up to date

Martin Pollins at Bizezia, an online marketing and management tool provider, says: "Nothing is more damaging to a visitor's confidence than coming across information which went out of date years ago, especially if this is displayed on a prominent page. You really need to put in the effort to keep your content up to date."

In the past couple of years content management systems which allow marketers to do this easily have reached the market. Ed Freed, the IT director at marketing agency AI London, says: "There are many content management systems available, all with different features, usage and licensing, so picking one can be a complicated affair. When sourcing a system you should consider how often content changes, how many people within the organisation need to be able to update content, the ongoing licensing and support costs, the technical expertise and the financial stability of the vendor."

6. Find the right agency

Few B2B companies have the full range of skills in-house to build and maintain their websites, and so most use agencies. Finding the right agency is a challenging and important process. Simon Jenkinson, web director at digital agency Moonfish, offers this advice: "Ask colleagues who they use, as the best recommendations will come from them. When reviewing agencies, make sure you look at a prospective agency's website. If they

don't have a very inspiring site then you can reasonably suspect they'll do the same with yours."

Stuart Larkman, creative director at Juice Design, says, "The design agency marketplace is currently overpopulated with one-man bands and small agencies. If you go for the lower fees and more innovative approach of a smaller player, you need to be confident that you can live without the project management skills and accountability that a more established agency can offer."

Managing the relationship effectively is as important as picking the right agency in the first place. Roy Murphy, head of Interactive at agency Halpern Cowan Advertising, offers this advice: "Maintaining a good relationship throughout the project means outlining expectations and deliverables from the outset. Relaying key milestones and sign-off stages and allowing plenty of time for amendments and tweaks will help the process run smoothly."

7. Measure response

As with all marketing, it is essential to measure the response to your website. What you measure depends on the objectives of your website, be that sales, information, recruitment, or any other. Tim Gibbon, marketing communications director at web analytics firm WebtraffIQ, offers this advice: "You should use a measurement system to do real-time monitoring, measurement and analysis over a significant period of time, but you should also run focus groups with sample target audiences. Never forget that successful web design is, above all else, about human interaction."

CONTACTS: AI LONDON
TEL: 020 908 2700
WEB: WWW.AI.LONDON.CO.UK

BASE ONE
TEL: 020 8943 9988
WEB: WWW.BASEONEINTERACTIVE.CO.UK



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MELANIE SMITH
Marketing manager,
Market Location

BIZEZIA
TEL: 0370 3891420
WEB: WWW.BIZEZIA.COM

BLUELINEMEDIA
TEL: 01242 245496
WEB: WWW.BLUELINEMEDIA.CO.UK

HALPERN CONAN ADVERTISING
TEL: 020 7284 9700
WEB: WWW.HALPERNCONAN.COM

JPMH
TEL: 0207 645 3299
WEB: WWW.JPMH.CO.UK

CONTACTS: INTERCEA
TEL: 018 916 9900
WEB: WWW.INTERCEA.CO.UK

MOONFISH
TEL: 08700 70 4321
WEB: WWW.MOONFISH.COM

NOCCONTENT
TEL: 020 7484 5028
WEB: WWW.NOCCONTENT.COM

VIGNETTE
TEL: 0113 251 5151
WEB: WWW.VIGNETTE.COM

CASE STUDY: CORUS

Corus is one of the world's largest metal producers, with an annual turnover of £8 billion and operations in the UK, Netherlands, Germany, France, Norway and Belgium. It has 48,500 employees in over 40 countries.

In the second half of 2003 it embarked on an ambitious 'Restoring Success' programme, aimed at closing the gap between it and its European competitors. For its online activities, it recognised the need to improve customer service by providing easier and faster access to online company and product information.

Maria Harris, new media manager at Corus, comments, "The Internet simply wasn't working for us as a

communications tool. We had over 80 client-facing websites, but we weren't presenting a single brand. We need to ensure consistency and let our customers find what they were looking for more easily."

Corus worked with content management solutions provider Vignette on this project. The supplier developed a common navigation system and design, a single access point for all audiences, and a content management system that all Corus staff could use.

The new site went live in September 2004, and Harris comments: "We're now more cost and resource efficient and have a communications tool which reflects the essence of our brand. For the first time we're meeting the needs of stakeholders rather than just those of our organisation."