

Keep Website Current, Convenient To Build Business, Smith Advises

ATLANTIC CITY, NJ — The Internet has developed into an almost indispensable marketing tool with such speed that many organizations have not yet caught up with public expectations for a commercial website. Richard Smith of OCS Access described those expectations, and explained how operators can meet them, at a seminar titled “Creating Additional Sales on the Web” at the National Beverage & Products Association annual convention here.

OCS Access is a computer company specializing in website design and support services for the refreshment services business. In today’s market, he said, effective Web-based marketing can provide a substantial competitive advantage.

In order to gain that advantage, he suggested, it’s important to maintain focus. “You probably should concentrate on business-to-business transactions, and not on selling ‘K-Cups’ to everybody who has a credit card,” Smith recommended. “And you have to view your website as an integral part of your business and your daily operations. Too many websites are set up, and then just left sitting out there, forgotten.”

A good website can generate a lot of online business, the speaker emphasized; but this requires integrating the Web component with the rest of the company’s marketing. “You can’t leave it to one person in the company,” he warned. And the online program should incorporate the operation’s themes, starting with the site’s overall appearance. If the company’s colors are blue and white, then those colors should appear throughout its website.

Smith used graphic examples of websites to illustrate the progress that has been made in Web-based marketing over the past decade.

A “first-generation” website, he said, usually included little more than a company’s name and logo, a brief description of its products and services, and contact information. These were prevalent as recently as five years ago.

The more elaborate first-generation sites

often were “templated,” assembled from standardized elements, and Smith showed an example of one. “Somebody bought a software package at CompUSA and put something together,” he explained. “It includes a few pages, and it’s never updated. If it allows ‘ordering’ at all, you do that by downloading and printing a form to fill out and fax to the supplier.

Commercial websites have made great progress in offering customer interactivity and convenience. Smith displayed the site maintained Corporate Coffee Services (Westbury, NY), which exemplifies the state of the art in providing information and making online ordering easy.

Smith pointed to several features of the CCS home page that meet or surpass current online customer expectations. It includes a product category list that runs down one side, offering buttons that invite the visitor to click on the desired product type. It displays a central block of representative illustrations, so the visitor knows at a glance what CCS does; and someone interested in learning about becoming a client can activate a link, or alternatively, call a toll-free telephone number displayed prominently on the home page.

The site is revised often, Smith continued, partly through the use of dynamic updating. And it includes all the information a prospective client needs, including downloadable documents (Adobe PDF files) and links to other relevant sites.

When setting out to design an attractive and fully functional website, it’s important to adopt the perspective of the prospective customer. The fundamental goal, he emphasized, is “Make it easy to find what I want.”

This calls for looking at the business from the perspective of an outsider. “For example, you’re going to list your products by category,” Smith noted. “A company’s categories usually have been set up for use by the people in the company. You need to rethink those categories when designing your website, to make sure they’re ‘friendly’ – meaningful – to the customer.”

Once this is done, it’s a good idea to review the resulting list with an eye to establishing more categories containing fewer items. “If you have a category that contains 404 items and occupies 12 pages, people just aren’t going to scroll through all of them,” he pointed out.

A great aid to comprehending a product list on screen is the intelligent use of illustrations. Smith observed that, unfortunately, there is not at present a single source for all the product illustrations an operator might want. “We have clients who take their own pictures,” he said. “If you do this, you can use the images in your sales literature, too.”

The great benefit of illustrating a product listing is that “it assures me, as a customer, that you know what I want to buy,” the veteran Web designer emphasized.

Product descriptions also are important, Smith added. “Like product categories, product descriptions too often are written for use by your customer service representatives and warehouse staff, not for your customers,” he warned. It’s worth spending some time to make sure that an item is described in terms that mean something to a prospective buyer who does not work in the office refreshments business. For example, identifying a product as “MAPLE-BR SUG-OATMEAL EXPSes” is far more meaningful to an operator than to the average consumer.

It’s a very good idea to link each entry on a product list to a “long” description of the item, the speaker said. “This is your opportunity to sell,” he emphasized. Even a somewhat enigmatic one-line listing – GM RAIN/NUT KCUP, for example – can be significant if it is linked to a description like “CMCR C-CUP Rain Forest Nut: Green Mountain Coffee Roasters K-Cups 25 single-serve cups per box. A medium roast. A subtly sweet, delightful coffee with tastes of vanilla, caramel, cashew and real slices of Brazil nuts. Fair Trade Certified...”

Extra “indicators” also can be helpful in telling customers just what they are look-

ing at. Smith showed a listing for fraction-packed coffee which not only names and depicts the product, but includes a “roast indicator” (resembling a stylized slide control extending from “mild” to “bold”) and a standard “decaf indicator” that distinguishes decaffeinated varieties. The observer sees clearly, at a glance, what the product is, what it looks like and what characteristics it possesses. Each of these listings includes not only an “Add to Cart” order invitation, but also a link to “Request a Quote.”

Good, useful information is important, Smith summarized. Also important is empowering visitors to do everything they need to do to get the product, without leaving the site or the keyboard. “If I have to call you anyway, I could just order by phone,” he pointed out.

Expert Web marketers also know the value of reassuring a customer who has placed an order, the speaker said. “Send an e-mail when you receive an order,” he advised. “Even large, well-known companies like Amazon don’t always do this very well; it can take them 24 hours to send an acknowledgement,” he pointed out. Customers want to know that an order has not vanished into “cyberspace,” but has in fact been received and is being processed. The faster they can be assured of this, the better.

Customers also want to know that their transactions are secure, and an online marketer should sign up with one of the services that certify security, like Verisign. The cost is modest and the benefit is great.

Once the operation has such a “certificate,” it’s essential to keep it current, renewing one’s enrollment on time. Smith displayed a site whose owner had missed the renewal deadline, and so did not display the “secure” symbol for three days. The owner received many e-mails advising that the site was not secure, and worse. “Customers are brutal about this,” he said.

More than most marketers, office refreshment services must assure Web shoppers that they will be billed correctly. “Be

sure your customers see their price on your site,” the speaker urged. “If you don’t make sure of this, you’ll discourage them from using the site. Even if they call and you tell them that you’ll correct the price ‘on the back end,’ they won’t be confident, and they won’t shop the site.

“Don’t post list prices,” Smith warned. “And, if a customer calls and asks what his price is for Pepsi, your answer should be exactly the same as what he’s seeing on the screen.”

A website that has been intelligently designed and implemented for ease of navigation and use by customers and prospects will do much more than speed and simplify ordering, the Web expert stated. “It will increase sales. Someone may buy 30 items from you; but, if they’re looking at 200 items, they’ll *shop*,” he explained. “If you fax them an order form, they’ll order; but if you make your website informative and inviting, they’ll shop – and they’ll shop after hours.”

This not only helps in gaining new clients, but can increase penetration of existing accounts. “Every time a customer logs onto your site, you have an opportunity to sell,” Smith repeated. “The ‘landing page’ is valuable real estate.” This effect is amplified when “static” selling mechanisms are replaced with “smart” ones.

For example, that “landing page” can showcase new products, or display a rotat-

ing variety of existing ones. Smith displayed a Filterfresh site that embodies this principle. The page is designed with a block of four pictures and captions in the lower right quadrant. The illustrations change frequently, rotating through items selected from the complete menu according to criteria that give weight to novelty, to products that the customer might not associate with an office refreshment service (like “Twizzlers” candy).

Featured items also can be displayed in this manner. Smith demonstrated the right way to do this, which is to showcase the specials (perhaps three products) on the “landing page” and then carry the “featured” theme through to the other pages on which those items are shown – always with the special pricing.

Software integrated with the site can make this sort of linked updating simple and reliable, and can do a great deal more. One technique often used in e-commerce is to track online orders and identify patterns. Smith explained that it’s easy to determine which items are sold with other items, and to rank them for listing. This is the method that underlies the familiar notice, “Customers who bought this product also bought X, Y and Z...” It is a “dynamic” mechanism, based on actual orders.

The same general approach can be used to scan orders placed by a particular client over time, identify items that the customer

never has ordered, select a few likely ones and suggest them in a window labeled, “You might also like to try...”

By the same token, someone purchasing coffee probably uses products related to coffee – sweeteners, creamers, stir-sticks, flavorings – and so it’s helpful to remind the buyer that these things are available. “On checkout, the system looks at the contents of the ‘cart’ and suggests two or three related items,” Smith explained. “It can identify a category, so that if the customer has ordered ‘Sugar in the Raw,’ the suggestions will not include another sweetener.”

Integrating website administration with the operator’s management information system opens up additional possibilities that customers will like, the speaker pointed out. For example, when the driver returns at the end of the day, the day’s invoices can be digitized, or uploaded from a handheld route computer, and made available to customers online. “They can look up an invoice by themselves, without having to call you,” he said.

A website also offers the opportunity to provide “online chat” capability, which enables a client or a prospect to send messages to the operation, and receive appropriate replies immediately. A customer support representative typically is able to conduct about three of these “chats” at once – but only one telephone call, Smith

pointed out.

Also common is provision for sending periodic e-mails to customers, the website design expert observed. This is not always done with discretion, he warned, and it can be counterproductive when it isn’t. “Always give the recipient a way to opt out of future transmissions; this is very important,” he urged.

The e-mails can include order confirmations, tracking information for products shipped by a delivery service like United Parcel Service and Federal Express (this can be done easily by tying into the carrier’s order-tracking system), preparing clients for the scheduled pre-call and, of course, offering periodic specials. Services are available that offer very sophisticated and flexible e-mailing automation.

And, Smith concluded, operators with websites that are not able to accept credit-card orders are missing a tremendous business tool. Customers who are billed monthly on the usual open-account basis can be offered the opportunity to pay with a credit card. Some will do so, reducing receivables. And new customers can be signed up on a credit-card-only basis, eliminating the billing function altogether.

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